Desperately Seeking Ranma

by pixelwriter1

Summary

Ranma and Kasumi are missing, everyone is annoyed about it. Nabiki is doing her best, Akane is going slowly crazy (or at least crazier) and the parents are still idiots.

Mostly told from Nabiki's point of view.

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(A character list can be found at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1szka75s0_N9v61J4rowDaqGa_yKzze_msc2R2fE3PjQ/pub
Contains spoilers!)
"It's been six months, Nabiki! You always say you can find anyone, but you haven't managed to track either one of them down so far." The aggrieved female voice echoed through the yard of the large house complex, coming from an upstairs window. Several neighbours grumbled and closed their own windows, trying to keep the noise down. Those Tendo sisters were weird, loud, and annoying. The nice one had disappeared some time ago, leaving the loud one and the scary one. The father, known to the neighbourhood as 'The Fountain' behind his back due to his habit of bursting into tears when emotionally stressed, was fairly inoffensive, although his choice of house guests had raised eyebrows.

The two long-term guests currently staying were odd. One, a good-looking auburn-haired woman who appeared younger than many suspected she was, had seemingly given up her habit of carrying a cloth-wrapped sword with her everywhere she went. This had made many people feel slightly relieved although she had never to anyone's knowledge threatened anyone with it, or even unsheathed it, outside the house. The other one, a bald male in his early forties, who gave the misleading appearance of being somewhat overweight due to a heavily muscled body type, was in some way associated with a large Giant Panda, which could fairly often be seen wandering the area. Strangely, the panda and the man were never seen together.

Some of the members of the community had a frankly unbelievable reason as to why that was, but most people from outside the Neriman area tended to think their stories were idiotic. That said, most people from outside Nerima thought the entire place was insane at best, and incredibly dangerous at worst, the Furinkan suburb being the centre of insanity. Those that had even heard of it at least. For various reasons other districts tended to pretend that Nerima didn't exist. One or two of the other wards of the Greater Tokyo area had a certain sympathy for Nerima, infested as they were by odd magical goings-on, intermittent attacks by unnatural creatures, and occasional flurries of magical girls, who were normally skimpily dressed in impractical uniforms, with a near-total disregard for collateral damage.

These wards were rather envious of Nerima, as all it seemed to have to deal with were outbreaks of martial artistry. No one from outside could really see what the fuss was about, demons and demon-hunters seemed like much more trouble. The one or two civic leaders who had gone on fact-finding measures to Nerima to work out whether they could trade one problem for another had come back pale and shaking, needing copious amounts of alcoholic beverages before they said that they preferred the demons. They were at least fairly predictable.

"I know! I don't know what's going on, damn it, I can't work out how the hell they could have vanished so effectively. And stop shouting at me for god's sake!" A different, smoother, but no quieter voice rang out, causing the neighbours to turn the TV up. Most of them were vaguely regretting whatever had happened to make the nice one and the teenaged boy leave half a year ago. The very pretty red-headed girl who was often around had also vanished. The three of them were beginning to be missed, the older sister had somehow managed to keep a lid on the household to a large extent, and the boy and his sister/cousin/friend/something unbelievable, depending on who
you talked to, had kept a lid on most of the district. The nice one had a calming influence on every one she met, but since she'd been gone the Tendo household had become a loud and argumentative place. Both remaining sisters seemed to spend most of the time shouting at each other, the younger one often making a lot of noise practising some form of either martial arts or demolition work, no-one could quite decide what. It certainly involved a large number of concrete blocks.

The three older people in the house also seemed to consider arguing late into the night a regular basis an acceptable occupation. This annoyed everyone. When the other peculiar visitors were taken into account, all of whom had their own notable and normally loud voices to be added to the mix, everyone within earshot was missing the young people who seemed to have escaped the madness while at the same time rather envying them. The dark-haired young woman with the odious laugh was particularly unnerving.

Although, when the pig-tailed boy and the red-head had been in residence, some quite spectacular displays of martial artistry had broken out, often at inconvenient times of day, they'd normally been over fairly quickly. The accompanying damage to the civic infrastructure was occasionally impressive, even if not on the level one heard stories of from that ward on the other side of Tokyo with the demon problem. That said, it was also usually repaired quite fast. Since the night six months ago when, after some altercation that involved a truly remarkable effect that looked and sounded from a distance more like something out of a rather good science fiction movie, the two, or possibly three, young people had vanished, things had gone downhill.

All the lesser martial artists in the area seemed to be fighting amongst themselves almost daily, and with a total lack of thought for innocent bystanders. The pig-tailed boy, whatever his faults, had been a professional, never endangering anyone not directly involved. The other characters didn't suffer from the same reluctance, as a result of which a number of passers-by had found themselves in hospital, luckily so far not seriously injured. The police had been called a number of times, without much effect, as they were outnumbered by the abilities of the miscreants in question. They had tried their best, giving a number of them a stern talking to, but to be honest that was about all they could do. No normal cell could hold any of the freakishly overpowered people involved, and frankly they were hoping that if they ignored it long enough it would solve itself as a problem.

One or two of the more experienced officers were quietly running their own search for either the pig-tailed boy or the red-headed girl, hoping that if they were located they could be asked, persuaded, or bribed to come back and deal with the problem. The overenthusiastic sergeant who had announced that he would personally force either or both of them back at gunpoint had been restrained for his own good until he came to his senses. As bad as the current crop of martial artists was, no one who had ever had even the slightest interaction with the boy, girl, or boy/girl Ranma wanted to make them angry. Enough was known or suspected about the abilities of the person or people in question to make it clear how terminally stupid that action was likely to be, especially if the rumours of what had happened that night were accurate.

The remainder of the police were kept busy trying to clamp down on the steady rise of mostly petty crime that had accompanied the loss of the young martial artist. He or she had, almost incidentally, had a profound effect on gang trouble and petty theft. Not overtly as far as the general public was concerned, but enough that the people who were prone to cause trouble, especially ones who harmed their victims, had become aware that they tended to wake up in a ditch severely beaten. Normally with no idea what had happened, other than a memory of blue eyes in the dark, and a voice telling them that it wasn't nice to attack the weak and defenceless. For the last six months, though, the crime rate had been going slowly up, crimes against the person making most of the rise.
The only good part was that the perennial problem of a diminutive underwear thief seemed to have resolved itself, as the perpetrator of the constant thefts had apparently vanished soon after the elder Tendo daughter and the boy had. Every female in Nerima had relaxed just a little bit since then.

A couple of weeks ago, though, a rather nasty crime had happened. A young school-girl had been attacked and raped, nearly losing her life in the process. The attacker had apparently been scared off by a passing policeman, who had never even seen him. This was the first time in over two years that any sexual assault had taken place in Nerima, since the last time it had happened the young man who had committed it had turned himself in, with a ruptured testicle, dislocated arm, broken jaw, broken wrist, several broken ribs, innumerable bruises, and an overwhelming terror of any female with red hair that he kept for the rest of his life.

The red-headed girl really didn't like rapists.

One bright spark in the Neriman police force called in a favour at a large national newspaper and got the crime reported Japan-wide. A few days later there was a lot of screaming in one of the local parks, which attracted official attention when the sound died down to the point that the responding officers were sure that the cause had left. They found a middle-aged man, who turned out to be known to colleagues elsewhere in Tokyo for a number of crimes of violence, including rape, lying on the ground, beaten nearly to death and missing his right hand and his genitals. The wounds were unlike anything they'd ever seen before, looking more like something incredibly sharp and at the same time immensely hot had made perfectly clean cuts, cauterising the wounds simultaneously. The missing body parts were never found, although a small glassy crater a few metres away hinted at what had happened to them.

Next to him was a camera, the film from which when developed had a number of unpleasant shots on it, documenting not only the rape of the Neriman schoolgirl but three more until now unsolved assaults, one of which had resulted in a murder. While officially the police were investigating the assault on the rapist, unofficially the entire affair had been swept into the drawer labelled 'He damn well deserved what he got, the bastard, and anyway do you want to try to arrest her?' There wasn't a hope in hell that whoever had done it would ever get charged as far as the Neriman police were concerned. No-one else in the ward cared much either, although a number of the more perceptive citizens had a shrewd idea about what had taken place in the park and were privately supportive.

The level of violent crime dropped like a stone immediately after that incident, and although it had been slowly rising again, a number of the more intelligent criminals had left the area. The collection of martial artists informally known as the Nerima Wrecking Crew had, of course, completely missed the entire sequence of events and what it implied. Nabiki Tendo would eventually work it out, being nobodies fool, but the discovery would come far too late for her to follow up on.

"Look, Akane, I've got every contact I have keeping an eye out for them. It's costing a fortune," Nabiki got up from her desk, leaning over to close the window against the chill late evening air, much to the relief of the neighbours. "No one has seen a sign of them since about two days after that night. There were a couple of sightings near the train station, and another one in the main business district of central Tokyo, but after that the trail goes dead." She sat again, swivelling around in her chair to look at her sister who was sitting on her bed scowling and grinding her teeth, apparently furious. Since that night, one she would never forget, the younger girl had been steadily getting more unstable in her sisters opinion.

Sighing, Nabiki leaned back in her chair and thought back to that night. Three days after the wedding disaster, three days of near constant arguing, shouting, and fighting. A large part of it
coming from or due to the younger girl she was looking at. The night they nearly lost their eldest sister, only to have her almost miraculously saved, then lost her again. The only good thing to have come from that was that the loss was due to her leaving rather than dying, although it looked like the former state was likely to be as permanent as the latter would have been. At least Akane wasn't a murderer, mused Nabiki, watching her younger sister fume. 'Not for lack of trying,' she thought uncharitably, regretting the thought almost immediately.

She had been finding herself feeling slightly more sympathetic to Ranma's point of view recently. Without the pigtailed boy to buffer Akane's tendency to boil over and hit things, everyone in the area was walking on eggshells. She regularly exploded into rage, but lacking a convenient martial-artist-based target, resorted to beating the crap out of a steadily increasing number of concrete blocks. Nabiki was buying them in by the pallet-load at the moment at ruinous expense. The only good part was that she had negotiated a bulk discount due to the quantities involved. She'd also had a brainwave a few weeks ago and found a purchaser for crushed concrete to be used as hardcore for building purposes. That at least got a small amount of the money back.

The brunette was dreading the day they could no longer afford to keep her sister in blocks to break. The effect on the immediate environment, not to mention the people, was apt to be unpleasant. She hoped that they could somehow get Ranma back before that happened. Momentarily she regretted the likely damage to the boy, but decided that it was better that it happen to him than, for example, her. A slight thought of the expression in the eyes of the, at the time female, Ranma as she'd walked out the gate gave her pause, it had been the expression of someone who wasn't going to take being pushed any further. Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought. It was Ranma, he never hit Akane back...

Two days after Ranma and Kasumi had walked through the gate, both of them wearing the weirdest smiles Nabiki had ever encountered, the trail had gone dead. The day after that, a group of worryingly professional appearing men with a large van had come to the house, apparently under instruction to box up and take away the majority of Kasumi's belongings. They'd had a very well itemised list, signed by the missing sister, and an attitude that suggested they wouldn't take no for an answer. Nabiki had looked at the one who had knocked politely at the door, evaluating him carefully, then at his three compatriots, before stepping out of the way. She knew when she was out of her depth. Akane had taken a certain amount of persuading to stay quiet, while their father had just cried. Nothing particularly unusual there.

The middle sister knew that Ranma was behind this somehow, torn between being curious how he'd managed to get people who looked more like high-level members of the Yakuza rather than normal removals men to do the work, and feeling that she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know. They'd filled the boxes quietly and efficiently, documenting everything, given her a receipt, and left. Although she'd tried to have them followed the trail had gone cold immediately, they were apparently professional even in counter surveillance techniques. Yet more proof that they weren't quite what they presented themselves as.

She had found out that more or less at the same time someone had turned up at Furinkan High School with a letter giving them the authority to collect Ranma's school records and transfer him away from the school. There was no indication where he was transferred to, unfortunately. It suggested that he intended to complete his schooling, not that this gave her much to go on.

After that, there had been nothing. Happosai had disappeared sometime around then although they hadn't realised until considerably later that he wasn't coming back. The first few weeks had been very loud and quite hard on the immediate surroundings. Both Kunos had taken to walking in day or night, demanding to know where Ranma or the pig-tailed girl were, more or less interchangeably. Neither one of them having been present the night it all came to a head they didn't
believe anything they were told. Eventually Ukyo and Ryoga, with some interference from Akane in the guise of 'help' had beaten them senseless, after which they tended to stay away. Nabiki knew from her contacts that both of the crazy siblings had been using their considerable resources to do much what she was doing, with a similar lack of results. In fact she knew rather more about their results than they did, due to her having arranged to intercept the information before it was given to them. In effect the Kuno family was paying for a lot of her searching, not that it was doing much good.

Cologne and the two Amazon teenagers were also looking using more non-standard methods. The brunette girl had at one point, exasperated, talked to the Amazon elder, finding her at least as frustrated as she was. In an unusually garrulous mood, mainly due to being furious, she'd let slip that she'd been attempting to trace either Ranma or Kasumi via mystical means. What had been driving her around the bend was that all her attempts had met with failure, which according to the wizened elder, meant that somehow the magical surveillance was being blocked. When she'd learned that Happosai had not been seen for a couple of months she had immediately exploded with rage, suspecting him of being the reason she was having no luck.

Nabiki had thought it was quite likely the old woman was correct, although she'd also thought it wasn't impossible that Ranma himself had learned or acquired methods of his own to deal with such tracking. He'd certainly had sufficient reason to do so even before the big blow up, as the Amazons had been a constant thorn in his side with their magic long before that day. She was under no illusions as to how effectively the martial artist could learn new techniques and methods when he had a reason to do so. She wouldn't have put it past him to learn some form of magic as a backup plan.

Whatever the truth of it, none of the considerable resources brought to bear on the problem of the missing martial artist or Tendo sister had produced any result other than large bills and huge frustration. The result had been chaos, even by the standards of the various members of the NWC. Everyone seemed to be at everyone's throats. Ryoga and Mousse had nearly killed each other for some reason neither one of them was clear on. Shampoo and Ukyo likewise. Akane was crushing blocks at a rate high enough to pave most of Nerima with the rubble produced, while the Kunos kept popping up in the background annoying everyone. Her father almost flooded the house for the first two weeks before, dehydrated and cried out, he'd gone on a massive bender, only to be slapped back into a slightly more sensible frame of mind by an unlikely saviour in the form of Genma.

Nodoka had spent a month walking around with her sword in her hand ready to use it on anyone who even looked at her oddly, before one day suddenly putting it under her bed and apparently forgetting about it. This was still puzzling Nabiki, but for various reasons she didn't feel like asking why. All three parents now spent most evenings getting morose and melancholy about all the good times, most of which were misremembered, and loudly wondering where they'd gone wrong. It was left to the younger members of the household to do the bulk of the practical work. In essence this mostly meant Nabiki, which annoyed her no end. Akane would occasionally help out, but the one thing she actively wanted to do, cook the meals, had been firmly taken over by Nodoka after the first couple of days.

The older woman had argued fiercely with the youngest sister, matters only being resolved when Akane was pushed far enough to try her own food. She'd had to beat it into submission first, which to a normal person would have been warning enough not to put any of it into her mouth. In her case the three days of projectile vomiting that followed such an ill-advised move had pretty much cured her of the desire to try again.

As a result of the loss of Kasumi the household was eating food that, while good, wasn't up to the previous standard, in a house that was much less neat and tidy. It was only since she had gone that
the remaining people had realised what an extraordinary amount of work looking after a houseful
of people really was, and how well she'd done it for all those years. Nabiki at least was feeling
somewhat ashamed over how much they'd taken their older sister for granted. Akane had
occasionally espoused a similar opinion, but normally then followed it with a rant about how it was
all Ranma's fault for kidnapping the woman. She didn't appear to remember that it was Kasumi's
decision to leave, and why.

Turning back to her computer, Nabiki dismissed her sister for the moment, brought back to today
by the sound of an email registering in her inbox. Quickly opening it she read it, then slumped.
"Damn. Another dead end."

"What was it?"

"A contact at a small university in Osaka claimed to have seen someone who looked a lot like
Ranma in female form, only with blonde hair. She investigated and found it was definitely not her."
The middle sister crossed another line off a very long list of dead leads.

"Are you completely sure? Maybe we should go and check ourselves." Glancing over her shoulder,
Nabiki scowled.

"Yes, I'm sure. My contact was very thorough, she even got the girl's birth certificate. She's three
years too old, five centimetres too tall, and her breasts aren't big enough. What more do you want?
Anyway, we can't afford to go to Osaka right now." Glowering, Akane crossed her arms and stared
back.

"Some intelligence genius you are. Outwitted by a dumb martial artist jock."

"Oh, for god's sake, sis. I've told you over and over, he's not dumb. That's been evident for a while
now. I don't know how he's covered their tracks so well, he probably had help, but the one thing I
am damn sure of is that he's a hell of a lot smarter than he let on all this time. I'd have found him
for sure otherwise."

The other girl snorted. "Yeah, right. Him, smart? So why didn't he do better at school?" Nabiki
shrugged.

"I have no idea. I'm pretty sure he could have, but for some reason he decided not to. I managed to
get a copy of his transcripts and he was doing a lot better than we thought he was. Apparently he
had some sort of deal with several of the teachers to downplay his marks in public. Again, I don't
know why." Her sister looked unconvincing but dropped the subject. There was quiet for a while,
only broken by the intermittent sound of grinding teeth, both sisters lost in their own thoughts.
Eventually Akane spoke.

"So what's the next step?" she asked. Her sister looked pensive.

"I'm not sure. I have a few contacts that haven't checked back, so there might be something from
one of them, but I'm not hopeful. I even talked to a couple of people I know in the police. They'd
like Ranma back as well, they seem to think he was a positive influence on the neighbourhood as
far as reducing crime went." Akane snorted disbelievingly but kept quiet otherwise. Her sister
favoured her with a raised eyebrow, then continued after a few seconds. "They don't have any idea
where he is either. My contact said they were actually quite impressed over how efficiently he's
vanished. Again, it points to him having some sort of help. Who from is the mystery."

"OK, so he's got help. That doesn't help us, though, does it. We need to find him." Spinning her
chair around Nabiki studied her sister for a while.
"I'm beginning to wonder why we need to find him," she said slowly. Akane looked at her in amazement.

"What do you mean?"

Scratching her forehead, the older sister thought about it for a moment. "Well, aside from the expense and frustration, what is all this searching managing to do? We're no closer to finding him now than we were six months ago. Even if we do track him down, what then? Ask nicely if he'll come back? After what happened, I'd be a little surprised if he didn't basically shoot first and ask questions later, if at all. It wasn't like she and Kasumi left under the best of terms." She shuddered a little at the memory. "The look in her eyes when she stood up from under all that rubble... I really thought for a moment she was going to kill everyone in the garden without mercy. I've never seen so much anger and pain in someone's eyes before."

Rubbing her eyes for a moment, she glanced at her sister. "And that attack she used on your mallet, the one she saved Kasumi with? It was like something out of a sci-fi movie. I don't think you saw it properly, you were too close, but it was like a solid beam of light that came from the rubble. The noise was incredible. I had no idea she was able to do anything like that and neither did anyone else." This was indeed true. When she'd mentioned it to Cologne, the old woman had gone very quiet for some time, then refused to discuss it. She'd got the impression that the elder was genuinely shocked and scared by what she'd seen that night. None of the younger people had paid a lot of attention to the implications of the surprise new attack, but Nabiki thought this was a serious mistake.

She'd examined the rubble pile closely the next day, finding the large piece of stone the ki beam had passed through on it's way to intercept Akane's mallet. There was a fifteen centimetre diameter hole piercing entirely through it, the edges of which were glass-smooth and parallel. It looked like it had been polished, or perhaps exposed to extreme heat. Even after passing through over thirty centimetres of granite, the beam had continued on through the ki mallet wielded by her sister, disrupting it very loudly, and when she traced it's path, she had noticed a semicircular notch in the tiles on the peak of the roof some forty metres away. Climbing up by way of a ladder she'd found this was also completely smooth and glassy. Curious, she'd measured both the hole in the stone block and the notch in the roof, finding that they were basically the same diameter, implying the beam had very little spread to it.

The possible implications of all this were very disturbing. Leaving aside how on earth the red-head had been able to aim the attack so precisely from under tons of detritus, or for that matter had even known what was happening and when to use it, how had she learned to produce such an attack? No one had ever seen her use anything like it before. It was devastatingly powerful, of that Nabiki was certain, to a level that made her extremely worried. She was aware that the martial artist had a remarkable respect for life, and also that he held back a lot of his more dangerous attacks in the encounters he had with his peers, but she had developed a sneaking suspicion that nobody realised quite how much he was holding back. The look on the girl's face as she'd risen from the ground like an avenging demon still made her wake up in a cold sweat on occasion. It was the face of someone who had reached their breaking point.

"I'm kind of starting to think that maybe we should let him go," the brunette said reluctantly. Akane glared, appalled.

"I don't care if you're chicken or not, but we're going to get him back. He kidnapped Kasumi, don't forget, and we have to rescue her." Nabiki sighed heavily.

"He didn't 'kidnap' Kasumi. You know damn well what happened. Our sister went with her
willingly. You did nearly kill her. If it hadn't been for Ranma..." The middle Tendo was still haunted by the memory of the shock, fear, and betrayal in their elder sister's eyes, and the sudden simple joy that she'd glimpsed as the woman turned away from them and left. Akane looked away at the mention of her near-disastrous inadvertent attack on their sister, refusing to meet Nabiki's gaze. Memories of those few seconds when she knew beyond doubt that she'd killed her sister filled her until she pushed them down, yet again, by blaming it all on Ranma. If he hadn't hidden under all that debris for three days instead of coming out and taking his punishment like a man, she wouldn't have nearly hit Kasumi.

Wondering what was going through her sister's head, Nabiki watched her face, in fact coming quite close to what the other girl was thinking. After a little while she could see that the younger woman had dismissed whatever doubt she'd been feeling as her face once more filled with anger. "We're going to get him back," she repeated, abruptly standing. "He's got responsibilities to us, to me." Glaring at her sister she paced back and forth on the carpet. Nabiki sighed a little, yet again. "Easier said than done," she muttered, turning back to her computer. More loudly, she commented, "We also need to figure out how to get more money in. In six months we've barely started repairing the Dojo, and the household budget is straining. We're likely to be eating rice and pickles again pretty soon unless we can start either making some heavy cuts, or earning more money." Casting a jaundiced eye at her sister, still wearing a hole in her carpet, she saw that the girl was pretty much ignoring her. "Akane? Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, yes, money, pickles, I heard you. What are you going to do about it?" the blue-haired girl snapped.

"Me? What about you? You could, I don't know, perhaps get a job or something? You've graduated now, you don't have to go to school any more, and you don't have any university plans at the moment. Use some of that free time and earn your keep!" Nabiki was losing patience again. Stopping in the middle of the room and raising her voice, Akane retorted, "Well, you're the one who's always selling information and photos and blackmailing people. Can't you just do more of that?" Nabiki glared back.

"Unlike you, I do have university plans, which start quite soon. I'm having enough trouble earning money for that, never mind paying for a lot of the household as well. Father brings in something from his council job, Nodoka has contributed a fair amount, and even Genma has kicked in a little now and then. Although he probably stole it, the indolent bastard. You're just a net drain on the finances. You're eighteen now, time you started to help." The younger girl went dark red about the face and neck.

Even with the window shut the shouting annoyed the neighbours for hours.

"Damn and blast!" the voice shouted, accompanied by a crash of breaking ceramic. Shampoo looked up from her work in the kitchen, wincing at the yell. Wiping her hands she walked further into the private part of the building, peering cautiously into Cologne's work room, unwilling to enter without permission. Not after what had happened to Mousse that time...

"Great Grandmother? Are you all right?" she asked politely in Mandarin. The elder looked over her shoulder, glowering, then reluctantly nodded.

"Yes, child. I'm sorry, I'm getting frustrated. Every time I think I might have figured out a method to track that pig-tailed menace, I find that someone, somehow, has already thought of it and blocked it. I'm running out of ideas." Turning back to the remains of what had been her best
scrying bowl she ruefully poked through the shiny fragments, glad it had had simply shattered rather than exploding. The backlash from the spell she'd tried could easily have caused much more serious damage. "I wish I knew who was helping him. Whoever it is has a serious amount of power. That spell should have punched through pretty much any anti-scrying countermeasure, instead it just bounced. It's got to be Happosai. That little pervert, despite his disgusting ways, knows a hell of a lot about all sorts of things he shouldn't." Shampoo stepped just inside the doorway, looking curiously at the wreckage.

"Are you sure it wasn't husband?" Cologne shook her head.

"How could he possibly have learned to work magic? It takes a certain mindset which I don't think he has." Shampoo wasn't convinced.

"You know what he's like when he decides to learn something. Nothing stops him." This was indeed true and the elder considered the idea carefully for a while.

"I'll admit that future son-in-law does have an impressive ability to adapt and learn when he is up against a threat, but... It still seems very unlikely to me. I think it's Happosai." She muttered to herself, not intending Shampoo to overhear, "I should have killed the little shit decades ago." The young woman heard, but suppressed the smile that threatened to come on as she didn't think her great grandmother was in the sort of mood that would appreciate it.

"Have you managed to learn anything?" she asked instead. "It's been over a year since he and the nice sister vanished." Sweeping the debris into a bag, Cologne dropped it into a waste bin, sat down, and sighed.

"Nothing. Nearly fourteen months, I've lost track of how many spells, every contact I have anywhere, and nothing. Not one verifiable sighting or even decent rumour of him being sighted, or the Tendo girl for that matter. I don't even know if they're still in Japan. Hell, for all I know they're not even in this reality or time any more." The girl with the long lilac hair looked askance at the old woman at this, which made her grin a little. "Come on, you've seen enough over the last few years to know that where that boy is concerned, almost nothing is impossible. But yes, you're right, it's unlikely that he's jumped through a portal to hell or anything like that."

Leaning against the wall, Shampoo gazed unseeingly at the floor. Eventually, she looked up. "Do you think we'll ever find him?" she asked softly. Cologne shrugged.

"I hope so. He'd be an incredible asset for the tribe. And... by now I'm actually getting worried. I hope he's all right." They looked at each other for a moment, sharing a genuine concern for the boy, difficult as he was.

"Has the mercenary girl had any more luck?" Shampoo asked after a few seconds. Cologne shook her head.

"No, not that I am aware. Not that she'd tell me if she did, but I'd have found out by now anyway. She's still trying although the last I heard they were running out of money to pay for the search. I believe that she's somehow managed to subvert most of the investigators working for the Kuno children, very sneaky, she's getting the rich idiots to pay for the bulk of her search. But, just like us, she's found nothing."

There was silence for a moment, then Shampoo nodded, turning to go back to work. As she left the elder reached for yet another scroll, opening it and looking for a spell she hadn't tried yet.
"Son of a bitch!" Nabiki yelled, staring at her computer screen. Akane, who was passing her room at the time, came in to find out what was going on. The elder girl was home during a short holiday, normally she stayed at the university accommodation as much as possible, due to the somewhat strained household relationships. Genma and Nodoka were still living in the Tendo house after nearly two and a half years, which slightly puzzled her, but at the same time it at least meant that edible food was being cooked. Soun was even slowly recovering his mental health, reaching the point that he had been discussing with the other martial artist the idea of taking on a few students.

Of course, where to teach them would be the problem, the Dojo itself was still only half-rebuilt, due to a lack of funds. It at least had a roof without holes now. They were thinking of renting space in a nearby warehouse, with the thought that they could put any money earned into completing the rebuilding. Nabiki was all for the idea, but privately felt it was pretty ambitious for a pair of middle-aged albeit undeniably very good martial artists, especially as one of them was nearly the text-book example of sloth while the other tended to have major emotional breakdowns on a semi-random basis. Still, it might work, and if nothing else would keep them busy.

Her sister and she were getting along better at the moment, after a long period during which they barely spoke. Akane had managed to find a job in retail that stuck, having gone through a number of others, losing most of them due to her bad temper. This last one was working for a small jewellery shop, the owner of which had been impressed when an attempted theft on her first day had resulted in an unconscious thief with two broken arms. He'd decided that the enhanced security was worth the occasional argument. The money was reasonable, adding a welcome flexibility to the household budget. Unfortunately the debts that had built up would take some time to pay off before she could seriously start saving for her own further education.

"What's the problem?" she asked, entering the room. Nabiki pointed an accusing finger at her monitor.

"An old police report a contact sent me. It's from nearly two years ago." She was extremely pissed off, and a curious Akane came over and read it over her shoulder. The details were somewhat gruesome.

"I remember hearing something about that. The pervert got what was coming to him, everyone thought. The girl he assaulted was the sister of someone I knew at school." Nabiki shook her head.

"No, you're missing the point. Read it again, and think about it. Read the notes from my contact as well." The younger woman did so, then glanced at her sister.

"I still don't get it." The brunette sighed impatiently.

"Look. Someone at the police station here in Nerima got this crime, nasty but local, reported in a major paper covering all of Japan. Five days later the rapist is found nearly dead in a park with bits missing. The police got reports of screams for at least an hour before they bothered to investigate, which is unusually inefficient of them. The missing parts were never found but they did find a melted crater in the ground near him." She looked at her sister's face to see if she was following. "No one has ever been arrested or even questioned about the attack on the rapist, and my contact said that they had no intention of following up on it. Doesn't that sound a little odd to you?" Akane shrugged.

"So?"
"I recognise the name of the lieutenant at the station who called the papers. He knew Ranma, he was one of the few policemen that knew all about him. The guy is smart, and also kind of... flexible... in his approach to life in Nerima. Pragmatic, I guess." Paging through the document, she pointed to a line in the medical report. "Totally clean cuts even through the bone, cauterised, almost no blood loss. No tool marks of any kind. The man was beaten to a level that the doctors say should have killed him, but whoever did it was so good they missed everything critical, just hit all the painful places." Akane was still looking blank and now slightly irritated.

Nabiki swivelled her chair around, staring at her sister like she was looking at a child. "It was Ranma. I'm sure of it." The blue haired young woman returned her gaze for a few seconds, stepping back and sinking down to sit on the bed

"Ranma did that?" She didn't immediately disbelieve it but wasn't convinced. Nabiki nodded firmly.

"It was a martial artist, definitely. Only someone very skilled in the art could do that much damage without critically injuring the person. And the cuts? The only thing I can think of that I've ever seen that could do something like that was some sort of ki attack. The cat-fist could certainly slice someone into little bits as easily as a knife through butter. The cauterisation is a bit odd, but even so, it fits. As does the crater."

"Maybe some other martial artist could have done it? There are a lot of them around here, you know." Akane still wasn't convinced.

"Possibly. But I don't think so. Any of the others I know personally would have just kicked the shit out of the guy then dropped him off at the police station. I'm aware there are quite a few I've never met, but one thing I do know is that Ranma is much, much better than any of them. And I know for a fact that he absolutely hates rapists. It's almost scary how he feels about rape. One time I saw him read something in the paper about a girl getting assaulted near here, he looked like he was ready to kill someone. You know what he's like about defending the weak, and nothing says the weak needing defending like rape." She paused, watching Akane, who seemed less disbelieving. "I think the fact that he's female a lot of the time gives him even more reason to get upset about attacks on women. Whatever, he doesn't take prisoners where that sort of thing is concerned."

Turning back to the report she scanned it again, nodding. "It was him, I'm certain. Which means that he was back here nearly six months after he vanished. And it's taken me two damn years to find out about it!"

"Can we use that to find him?"

Nabiki shook her head. "It's much too long ago. Perhaps if I'd found out at the time... perhaps not. He seems to have been very careful to cover his tracks. Apparently the police did unofficially poke around a little but found nothing."

"So it's useless, then." Akane stood up, dismissing the report with a grunt. Stomping out of her sister's room she went downstairs to shout at Genma, the reminder of her errant fiancé bringing on a bad mood. Nabiki watched her go, then turned back to her computer with one eyebrow twitching a little. The girl, young woman now, as she had just turned twenty the previous month, was still erratic and prone to outbursts of massive anger. Both the middle sister and her father had told her to keep the public displays of destruction to a minimum as she was now a legal adult, which gave the police slightly more leverage if she caused trouble. Amazingly she seemed to have listened at least to some degree, with the result that she didn't get into as many fights as before. How long that would last was anyone's guess.
A lot of it probably hinged on the next time Ryoga would turn up. About a year ago Akane had finally worked out what everyone else had known for a long time, that Ryoga and her little pet P-Chan were one and the same. It had been completely accidental, she'd managed to spill a pan of near-boiling water on the little pig when she was in the kitchen and Ryoga hadn't seen it coming. Even while he was screaming in agony, red and naked on the floor, she had seen, understood, gone almost purple with rage, then proceeded to inflict the beating of a lifetime on him. Nabiki had in the end been forced to call on Ukyo and Shampoo to help pull her off him before she killed him. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was nearly invulnerable there was little doubt that he wouldn't have made it.

Even so, he spent nearly a month in the hospital and was walking with a limp for another six. The damage to the side of the house where he'd been knocked through, the garden, the garden wall when he'd gone through that, and two cars in the street outside looked more like a decent size bomb had been dropped on the area. The two policemen, veterans of Nerima, that had finally showed up when everyone was sure that it was safe had been genuinely impressed with the level of damage, and quietly appalled that one slim female had done it with her bare hands. No one wanted to see a repeat, so Ryoga was quickly spirited away when Akane was arguing with Ukyo, what was left of him being taken to recover at a hospital well outside the area. Afterwards everyone denied knowing where he'd ended up. The youngest Tendo looked for him for at least a couple of months after this, intending to finish the job, but luckily for both of them couldn't find him.

Nabiki had gone to have a quiet word with the part-time pig when he'd recovered enough to be able to talk. She'd pointed out that while he was undoubtedly tougher than her sister, she was a lot like that American comic book character The Hulk in that the angrier she got the more dangerous she became. Ryoga had managed to make her angrier than anyone had believed possible. His inability to effectively defend himself against women, unless the woman in question was Ranma, would also work against him. There was a good chance she could, and indeed would, kill him if they met up again while she was still furious, so it was strongly suggested that he steer well clear of Nerima for the foreseeable future. Like the next ten years or so. She'd given him some cash they could ill afford, a new set of accurate maps and a compass, and told him to make sure he stayed out of the area in future. He hadn't been seen more than a few times since, always moving at a dead run directly away when he realised he had accidentally strayed back into danger range.

It was only a matter of time until he popped up too close before he could work it out, which made Nabiki lose sleep now and then. Hopefully by the time this happened her sister would have cooled off a little, although it didn't seem likely at the moment. She was even more convinced that all men were perverts, although she made a few rare exceptions if they were old enough and she felt that they deserved some respect. That was the only reason she was able to get a job at all. The middle sister had wondered for some considerable time whether her sister was a closet lesbian, her intense dislike for males seemed excessive otherwise. Her dislike for anything she deemed 'perverted' was even more intense, most definitely including anything that smacked of homosexuality, which went a long way towards explaining her constant anger. Even on a good day it was simmering just below the surface.

Repairing the damage to the house and garden had used up most of the money that Nabiki had budgeted towards rebuilding the Dojo, delaying that project even more, but the house took priority. She still hoped to get it finished within the next six months so when winter came it was done.

Looking through the police report yet again, she re-read the notes from her contact, thinking about what it all meant. After a few minutes pondering it she emailed a request for more information on any other cases over the last couple of years that met a certain set of specific conditions, then turned the computer off. Lying on her bed she stared at the ceiling for a while, mulling over what she'd learned.
Despite Akane's arguments to the contrary she was certain that the report detailed something that Ranma had been responsible for. There were just too many things that didn't add up otherwise. But that said, the report raised worries, ones she was sure that Akane had missed. The level of brutality involved in the injuries sustained by the rapist spoke of a certain coldness that she'd never have suspected the young martial artist capable of, at least before that unforgettable night nearly two and a half years ago. On that night, having seen the expression the red-headed girl had worn as she walked out of the rubble, she'd have believed almost anything you cared to mention. It had been terrifying. If it was Ranma, he had changed.

'Not surprising, all things considered,' she thought to herself. 'People do change as they mature, and god knows he's had more reason than anyone else I know...' Closing her eyes for a moment she massaged them. 'I suppose the fact that the rapist lived is proof that he hasn't completely thrown away mercy, although under the circumstances it might have been kinder to finish the job. I wonder if that was the point?' Sitting up then swinging her legs around, she sat on the edge of the bed for a moment before standing up and heading downstairs to begin cleaning the living room. She still didn't like doing the work, but as she didn't have to all the time now since she was away at university a lot of the time, she felt it was her duty to improve on the rather indifferent job Akane and the others managed when she was in residence. She liked coming home to a clean house.

As she ran the vacuum around the room she was still thinking about the whole Ranma situation. In truth over the last year she hadn't been putting as much effort into the search as she had for the first eighteen months, partly due to a lack of funding, partly due to thinking that if the boy hadn't been found by that time, it was unlikely that he'd suddenly give himself away. If she ever did find him she suspected it would be by luck more than anything else. Akane had slowly stopped pushing so hard, although it didn't take much to get her ranting on the subject. In fact Nabiki was pleasantly surprised that she'd not seized on the police report to start yet another argument about how the middle sister should be trying harder to track the martial artist down.

Both of them still missed Kasumi every day, but even there Akane's guilt about what she'd nearly done had stopped her pushing too hard eventually. In the end she barely mentioned their older sister unless either very tired or very angry. Nabiki wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not. When the subject did come up the younger woman would usually change it quickly with a look in her eyes that made it clear the subject was uncomfortable for her. Everyone had learned not to mention either the missing fiancé or the missing sister unless they really wanted a good shouting match.

The NWC had slowly moved on after the Ryoga incident. Both Kunos still occasionally put in a highly unwelcome appearance, although neither one seemed to have their hearts in it. Tatewaki would every now and then deliver a request for pictures of his 'pig-tailed princess' but it seemed to be more for old times sake than anything else. Kodachi had a habit of intermittently dropping into the back yard and giving off one of her horrific laughs, but after Akane nearly killed Ryoga she'd become much more circumspect. No saner, though. Nabiki still got reports on her behaviour towards whatever poor sod had sparked her interest that month, most of whom left the area for good as soon as they could. The young woman needed professional help, or possibly just locking up. Not that either of these events would be likely to happen due to the family's political influence.

Ukyo had gone home for an extended period a few months ago, cutting contact with Nerima completely for a while and closing the okonomiyaki café. Some time later Konatsu had disappeared as well, both of them eventually reappearing a few weeks later, reopening the shop and carrying on as if nothing had happened. Nabiki's curiosity had driven her to investigate, but all she'd easily been able to find out was that Ukyo had managed to persuade her father that there was no chance of her marrying Ranma. Oddly enough she seemed quite relieved about it and happier than she'd been for some time beforehand. The middle Tendo had visited her café many times since, noting that the
cross-dressing ninja seemed to be very close to Ukyo now, closer than before, reaching her own conclusions after watching them for a while. As far as she was concerned it was their own business but privately she was pleased for the sake of someone who had become a friend.

The thing she found most surprising was that the Amazons were still in the area. With so long having passed since Ranma disappeared she had expected that they'd return to China, but they hadn't moved. Nabiki was on fairly good terms with them, strangely. She didn't trust Cologne, Cologne didn't trust her, but it was a sort of Cold War détente type of mistrust. Neither one thought the other was likely to suddenly turn on them, while at the same time neither one would necessarily believe anything the other said without checking it carefully. They both occasionally exchanged information on their respective searches when it suited them.

Shampoo had become considerably better at speaking Japanese over the last couple of years having put in quite a lot of effort. The young woman had almost the exact opposite of a gift for languages but got annoyed about being taken as something of a bimbo, in the end finding a good mail-order language course and sticking to it with surprising discipline. In the end she still made the odd mistake but overall sounded a lot smarter. Mousse was still pursuing her with no apparent luck but refused to give up. He was impressive in his dedication but showed a lack of common sense in Nabiki's opinion.

A couple of months ago she'd asked Shampoo outright why they were still in Japan. The answer both surprised and amused her. Both young people had come to realise that while they held great affection for their village they found daily life in Japan much more to their liking in most respects. They'd integrated pretty well into Neriman life which was probably helped by the fact that Nerimans were quite used to the unexpected and found foreign martial artists who occasionally turned into animals more comedic than anything else, as long as they refrained from fighting in the streets and damaging the fixtures and fittings. Since Ryoga had left, or more accurately been kicked out, the number of fights had reduced considerably. This pleased the average Neriman nearly as much as it pleased the local police who had been getting very irritated by their impotence in the face of the random attacks of martial artistry.

That's not to say that these things had stopped completely, or even dramatically reduced in number. It's just that without the main heavy guns of the local martial artist group the damage had become much more manageable. Nerima was still a pretty weird place by most people's standards, with a higher density of martial artists and mystical fighters than probably anywhere on the planet.

With the drop in fights between each other the various parties had taken to exercising their martial instincts on any evil-doers who were dim enough to do evil within the boundaries of the ward. Crime had plummeted to levels lower than anyone could remember as a result. It was a spectacularly brave, stupid, or ill-informed mugger who tried plying his or her trade within Nerima. It never ended well for them. This suited the police quite nicely as they were a particularly pragmatic bunch by normal cop terms. As long as the crime stayed low, no one was too badly beaten, and they could claim credit for the arrests, they were perfectly happy to let things proceed as normal. Most of them were cynical enough to realise there wasn't a hell of a lot they could do about it anyway, something that had been brought home pretty effectively during the first few months of Ranma's disappearance.

The few police who knew the truth were still quietly keeping an eye out for either the pig-tailed boy or the red-headed girl, but had given up actively searching. Long before Nabiki had come to much the same conclusion they had decided that to vanish so thoroughly meant the martial artist either had powerful help, knew something they didn't, or had left the country completely. 'Possibly the planet,' quipped one lieutenant, which got him some odd looks followed by slow thoughtful nods. You couldn't put anything past that person.
The only reason they bothered with even the amount of vigilance they did was due to the intermittent reports that came in at widely separated intervals of sexual predators who met particularly nasty comeuppances. These happened all over the Greater Tokyo area and in a few other cities throughout Japan, giving the people who looked into this sort of thing the distinct impression that there was a sexual predator predator out there somewhere. Discussions had been had between the local Neriman police and a few high-ranked officers from other districts, after the third one of these cases. Much information was given out behind a firmly closed door, some photos and video shown, and the high-ranked officials eventually left looking more than a little disturbed. Even slightly frightened.

After considerable thought the decision was made that as long as whatever it was kept to doing what it was doing, there was little they should do about it. Or, the unwritten addendum added, could do about it. Some of the video they'd been shown was, well, worrying. Not to mention that there was no proof whatsoever that the events were connected other than a certain feeling in the bones of various experienced cops. Each method of retribution, while excruciatingly painful, appeared to be unique, and carefully judged to be non-fatal. For all they could prove it was merely a series of vaguely similar but unconnected random attacks. As these were all on people who were known to be extremely dangerous sexual deviants, accounting between them so far for over fifty-three murders spanning some forty years, no one could really bring themselves to be overly worried about the ‘victims’. Technically, crimes were being committed, but in the process they were solving much worse crimes.

There was also the fact that no collateral damage was created, no one had ever seen or heard anything other than some nasty screaming, and in any case it was a lot less bother than random demon attacks, which some wards still suffered from. These wards, when they became aware of what had happened to certain unsavoury individuals, began rather wishing that whoever or whatever was behind that would turn their attention to demons. They were certain to cause less trouble than those bloody magical girls, who still didn't seem to realise that destroying an entire street and hospitalising a dozen people for shock at each demonic encounter was heading into definite overkill territory.

Finishing with the vacuum cleaner Nabiki put it away in the cupboard, then began cleaning the table and generally tidying up. She'd become quite good at household tasks, something she'd long felt was beneath her, partly due to circumstances and partly out of belated respect for her vanished elder sister. The brunette still held out hope that Kasumi would one day walk through the door and didn't want her to come into the house she'd run so well for so long to find it a mess. Finishing with the living room and moving into the kitchen she looked around with a snort. "Some cleaning, Akane," she mumbled under her breath, picking up a pan and looking at the crud caked on it with disgust. The younger sister had obviously snuck in and tried her hand at cooking once more, despite the threats from both Nabiki and Nodoka at what would happen if she did that again.

There were only so many times you could chase chicken teriyaki around the garden with a shovel before you decided that enough was enough, after all.

Grumbling, Nabiki reached for the hammer and cold chisel they kept in the drawer for just such an occasion, viciously chipping whatever it was off the sides of the pan, wincing as it sparked. She continued musing on the whole Ranma affair.

The most unexpected thing about the Amazons in her opinion was Cologne. The old woman, lead elder of the tribe, seemed to prefer being as far away from that tribe as possible. The young woman had never quite summoned up the nerve to ask her outright but it seemed likely that the reasons Shampoo and Mousse had for staying in Japan applied to the elder as well. Certainly she seemed to find modern appliances very useful, and apparently enjoyed running a noodle restaurant. While
Nabiki had no doubt that she was still as devious as ever behind the scenes the old girl seemed to have contentedly settled into a certain routine.

A few times she'd gone back to China for a couple of weeks, once or twice taking Shampoo with her, but always reappeared. The tribe itself still seemed to want Ranma found and Nabiki suspected that Cologne was using that desire to give herself a convenient excuse to stick around in Nerima.

Finishing with the pan she dropped it into a plastic bucket, then half-filled it with water. Retrieving a bottle of hydrochloric acid, normally used for cleaning particularly stubborn drains, from under the sink, she poured a generous amount into the bucket, leaning back from the cloud of purple vapour that rose from the bubbling contents accompanied by a hissing sound. "Purple? That's new. What the hell was she cooking with, ink?" The smell was appalling so she held a hand over her mouth and picked the bucket up with the other one, quickly carrying it out into the back garden. The fumes subsided after ten minutes or so, during which she finished with the rest of the dishes. Reclaiming the bucket she carefully lifted the stainless steel pan out, half-expecting to find it full of holes. Or possibly transmuted into gold.

In fact it was as shiny as if it was brand new. "Damn. If I could find out how she made that stuff we could sell it as a heavy-duty cleaner," she muttered, rinsing off the pan and inspecting it. While she was looking at it and marvelling at how clean it was there was a tired little squelching noise from behind her, making her turn just in time to see the bucket collapse into a soft mess of dissolved plastic and spill it's contents all over the floor. Luckily the mix of acid and whatever Akane had cooked up seemed to have expended it's activity, so it only left a nasty black-blue puddle rather than a hole. Nabiki sighed heavily and went to find the mop.
"Well, Genma old boy, I think we can be proud of ourselves."

"Indeed, Tendo. Five students, and no fatalities yet. Or even any serious injuries! The Saotome-Tendo School of Anything Goes Martial Arts is a success."

"You mean the Tendo-Saotome School, surely?"

"Not at all, my friend. The Saotome name is far better known in martial arts circles than the Tendo name. No offence."

"None taken, my dear friend. But I believe you may be mistaken. The Tendo Dojo has been a fixture of Nerima for far longer than the Saotome name has been associated with anything other than random thievery. No offence."

"Oh, I'm not offended, Tendo. How could I be after you so generously allowed myself and the boy to stay with you for so long. Even if you did let your daughter drive him off."

"Ah. Yes, your son, a true genius at the martial arts. Such a pity that he ran away."

The two men glared at each other while behind them three young men and two young women exchanged glances in the brightly-lit Dojo. This sort of thing was a fairly regular occurrence, but still caused mild concern, since at this point it was a fifty-fifty toss-up whether the two elder martial artists would shake hands and forget about it, or devolve into a shouting match followed by a certain amount of fighting. The students watched for a while longer, then decided that this was going to be one of the longer insult sessions and went back to sparring with each other. Eventually their teachers would get back to the actual teaching part of the process.

There had originally been eight students in the first group to join up with the re-established Saotome-Tendo, or Tendo-Saotome, depending on who you asked, school. In the beginning they had been taught out of part of a warehouse a couple of kilometres away but as the fortunes of the Dojo improved the old training hall was repaired to the point it could be used again. A couple of months ago they had moved in. Just after the move two of the students had become disillusioned with the teachers and had left, and a few weeks ago another had left for family reasons, although she said that she'd be back one day. So far no one else had joined although recently there had been interest from a few other teenagers and a couple of adults.

Soun reached the point of punching Genma in the face, which normally meant that in about five minutes one or other of them would end up in the koi pond. None of the students could understand quite why that particular place seemed to always be where the fight ended, but it invariably was. The first time they had witnessed the sudden change that overtook Sensei Saotome one of the women and two of the men had fainted, but by now they simply took it as one of those things that happened. This was Nerima after all. Once more the students stopped what they were doing to watch as the fight in progress rapidly left the building, following it outside and around the house, making bets as to which Sensei would end up wet. The two girls, who had picked Soun, smiled and collected their winnings, before going back inside followed by three irritated young men, one dripping and grumbling Master, and an irritatingly smug one with a smile on his bespectacled face.

Nabiki turned away from the window of her room, having been watching the antics of her father and Genma in the back yard. The sight brought back memories of Ranma and his father fighting in a similar manner, fights that also usually resulted in one or other participant getting dunked. She
was slightly surprised to realise that at some level she somewhat missed them. Just over three years had passed since she'd last seen the pig-tailed boy. She wondered what, at twenty-one, he now looked like. Likely he had grown a little taller, probably in both forms, but she guessed not by much. He'd never had the build of someone who would reach a great stature, although he had been extremely well developed even so. Once or twice she'd caught sight of him in the bathroom, genuinely by accident unlike what she suspected of Akane, and had been quietly impressed.

With a small private smile she sat in front of her computer and resumed reading the various police reports and other information she'd managed to cajole out of various contacts in official positions in the seven months since she'd read the one concerning the rapist in the park. In total nine reports had turned up that met her qualifications, and a further four that she was by now sure were unconnected. The most recent was only two months old, while the first one dated back to just under six months after the night of the great disaster. As the police had done before her she had found no real connection between them in either method or location but a feeling in her gut made her sure at a level she couldn't ignore that they were all the result of one person, that being Ranma. In another life she would have made an exceptional detective.

Dull thuds and a faint shout from the direction of the Dojo made her glance up for a moment. By the sounds of it Akane had joined the lessons. The two fathers had begun teaching her formally some months ago, Genma unwilling to get involved with her martial arts education until Soun did. They had known for some time that she was actually quite good in some respects, but hadn't really realized just how bad she was in many others. Soun had been very disappointed when he found out quite how much she had concentrated on attack to the exclusion of defence. The training that Ranma had been surreptitiously giving her in the guise of not giving her any training at all had improved her speed considerably, but since he'd left she had picked up even more bad habits.

Her father had always believed her to be reasonably good, and compared to the average martial artist she was better than average, but brute strength and an overwhelming attack didn't win fights against the sort of people Ranma had gone up against. Even when she attacked and nearly killed Ryoga, it was only the unexpectedness of her first blow that had allowed her to keep him off balance enough to press her advantage. If he had ever truly defended himself she'd most likely have soon found herself on the defensive. In Nabiki's opinion, one she shared with both the fathers and Ranma himself, she mainly lacked discipline and the ability to not let her temper get away from her. If she could overcome those defects she had it in her to be a decent but probably never spectacular practitioner of Anything Goes, which would put her in a very high class of martial artist generally. Her sister wasn't convinced that she would succeed, although she couldn't deny that she certainly had enthusiasm.

Another yell was followed by a crash and Nabiki winced slightly, adding a couple of thousand yen to the list of new damage in her head, not looking away from the screen. She was genuinely impressed with the fact that both the older men had kept at the teaching as long as they had, with no signs yet that they intended to give up. There had been a number of teething problems at the start, partly due to Soun being rusty and Genma being calibrated to teach someone at Ranma's level, which almost no-one was or indeed could be. Eventually they had managed to work out the bugs and had in fact become pretty good teachers. Soun was becoming much more like the father that she remembered, while his friend wasn't quite as big a pain as he had been. That wasn't to suggest she liked him very much though. At least the teaching school was on the verge of becoming financially independent, and even possibly mildly profitable.

Trying to ignore the noises drifting over the house and into her open window she concentrated on the work in hand. She was once more going over the various reports she had determined detailed places and events Ranma had been involved with, trying to pin down some sort of pattern. It wasn't easy, if it hadn't been for her familiarity with the martial artist and her certainty that the reports
were related she would have given up months ago. Sitting back having re-read the latest one yet again, she pulled at her lower lip absently while considering it, then opened another document. This one contained a number of items of interest to her, ones she had gleaned from various sources and that on the face of it were unrelated to either the police reports or her search.

There were reports on various apparent mystical goings on in and around Tokyo, such as demon attacks, magical girl sightings, even events that seemed more hearsay and rumour than fact. In addition was a list of various petty crimes, some solved, some not, that had attracted her attention. A few of them had the official police reports included, others came from reports in newspapers and online. All in all it was a fairly eclectic mix that to most people would have seemed pretty much random, but to her mind had something that interested her. Not truly something in common, or anything as crude as a pattern, more just a sort of vague trend. She scrolled through the list of reports, photos, and a small amount of video, looking yet again for the elusive thread that would tie things together into a whole.

The brunette wasn't even sure that whole was the one she hoped it was, but she was sure it was there. Somewhere. Eventually she sighed and slumped into her chair, turning off the monitor. It wasn't going to come to her this time.

Three days later she received another batch of information from a contact at a police station in a ward on the other side of the centre of Tokyo, along with a short note that suggested the contact would very much like to renegotiate his rate. A quick phone call during which no specific threat was made, but several were vaguely implied, left the young sergeant sweating slightly and regretting ever having become involved in any way with that damn Tendo girl. She put the wind up him more than some fairly unpleasant Yakuza thugs he'd had to deal with recently did, yet he was hard-pressed to explain exactly why. Putting the phone down Nabiki smiled icily in satisfaction then began looking through the information she had acquired.

Most of it was irrelevant but a couple of items stood out to her. Re-reading them very carefully she looked at the single photo enclosed, which showed a blurry image of a frankly unbelievable creature that most outside Tokyo would have dismissed as an obvious fake. Being a resident of Furinkan the middle Tendo sister accepted it as simple fact, then ignored it. The demonic creature apparently in the throes of expiring wasn't what she was interested in, neither were the three teen-aged girls in skimpy and impractical clothing cavorting around the creature with odd weapons. What was interesting was something barely visible on the extreme edge of the photo, a perfectly straight line of actinic purple-white light that looked like a special effect, originating from a source off-camera and intersecting the head of the demon. She was suddenly positive she'd seen something very much like that once before, under circumstances she'd never forget.

"Fuck me," she breathed faintly, staring at the photo, magnifying it on the screen to see if she could make out any more detail. "Could it really be...?" Looking through the attached text she saw that the photo had been taken in a ward she had never visited, one she had heard of as something of a hot-bed of odd demon attack events. The place apparently suffered from demons and magical girls in almost equal quantities, people being hard-pressed to say which group caused more damage. She'd heard at least one wag comment that on balance the inhabitants would prefer that the magical girls leave them to the demons rather than the reverse. The civic cost of their battles was apparently on a scale that would have made the NWC at its peak feel that it wasn't trying hard enough.

Digging further into the report, then calling her police contact back and pushing him slightly further down the path to developing an ulcer, she found out that the photo originated from a part of the ward in question that encompassed a small but world renowned private medical and research university. Apparently it was also well off the normal patch of this particular group of magical girl
demon hunters, which had sparked the curiosity of several groups that followed such things. This led her to some news groups and forums where she found even more information, some from this recent event a week ago, some dating back several years.

It took her another week to exhaust all the sources she could find on this new avenue of enquiry but in the end she had drawn some fascinating conclusions. The entire ward suffered from various semi-random demon incursions, for reasons she was unable to determine, which were normally dealt with moderately efficiently but in a remarkably overblown manner by one or other group of magical girls, as was the custom in those parts. The exception was a small area in the vicinity of the university which seemed to have almost no demon attacks, or for that matter demon hunter attacks. The ones that did occur seemed mainly to be accidental, quite likely the result of one party chasing the other into or through this area.

One thing that stood out was that interactions between demons and the hunters thereof often ended very abruptly when they crossed an ill-defined boundary around the general university area, sometimes with the extremely efficient and ruthless elimination of the demon in question, sometimes with the apparent just as sudden retreat of same, and at least once with the demon hunter involved having the shit kicked out of it while the demon watched from the sidelines and by all accounts laughed it's arse off. The other, unique, aspect about this was that no damage to anything other than the participants in these fights seemed to happen most of the time, or if it did it was quickly repaired. No one outside the limited audience of a couple of small internet forums seemed to realise anything odd was going on and even they hadn't put it all together for some reason.

Very interestingly, this state of affairs had begun fairly suddenly approximately two and a half years ago. Before that the place was just as likely to get hit as anywhere else in the general area. It was clear that something had changed back then, and the brunette had an idea what that could be. The question was what to do about it.

Assuming she was correct and this had something to do with the long-missing martial artist, the implication was that he was living in or somehow connected with that specific area, defending it against something he felt wasn't welcome. If that was the case how would he react to any of the people from his former life turning up on his doorstep? If she gave or sold her suspicions to pretty much any of the various parties who still wanted to find him, there was no doubt that all of them would find out sooner or later and go looking for him. That sounded to her like a recipe for disaster on a remarkable scale.

One issue she was having trouble with was that most of the old crew were more or less beginning to get their lives in order. Throwing Ranma back into the mix would scupper that, and presumably do much the same thing to him. How he would react to such a thing was an unknown but it was unlikely to be positively. Ukyo, certainly, seemed quite happy with Konatsu and Nabiki considered them both friends. She didn't want to cause them any problems. Sitting back and considering this thought some more brought the realisation, along with a slight shock of worry, that they were among the very few people she really did think of as friends rather than acquaintances or pawns.

The other thing that slowly dawned on her was that she no longer really had much interest in causing Ranma any more problems either. If he had managed to build a new life for himself, was it something she could bring herself to disrupt? 'Perhaps I have a conscience after all, despite what everyone says,' she thought with a wry grin. Shaking her head at the thought she reached out and turned off the monitor, stood, stretched, then went to the window to look out over the yard. What to do?

Noticing Akane walking back towards the house she sighed slightly. Her younger sister was still
bound and determined to find the young man, even though she didn't talk about it nearly as much nowadays. There was little doubt that if she got even a hint of a possible location for him she'd be off like a shot intending to drag him back by his pigtail. Not that she had much chance of that. If what Nabiki suspected was true, the results of the blue-haired young woman actually meeting the martial artist again would probably be epic and perhaps lethal. The evidence suggested that any bias he had against striking a woman, at least one who was attacking him, had long since vanished. Nabiki was under no illusions about how her sister would stand up to an enraged Ranma if he decided to go all out. The battle would be short, violent, and probably visible from space.

In some ways she felt it might be best to simply forget about what she'd worked out. Two things stood in the way of that, though; Her curiosity, which would keep her awake at night until she found out whether she was correct, and concern for her other sister. She still missed her terribly, so if there was the slightest chance that finding Ranma would lead her to Kasumi she had no choice. "Damn," she mumbled, turning away from the window. "I guess I'm going to Minato tomorrow."

Hearing Nodoka calling everyone to come for lunch Nabiki left the room, closing the door on the way out, completely unaware that she had been, as on many occasions in the past, observed and overheard in the room she believed private. The observer left soon after she did.

The gently bleeping phone was answered after half a dozen rings.

"Hi."

"You're sure?"

"I understand. It was inevitable, sooner or later. It's taken longer than I expected, actually."

"Yes, we're pretty much ready. It all depends on whether she tells anyone else first."

"Thanks, my friend. You've been a lot of help over the years."

"Yes, the usual place and amount. I'll let you know how it goes."

"Goodbye, Sasuke."

The person who had answered pressed the disconnect button, dropped the phone back on the table, then turned to his companion who was listening with silent interest. Meeting concerned brown eyes, he smiled. "We're going to have a visitor soon."

"Oh, my."
Chapter 4

As it happened it was four days later that Nabiki set out on her visit to the area she suspected contained an errant martial artist/fiancé to her sister. A number of things cropped up that she had no choice but to deal with, various bills needed to be paid, and above all she had to make sure she could travel without being followed or in any way suspected of anything. Assuring herself of this last point was nearly a day's work in itself. Finally, though, she left the Tendo residence early one morning heading for the nearest train station with her cellphone turned off just in case. Taking a train in a different direction she carefully checked for a tail, switching trains three times before she was sure she wasn't being followed. After travelling nearly twice the actual distance between home and her destination she finally arrived at the station one stop away from her target, as another precaution, taking a taxi the final two kilometres.

After some thought she had decided to start at the university itself, then work her way outwards. She had photos of both forms of Ranma and of Kasumi, with the hope that someone might recognise either of them. It seemed a faint chance, none of her contacts in the area had ever come up with anything, but it was worth a try. Heading for the university admissions office she found herself talking to a pleasant middle-aged woman who, after some buttering up and a decent bribe, was willing to look at the photos. This drew a blank. She was sure she'd never seen any of the three people shown, and as she told Nabiki, she had worked in that position for twenty years and had a very good memory for faces. Thanking her with an inner feeling of mild disappointment, the Tendo woman left the office and walked outside to sit in the sun while trying to decide on another approach.

To be honest she hadn't expected that avenue to bear fruit, but it had been an obvious first attempt. Deciding to ask around in the various cafés around the campus, she picked a direction more or less at random and started off.

Three hours later she was getting irritated. She'd spoken to dozens of people, spending quite a lot of cash on 'incentives,' with nothing to show for it but sore feet. Sitting at a table outside the last café she made some notes, looking up to order a coffee when the waitress stopped by. Sipping it appreciatively when it came the brunette considered her options. She could give up, chalk the whole thing up to coincidence, go home, and forget about it. The idea made her snort derisively. She could expand her search, going further out into the community and hoping that she found something. A twinge of pain from her abused feet made her reluctant to do that unless necessary. Or she could sit here for a while, trying to come up with another plan. That seemed like the easiest solution, at least for the next half hour or so. Smiling slightly to herself she ordered another coffee and a sandwich, kicking off her shoes and massaging one foot.

Half an hour or so later a pretty brunette girl of average height, casually dressed in the normal student attire of a T-shirt with the name of a popular band on it and tight jeans, her long braided hair tied off with a bright red silk bow, came up to her, looking uncertain. Pushing her stylish sunglasses up her nose with one finger she glanced around nervously, then leaned closer. Intrigued, Nabiki watched with curiosity, waiting for the girl to speak. "Um, excuse me, but someone mentioned you were looking for some people?" The middle Tendo sister nodded with a faint smile. This was the sort of thing she was used to.

"Yes. Why, do you have some information for me?" The girl glanced around again, then pulled out one of the other chairs and sat. Leaning forward she lowered her voice a little.

"I might have. You have photos, I'm told?"
"Yes." Pulling out the now somewhat dog-eared pictures Nabiki dropped them on the table in front of the girl, who spread them apart with one hand while nibbling a nail on the other. She inspected them carefully, picking each one up in turn and looking at it over her sunglasses which had slipped down her nose again. Nabiki noticed that she kept coming back to the one of Ranma's female form and smiled internally.

"OK. I might have seen some of these people, I think," the girl said, putting the photos on the table in a neat line, reaching out with one finger to align one of them better. Not looking at Nabiki she casually, or at least what she presumably thought was casually, said "Ah, I believe you were offering, um, payment... for information?" Her cheek was twitching a little as she quickly glanced at the face of the other woman then away again, while once more her table-mate was smiling inside.

"If you have some real information I think I could probably come up with, hmm, shall we say five thousand yen?" The girl seemed slightly taken aback.

"Um. I could get in a lot of trouble if anyone finds out I told you anything. Twenty thousand." Nabiki grinned coldly.

"Trust me, dear, you could get in a lot more trouble if you're wasting my time. Six thousand."

Looking around again, her eyes darting back and forth, the girl sweated a little. Pushing her sunglasses up her face she replied, "Eighteen thousand, and I'll tell you where I saw them." Leaning back in her chair, Nabiki considered the increasingly nervous-looking young woman for long enough to make her squirm.

"Take me to where you saw them, tell me what you know, and I'll agree to sixteen thousand." The other brunette went still for a moment then reluctantly nodded.

"OK." She pushed the photos further apart, then indicated the one of the female Ranma. "This one, I think. She looks younger in this photo, but I'm pretty sure it's her. I think she's some sort of martial artist, I've seen her doing some sort of practice. She and a friend moved in to my apartment building about eighteen months ago. They always seem to be really careful about being seen outside." Trying not to grin, Nabiki leaned forward.

"What about this one. Have you seen her?" She pushed the photo of Kasumi forward. The girl picked it up and studied it again, looking doubtful.

"It might be her friend. It kind of looks like her but she's got different hair. I haven't seen her as much." Inspecting the photo some more, she finally put it back down. "Sorry, I can't be sure." Slightly disappointed but not showing it, Nabiki nodded.

"All right. Where is this apartment building of yours?"

"It's about a kilometre and a half away."

"Fine. Show me where, and I'll pay you when I'm sure you're being honest with me." The girl appeared offended.

"I'm telling the truth!" Nabiki smiled coldly.

"They always say that." The brunette looked at her oddly, then glanced around again.

"Fine. Come on. It's about ten minutes walk." They stood, the Tendo woman dropped a couple of notes on the table before following her new acquaintance out of the café and down the street. The
girl struck her as a fairly new student, perhaps first or second year. Curious, she asked, "I assume you're a student here? What are you studying?"

"Sports medicine," the girl replied, constantly looking around as if she was sure they were being followed. Her obvious paranoia was becoming irritating and Nabiki had to suppress the urge to tell her to calm down. "Physiotherapy, biomechanics of athletes, that sort of thing. It's fascinating." Nabiki nodded in the right places as the girl chattered nervously, learning far more than she wanted about oxygen depletion in muscles. Eventually her continued silence seemed to make the girl sufficiently nervous to shut up and they walked the rest of the way in silence, with the brunette looking over her shoulder now and then. Reaching a block of what looked like high-end apartments that backed onto a large park, the girl stopped.

"This is it. That girl and her friend are in the apartment on the top floor." Nabiki inspected the building, which had a high-security door access control panel next to the main entrance. It looked like a nice place to live and as a result quite expensive. If it was indeed Ranma that the girl had seen, how did he afford this? Looking up at the front of the building she saw that it probably didn't have many flats in it, perhaps one or two per floor, each of them with a balcony at the front. The top one also seemed to have some sort of roof garden from what she could see from the ground.

"Expensive place." The girl nodded.

"Very. My grandfather pays for my apartment, but I don't get much money otherwise. So..." She held out her hand looking embarrassed. Nabiki smiled.

"Get me inside and I'll pay you." With a slight sigh the brunette nodded, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a swipe card. She walked to the door and ran it through the reader which beeped and illuminated a small green light, then she pulled the door open. Nabiki walked through with satisfaction. The girl followed her inside, leading the way to an elevator. Pressing the button and looking around nervously, she jumped a little when the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Waving Nabiki inside she once more followed, pressing the top button once inside.

"Only building residents can access the top floor. There's a swimming pool up there as well." She swiped her card through the reader next to the control panel, the doors slid shut, and the elevator ascended. When it stopped and the door opened she stuck her head out, looking quickly around. Waving Nabiki out she held the elevator door open with her foot and held out her hand again. "Down at the end on the left. Apartment 601." The Tendo woman glanced in the indicated direction then nodded.

"Good. Thank you." She pulled out a roll of notes and peeled off the negotiated amount, handing it to the girl and putting the rest back in her pocket, "Here you go." The girl took it and smiled a little uncertainly. As she stepped back into the elevator the doors slid silently shut. Satisfied, Nabiki turned and headed in the direction the girl had indicated, finding that at the end of the corridor was only one door, with a discrete 601 in gold numbers on it above the lens of a security viewer. Below that was something that made her heart miss a beat. A small sign in the form of a wooden duck, painted yellow, hung from a screw in the door. This one was unmarked but she felt it couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

Raising a hand which she noted with inner surprise was trembling a little, she knocked on the door next to the wooden duck. There was no immediate answer, so she knocked again, slightly more firmly. With a faint click the door opened a little, apparently not having been shut properly. After a moment's thought she gently pushed on it, watching as it swung open to reveal a hallway with a number of doors opening off it, some coats hung up on the wall inside above a rack for shoes.
Tentatively stepping inside she looked around curiously. There were a couple of house-plants on a table a few metres down the hallway, three or four paintings and a pair of prints hung on the walls, a nice carpet on the floor. The walls were painted a muted yellow with white trim on the woodwork. Walking slowly down the hallway she glanced into each open door as she came to it, seeing sparse but nice furnishings, a well-equipped kitchen, three rooms that seemed to be bedrooms, only one of which appeared to be in current use, and a large living room that obviously opened out onto the balcony at the front of the building.

So far she hadn't seen any sign of life, but for some reason couldn't bring herself to call out. *This is going to be very awkward if it turns out that Ranma doesn't live here,* she thought wildly to herself, trying not to laugh hysterically. The quiet was starting to get to her. Hearing a faint noise from somewhere behind her she whirled around, looking about for the cause. Nothing was visible but she noticed something she'd missed up to now, that the hallway turned away from the front of the building just beside the living room, heading towards the back. The apartment seemed to occupy the entire top floor, nearly as large as the entire Tendo house. Cautiously heading down the corridor towards the back of the building she came to a closed set of sliding doors. There were faint noises coming from beyond that point which sounded like footsteps.

Taking a deep breath she slowly slid one side of the double doors to the side. It silently opened to reveal that the entire back half of the apartment was one enormous room, floored in polished wood, with several large windows overlooking the park beyond. There were a pair of skylights in the ceiling which was a good three metres up. All this she took in at glance, before her attention was drawn to the figure in the middle of the room.

The person, tall, female, brown hair in a ponytail down her back to her waist, dressed in loose black silk clothing, was concentrating completely on an intricate martial arts kata, one Nabiki instantly recognised as belonging to the Anything Goes school. She was performing it smoothly and flawlessly at considerable speed, smiling gently to herself. Stepping further into the room Nabiki watched with her heart beating at twice the normal speed. She had seen Ranma perform this kata dozens of times, but this woman wasn't Ranma.

It was, of course, Kasumi. She turned towards her sister and smiled more widely at her, apparently unsurprised at seeing her standing there with a dumbstruck expression on her face, unable to speak. Nabiki got the sudden impression that Kasumi had been aware of her presence the entire time she'd been in the apartment. Taking a couple of steps towards her long-missing sister she raised one hand, then slowly let it fall to her side, watching as the woman continued the long and complex series of motions, a graceful dance with deadly potential. Just as she was finishing Nabiki heard the noise from behind her of the door to the room closing with a click, spinning around to see the young woman who had led her here. The brunette dropped her hand from the door and walked past Nabiki to meet Kasumi who was coming in the other direction. They met, then hugged, while the middle sister watched agape, unable to work out what was going on. Both turned to smile at the stunned Tendo woman, who saw they were holding hands.

"Hello, Nabiki. We were expecting you three days ago," said the young woman with a cocky grin, one she recognised with shock even if the face it was on was one she'd never seen before today. While she was staring in disbelief the girl shimmered as if seen through a heat haze, shrinking slightly, hair brightening and changing colour. A second or two later the once-familiar sight, last seen three and a half years ago, of Ranma in her female form grinned at Nabiki.

Who promptly fainted.
Chapter 5

Nabiki opened her eyes and stretched, staring at the ceiling with mild interest. The bed felt amazingly comfortable today, making her reluctant to get up. Her eyes drifted shut and she relaxed. Five seconds later her eyes snapped open again, she tensed, then slowly lifted her head and looked around. This wasn't her room. Memory flooded back, but what she remembered was so absurd it couldn't possibly be true. Could it?

Turning her head towards the window in the side of the room near the head of the bed she was lying in she could see buildings in the distance she recognised as the university. With a sigh she dropped her head back onto the pillow. "It really happened," she muttered, before pushing the covers back and sitting up. Looking at her watch she saw it was now mid afternoon, she must have been asleep for a couple of hours. Stretching again she yawned, then got to her feet and explored the room, which was nicely furnished and painted a delicate egg-shell blue. Briefly examining a painting hanging on the wall, a watercolour by an artist she vaguely remembered hearing about, she ended up standing by the window looking out onto the street.

The view out over the local area was very good, showing off the university campus well, a kilometre away to the east. Down at street level a few people were walking about, with the occasional car going past. Overall it seemed like a nice quiet area, one that was pretty affluent. It made the question of how Ranma and Kasumi could afford to live here even more puzzling. This apartment, for example, must cost a fortune to rent. It was huge and well-appointed, not to mention the location.

Ranma. Kasumi. She'd finally found them, but was left with more questions than ever. Not the least of which was, how the hell had Ranma pulled off that stunt? He, She, had looked and even acted completely differently, fooling her totally. Even allowing for some sort of shape changing magic, which she was kind of used to after all, the mannerisms, voice, everything, had been completely convincing. The thought that it was Ranma, not the young female university student she presented herself as, would never have occurred to her. If nothing else, the last three years or so seemed to have made an amazing actor out of the gender changing martial artist.

Taking a deep breath, the brunette Tendo turned and walked towards the door, opening it with a determined air. She was going to find out what was going on. When she left the room she found it was one of the ones that opened off the main hallway, next to the one that seemed to be in use. Heading towards the living room she looked around, once more finding it deserted. This time, though, she could clearly hear sounds coming from the large room at the rear of the apartment and went in that direction, questions burning in her mind.

The double doors were open so she went through, to find Kasumi and Ranma, who was still female but now wearing the same black silks as the older girl, sparring in the middle of the room. She watched, fascinated and somewhat shocked, as her gentle older sister attacked the smaller red-head with the level of ferocity that she'd have expected from Akane, but also with a skill that was clearly orders of magnitude past what their younger sister could bring to bear. If it wasn't for the fact that both women were grinning happily the middle sister would have thought that they were in a fight for their lives.

As it was the bout was clearly just for practice. Ranma deflected the strikes that rained down on her, her opponent moving with blurring speed, dodging and leaping about to the sound of arms and legs striking each other. Both participants were clearly enjoying themselves, even as they exchanged blows that could shatter concrete. Nabiki's eyes bugged out as her sister suddenly
performed a standing front flip right over the head of the younger red-head, to land behind her with her arm around her neck and the other hand pressed lightly against her spine.

"Brilliantly executed, Kas," Ranma said with a broad smile, before somehow spinning around and redirecting the pressure so that Kasumi was now the one in a precarious situation. The move was so fast Nabiki couldn't determine what she'd done or how. "You're getting very good at that move." The red-haired woman released her opponent, both of them stepping apart and bowing formally to conclude the match. They turned to look at the middle sister, who was gaping with her mouth hanging open, before exchanging amused glances. Ranma walked towards the door. "I'm going to change. Meet you in the living room." As she walked past Nabiki she gently reached out and closed the other woman's mouth with a faint click. "Still take your coffee with milk, Nabiki?"

The brunette nodded weakly as the martial artist left the room. She followed the black-clad red-head with her eyes for a moment before turning them back towards her older sister who was approaching her with a familiar smile, one that seemed somehow happier she remembered. Kasumi stopped in front of her, looking her up and down, before opening her arms. "I've missed you, sister," she said softly. The other woman stared for a long moment before launching herself at her older sister with a wordless cry, grabbing her and hugging her hard, tears running down her face. Kasumi held her tightly, resting her head on the shorter woman's shoulder, her own eyes glistening.

A few minutes later the elder sister had led her still-crying sibling back into the living room and was sitting beside her on the L-shaped sofa that fitted into the corner of the room, still holding her. Ranma, male now and dressed in black jeans with a red silk shirt, came into the room with a tray full of drinks. Putting it on the low table near the sofa he poured three cups of coffee, putting one in front of each of the women, before taking a seat on the other arm of the sofa and leaning back, sipping his own coffee and watching them silently.

Eventually Nabiki sniffled, wiped her eyes, and pushed herself upright on the sofa. Reaching for her cup she brought it to her mouth and gulped a few mouthfuls of the hot drink, finding it strong and just the way she liked it. Holding the cup in both hands, allowing the heat to warm fingers that seemed to have gone cold despite the pleasant ambient temperature of the room, she composed herself, glancing between the other two. They looked at each other for a moment, understanding seeming to pass, then Ranma nodded. Studying Nabiki he smiled a little, putting his cup down on the table and leaning forward.

"So, how have you been?" She stared at him for a long while before a slight smile twitched one corner of her mouth. He responded with a grin, and before she knew it she was howling with laughter. The other two joined in, the living room ringing with their amusement for some little while. Eventually it wound down and she wiped her eyes, still giggling.

"You bastard. Thanks, I needed that." Graciously he tilted his head towards her with a smile.

"You're welcome."

Looking at him curiously, she assessed the martial artist carefully. Since she'd last seen him he'd grown slightly and filled out a bit, all of it obviously hard muscle. His face was a bit more mature, harder adult planes and features replacing or supplanting the traces of adolescence left at eighteen, now he was nearly twenty-two. She'd noticed that his female form, while still petite, was noticeably taller and if anything even more developed than before. In both cases the changes were all for the positive. The man sitting across from her was someone she could easily see almost any woman being attracted to, even more than as the boy she remembered. Likewise, the red-headed young woman was truly beautiful, even more than the girl had been.

Switching her gaze to her sister she inspected her as well. Kasumi looked much like she
remembered but carried herself with an air of assurance that she hadn't had before, a quiet competence overlaid on the serene gentle woman of old. It gave the impression of a mother figure who could also pull the arms off an attacker and beat him to death with them, all the while looking apologetic for the inconvenience.

The mental image made her giggle, Kasumi smiling at her even without knowing why she was amused. Reaching out she hugged her older sister again. "God, I've missed you, sis," she whispered. Releasing the older woman she once more glanced between her and Ranma. "Will you tell me what's going on? How did you get so good at martial arts. Why did you? Where have you been? What are you doing? And you!" She pointed at Ranma, who looked mildly amused. "How the hell did you do that, that... whatever the hell it was! You fooled me completely." He grinned, accepting the comment as praise.

"Thanks. That was a lot of fun." She glared at him, then giggled, not sure whether to laugh or scream.

"It wasn't meant as a compliment!"

"I know." He was still grinning, and in the end all she could do was laugh. Kasumi smiled at both of them, drinking her coffee and watching.

"Ranma, you're still an idiot. I've missed you too." He appeared both slightly surprised and rather pleased.

"Of all of them, you're the only one I did miss, Nabiki. You were a pain in my rear, but at least I could talk to you as a person. The only other one like that came with me." He smiled at her, then glanced at Kasumi, who was looking at him with what Nabiki could easily see was much more than simply fondness. They obviously meant a lot to each other. For some reason this made her considerably happier.

Kasumi asked, "Would you like to stay overnight? It's going to take quite a long time if you want to hear the whole story. We've got plenty of room."

Glancing around Nabiki could only agree with this. The apartment was huge. "I guess I could. I'll have to call home and tell them something though, they're expecting me back tonight." Ranma tossed her a cell-phone unexpectedly, making her blink as Kasumi's slender hand came out of nowhere faster than she could follow to snag it before it could hit her in the face. Her sister handed it to her with a slight smile.

"Use this one, it's a special one that can't be traced to us. Just in case." She looked at him curiously, this seemed paranoid even to her, also very high tech for the Ranma she remembered. Still, she accepted it and dialled the number of the Tendo residence. Nodoka answered, and after exchanging pleasantries Nabiki told her that she'd bumped in to a friend from university who had invited her out for the night, so as a result she was going to stay over rather than come back very late. The older woman thought this was a good idea, told her to have a nice time, then bid her goodbye. Disconnecting the phone she handed it back to the martial artist who put it back wherever he'd gotten it from. When he looked back to her she was grinning at him, having just noticed that his hair was still in the braid that he'd worn as the brunette student, complete with the red bow.

"The hairstyle suits you better as a woman, Saotome," she said with amusement in her voice. He laughed.

"I know. It took ages to braid it like this though, and I'm going out as a female later, so I left it." Reaching back he pulled his braid over his shoulder in the manner that Kasumi had always
affected, looking pleased with the effect. Both women laughed.

"He's quite vain about his appearance, even more so when he's a she," Kasumi loudly whispered to her sister, her eyes twinkling. Ranma looked outraged.

"That's only because I look good." He waved the end of the silly-looking braid at the sisters, who exchanged glances then giggled. Carefully adjusting the bow he flipped the braid behind him, looking satisfied, then grinned. Nabiki watched with amusement.

"You seem a lot better adjusted to your female aspect now," she commented. He nodded happily.

"A very good person helped me a lot with that. I came to realise it's only another side of me, one that's as much me as any part could be. There's no point fighting it, better to accept it and move on." It was clear who he was talking about, Nabiki could see how proud Kasumi looked at his words.

"So you've stopped looking for a cure?" Suddenly serious, he met her gaze with his own.

"There is no cure. I'm sure of that."

"But, the springs..."

"Mix. They don't replace. Taro is proof of that, but no one seems to have worked it out." Nabiki's eyes widened at the concept.

"Ah. Yes, I see, it is pretty obvious. I wonder why we didn't see it before?" He smirked a little.

"Everyone was so hung up on the mistaken idea that if one spring changes you, logically another one should change the change. It does, but not in a generally useful way."

After a moment's thought Nabiki asked, "Surely Cologne should know that? Why would she try to bribe you with the Spring of Drowned Man water? For that matter, why did the Jusenkyo Guide send you some for a wedding present?" Ranma's face hardened.

"Oh, I'm absolutely certain Cologne knows full well that there is no cure, and that the results of mixing the springs would be... unwelcome. I'm not sure why she never brought it up, I'll admit, but my suspicion is that she was working on the basis that by holding that over me she could control me. She may think that If she'd come right out and told me there was no cure I'd have been even less cooperative with her plans." He didn't look happy, his expression showing there was a good deal of anger left in him over the way he'd been used by the Amazons. "As far as the Guide goes, I'm kind of puzzled. Certainly he should know about the effects of mixing the springs, but he acted for a long time like it was a cure. Perhaps he was acting under the influence of the Amazons? No idea. One day I'll have to ask." Nabiki nodded slowly, pondering the implications and the possible causes of the Guides behaviour.

"I don't think either Mousse or Shampoo know about it either," Ranma added. "Mousse particularly. I know he'd love to be rid of his curse, the fight over that damn water proved that. Shampoo, maybe, she tends to follow Cologne's orders, but even there I kind of doubt it." He shrugged. "It's all a bit strange. I've put it down mainly to the Amazons being both secretive and authoritarian."

"Did you look for a different cure?" He nodded.

"For a while. I know some pretty good magic users, and after we... left... I spent a couple of months talking to a few. Everyone who looked into it agreed that the Jusenkyo magic is horribly powerful,
very old, and completely unbeatable. At least without paying a price that sane people would be unwilling to pay." He looked a little haunted for a moment, then shook his head. "No, once you've got this curse you're stuck with it for good. That's kind of the point. Luckily, I had help realising that at least in my case it isn't really a curse."

Kasumi interjected, "It took some time to convince him completely, but even before the wedding fiasco he was slowly working this all out and coming to terms with it. If it hadn't been for his, um, unhelpful upbringing with Genma, he'd probably have been able to deal with it much earlier." She momentarily seemed as irritated as Nabiki had ever seen her, a mild frown crossing her face. "That man has a lot to answer for..." Ranma smiled at her.

"Don't get all worked up, Kas. Sooner or later he'll pay for his actions, one way or another."
Returning his attention to the other sister he watched her face for a moment, then added with a sly look, "All that said, it turns out that with the right methods and a lot of practice, the curse can be... useful." She looked at him with a raised eyebrow wondering what he was talking about, then nearly choked on her coffee when he suddenly turned female without the aid of cold water.

"Ack! What the fuck?" she managed, coughing violently. Kasumi deftly relieved her of her mug and slapped her on the back at the same time while shooting an evil look at her companion.

"That wasn't very nice, Ranma," she scolded. The red-headed woman looked abashed although the corners of her mouth were twitching a little.

"Sorry." They both waited for Nabiki to regain her composure. Eventually she managed to clear her throat of misplaced coffee, then glared at the red-head, who grinned back. Even with the apparent shape change earlier in the practice room, the sudden shift of gender had taken her by surprise.

"How did you do that, Saotome?" she demanded. The other woman looked satisfied with the reaction she had caused, bright blue eyes glinting with humour in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Lots and lots of practice, mainly." Nabiki didn't seem satisfied so she expanded on her subject. "It's kind of a hybrid of ki control, magic, and meditation. I finally figured out how to make the curse think it's been triggered, by fooling the bit that looks for hot or cold water. It's not perfect, water still makes me change unless I'm ready for it and concentrating, but it's a huge improvement. One day I may be able to suppress the water part completely but that will probably take years of practice. The best part is that I'm almost certain I can stop any changes to the curse, such as it being locked, now. Not that I've had reason to try, but the method I've worked out seems plausible." She seemed very pleased with herself. The middle sister was impressed and a little awed.

"How did you learn magic of all things?" She found she wasn't nearly as surprised as most people would have been, remembering her thoughts over the years that the martial artist seemed to be able to learn anything he or she had an interest in. The woman shrugged.

"Just kind of picked it up. Like I said, I know quite a lot of magic users. I watched what was happening whenever I was near one, and I've been around a hell of a lot of magic over the years for some damn reason. Eventually I started to make sense of what was going on, and how to do it myself. It annoys real mages as they tell me I can't possibly make it work the way I do, but whatever they say it works." The brunette stared at her for a while, then smiled.

"Not an idiot. I was right."

"Thanks." They shared an amused look for a moment.
"So, earlier, that incredible bit of acting? Was that magic as well?" Ranma looked pleased with herself again.

"Partly. The change is magic, it's a sort of an illusion more than a genuine shape change. This is a real shift, I am completely physically female at the moment. When I use that spell, though, it doesn't make a change as complete. But it's very flexible." She shimmered again, and a couple of seconds later the girl from earlier was sitting in her place. Another shimmer, and it was a much older woman there, then a young boy. "You see? Under all this I'm still me, but the outside looks and sounds completely convincing. It fools cameras, people, and even most magic users. Some really good ones can see through it, or at least tell that it's not real, but even they can't work out what the real person is behind it." The small boy shimmered and turned into something that made Nabiki's eyes widen and forced a strangled squeak from her throat.

The thing sitting there grinning at her from a mouth with far too many teeth was humanoid, female, and damn scary, seeing as it appeared to be some sort of demonic creature. Dark blue scales covered it under quite a lot of thin black leather, yellow slit-pupilled eyes looked back at her with cold amusement, while a forked tongue slipped between the fangs. It crossed one hoofed leg over the other knee and waved at her with a taloned hand, before shimmering again and changing back into the familiar and definitely welcome form of Ranma again.

"Holy shit," Nabiki managed after a long pause, in a small voice. Kasumi was half-smiling, half-frowning.

"Again, that wasn't very nice." The red-head grinned.

"No, but it was funny." The older woman sighed.

Licking dry lips, the middle sister asked after a pause, "So, that's how you've managed to stay hidden all this time?" Ranma shook her head.

"No, not at first, although it's been very useful. I only completely mastered this about a year and a half ago. I sort of cobbled it together from several spells I learned that were a lot more limited, then worked on it until it did what I wanted. There's still room for improvement, I think, but it works pretty well as it is. Before that, we used a different approach." She gestured around at the apartment. "This place is shielded against magical surveillance, as are both of us. In the beginning that was Happosai's work. He has all sorts of interesting artefacts and techniques that he helped us with. We also picked up a lot more useful methods to stop people tracking us over the years." She produced the secure cell-phone again.

"This, for example. I got it from a contact in a part of the government I can't mention, along with a few other useful tech toys. They owed me a few favours for helping them with a... sort of a problem... a while ago." She put the thing away again. "There are a lot of other things as well. Some are just techniques, some are equipment. All together it makes disappearing possible. For a while, at least." Inspecting Nabiki, she smiled a bit. "I knew that eventually you'd find us if we stayed in Japan, but there were reasons for doing so. Although you took longer than I expected." She looked smug.

Nabiki had been listening with a slight feeling of unreality. How on earth had Ranma learned all these skills, met all these people? She was becoming aware that there was a major part of the gender-shifting martial artist's life that had completely bypassed her. Something the woman had mentioned made her think. "Happosai. You said he helped you. I always thought that was what happened when he disappeared. That night, the way he looked at both of you, it was clear that something had changed. He didn't talk about it, but it must have been about two weeks later that he left and just never came back." Ranma smiled slightly. "So where is he? No-one seems to have
seen him for at least two, two and a half years."

The red-head changed back into the man, making Nabiki stare once more. The casual way he did it was weird, the way Kasumi didn't react was weirder. "Oh, he's around, some of the time. Yes, you're right, he followed us almost immediately. Once we'd established our first cover I let him know where we were, and he helped us make a much better one. When that was working, we spent nearly two years staying out of sight and training. That's when I started teaching Kas the art."

Kasumi turned to look at her sister. "He's a very good teacher. At first, me learning was just for self defence, in case our precautions didn't work. There was always the possibility that one of the fiancées or rivals would track us down and Ranma felt that if I was with him I was in danger. So he wanted to teach me to be able to hold them off long enough for him to help." She smiled at the other woman. "Neither one of us expected that I would enjoy it so much." Ranma nodded.

"Or that she'd be so good at it. It's practically criminal, the raw talent for the art that nearly got wasted. She's got it in her to be almost as good as I am, and the 'almost' is only because I've been learning since I could walk. Even so, in a bit more than three years she's learned as much as most people would in twenty." He looked very proud. "If someone does attack her now they'll regret it. Not for very long, mind you." Kasumi seemed worried.

"Oh, my, I could never kill someone, even if they were attacking me." She paused, then added with an unnerving smile, "I could probably force myself to maim them a bit though." With wide eyes Nabiki edged slightly away from her sister, making Ranma smirk.

"She's a lot better than Akane will probably ever be," he said with distinct pleasure. Kasumi appeared embarrassed, but Nabiki nodded thoughtfully. While not an expert she was the daughter of a very good martial artist, and could assess the abilities of someone like that pretty well. What she'd seen in the practice room lent a lot of credence to Ranma's assertion. Her younger sister, while extremely strong, lacked a certain something that would inhibit her progressing much past the point she was now unless she fixed it. Which didn't seem likely, as it was almost certainly tied in with her temper and overall emotional immaturity.

Inspecting her older sister with new eyes, Nabiki slowly asked, "So, have you learned any ki techniques as well?" Those abilities were what turned someone like Ranma from implausibly powerful into appallingly powerful. Kasumi looked down, frowning a little.

"Well, yes, but not as much as I should have." Ranma laughed.

"Kas, don't be so hard on yourself. You know, or you should do, I've told you often enough, that you're already very good. You just need more practice." He glanced at her sister. "She's a perfectionist. I can do things that she can't yet, but she wants to. It will come with time." He seemed very pleased. "Go on, show her," he said to the older sister. With a slightly embarrassed smile Kasumi held out her hand, making Nabiki squeak with surprise when a softly glowing ball of light suddenly appeared in it. The light grew in size and intensity, stopping at the dimensions of a softball. The white-gold light looked like the woman was holding a hundred watt light bulb in her hand, but the slight tingle of static that came from it made it clear that something a lot more dangerous than a globe of thin glass was present.

Nabiki stared in amazement, watching as Kasumi quickly flipped the ball of ki from one hand to the other, then made it vanish again. "Bloody hell," she breathed, very impressed indeed. The only people she'd ever seen do anything like that were Ryoga and Ranma. Presumably Happosai could as well, but he used ki in other ways most of the time. Looking at her sister with near-awe, she smiled. "You have been busy," she commented. Kasumi smiled back, pleased.
"It was a lot of work, but I'm getting there."

"She's a lot better than she thinks," Ranma said. "I'd put her overall level with ki at about where I was before I went up against Herb the second time. General use of the Art, probably around my level when I arrived in Nerima, but with a number of techniques I didn't know then. At the moment she could probably beat me at that point, and give Ryoga a seriously bad day right now. Anyone else other than Happosai, Cologne or possibly your father, would be in trouble." Nabiki was surprised by the last name. He noticed her expression. "Your father is actually very good. Probably slightly better than Pop in some ways. He's out of practice though, even with the new school."

Nabiki stared, surprised. "You know about that?" He nodded, scratching the back of his neck in a gesture she recognised as one of slight embarrassment.

"Um, yes. We've... Well, we've kind of been keeping an eye on things in Nerima." She looked hard at him, then at her sister, who also appeared embarrassed.

"How? And why?"

"You have your network, I have mine." He smiled mischievously. "They overlap." Nabiki stared at him for a long moment, light finally dawning.

"You suborned my contacts, you bastard!" The man smirked, very amused.

"Not all of them. But enough. Anyway, you did the same thing to the Kuno loonies."

"That's different!" Ranma laughed, delighted at her outrage.

"Not really. Anyway, yes, I kind of flipped a number of your people. Mostly ones in this area, but a few key ones in other places, and in Nerima. Plus I have others you don't know about."

"How the hell did you do that?" Nabiki was desperately curious, and knew full well he knew it.

"I could pay better, for a start. Also, the difficult ones turned out to be a lot more scared of me than of you, when I pushed a little." He paused, then grinned. "They don't know it's me, in most cases." He shimmered again and there was a much larger, very dangerous looking man sitting there, wearing dark glasses and with a scar down his cheek. "Some of them know Gorou here," he said in a much deeper voice. With another shimmer the hulking man was replaced with a tall dark-skinned woman, wearing a business suit with her long hair up in a bun. "Others know Mika." The voice this time was low and sultry. With a final shimmer, an exact duplicate of Nabiki sat on the other side of the table.

"One or two think they're talking to you, and you've told them not to talk except face to face, after the right password has been given." The duplicate watched her with a cold smile she recognised with a chill from the mirror from when she practised it.

"Fuck me..." she said faintly, staring in disbelief. The faux Nabiki suddenly grinned in a very Ranma-like manner and shimmered back into the dark-haired young man.

"You should see your face," he chuckled.

"Ranma...," Kasumi said warningly. He looked abashed.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist." The older woman gave him a long-suffering look. Nabiki's mind was reeling. This was far beyond anything she had expected, but it explained a lot of things that had been bothering her for years.
"So," she said slowly, working it out as she spoke, "Ever since you left, you've been playing me and everyone else, from only thirty kilometres away?" He nodded.

"Kind of. It's a long story, so I guess I should start at the beginning. I'll skip a lot of the boring stuff, we can go over that later if you really want to. First, though, we need to know what you intend to do." He and Kasumi both looked intently at her, making her uncomfortable.
Chapter 6

Nabiki met their gazes uncertainly. "What do you mean?" Kasumi put her hand on her sister's.

"He means, are you going to tell anyone else about us? We won't stop you if that's what you want to do, but it will make things a lot easier if you don't. At least for the time being." Nabiki studied her sister, then glanced at the young man watching them both.

"I haven't decided yet. A couple of years ago, yes, I would have told the others, or more accurately, sold them the information." Ranma chuckled, while Kasumi seemed resigned. "A year ago, I might have told Akane. But now..." She trailed off, trying to work out what she meant to herself. "I'm really not sure. On the one hand, a lot of people have been looking for you for a long time. That aside, Akane really misses you, Kasumi." The older sister looked regretful.

"I know. I'm sorry."

Nabiki waved this off. "It doesn't matter, right now. I kind of know why you left, and even though for a long time afterwards I was really pissed off about it, now I tend to agree. You seem happier than I've seen you for as long as I can remember." Kasumi and Ranma shared a glance and a smile. "And I can guess some of the reasons." She paused again and the other two waited politely for her to gather her thoughts. Eventually she continued. "On the other hand, a lot of the people back home are more or less sorting themselves out. No offence, but having you around seemed to be the catalyst for a lot of trouble, even if it wasn't your fault." She looked at Ranma, surprised when he nodded thoughtfully.

"I know. I even know some of why that was. One day I'll find out the rest, and there will be a reckoning..." He didn't seem inclined to expand on that, so after a minute she resumed talking.

"Ukyo is happy with Konatsu. Tatewaki and Kodachi are staying away now, most of the time at least, the Amazons seem to have settled down to just being neighbours, and Ryoga, well, I guess you know what happened to him?" Ranma nodded, looking simultaneously regretful and highly amused.

"Oh yes, I know. I have to admit I'd have liked to have seen that. It serves the little pig right in my opinion. It's a pity it ever came to that but it was entirely his own damn fault." It was Nabiki's turn to smirk. She agreed completely.

"Akane is the one I'm really worried about. She doesn't talk about you much nowadays, but she's... well, she's not very stable, I'm afraid. I don't know what would happen if you came back into the picture. She's still obsessed with you, I think. The thing that scares me is that she might really try to hurt you." Ranma looked both thoughtful and resigned.

"That's pretty much what we thought." He paused, looking at both Tendo sisters. "I have to tell you, that wouldn't end well for her." The young man didn't look happy about it, but seemed determined. Nabiki sighed.

"I thought as much. I don't even disagree. She's obsessive, overbearing, and short tempered at the best of times nowadays. She hasn't matured much since you left." Looking at him sympathetically, she added, "I don't truly think any of that was your fault. In all probability she'd have ended up like this anyway. You were just a convenient target who happened to come along at the right time. Personally, the two people I blame, if anyone is to blame, are Tatewaki Kuno and our father." Kasumi seemed upset.
"Oh, Nabiki, is that really fair? Father?" Nabiki nodded firmly.

"Oh yes, it's fair. He dropped the ball on raising Akane properly. You did your best, I know, and I even understand why he failed, but that doesn't change the fact that he did fail. If mother had lived, perhaps..." She shrugged helplessly. "We'll never know." Glancing at Ranma she said, "In a way it's a good thing you did come into our lives. If she hadn't had you to hit, she might have picked someone who couldn't take it. That would have ended very badly." The young man sighed, but agreed.

"Both our fathers even seem to be growing more sensible. Which isn't something I ever thought would happen, especially with yours." Ranma grinned, as did she. "Their new teaching school actually seems to be working. They've got real students, ones that genuinely want to learn, and even more surprising, are learning. OK, they tend to have at least one fight every day, and insult each other all the time, but they've stuck to it for the last six or seven months so far. It's possible that they'll make a real success of it." Both Kasumi and Ranma smiled at this.

"That's the most surprising thing of all," the young man said, "It's just a shame it took so much pain and trouble before they finally started being sensible."

"I know." Picking up her mug she found the coffee was stone cold. Kasumi took it from her and went into the kitchen to make a new pot. When she came back they resumed talking.

"So. What will you do?" Ranma looked at her curiously over his coffee. She sighed.

"I guess, at least for the time being, I won't tell anyone. If I do decide to let them know, I'll tell you first. OK?" He shared a glance with Kasumi, who nodded.

"OK. That's fair enough." Nabiki sipped her coffee, thinking, then chuckled. "What?" Ranma asked, curious.

"I was just thinking about what they'd say if they knew I know where you are. How they'd react. Akane would go absolutely insane with rage. Our fathers would be wailing and crying, 'The schools must be joined! The schools must be joined!' Shampoo would be running around shouting 'Airen!' Complete chaos." Ranma and Kasumi glanced at each other, sharing a smile. Kasumi turned to her sister.

"Nabiki? The schools were joined three months ago." She held up her left hand, and for the first time Nabiki focussed on the slim gold ring on it. Freezing in shock, she stared at the ring, then at her sisters face, before glancing at the young man across from her. He held up his hand to show a matching ring. There was a very long silence, before the middle sister hugged her older sibling hard.

"Congratulations." She was crying again. "It took him that long to ask you?" Ranma laughed.

"She asked me. What could I do except say yes?" The middle sister laughed with him. Kasumi had a pleased look on her face. Eventually Nabiki released her sister and sat back, grinning at the pair of them.

"I'm very happy for you both. I had wondered whether this would happen, but... It's still a surprise. I'm just sorry I missed it." She thought for a moment, then laughed again. "Oh, god, Akane would explode. And the fathers! Their greatest wish, the Tendo and Saotome schools of Anything Goes are finally one, and they don't know!" She was nearly unable to breath for the laughter. Ranma was looking smug.
"Oh, it gets better." He got up, walked over to the wall, and removed a decorative scroll that was hanging there. Bringing it back to the sofa he handed it to Nabiki before sitting down again. Curiously she read it, her eyes widening.

"This is..." He nodded, smirking once more.

"Official notice from Happosai naming me Grand Master of the Anything Goes Martial Arts School. He finally decided he'd taught me everything he could and said he was proud to name me his successor. The little pervert really is a little pervert, and in a lot of ways a horrible person, but he's also a damn fine martial artist and a good friend." He chuckled. "And if you'd told me four years ago that I'd ever say that I'd have thought you were drunk."

"So, that means you outrank both our fathers in Anything Goes?" He nodded once more.

"Exactly. I can teach anyone I want any part of it, as well. I've been teaching Kas all sorts of interesting things." Nabiki glanced at her sister, who had a weird smile on her face. She held out her hand, from which dangled something Nabiki recognised. Dropping the scroll she hastily felt her chest, then snatched the bra from her sisters fingers.

"Kasumi!" she screeched, outraged. Ranma was nearly pissing himself with laughter.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," her older sister said with a very Ranma-like smirk.

"Oh, god, there's two of them now," Nabiki moaned quietly, making Ranma laugh even harder. Even Kasumi was giggling by this point.

"I told you he taught me everything. Some of those things are pretty strange." The young man finally stopped laughing, changing into a young woman and sitting up again from where she'd fallen while laughing. Nabiki was slowly becoming used to the apparently random gender changes, accepting it as something that the martial artist just liked doing. The fact that Kasumi didn't seem to notice or care helped in that respect. "A lot of his techniques are based on or around some really deviant things, mainly to do with women's underwear. They can obviously be used for other things as well." Kasumi handed Nabiki her wallet with a grin. Then her watch.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Kasumi," her sister said, laughing. "So the pinnacle of martial arts is a super-powered pick-pocket?" The older woman dissolved into giggles. Ranma watched with considerable humour on her face.

"That's not the main use, but..." she said, shrugging.

"You two obviously deserve each other," Nabiki commented, putting her belongings away in her pocket then staring suspiciously at her sister to make sure she wasn't going for anything else. "I would never have suspected you of such a weird sense of humour, sis. This idiot is obviously a bad influence on you." She was both impressed and amused by her sister's new skills. "What else can you do?" Ranma smiled, tossing her wife one of the sofa cushions. Kasumi caught it deftly and made it vanish while Nabiki looked on with astonishment. "Hidden weapons as well?" The older woman nodded with a smile, pulling a bo staff from nowhere and balancing it on one finger, then making it disappear once more.

"It's really useful for shopping," she said, looking pleased. Nabiki stared for a moment then laughed again.

"Now that's the Kasumi I remember."

Her sister looked at her for a moment, then stood up and walked a few paces away. With a serene,
very Kasumi-like smile, she faded from view until there was no trace of her. Once again Nabiki stared in shock. "Holy crap." Ranma smiled happily.

"She's really good at that. Probably better than I am. It's a kind of hybrid of some of Pop's techniques and Happosai's, which Kas and I both tweaked. Originally it fooled someone's ki sense, Happosai's method went further to true invisibility, while this method covers everything I could think of. It works on microphones, cameras, heat sensors, everything I've been able to test it with. Even magic. But it's a bit tiring so generally you don't use it for long." Nabiki twitched violently when suddenly Kasumi reappeared on the other side of her and sat down wearing an amused expression.

"Happosai was really impressed with that technique. Especially the improvements Kasumi made to it. She came up with several modifications that made it much easier to pull off." The tall woman seemed slightly embarrassed by the praise, which made Ranma giggle a little. "She's very good at making ki techniques more efficient," the red-head said, looking at her wife with pride.

"While Ranma is amazing with coming up with new techniques in the first place. We work well together." Kasumi returned the look, as Nabiki glanced between them, grinning a little.

"We do have a mutual admiration club going on here, don't we?" Both of them nodded, laughing. Kasumi pulled the sofa cushion back out of wherever she had stored it and tossed it back to Ranma, who put it back where it came from.

"OK. I guess we should really tell you the whole thing." The red-head leaned back, as Kasumi put her arm around her sister's shoulders. "You remember what started all this, that damn wedding, and the total cluster fuck it became? Right. After the Dojo partially collapsed, I was under the wreckage..." Ranma recounted the story from her point of view up to the time she and Kasumi left for good. It made Nabiki uncomfortable to listen to her talk, even after more than three years her words betrayed a level of pain, loneliness, and despair that was horrifying. She was also appalled at how close they'd all come to a truly incredible disaster, if Ranma had been pushed just that tiny little bit further.

At the time she'd had no idea how stressed the martial artist was, or how powerful. Hearing about the way she'd invented a whole new set of techniques even while lying under tons of rock and wood, merely because she didn't want to face her family both impressed the hell out of her and made her nearly cry. It also scared her a little. It was apparent to her that everyone had very severely underestimated the intelligence of the person sitting across from her from day one. The sort of mind that could do what she'd seen and heard about was by no means that of a mere jock, in fact it probably rivalled her own. She was getting a sneaking suspicion that it might even exceed it. Kasumi listened silently, her eyes fixed on her currently female husband, an expression on her face that most observers would have thought neutral but Nabiki had the experience to realise was quite upset.

When Ranma finished the story of the night when everything changed, she paused, looking at the floor. "I was so happy to be leaving. So happy. You can't imagine what it was like, to finally be free of being treated like a pet, no, more like a gold mine. Something that people wanted for what they can dig out of it, but not something that they really cared about personally. Even a pet would have been treated better in a lot of respects. It felt like most of the people who wanted to use me, had plans for me, wanted more than anything to stop anyone else getting me. Lying under that pile of crap for three days listening to you all shouting and screaming at each other, not one person worried about me, just about what they wanted." She stopped again, a tear running down her cheek.
"I was so close to just giving up, letting nature take it's course. It would have been so easy. Eventually you'd have found a body, everyone could have argued about that all they wanted, but I'd be out of it. It would have been such a relief." She looked up, meeting Nabiki's shocked gaze with her own. The pain there was still evident but was nothing compared to what the middle Tendo woman remembered from that night years ago. "Then, I remembered that there was someone who was as mistreated as I was in that house. Even more so, really. I decided that I couldn't give up, I wasn't going to let life beat me. Ranma Saotome does not lose!" She nearly hissed the last words, her eyes blazing. Nabiki shrank into the arms of her sister, truly frightened for a moment. The eyes, while completely human, were for a brief few seconds more terrifying than those of the illusory demoness the martial artist had become earlier.

Those eyes softened as they moved sideways to land on the face of the other Tendo woman present. "The worst night of my life, with one action from your sister, became the start of a new life." Nabiki wasn't sure which one of them the red-head was talking to. "She acted like she always does, with excessive anger and violence, but for once she was about to do something she could never take back. So I stopped it. And in the process found something I'd overlooked for two years. In a weird way I owe Akane thanks." She turned male again, smiling at his wife. "It took nearly three years, but we were finally ready to complete what we started that night." He fell silent, the two women watching him for a while. Eventually Kasumi picked up the story.

"I was completely disgusted with everyone. Even, for a while and to my shame, with Ranma. But I came to realise that it wasn't his fault, that he was as much a victim in the whole thing as I was. The difference between us was that in my case it was self-inflicted. I was trapped in a situation of my own making, one I'd slowly built around myself from the best intentions but that was gradually killing me." She smiled at her sister. "I don't blame any of you, please understand, not really. What happened needed to happen. But, it had reached a point where I had to make a decision. If I hadn't left then, I never would have, and eventually would never even want to. I knew deep down that it was going to destroy me as a person in the end but I couldn't work up the nerve to do anything about it." She reached out for her coffee mug to find it was empty. Ranma got up to make yet another pot.

"Then, in her rage, Akane tried to kill me." She shivered at the memory. "Even as she was swinging that mallet, I could see in her eyes that she knew what she'd done, but she also knew it was too late to stop it. I knew I was dead. Then..." She swallowed. "Then, I lived." Ranma came back with the coffee, sitting next to them on the sofa and holding her free hand. "By a miracle, I was saved, in a situation where I couldn't possibly be saved." She shook her head slowly. "It was impossible, but it happened. When she offered me her hand, what could I do but take it? It was the only choice. For both our sakes." Gently disengaging herself from both her sister and her husband she leaned forwards and poured them all coffee, handing each of her companions a cup. Sipping hers she stared into the past for a while, then smiled.

"I've never regretted it." Turning her head to gaze at her sister, she inspected her for a moment. "I missed all of you so much, but I don't regret what I did for an instant." Nabiki nodded quietly, understanding. There was silence for a while as they all found themselves busy with their own thoughts. Eventually, Ranma moved back to the other part of the sofa so he could see both sisters more easily, picking up the story again.

"When we left, we didn't really have anywhere specific in mind, just 'away'. I was still in quite a lot of pain from the hole in my side, Kas had some superficial burns and bruises, but neither one of us needed much medical attention. I had a fair amount of money stashed away for emergencies, money you and Pop didn't know about." He grinned at her. "We ended up just getting on a train at random, heading out of the city until we found somewhere I could put up my tent. We just collapsed into it when it was up, we were both exhausted. The next morning I was mostly healed
and Kas was a lot better. We talked for a while, trying to decide what to do. I wasn't sure if she wanted to stay with me or go on her own." Kasumi smiled at him.

"I told her that there was no way I was letting her go off alone, not in the state she was in. We argued about it for quite a while. Ranma was convinced that everyone would be looking for both of us very quickly and if any of the fiancées found me with her I'd be in danger. I told her it didn't matter, I wasn't leaving her. In the end she gave up." Ranma chuckled a little.

"OK, so occasionally I do lose. That time, I didn't mind at all." He drank some coffee, putting the cup down on the table. "After talking it out we decided that the best thing was to disappear completely. And basically for good. I wanted to complete my schooling at least, after that we could decide what to do. Kasumi was still interested in learning, something other than household stuff, perhaps become doctor. Perhaps not. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do except keep training in the Art, but I also wanted to broaden my horizons. In either case, we needed to hide from you lot, probably for years, we needed money, and for both we needed help." Producing a pack of chocolate chip cookies from nowhere he took a couple and handed the packet to Nabiki.

Nibbling one, he continued, "I didn't have a lot of friends. At the time, I thought none. Acquaintances, yes, lots of them, but no one I could turn to when I had real trouble. It turned out I had two friends as it happened. One was with me, the other one was a three foot tall deviant." He smiled ruefully. "Anyway, I was slightly startled when I started thinking about how many people owed me favours. People in some interesting places seemed to think that they owed me something, because at some point I'd helped them. After I thought about it for a while I started contacting a few of those people, the ones I thought I could trust. I was genuinely surprised at the response." He mentioned some names and Nabiki' eyes widened.

"Good grief. I thought I had some impressive contacts!" She was extremely impressed and very curious. What on earth had he done for these people? "Hey, you mean those 'moving men' really were Yakuza?" He nodded with a small grin.

"Oh, yes, that particular Oyabun feels he owes me a debt he can never repay. But he was willing to try. He helped a lot with discreetly moving things around, and so on. Sort of his speciality." She looked narrowly at him.

"You mean smuggling." The martial artist laughed.

"I mean he specialises in moving things that other people want moved without different people knowing about it. His organisation is very good at it indeed." She was still looking at him speculatively. He shrugged. "Crime is going to happen no matter what. Organised crime is in many ways preferable to disorganised crime. I generally stay out of their business unless they do something I can't ignore. If they do, well, we came to an arrangement."

"Which is?"

"They don't hurt people who don't deserve it, and especially they don't hurt women, I leave them alone. Otherwise we have words." The young man said this in a completely flat tone that sent shivers down her back. After a moment, he went on in a lighter vein, "His group, and various other people I knew, helped quickly find us somewhere to stay off the radar and helped set up temporary identities. When it was safe for the time being I decided to contact Happosai. He came very quickly, and it turned out it was the best thing I could have done. Somehow I had really earned his respect that night, while the others had lost it completely." Ranma stopped and looked at her for a moment.

"Have you ever wondered how old he really is?" Nabiki looked puzzled.
"Well, no, not as such. I know he's pretty ancient. Contemporary with Cologne, I guess, from what I've heard, and supposedly she's something like two hundred and fifty plus years old."

"Closer to three hundred." He smiled. "The result of clean living and a pure soul?" They all looked at each other with amusement. It seemed unlikely. "Whatever. Pretty damn old. Happosai is older, by quite a bit. At least five hundred years as far as I can tell, as unbelievable as that sounds. He cheats." Kasumi produced a muffled giggle, making Nabiki look at her for a moment. Ranma smiled again.

"Anyway, old. Really, really old. And under the happy little deviant act, really, really smart. It turns out he's been saving money for a very long time indeed." The young man looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "You'd know if anyone would. What effect do you think compound interest would have on money over three or four centuries?" The middle sister stared, then went pale.

"Oh, hell. He must be richer than god."

"Not quite, but it turns out he's got more resources scattered around than you'd ever believe. He helped us out financially." She was curious, money was a favourite subject of hers.

"How much did he give you?" Kasumi smiled gently at her, then waved her hand around.

"All this? We own it." Nabiki was astounded.

"You own this apartment?" Her sister shook her head still wearing the same gentle smile.

"No. We own the building." Nabiki almost stopped breathing.
"You own this building," she said after a long, long pause. Kasumi nodded.

"Yes."

"The entire thing."

"Yes."

"That must be nice." Her sister's smile widened.

"Yes."

Slumping back into her seat, Nabiki looked at the coffee cup on the table. "I need something stronger than that, I think." With a grin Ranma got up, went into the kitchen, returning with two bottles of beer. Handing one to each sister he sat down again. Nabiki opened hers and drained half of it, then put the bottle on the table. Staring at it for a while, she mumbled to herself. Eventually she looked around at the others.

"The whole thing?" she asked plaintively. Ranma glanced at his wife, who seemed amused, then nodded.

"Yep. All six floors, the basement, the roof garden, the parking garage, all of it. It was a pre-wedding present from Happosai. He was sure we'd get married in the end even if we weren't." Kasumi raised a hand.

"I was." He looked at her and sighed a little.

"OK, you were. I wasn't." She grinned.

Nabiki was still trying to wrap her mind around the concept that her sister and her brother/sister in law owned an entire apartment block in one of the most affluent areas of Minato. "Would you like to see it?" Kasumi asked. Her sister nodded numbly.

The next hour was a guided tour of the entire building, starting with the roof garden. This was huge, as it turned out, covering nearly the same area as the Dojo garden did. It was accessed from the end of the practice room, which while not quite as large as the Tendo training hall was pretty impressive, at around eighteen metres long by eight wide. There was a fairly large swimming pool in a glass enclosure at one side of the roof, including a sauna and a jacuzzi, the rest of the roof area, about twenty-five metres on a side, being devoted to the garden. There were several paths through the foliage, making the garden seem much bigger than it was. Surrounding the roof was a wall about one and a half metres high, enough to stop someone accidentally falling off but low enough that one could look over it to see the rest of the city.

Exiting the roof by means of a different staircase at the other side they found themselves in the corridor next to the elevator Nabiki had come up in. Kasumi pressed the button and the doors slid open, all of them getting in. The next floor consisted of an apartment nearly as large as the one on the top floor, the remaining space being occupied with the machinery to run the pool and jacuzzi. There was no room as large as the practice one on the top floor, but the rear room overlooking the park was still considerable in size. Nabiki noticed for the first time that there was a balcony on the rear of the building outside each apartment as well as at the front. Opening the door and walking out onto it she looked around, then down.
"This is incredible. And there's no one else living here?" she asked curiously. Kasumi shook her head.

"No. The place was empty when Happosai gave it to us six months after we left the Dojo. Even back then he was sure we'd end up together. The lower four floors have two apartments each, one of those we've set aside for him when he visits. He likes to have a private space for his... special interests." She smiled and grimaced a little at the same time, Nabiki knowing exactly how she felt. "The rest are vacant, although furnished. I go and air them out every now and then. We haven't decided what to do with the space yet. I suppose we could rent them out, they'd bring in a lot of money in this area, but up until now we've wanted the privacy for obvious reasons." She pulled the balcony door shut as they walked back in, locking it behind them.

Ranma, who was checking the kitchen appliances were in good order, turned as they came into the room. "Pretty neat, isn't it?" Nabiki nodded, still having difficulty with the concept.

"You'd get a huge amount of income if you rented out the empty apartments," she said.

"I know. But like Kas said, there were good reasons for not doing that, at least for the time being. Perhaps one day. Anyway, we're not exactly hurting for money." The three of them left the apartment, going down in the lift to the next floor. Nabiki was shown the two apartments there, both of which were still very substantial. "The other three floors are basically the same as this one. All the apartments from here down have the same floor plan." They got into the elevator again and descended to the parking garage. This had space for at least two dozen vehicles, although it was currently empty, with a powered door at the rear. Below that was the last floor, an enormous basement, covering the entire floor area of the building, supported at intervals by steel and concrete pillars. It was at least three metres high and well lit.

An odd feature that caught Nabiki's eye was a pile of concrete blocks at one end of the basement space, apparently propping up several large metal plates which, when she walked over to have a look, each turned out to be about five or six centimetres thick. The entire stack was close to thirty centimetres from front to back, lying at a steep angle against a couple of metres of concrete blocks next to the wall. The top plate had a number of scorched and melted spots on it, and a few small holes. "What's this for?" she asked. Kasumi glanced at Ranma, then at her sister.

"Target practice." Nabiki looked at her oddly.

"What?"

"Target practice. Watch." The elder sister waved her sibling over to the other end of the basement, then took up a stance with her hands at her waist, cupped with the wrists together. Nabiki watched with amazement as a ball of golden-white ki once more built between her hands, until she pushed them towards the pile of steel and concrete. The ball of light shot across the basement, crossing the twenty-five metres in a fraction of a second, to impact against the steel plates with a deafening crack that echoed around the large room. The plates rang like an enormous bell for several seconds.

"Um. Ow." Nabiki stuck a finger in her ear, which was ringing. She saw the plate now had another shallow crater with melted edges. "That's kind of scary," she said, making her sister appear pleased. Ranma was grinning.

"Like I said, she's getting pretty good at ki manipulation. That was a really small one, we have to be careful down here, or the place might collapse." He held out one hand and a thin beam of blue-white light flickered between his palm and the plates, making a weird crackling whoosh sort of sound. Once more the plates rang. This time there was a pencil-diameter hole in the top plate. Kasumi looked at him with her eyebrows raised, then performed the same trick, her beam the same
golden white as the ki ball had been. It was noticeably weaker than the one Ranma had produced, but she squealed with joy and clapped her hands.

"That's the first time I've made that work properly!" She was very pleased indeed. Nabiki smiled, while inside she was thinking that her sister was becoming a very dangerous person. Ranma hugged his wife with a broad smile.

"Well done, Kas. Remember what you did, and try again." It took her three more attempts to duplicate the feat, but she grinned happily when she did. Then she did it twice more, to prove it wasn't an accident. Her sister watched with amusement as she hopped around, more excited than she'd ever seen the older woman.

"That was what you did to stop Akane's mallet, isn't it?" she asked. He nodded.

"Yes. It was the only thing I could think of at the time, and I really wasn't sure it would work. It seemed possible when I was thinking about it, but the circumstances weren't ideal to try a new technique for the first time. I didn't have any choice though. If it hadn't worked..." The dark haired man looked momentarily upset. Kasumi put her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't think about it. It worked, you saved me, and came up with a whole new technique at the same time." Glancing at her he smiled slightly. Turning to Nabiki he waved at the holes in the steel plates.

"That technique is much more difficult than the ki spheres, but a lot more powerful. If I wound the power up I could easily punch a hole big enough to fit a basketball into all the way through all of that stuff and the wall behind it. Not a good idea down here. I don't want to go blowing holes in the foundations of my own house." She agreed that it seemed like a bad idea.

"I had a look at the damage you caused when you saved Kasumi. It was pretty impressive. If anyone had been in the way... Hell, that ki beam went through thirty centimetres of granite without stopping, and part of the roof tiles as well. I wonder how far it went?" He looked interested.

"I don't really know what the maximum range is. A couple of years ago I did try zapping something a few kilometres away and managed it, but haven't tried anything like that again. I was more concerned with limiting the range so I wouldn't accidentally hurt someone." He turned towards the target plates again and once more raised his hand. The beam that formed this time only went half-way across the basement before stopping abruptly. As he concentrated it steadily shortened, until there was about a metre of blue-white light coming from his hand. Nabiki stared as he tilted it up, then slowly moved it around like he was holding a pole made of light.

"Bloody hell, you've got a light sabre!" He grinned.

"Silly movie, but yes, it gave me some ideas." Ceasing projecting the beam he walked over to the pile of steel, then made another, much shorter one, this time only about thirty centimetres long. Waving it casually past the corner of the top plate he watched as a piece the size of a dinner plate dropped to the floor with a loud clang, the cut edge glowing red. Once more, Nabiki stared in awe. The two sisters walked over to look at the damage, the younger one only then noticing that the plates showed signs of having a similar attack used on them many times before. Prodding the lump of steel on the floor with her foot, which didn't make it move a millimetre, the brunette wondered how on earth they got all this stuff down here in the first place.

Ranma gestured to the elevator. "Let's go back upstairs. I'll tell you the rest, and we can get something to eat. Late lunch or early dinner, it's around half past five now." Nabiki followed him, looking back over her shoulder to see where her sister was. She stopped dead when she noticed that
Kasumi had picked up the chunk of steel, which must have weighed over thirty kilos, with one delicate hand, putting it neatly on top of the pile of concrete blocks as easily as if she was tidying up books in the living room. Her elder sister met her gaze with a small smile, brushing her hands together as she walked past. The other woman shook her head in amazement.

Upstairs, they went back into the apartment, Kasumi stopping to change out of the black silks which she was still wearing and to shower. Ranma and Nabiki went into the kitchen where he started very competently preparing a quite elaborate meal. "Kas isn't the only one who's learned a lot over the last few years," he said when he noticed Nabiki's slight expression of surprise. "She's taught me all sorts of things as well." While he cooked, Nabiki wandered around the apartment looking at it. Up until now she hadn't seen all of it. The place really was very large. There were five bedrooms in total, she found, one that was clearly Kasumi and Ranma's, the one she had woken in, and three guest rooms. One of these looked like it had probably been Ranma's room before they married, judging by the furnishings. Something she found interesting was that it wasn't by any means the largest room.

In addition to the bedrooms, there was the kitchen, the living room which also doubled as a dining room, and the practice room, all of which she had already seen. Going beyond them she found a room clearly set up as a study, which had another smaller room opening off it that seemed to be a library judging by the large number of books and scrolls on shelves neatly laid out in it. Two bathrooms, not including the small one opening off the largest bedroom, and a utility room with laundry facilities nearly completed the apartment. The last room she found by accident, it was almost hidden off the practice room. When she went in she found a large collection of martial arts weapons and equipment, which reminded her of the similar storage room at the Dojo, although if anything Ranma and Kasumi had a larger collection than Soun did. Shaking her head at the sheer size of the place she returned to the kitchen.

Kasumi had joined Ranma at the cooking, chopping vegetables for a salad, and smiled at her sister when she came in. "What do you think of our home?" she asked. Nabiki leaned against the counter edge and looked around, then grinned.

"I think I want to move in," she replied, only half-joking. Ranma laughed, while Kasumi looked pleased.

"The meal will be ready in about forty minutes. Let me put this in the oven, and we can continue with the story, if you want," he said, finishing up his preparations and washing his hands. Covering the dish he slid it into the oven, set the time and temperature, then closed the door. Offering her another beer he led the way into the living area, Kasumi following with a bowl of snacks. Once they were all sitting again, he thought for a second. "Right, where did we get to. Ah, Happosai. OK, so aside from this place, he sorted us out financially, which barely made a dent in his resources. We'll never have to work for a living if we don't want to, though." Nabiki was astounded again.

"Once we had a good cover sorted out, one that would keep anyone from finding us for the foreseeable future, we had time to think about what we were going to do." He popped a few nuts into his mouth, chewing while Kasumi took up the story.

"Ranma wanted to finish his schooling and graduate high school, at the very least. You know he was actually doing very well in Furinkan?" Her sister nodded. "For various reasons he didn't make too much of a fuss about it, but he was in the top ten percent of students there. It's very impressive when you realise that before he came to Nerima he'd only had about two years of formal schooling, which wasn't even continuous." She smiled at her husband with pride. "The problem was we couldn't enrol him in another school under his own name, it would have made it too easy for
people to find us."

"What did you do?" Ranma swallowed another nut, then answered.

"Early on, in the first week or so, I called in a favour from someone a bit unusual." He seemed slightly embarrassed. "You know this area is awash with different groups of magical girls for some weird reason?" She nodded once more. "I still haven't worked out why. Anyway, a few of them are fairly sensible people, most are idiots. Well meaning idiots, but still idiots. They're often grossly overpowered, yet have next to no tactical skills or real martial arts abilities, and show an amazing level of arrogance over anything that falls into the category they think of as 'demonic.'" He frowned a little. "I mean, you only have to look a little out of the ordinary in some parts of this ward and you get jumped by half a dozen pretty schoolgirls in some perverts idea of a cheerleader outfit ranting about foul fiends. It's like being surrounded by dozens of female versions of Kuno, only genuinely dangerous."

Nabiki looked amused at his description, while Kasumi was smiling at her husband in a tolerant fashion, obviously having heard these complaints before. "They're mainly a damn menace, in my view. Oh sure, some of the demons and other odd entities that pop up from time to time are worse, but quite a few of them are essentially harmless and just want to be left alone. Just because someone has a tail and scales is no reason to immediately start chucking magical shuriken or some such thing at them. And don't even mention the stupid names they come up with for their attacks. It's ridiculous. Half the time a competent fighter would have wiped them out before they finished the wind-up for the attack and shouting out the name. Which is always stupid." He didn't look impressed.

"They usually can't even spell overkill never mind know what it means. The amount of damage they cause is amazing, it makes Ryoga look like an amateur." He shook his head in disgust. "All that aside, sometimes they do deal with a real threat. One day I've got to figure out why so much of that sort of thing happens here. So anyway, a few years ago, one of the slightly less crazy groups ran into something they couldn't handle. Basically they bit off a lot more than they could chew. Kind of their own fault, actually, the threat would have gone away on it's own if they'd just stayed back. As it happened I was in the area, completely coincidentally, it was where I'd landed after one of Akane's more impressive mallet attacks." He rubbed the top of his head unconsciously, while Nabiki winced a little in sympathy. "I pulled myself out of the hole I'd made when I landed to find myself in the middle of a major magical battle. The thing they were attacking, and losing to very badly, took an interest in me."

Ranma smiled a little at the memory. "That was kind of a mistake. I was in a really shitty mood anyway, Akane had jumped me out of the blue for no good reason, and I'll admit I was spoiling for a fight. When this stupid demonic whatever it was decided to take a swing at me, especially after I'd seen how badly it had hurt those girls, it was a really good outlet for all the frustration from dealing with your sister." His smile widened in reminiscence, becoming quite predatory. "It was an amazing fight. The thing didn't have much technique but it was damn tough, tougher than Ryoga. Didn't help it much in the end. I got annoyed with it and really cut loose after about a quarter of an hour. You can still see the crater in that park." Nabiki's eyes widened as she glanced at her sister, who nodded.

"He showed me. It's about fifteen metres across."

"Good grief." She was thinking about what would have happened if he'd ever become that angry in Furinkan. Returning to his seat after having quickly gone to retrieve a glass of water, Ranma sipped it, then continued.
"I'd ended up getting soaked because of a fountain it threw me into, which made these girls think I was a magical girl as well. That took a while to sort out. They were very grateful that I'd helped them, saved them is more accurate, and I ended up helping them a few more times over the next month, filling in for one of them that was badly injured until she healed up." He grimaced a little, while Nabiki began to smirk. She could see where this was going. "Um, they insisted I wear their uniform, when I was helping out. In the end I gave in, they were very persuasive." He glared at the middle sister who was snickering. "It's not funny. That damn uniform was nearly obscene. It made me look more naked than being naked!"

She started to laugh, Kasumi also giggling. "Thanks a lot. The important thing is that they had these magical artefacts that were a sort of a disguise. They made people who saw them unable to remember much about what they looked like. Not invisibility, more like a confusion spell. Without either using one yourself, or being present when they were activated, when the things were in use you'd never be able to describe or recognise the person using them later. They even screw up cameras. Very useful if you're going to run around looking like a pornographic version of a schoolgirl." Nabiki was limp with hilarity, picturing the female Ranma in one of the skimpier magical girl uniforms, looking really, really annoyed. Much like he looked at the moment in fact. He waited impatiently until she stopped giggling. "Finished?" She nodded weakly.

"I got in touch with them and explained, so they gave me a couple of spares. We used them for a year or so every time we went out, which made it nearly impossible for anyone to trace us." Taking another drink, he paused for breath. Kasumi picked up the tale once more.

"We were able to enrol him in a local school under a different name. It was as a her in fact. We discussed it for quite a while, but it seemed safer even though he wasn't happy about it at the time. The chances of getting splashed with hot water accidentally are much lower than with cold water. Happosai helped us, finding some way to get the school to accept Ranma's transcripts under that name, and keep any reference to who we really were out of the records. I don't know how he did it, it was probably naughty though." She smiled happily. "It worked. With the magical devices we could come and go as we pleased and no-one ever worked out that she wasn't who she said she was. She graduated with very high marks."

Ranma was grinning a little. "Kas took ages persuading me to go to school while female, but I've found over the years I can never really say no to her. Especially when she's right. It was really embarrassing at first but I got used to it much faster than I expected. I kept my head down, stayed out of any excitement, just tried to stay in the background and finish school. It was mostly uneventful." Rising once more he went into the kitchen to check on the progress of the food. "Another twenty minutes or so," he commented as he returned. "Eventually, I worked out the first version of the illusion spell, which made some of this easier. We could set up identities that people could remember, but not associate with who we really were. Another contact has ways of getting very convincing IDs for us, which let us create a number of personae for public use. The problem is that he couldn't make them good enough to be completely sure that a passport, for example, would work all over the world. That's one reason we stayed in Japan."

Drinking some more water, he smiled. "There are other reasons as well. We wanted to keep an eye on you lot, just in case. Plus, until I was legally an adult at twenty, we couldn't do a number of things under our real names that we wanted to do."

Nabiki was going over some of what he'd just told her in her head, there was something... Ah. "OK. Either that means that you can do magic as well," she said, glancing at her sister, "or you can use that spell on other people." She looked back to Ranma, who grinned.

"I can, as it happens. It takes more power, but not enough to make much of a difference most of the
time. But with Kas I don't need to." A flicker of motion caught the corner of Nabiki's vision and she turned her head to find herself, once more, looking at a perfect duplicate.
"AGH!" she yelped in surprise. The duplicate Nabiki raised an eyebrow in an unnervingly accurate imitation of the original. Looking wildly back to Ranma she yelped once more when she found herself looking at her own face yet again, wearing exactly the same expression as the first one. "Stop that!" she shouted in irritation. "It's incredibly creepy!"

Both Nabiki clones said, in perfect unison and in her own voice, "I know. But it's funny." She glared at them as they collapsed in laughter, shimmering back into their true forms in the process. Ranma was female once again which made her blink for a moment, then sigh. "You two are extremely annoying and very weird." This only made them laugh harder. She leaned back into the sofa and waited for the pair of lunatics to calm down, which took a little while.

"God, you should have seen the look on your face, Nabiki," Ranma chortled. "I wish I'd had a camera." She snorted with a complete lack of amusement, making the red-head grin.

"Oh, grow up, Saotome," she snarled. Kasumi put her hand on her sister's shoulder.

"Don't get too annoyed, sister. We didn't mean to irritate you, but you have to admit it was very amusing. I couldn't resist." She seemed apologetic enough, but the corners of her mouth were twitching suspiciously. Nabiki looked at her sister through narrowed eyes for a moment, then slumped, crossing her arms defensively.

"OK, yes, I can see you'd think that. It's just kind of scary, you understand? I haven't seen either of you for over three years, then to find out how much you've changed... it's freaking me out a little. The magic and the martial arts just add to that." Kasumi looked sympathetic, quickly hugging her sister for a moment.

"I do understand. I'm so very happy to see you after all this time. Yes, I have changed, but I had to. I think I'm probably more like I should have been, in a sense, closer to what I'd have been if I hadn't had to take over after mother died. As I said before, I don't resent what happened, it taught me so many things I could never have learned otherwise, but it was time to move on. I hope you can understand that." Nabiki was watching her with a neutral expression but slowly nodded.

"I think so. I agree, as well. But it's still strange. Whatever I was expecting to find here, it wasn't...," she looked around, waving one hand vaguely at the apartment, "all this." Glancing at Ranma, who was watching her soberly now, she suddenly smiled. "But I'm very glad you two seem to be doing so well. Don't worry, I'll get used to it. Eventually." The red-headed young woman smiled back, then looked up as a beeping sound came from the kitchen.

"Aha. Dinner is ready. Kas, can you help me set the table?" Her wife patted her sister comfortingly on the knee then stood and followed the other woman into the kitchen. Within a few minutes they had the table laid out, the food on it, and all three of them were seated around it. "I hope you enjoy it," Ranma said, picking up her chopsticks. The other two began eating, Nabiki's eyes widening after the first couple of mouthfuls.

"This is really good, Ranma. You've learned a lot about cooking." The other woman smiled in gratitude.

"Thanks. Kasumi is much better than I'll ever be, but she taught me a lot." There was silence for a while as they ate, then Nabiki thought of something.
"Hey. If that illusion spell can do clothes and hair and whatnot, why bother braiding yours like that? Or for that matter, wear the clothes you were wearing when we met? Which I'm still annoyed about, by the way." Ranma grinned at this.

"Good. Consider it payback for all the times you charged me for stupid things." Nabiki grinned back.

"Speaking of that, you still owe me forty-three thousand, five hundred and twenty yen, you know." Kasumi sighed a little, while her female husband laughed.

"I'll write you a cheque." She ate some more food, then answered the original question while Nabiki was snickering. "Yes, the spell can do clothes and hair, pretty much anything you'd want. But the more complex the illusion the more energy it takes. Having my hair like this and dressing in the clothes I want the illusory persona to have means I only need to change myself. It lets me keep the illusion running for a long time without as much drain on my power level, which can be very useful." The brunette nodded thoughtfully.

"So, you use that form a lot, then?" It was Ranma's time to nod.

"Yes, that one is an established persona I have ID papers for." She shimmered and became the girl from earlier. Nabiki watched, fascinated, the change was perfect. Nothing at all remained to indicate that the girl sitting there was the Ranma she knew. Even the body language changed. "Hello. I'm Maiko Nakahara. Pleased to meet you." She held out a hand and after a momentary pause Nabiki shook it with a small smile. The voice was slightly deeper than Ranma's own female voice, with more feminine intonations. Totally convincing and giving nothing away. After a few seconds the girl developed the Ranma grin, the body language reverting to something she was very familiar with. She stared, impressed.

"That's absolutely amazing. How did you get so good at acting?" Ranma, in the guise of Maiko, grinned.

"Again, lots and lots of practice. It was more difficult at first, but I seem to have something of a gift for this sort of thing. Kas is pretty good at it as well. We both have a couple of standard identities we use outside the house. This is the one I go to university as." Nabiki stared again.

"You're going to university?" 'Maiko' smiled.

"Of course. Why, did you think I made up all that stuff about oxygen depletion in muscles?" Nabiki shrugged.

"I didn't think much about it, after I found out who you actually were. But now you mention it..."

"It's true. I really am taking a course in sports medicine and biomechanics. I'm in my second year there. It's going pretty well, I should have a degree in it in two years." The middle Tendo sister shook her head, impressed and surprised.

"Won't it be a bit difficult, having 'Maiko' be the one with the degree?" The brunette girl smiled a little.

"There are ways to deal with that when the time comes. It won't be a problem." Intrigued, Nabiki started to ask for details until another thought struck her.

Turning to Kasumi, who had been eating silently and listening with a small smile on her face the whole time, she asked curiously, "Are you at the university as well?" Kasumi's smile widened, she shimmered in the same way Ranma had done, and there was a completely different girl sitting
there. She was still quite tall but a little shorter than Kasumi's true form, with short blonde hair in a sort of a pageboy cut. Her eyes were hazel, her face very pretty but showing no relationship to her normal features at all, looking like a Northern European/Japanese ethnic mix. Nabiki would never have had the slightest clue that this was her sister if she'd passed her in the street.

"Hi. I'm Rika Nygaard." Her voice was quite deep for a woman, with a trace of a foreign accent of some sort. Nabiki stared at her transfigured sister for several seconds, appearing slightly stunned. 'Rika' went on, her face quite serious unlike Kasumi's normal expression, "I'm in the second year of a medical degree. I have another three or four years to go to become a doctor. Oh yes, in case you're wondering, my father is Danish. He met my mother when she was on a trip to Europe, followed her back to Japan, and has lived here ever since." Her sister was still staring at her. With a shimmer she resumed her normal appearance, looking pleased.

"Was that convincing?" she asked curiously. Nabiki nodded, speechless.

"Oh, yes. Very." After a few more seconds of staring she shook herself a little. "Bloody hell, Kasumi! That was even weirder than her," she pointed at Ranma, who was eating quietly still in her Maiko guise, "How did you get so good at that?" Kasumi seemed amused at her sister's reaction.

"Like Ranma said, a lot of practice. We both spent entire days, once or twice a couple of weeks, in those forms, quizzing each other on our persona until it became second nature. The illusion spell sorts out the voice, but the mannerisms and so on take lots of repetition until you can do it without thinking. I can't do male forms at all convincingly, yet. Ranma is a lot better at being female than I am at being male, for obvious reasons." Nabiki stared for a moment more, then resumed eating before her food got cold, shooting both her sister and current sister in law curious yet respectful glances.

Ranma went back to her true appearance after a few minutes. "We each have a couple of properly documented alternate personae we practised with until they were second nature, and several more that we use less often. Basically, it's one for use at the university, and one for everywhere else, which we try to keep separate so that people won't link them to each other. The others are for specific purposes. You've seen a few of mine earlier." Nabiki grinned.

"Was that demoness with the scales a special purpose one? Or just something you came up with to scare me?" Ranma looked very amused.

"Oh, Zytha'a is a special purpose one, definitely." Suddenly the blue scaled demoness was sitting in the red-head's place, delicately putting some chicken in her mouth with the chopsticks. Nabiki leaned away for a moment, startled, then inspected the apparition more closely now that she wasn't scared of it. That's not to say that those teeth didn't make an impression.

"What possible purpose could looking like that serve?" she asked curiously. The demoness grinned in a worrying way, making her blink despite herself.

"Dealing with a very specific group of magical girls," she said in a throaty voice with a weird accent that Nabiki couldn't place at all. "They keep turning up and causing trouble, so a year or so ago I decided that I'd had enough. I came up with this, it's based on someone I know." This made Nabiki stare in disbelief.

"You know a demoness?" The disguised Ranma nodded with a toothy grin.

"Several, actually. Decent people, by and large. As are quite a few of the male demons I've met. Oh, they have some pretty odd ideas of normal behaviour by our standards, but overall they're easy enough to deal with. Assuming you don't simply attack them on sight, like those idiotic girls tend
to do." The demoness changed back into the red-head, making Nabiki relax very slightly. Even when she knew who it was under the illusion, it was so convincing it was a bit worrying. "Zythra'a has a tendency of popping up when those girls are beating up something that doesn't deserve it and returning the favour, normally in as embarrassing a way as possible. They absolutely hate her, but they're also terrified of her. It's been quite effective at keeping them out of the area around the university so far, without me having to resort to more serious measures."

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" Nabiki queried. "They could end up getting some allies together and coming after you. Or Zythra'a, at any rate." Ranma shrugged.

"It's not an ideal method, I'll admit, but so far it seems to be working. There's quite a bit of rivalry between the different groups of magical twits and I've been careful to have Zythra'a only go after that one bunch. The others seem to think it's hysterical. Once, one of the other groups was even watching and taking bets on the outcome of a fight. That really didn't help relations between them, especially when they accepted a bet from me." She grinned widely, and Nabiki could only laugh at the red-head's style. "I won." Kasumi sighed a little, but with a patient look.

"One of the reports I read seemed to suggest that a demon-hunter has had to be carried out of here on a stretcher. And that the demon that the hunter was hunting seemed extremely amused." Ranma chuckled.

"Oh, that one. Yes, that was kind of funny. This girl was over the top even by the standards of that type, she chased a demon into the area I'd made clear was off limits, started causing a lot of damage, nearly killed two bystanders with some sort of explosive attack, then went after me when I told her to push off. She had no idea of how to minimise collateral damage at all, I don't think she cared how many people got hurt as long as she got her demon. A bit like Ryoga on a bad day, but even more pig-headed. The demon wasn't much of a problem, really, he was here just looking around when she jumped him. Young one, he should have known better. Anyway, in the end I was forced to give her a pretty good pounding to get her to stop, she just wouldn't back down. I'd admire that normally, but she was completely out of control and likely to kill someone. The demon found it all highly amusing, I don't think he appreciated being attacked like that. He was rolling on the ground laughing his tail off when I broke her arm. Weird sense of humour. I've got a standing invitation to visit him if I'm ever around where he comes from." She looked amused.

Nabiki was listening with a mild sense of unreality. If it hadn't been for the things she knew damn well the martial artist had experienced and done she wouldn't have believed a word of it, but even so it was a lot to accept. "What about the other reports of the demons or whatever coming in to this area and not going back out?" Ranma seemed saddened.

"Oh, they're true as well. While quite a few of the so-called demons are, while not harmless, basically just tourists, there are certainly things that are extremely nasty." She paused, trying to think of a way to explain it. "These creatures come from different worlds, normally through some sort of portal from there to here. They don't all come from the same place. A couple of the places they do come from are a pretty close match to what you'd think of as hell, or a hell at any rate. Those are the dangerous ones. Most of them are pretty dim, one or two are anything but. They're the really dangerous ones. I'd prefer to send them back, I don't like killing, but sometimes there's no alternative. The magical girls do a reasonable job in many cases of dealing with these things, and if they stuck to the dangerous ones things would be a lot better. But they don't, and most of them also don't think much about blowing up an entire building to get one demon. No finesse."

She looked very irritated. "I don't want to live somewhere where at any moment some damn creature or even worse creature-hunter might decide to blow the front off a building I'm in. Especially this one. So I've been taking steps to make sure that they know damn well to stay away.
The smarter ones got the hint pretty quickly, but not all of them are smart, on either side." Finishing her food she put her chopsticks in the bowl, then sighed a little. "It's a nuisance. I find that turning up as soon as they do, blowing up whatever they're chasing if it won't see reason, then shouting at them normally does the trick, but sometimes I have to go further. I guess it keeps me in shape at least." She glanced at her wife, who smiled back. "And it's been good practise for Kas." Her sister looked at the older woman in shock.

"You've fought demonic things?" Kasumi nodded happily.

"And a couple of magical girls. They weren't very good." Nabiki stared once more. This was getting very weird indeed.
"I'm having a lot of problems with all this", the middle Tendo sister moaned, dropping her chopsticks and putting her head in her hands. Kasumi and Ranma glanced at each other, the martial artist turning male after a few seconds, then leaning over and putting his hand on her back.

"We're sorry, Nabiki. I know it's all different now. A lot of things have changed over the last three years, for you as well as us. But we're basically the same people. Your sister is still your sister, she just has some new skills and interests as well." The brunette rolled her head to the side so she could see him out of one eye, then sighed heavily.

"I know, I know." She raised her head and looked at him, then at her sister, who appeared slightly worried. "But still, it's a lot to take in. Every time I think I've come to grips with it you drop something else on me." She pointed at Kasumi. "You, my older sister, the ultimate home maker, the woman who abhors violence, fight both demons and magical girls with your superhuman martial arts skills?" She giggled a little hysterically while Kasumi smiled uncertainly. "It's completely insane. I kind of expect insanity from him," she jerked a thumb at Ranma without looking at him, "But you were always the sensible one." Ranma glanced at his wife and shrugged a little, he couldn't deny the truth of her words. There was silence for a while, then Nabiki picked up her chopsticks and resumed eating with a far-off expression. Ranma and Kasumi exchanged glances again and wordlessly agreed to let her think things through.

The rest of the meal passed quietly. When they finished, Ranma cleared the table while Kasumi sat and watched her sister, who was staring at the table wearing a puzzled expression. After some minutes she looked up at her older sister and smiled a little. "I'll be OK, sis. It's just a lot to take in."

"I know. I'm sorry you're having a hard time with it." Standing, she motioned to her sister to follow her, then led the way through the practice room up to the roof garden. They stood beside each other at the edge looking out over Tokyo in the evening twilight, admiring the view. "Please don't blame Ranma for any of this," the older woman said after a while. "He saved me from myself, as much as I saved him from himself. I love him very much, but I love you very much as well and don't want you to be upset. It's been very hard all this time, knowing how close you were but being unable to talk to you. You have no idea how many times I wanted to just go back to Nerima to see you all." She smiled sadly. "When we got the illusion spell working we did pop back a couple of times, just to see the place, but I couldn't risk contacting anyone. I watched you and Akane from a distance though." She put her arm around the shorter woman's shoulders and pulled her close.

"I missed you so much. It's wonderful that you finally came." Nabiki leaned against her sister, listening to her words carefully. It helped.

"It wasn't through lack of effort that I took so long, you know." Kasumi laughed.

"I do know. There were good reasons for us both to vanish, ones you understand. That didn't make it any easier." She smiled a little deviously. "I was slightly disappointed that it took you so long to track us down." Nabiki looked annoyed.

"I'm sorry I didn't live up to your expectations. It's been pretty hard the last three years. Money is always tight, Akane has been an absolute nightmare a lot of the time, and all the insanity at home didn't stop when you guys left. If anything it got worse." Pulling away from Kasumi she put her hands on the railing around the roof and stared out across the city silently, while her sister watched. After a few seconds she sighed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. It's getting better now, but Akane
is still a nightmare. At least I'm at university myself most of the time, so I don't have to put up with her. It worries me, though, when I think what will happen if she ever finds out about Ranma. Or if Ryoga is stupid enough to come back, either." Turning she leaned her rear on the wall and looked at her sister.

"She's getting really unstable, Kasumi. It scares me. She was bad enough when Ranma was there, hitting him all the time for stupid reasons, but now... Oh, she's much quieter about him, unless you manage to trigger a rant, but I know she's still obsessed. More obsessed, even. She hasn't grown up at all." The brunette looked upset. "I lost two sisters that night. I finally got one back, but the other one is still slipping away." Shaking her head she turned to look out over the city again. "Even when she was younger she alternated between the nice Akane, the one I remember growing up, and the violent paranoid one that hit Ranma. Fair enough, sometimes he provoked it, but most of the time he didn't, the poor bastard. The violent Akane is pretty much all that's left now." Kasumi stepped closer and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't realise it was that bad. The reports we have are quite detailed, but don't go into much about Akane, they mainly concentrated on you." Nabiki glanced at her with a frown.

"You make it sound like you have someone watching me all the time." Kasumi was silent but had a slightly guilty expression. Nabiki stared. "Fuck me. You DO?"

"Not all the time. Just... quite a lot of it." Nabiki shook her head in disbelief.

"Who? And why?" Her sister looked at the ground, then met her eyes.

"I don't think I should tell you who, not at the moment. But the reason is because you were the biggest threat to us. If anyone could track us down it would be you." She laughed briefly. "As shown by the fact we're having this conversation." Nabiki couldn't help but smile a little. "Ranma thought we needed to know in advance what you were doing, in case we had to change our plans in a hurry. So we arranged to have you monitored, at least some of the time. I'm sorry, I know it's an invasion of privacy, and under normal circumstances I'd never have allowed it. But we didn't have much choice."

Her sister thought it over then sighed. It was exactly what she would have done, and in fact had been trying to do since they'd left. She could hardly object to it too much. Although she was desperate curiously to know who it was that was spying on her and how. "I guess I forgive you, sis." Kasumi smiled and hugged her. Curious, she asked, "Are you watching the others as well?"

The taller woman nodded with an amused look.

"Yes. Not all by the same method. Cologne is extremely difficult to sneak up on, but Happosai found a way to keep an eye on her from a distance. Ironically, blocking a lot of her attempts to do the same thing to us in the process. The Kunos are easy, and most of the rest either weren't much of a threat, or could be watched by keeping an eye on the Dojo." Nabiki looked impressed.

"It sounds like you're in the middle of quite the spy ring," she chuckled. Kasumi seemed both pleased and embarrassed at the praise.

"It's mostly Ranma and Happosai who did the work. I did come up with a few contacts, though." Her sister looked at her curiously. "Do you remember Mrs Tachibana?" The name didn't register beyond a very faint familiarity. "Ranma calls her the ladle lady." This **did** register, making Nabiki snort with surprised laughter.

"Her? The ancient little woman who waters the road even when it's raining? She's one of your spies?" Unable to stop herself she collapsed in giggles. "That's brilliant. No one would ever suspect
anything." Kasumi was looking very pleased with herself.

"She's a lovely woman. I stopped and talked to her almost every day on the way to the market. She was really happy to help us, she thought the whole thing was enormously funny."

When she'd collected herself, Nabiki asked her sister curiously, "So you recruited old women to spy on us all?" Kasumi nodded.

"Some of them. And shopkeepers, delivery people, various other people we knew. Ones we knew you'd never have any reason to suspect." The middle sister stared with amazement. She'd had no idea her older sister was so sneaky. It was very impressive, even if it had worked against her. The silence this time was much less emotional, as they watched the sky slowly darken.

Kasumi eventually said, "We can help out financially if you like." Nabiki glanced at her. "We have more money than we need, and would happily let you have some. You could get the Dojo fixed properly and not have to worry about the bills." She fell silent again, not pushing, just allowing her sister to think it through.

After a minute or so, Nabiki replied thoughtfully, "My first instinct is to say thanks very much. But the more I think about it the more it worries me for some reason." Her sister looked at her curiously. "Yes, money is tight at the moment, but the situation is slowly improving. Akane has a job, one that she seems to be able to hold on to, and the two fathers are actually working for the first time in years. I'm worried that if I turned up with a decent sum they might all decide that they didn't need to try as hard and it would all fall apart." The older woman nodded slowly.

"I think I understand. I'm not sure it's correct but you'd know that better than I would, you're closer to them right now." She was silent for a little while. "Still, perhaps you could take some of our money anyway, for emergencies? You don't have to spend it, but knowing it's there would take a lot off your mind. And mine." Nabiki thought it over then slowly agreed.

"All right. Thank you." Hugging her again, her sister smiled.

"That's what family is for." The two of them walked around the roof garden, which was now being lit by small lamps hidden in the undergrowth, coming on automatically as the evening progressed.

"What can we do about Akane?" the older woman asked as they stopped near the middle of the garden. Her sister sighed.

"I really don't know. The only thing I can think of at the moment is to keep her away from Ranma, and Ryoga. Other than that... Perhaps she'll grow out of it. Perhaps now that Father and Genma are teaching her they can redirect some of that rage into something useful." Shrugging helplessly, she sat on a bench under a large fern. Kasumi sat next to her and held her hand. "It gives me nightmares. She's nowhere near as good as you at the Art, and lacks any form of discipline, but she's horrifically strong and very fast. You add uncontrollable rage to that and the results could be appalling. What terrifies me is that one day she'll lose it towards someone who isn't Ranma or Ryoga, which will end up with corpses for sure." She shuddered.

"We won't let that happen," the older woman assured her, with a worried expression of her own.

"How can you stop it? OK, sure, if you get warning you and Ranma could get there and stop her, but what if she just snaps in the middle of the street? By the time anyone who could stop her gets there she could wipe out the entire area. She's nothing like as dangerous as Ranma is, or even you are now, but even so she's a lot more than the cops could handle." Neither one of them liked that thought but neither could work out a solution. Eventually Nabiki said, "I guess there isn't anything much we can decide about it right now. With any luck it won't happen, anyway."
Turning to look at her sister, she deliberately changed the subject from the depressing turn it had taken. "By the way, congratulations. I kind of got distracted earlier, but you're going to be a doctor! That's fantastic." Kasumi smiled brilliantly.

"I know! It's something I wanted to do since I was a little girl. At one point I thought perhaps being a nurse would be a good idea, but after I left Nerima, and talked to Ranma and Happosai, I decided why stop there? Whether I end up a practise GP or not I haven't decided yet, but I'm having so much fun at the moment you wouldn't believe it. I've missed learning like this all these years." Grinning at her sister's enthusiasm, Nabiki stood up.

"Come on, let's go back downstairs. You guys can tell me the rest of the story, then I want some alone time with my sister. I want you to tell me everything you've been doing at university." Kasumi smiled back, gracefully rising to her feet. When the two women re-entered the living room where Ranma was reading a book, he looked at them with a raised eyebrow. Both seemed much happier than when they'd left, Nabiki in particular.

"You look better, Nabiki. I'm sorry about overwhelming you earlier."

"Don't worry about it, Ranma. It was a lot to take in, that's all." She stared hard at him. "But I am going to have to talk to you about your spy network." He glanced at his wife who smiled and raised a hand to her mouth.

"Oh, my. How did she find out about that?" After a moment, all three of them started laughing.

When they wound down, Ranma grinned at the brunette woman. "Sorry about all the spying, but you understand the reasons I'm sure." She nodded, still giggling a little. "So, do you want to hear the rest? If it's not too much to take in."

"I can handle it. Hit me." She grinned back at him.

"OK." The two woman sat on the sofa again, settling in comfortably. "So, once I graduated high school, not around here, we spent nearly a year training Kas in the Art, ki practice, that sort of thing, while also getting all our contacts, and yours," he grinned and she looked annoyed, "sorted out so we knew what was going on back in Furinkan. Once we were sure we weren't going to be discovered and have to run for it again, we talked it over and decided that university for the both of us was what we wanted to do. Happosai was very supportive about that, he thinks education is much more important than Pop does. He suggested this place, he's got some sort of history with it. I'm not sure what. Since this building was available and the courses we wanted were taught here, that's where we ended up." He smiled. "Happosai had already given us the building long before we'd decided on the university. He's pretty sharp, I think he had a good idea what was going to happen."

"Around then I got the first version of the illusion spell working, so we also set up various identities using it and got the paperwork for them in order. I still didn't have control of the curse then, so we decided to continue with me going to university as a woman. The illusion spell could have covered for me if I'd changed but it was one more thing that might go wrong. Keeping it simple was the idea. Changing what I look like a little, like from one woman into a roughly similar sized one, is easier than for instance suddenly having to cover up being female when I'd been male up until then. In the early days that could have gone wrong very easily. Now I'm much better at it, but just carrying on as we have been is simplest." He shrugged a little. "I'm used to it, it doesn't bother me at all now. It's just part of who I am."

A thought struck him, and he glanced at the two women. "Does anyone want some ice cream?" Nabiki looked a little surprised at the randomness of the question, while Kasumi giggled.
"OK," the brunette said after a moment. He grinned and went into the kitchen, coming back after a few minutes with three bowls of strawberry ice cream and some spoons. Handing it out he sat and shovelled a considerable amount into his face, making both women look mildly disgusted. "Well, that hasn't changed, at any rate," Nabiki commented, starting in on hers in a much more appropriate manner. Kasumi laughed, also trying a spoonful.

"You have no idea. The amount of ice cream we get through... It's a good thing his metabolism is insanely fast or he'd weigh about two hundred kilos by now." Ranma stuck out a strawberry-flavoured tongue at her, making her giggle again.

Finishing his bowl he put it on the coffee table, then resumed talking. "After that, we pretty much settled into a routine. Practice for a couple of hours in the mornings, go to university, more practice at lunch, then for a couple of hours when we get home. Keep an eye on Nerima, beat up the occasional demon or magical girl, you know. More or less the usual." He snickered. Nabiki gave him a long look before shaking her head.

"Very weird. Both of you." She finished her treat and put her bowl on top of his. "And that's it?" He nodded.

"Pretty much. The last year or so has been surprisingly quiet. There's been the odd need to go outside Minato, for various reasons, but mostly we've just been learning things and waiting to see what happened with everyone in Nerima. A few months ago Kasumi decided that she wanted something more permanent with our relationship, we discussed it for a while, then more or less got engaged. We went on a few dates, something more formal than what we'd been doing up until then. One day, she basically sat on me until I agreed to marry her." He grinned, while Nabiki glanced at her sister with raised eyebrows. Kasumi was smiling happily, obviously remembering something. "We moved into the same bedroom, three months later we got married."

"I wish you could have been there, sister. It wasn't very romantic, we had to keep it quiet. That part I regret. It was just the two of us, Happosai, and the legal clerk. One day, perhaps we can do it over again with family." The elder sister smiled gently, thinking about the marriage. Her smile widened fractionally. "Since then it's been... very nice." Nabiki looked at her carefully, then at Ranma, who was wearing a slightly evil smile as he watched his wife, who seemed to be matching his expression quite closely. After a moment Nabiki coughed.

"Right. Well, again, congratulations." She was feeling a little uncomfortable. Kasumi and Ranma both jumped, looking guiltily at the middle sister, who snickered. "Are you considering children?" She was very curious about that. The other two exchanged glances, but it was Kasumi who answered.

"We have talked about it a few times. Neither one of us thinks that it's a good idea right now. But later on, well, we're not against the idea at all." Her sister nodded thoughtfully then got an odd look.

"So," she said slyly, "which one of you would have the kid?" Ranma stared wide-eyed at her, then at his wife, who looked first surprised then contemplative. Nabiki grinned.

"We haven't decided," Kasumi said, glancing at her husband mischievously. "Maybe one each?" Ranma seemed uncomfortable, but Nabiki was interested to note he didn't refute the suggestion. It gave her something to think about.

"Anyway," he said, his voice squeaking a little on the word and making both sisters smile, "that's basically it. We ran away, hid, learned magic, got money, found somewhere to live, went to school, got married, and here we are." He waved his hands at the room with a grin. Nabiki looked at him
for a long moment.

"I'm pretty sure there's a lot more to it than that."

"Oh, sure. But it would take days to go over it. We've already been talking for hours. I can tell you more another time if you want. Quite a lot of the story is very boring though."

After another pause, Nabiki sighed a little, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. Unfolding them she put them on the table face down. "OK. Thanks for letting me know everything. There's one thing you haven't mentioned yet, though, that I really need to know."

Pushing the papers across the table to him, she pulled her hand back. He watched her face for a moment, then picked them up, turned them over, and went still. Only his eyes moved as he read the top sheet, before putting them back on the table. He glanced at her with a neutral expression. "Was that you?" After a long moment during which he and Kasumi exchanged looks, he nodded.

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"No. Only the first eight." He locked eyes with his wife, and Nabiki slowly turned to look at her sister.

"You?" She couldn't believe it.

"He was a monster. He'd killed at least nine women, and was in the process of killing another one when we found him. She was only eleven!" Kasumi started crying and Ranma got up to sit beside her. Nabiki watch in silence, trying to understand how her gentle older sister could have done that to someone, even if he was a monster. Then she remembered the reports she'd read about the other victims of the person in question and found it quite easy to understand.

"Good for you, sis," she said quietly, leaning over and holding her tightly. On the other side Ranma was doing the same thing.

"I found him before Ranma did, we knew he was somewhere in the area but not exactly where. I was so angry when I saw what he was doing to that poor girl. It was strange, at first I was almost shaking with anger, then I went cold. Almost emotionless, like Ranma's soul of ice technique, but I wasn't using it. When I pulled him off the girl and threw him across the park into a tree his arm broke. I remember walking over and looking at him lying there with his pants around his ankles, his hands covered in blood..." She shivered at the memory. "There was a lot more blood when I stopped hitting him." Turning her head she buried her face in Ranma's chest. Nabiki looked over her shaking shoulders at his expression, while rubbing her sister's back. He looked upset, but weirdly proud as well.

"That bastard was the worst of the lot," he said quietly. "He'd raped, killed, and dismembered nine children over three years and the police had absolutely no leads. If Kas hadn't got him I would have, and I'm really not sure he'd have survived." The martial artist was silent for a while, hugging his wife. "I absolutely hate rapists, more than I can say. They're one of the most extreme examples of the powerful hurting the weak I can imagine, going against everything I believe, that I've trained for. Even then I find it difficult to think I could kill another human, but I came very close with a couple of those fuckers. None closer than this revolting excuse for a person." A bitter laugh escaped him. "You want to know the funny thing? The demoness I based Zythra'a on would have slaughtered him on the spot as someone who didn't deserve to live. What does that tell you about what he was like?"
The quiet in the room was only broken by the sound of Kasumi crying for some time.

Eventually she sat up, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. Ranma tenderly wiped a tear off her cheek.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, my love. Either for what you did, or for being upset about it. It needed to be done, you were the person in that place at that time. We had the ability to stop a horrible crime and if we hadn't we'd have been as guilty as the one committing it. You saved at least one life, and who knows how many more that he might have gone on to take."

Nabiki watched them, realising once more how much they cared for each other. She was very pleased that her sister had someone like that in her life, even under the circumstances. "I suspect the law might have a different interpretation, despite how much I agree with you myself." Ranma looked at her with a slight smile.

"Possibly. Possibly not. All nine of the people we've... dealt with... have been sexual predators of the worst possible type. None of them were people the police could catch." Watching her for a moment, he added, "Did you figure out that we were pointed at them? I suspect by the police themselves?" She stared at him for a long moment, some things that she'd noticed suddenly coming together in her head.

"Bloody hell. So that's what happened." While he watched she thought hard, then slowly asked, "Let me guess. Newspaper articles covering crimes on a national scale, that normally wouldn't get reported outside a smaller area?" The dark haired man nodded.

"More or less. Not the last one, he was enough of a threat that the story had been covered nationally anyway, but not very much. No one had any real details, the guy was very careful. But the rest, yes. The first one was in Nerima, I know you found out about that. Thanks to you I even know who came up with the idea. I always kind of liked that guy. For a cop he has a very straightforward attitude to life. I can't prove it, but I have a pretty good idea that he told a few people scattered around the country, probably friends of his, which made some of them try a similar thing when they got stuck."

The middle sister was listening with interest. It seemed plausible and fitted the facts. "You realise that if you're right they're using you as their own unofficial wet-work specialist, someone they can genuinely say they have no knowledge of if you get found out?" He smiled a little.

"Of course. In a way I don't even mind. I would if it wasn't for the fact that the people they're pointing me at really are the worst scum around. I don't truly enjoy hurting someone, even someone like that, so much, but if I don't people will die. Like I said to Kas, if I have the ability to stop a horrific crime and don't, in my mind that make me nearly as guilty as the person committing it."

"I'm going to have to look into this some more. It's kind of disturbing in a way." Ranma shrugged.

"I agree. But I'm not going to stand by and let anyone get raped under any circumstances."

Nabiki nodded, but cautioned, "Be careful. I doubt very much that any of the police from Nerima have any intention at all of ever trying to arrest you, but you never know if someone from a different city might not have a go."

"I'm not planning on making it a hobby. But thanks for the thought." He grinned at her, and even Kasumi looked happier. Nabiki retrieved her papers and looked at them for a moment, the picture of the injuries the last rapist had suffered making her shiver. The thought that her elder sister had
done that... For a few seconds she wondered if Akane really was the dangerous one in the family. 'Yes, she is;' she thought to herself after a second or two. 'Akane is likely to do this to a random person who just pushes her buttons wrong. What it would have taken to make Kasumi that angry...' She shivered again and tore the papers into small shreds.
Chapter 10

After a long period of quiet reflection, Nabiki looked at Ranma inquisitively. "That only leaves the last issue you had, the Neko-ken. What about the cat phobia?" Ranma returned her gaze for a moment, apparently thinking about his answer.

"It's still there, to a degree," he eventually replied. "I've been talking to a very good therapist about it for the last eighteen months or so. She doesn't know all the details of who I am, I go to her as Maiko, but I told her enough to let her understand the problem. She's been extremely helpful, and also wants to find Pop and have him committed." He grinned. "She doesn't like him at all. I told her that I'd lost track of him a long time ago after I escaped the child abusing son of a bitch." He shrugged a little. "It's kind of true. I see her three times a week for an hour or so. We ended up settling on a form of CBT as the best therapy. It's helped a huge amount with the phobia. Kas comes as well, just in case the Neko-ken is triggered, she can bring me out of it. But that hasn't happened for more than a year."

"So you're not afraid of cats any more?" she asked curiously. He shook his head.

"Not to the point of terror, like I was. I seriously don't like them, I'll admit, and the psychologist thinks I never will, but I can at least stand to be in the same room as one for a while. It looks like randomly setting me off into the Neko-ken state is over. I sure hope so."

Nabiki was impressed. Both by the fact that he'd sought therapy, and that he'd admit to it. The old Ranma might not have, being too embarrassed by something he saw as a weakness. She said as much. Kasumi and her husband exchanged glances, then he smiled again. "That's probably true. But the Neko-ken was the true weakness, an extremely dangerous one. You have no idea how close we came in the past to a bloodbath, in that state I wasn't functioning much above the level of a smart cat. If I'd been really angry..." He shuddered. "It's a pity I can't control the more useful manifestations of it, but I'd rather lose the whole thing than risk what could happen. I don't like not being in control of myself. That's the main reason I don't drink, aside from the horrible taste and the pointlessness of it."

By now it was about half past eight in the evening, the sky outside the living room windows was beginning to get properly dark. Ranma looked over at the clock hanging on the wall above the door to the kitchen. "I'm going to have to go out for a while. You guys can stay here, or come with me if you'd like." Nabiki watched as he disentangled himself from his wife, stood, turned female, then shimmered and changed into a different woman. This one had night-black hair, darker than anything the middle Tendo woman had ever seen before, with a brilliant blue streak running through it from a position off-centre over her forehead all the way back through the braid which she kept. She was a couple of centimetres taller than Ranma's normal female form, and as well developed, looking about nineteen. Her eyes were purple-blue, almost glowing in the light of the room, the gaze she cast back at Nabiki a little disturbing. When she smiled the brunette could see she had small fangs like Ryoga. Overall the effect was impressive and rather intimidating.

"Very nice. Who's this one?"

"Yori. Someone who doesn't take shit from magical girls or demons." Her voice was beautiful, a smoky contralto that would make most men look to see where it came from. There were odd harmonics to it that made Nabiki shiver a little. "Yori has a little demon blood in her, you see. She doesn't like people who attack other people who are a bit different just because they're a bit different, and she particularly doesn't like the attacking people to cause damage to property or bystanders. She tends to express her displeasure physically." The girl grinned in a disturbing
manner.

Ranma, or 'Yori', disappeared into her bedroom, coming back a little while later dressed in black silk clothes similar to the practice clothing she and Kasumi had been wearing that afternoon, but tighter and cut differently. There was a blue streak similar to the one in her hair running down the left side of the shirt. On her feet she was wearing black leather boots, quite stylish without being overtly feminine, while on her hands she had fingerless leather gloves, again black, contrasting with blue fingernails that looked very sharp. She'd removed the red bow and replaced it with an electric blue one. The end result was a bit like a fashion-conscious female ninja, someone who was genuinely dangerous. Nabiki looked her up and down for a moment with a smile, as she pirouetted to show off the complete ensemble.

"Yes, very nice indeed. Why female, though? Most of your alter-egos seem to be women." Ranma laughed.

"Only the ones you've seen so far. I've got as many male personae as female. This is because it's more or less expected around here that people jumping around the rooftops doing impossible things will be attractive women in odd costumes. I really have to find out why one day. Oddly enough, I attract less attention looking like this than I would if I went out beating up monsters as myself. A bit different from Nerima, that place is much more equal opportunity insanity." Kasumi laughed, as did Nabiki.

"I made the outfit a while ago. It was fun, I haven't done much sewing since we left." Kasumi inspected her work with a proprietary eye.

"Like I said, this way with the clothes, hair, and so on, I only need to hold the illusion for the body, which is a lot less effort. I could keep this running pretty much indefinitely, even while asleep, if necessary. To be honest by now I might be able to do that with any of them, I haven't tested it recently. Like ki techniques, the more you use it the more you seem to have available. Another thing that irritates the magic users I know, I'm told magic doesn't work like that at all." She grinned cockily, the underlying Ranma coming through strongly for a moment. "I think they're wrong. Or maybe I'm just doing something new. Like the healing with ki, no one seems to have thought about it before, or at least not written it down anywhere. Whatever, it seems to work."

"You certainly seem to have developed more of a fashion sense in the last few years," Nabiki said with amusement. Ranma seemed both amused and pleased by the comment, not embarrassed at all. "So where are you going?"

'Yori' got an exasperated expression on her face. "I learned yesterday that one of these damn demon-hunter groups thought that some otherworldly horror was lurking in a building on the other side of the university, and that they had made plans to deal with it tonight. I think they're wrong, I have a pretty good idea who's actually in there. Otherworldly, yes, horror, not really. I've got to go and check, tell them to make themselves scarce if it's who I think it is, then stop those idiots tearing up half the campus. If it really is something dangerous I'll have to deal with that as well." She sighed in a put-upon way. "The life of a martial artist is fraught with peril." Nabiki giggled hysterically, she'd heard Genma say the same thing many times, but she doubted very much whether this was the sort of thing he had in mind.

Ranma noted her amusement with a smile, glancing at Kasumi. "You two want to come and watch?"

"Is it likely to be dangerous?" Nabiki asked with a small amount of trepidation, glancing at her sister and wondering at the light of eagerness in her eyes. Kasumi looked back with an odd expression.
"Possibly. Probably not. But it might be a lot of fun. Come on, we can show you around the neighbourhood afterwards." With a small grunt of worry Nabiki stood.

"Oh, all right. But if you start throwing ki balls around, I'm off." The disguised Ranma laughed.

"Fair enough." She produced a thin silver bracelet and held it out. Curious, Nabiki took it, inspecting it with interest.

"What's this?"

"It's one of the magical artefacts I got from my friends. Put it on, it'll stop anyone being able to identify you later." Hesitating for a moment, the brunette shrugged a little and did as requested. 'Yori' touched it with one finger. "There. It's activated."

"I don't feel any different."

The girl with the black hair smiled. "You won't notice it working. It only affects other people, more specifically ones who aren't present when it's turned on and aren't also using the same device. But it's working, I can sense it. If you went out naked and jumped around in the street, afterwards no one would be able to describe you, recognise you, or even have a usable photo of you."

Lifting the bracelet to her eyes Nabiki stared at it closely, then grinned. "I can think of all sorts of uses for something like this." Kasumi laughed.

"We'll need it back."

"Aww..."

"It won't come off unless you deliberately take it off either, so you can't lose it," Ranma added with an amused look at the woman's palpable disappointment.

"Neat. OK, now what?" Walking over to the glass doors that opened onto the balcony, the currently female martial artist opened one side and looked out.

"Now, I turn invisible and jump off the balcony." She grinned at the expression on Nabiki's face, before looking at her wife. "Meet you two at the medical block in a few minutes, all right?" At Kasumi's nod she faded from view. Nabiki stared.

"I still can't get over that. It's amazing." Walking out onto the balcony she looked down at the street, then around at the scenery, before rejoining her sister inside. "Did she really jump off? It's at least a fifteen metre drop to the road."

"That's nothing," giggled her sister. "Even I can do that." She giggled even more at the expression on the brunette's face. "The really good trick is jumping back." Disappearing into her room for a few minutes she came back wearing a similar set of clothing to those that 'Yori' had worn, only a very dark grey in colour with a deep green belt. "How's this?" she asked, turning around in front of Nabiki.

"It's... not at all like what I remember you wearing at home."

"But how does it look?" Kasumi seemed a little anxious. Her sister raised her eyebrows, then smiled.

"It looks nice. It does suit you, really, I just never pictured you wearing anything like that." She gaped a little when her sister once more changed with the heat-haze shimmer she was becoming
familiar with, her hair going ice-blonde and her face and figure changing enough that she looked like a completely different person. She had green eyes now, that looked like emeralds in the pretty face that didn't resemble her own one at all, or 'Rika'.

"Yet another identity?" Nabiki was starting to lose track, wondering how these two could keep them all straight. The new version of her sister nodded with a small grin.

"This is Chou. She's a friend of Yori's, who sometimes comes with her." Her voice was pitched slightly higher than her own one, closer to Ranma's female form. With a shake of her head Nabiki laughed.

"You two are amazing. So, what next? I assume Ranma went invisible so no one would know where she came from while in that form? How do we get out?" With an impish look 'Chou' waved her towards the practice room. The pair of women went up the stairs at the back to the roof, ending up staring at the building next door, some ten metres away, it's roof about three metres lower.

Nabiki looked at the gap, then at her disguised sister, who seemed very amused. "No. No way. It's impossible." A shriek escaped her despite herself when her sister suddenly scooped her up in her arms as easily as if she was a bag of groceries, took a few steps back, then launched herself at the other building. One dainty foot pushed off from the railing of the roof wall, then they were flying through the night.

Finding herself unable to do anything at all other than wrap her arms around her sister and hang on, Nabiki was too scared to even close her eyes. The rooftops passed in a blur, impossibly long leaps interleaved among short runs at insane speed, the wind of their motion making her eyes water. In a very short space of time they had covered a couple of kilometres and were nearing the university main building complex, finally dropping four stories to the ground near where Nabiki had first encountered Ranma as Maiko. Kasumi lowered her sister's feet to the pavement but had to wait patiently for a few seconds until the other woman could open her hands and release her.

Shaking, Nabiki staggered over to a bench and sat down, staring at the ground and blinking while trying not to throw up. Eventually she recovered sufficiently to glare at her sister who was looking completely unrepentant. "Don't ever do that again, Kasumi!" she hissed, still trembling.

"Chou. Come on, it's so much fun!" The blonde girl smiled at her upset sister.

"It's not fun. Not at all. No. Never again." Realising she was babbling a little Nabiki fell silent and just expressed her feelings with an evil gaze which only seemed to amuse the older woman. Looking around she noticed with some surprise that the few people in the area paid them no more than casual glances. It reminded her of Furinkan in the way that passersby simply accepted young women dropping several metres off a building as normal. With a shake of her head she stood, approaching her still-smiling sister warily. "Fine, let's go and meet Ra... Yori. But no more roof hopping, all right?" 'Chou' grinned at her and nodded, indicating the correct direction.

They walked quietly for another few hundred metres, the younger sister still shaken. Every now and then she glanced at her older sibling wonderingly, thinking that she'd definitely changed in a lot more ways than the obvious. She would never have believed that Kasumi would be able to roof-hop like the rest of the NWC, never mind enjoy it so much. Arriving at one large building at the far side of the university complex from their apartment, her companion waved a hand at it. "That's the medical teaching block. Yori should be around here somewhere." As if called the black-haired girl faded into existence in front of them, snickering at Nabiki's 'eep' of shock.

"Don't do that," the brunette snapped.

"Sorry." It was obvious she wasn't. Pointing to a building across the street from the edge of the
campus, she added, "That's the one. I had a quick look around, I'm pretty sure I'm right about who's in there. No sign of the mini-skirted nuisances yet. I was waiting until you two turned up before I went over and checked it out."

"What are you going to do, knock on the front door?" Nabiki asked with slightly sarcastic curiosity. The other woman raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. Why not?" There didn't seem to be a good answer for that, so the three of them walked across the hundred or so metres intervening distance, going down an alley and arriving at a door with no markings on it. The building seemed to be a small commercial one of some sort, but there were no indications which company if any was associated with it. A small van was parked outside, and there were lights visible in some small windows to one side. 'Yori' walked confidently up to the door and knocked firmly, rocking back on her heels and waiting patiently for someone to answer. The others watched from a few metres away. Nothing happened, so she knocked again.

Eventually, the door slowly opened and a head peered around it slightly hesitantly. Nabiki stared, it belonged to someone or something that clearly wasn't human. The horselike ears on the sides of the head proved as much, never mind the fine scales covering it. Greenish cat-like eyes looked around, fixing on the figure of the black-haired girl waiting outside the entrance, then widened. "Yori!" the creature said in a deep voice that sounded pleased and surprised, as it flung the door open and leapt out. The younger Tendo sister gasped as the strange creature, which now she could see it properly looked like a sort of cross between a human, a horse, and some sort of huge lizard, enveloped the considerably smaller girl in it's arms. After a moment she relaxed as it became clear the thing was genuinely happy to see the young woman.

"Hi, Uthryyl." 'Yori' managed the name easily, despite the very strange pronunciation. "It's been a while. Can we come in?" The creature released her and stepped back, looking at her companions, then produced something that approximated a smile. It had a lot of teeth in it but was apparently friendly.

"Certainly." It held the door open and waved them through. Following the thing down the corridor in front of them Nabiki watched it's long tail sway from side to side, wondering what on earth she'd managed to get herself into. The disguised martial artist seemed completely accepting of the creature, talking to it as if to an old friend. When she glanced at her older sister she noticed the other woman didn't seem surprised either.

'And here I thought things up until now were weird...,' she thought to herself in mild panic. The creature Uthryyl led them through two more doors into a large room which contained three more of the things, along with a large pile of boxes. The others stopped what they were doing, which seemed to be loading the boxes onto a series of carts, looking at their companion and the three humans. Two of them smiled and called out Yori's name, while the last one seemed confused. After a moment it shrugged and went back to work.

While the three creatures and 'Yori' greeted each other, Nabiki wandered hesitantly over to look at the boxes the remaining one was still piling onto the carts. It glanced at her occasionally but didn't stop her or say anything. The young woman's eyebrows went up when she saw that according to the labels on the boxes, they were catering packs of expensive coffee beans and various high-end chocolate products. As they were still sealed it seemed likely that the contents were indeed what was on the labels. 'Are you seriously telling me that some... people, I guess... from some other world have come to Tokyo to stock up on coffee?' She shook her head in disbelief, looking at the alien appearing creature which had just positioned the last box in it's load, sighing with very human-sounding relief that the job was over.
Going back to the small group of people and kind-of-people, she listened curiously. "So those damn girls think we're evil demons come to eat the populace?" Uthryyl asked with a clearly irritated expression. One of the other ones giggled in a feminine tone. 'Yori' sighed.

"You know what they're like. That group is a real pain. They're running on some sort of prophecy, or something along those lines, which apparently requires them to cleanse the earth of the demonic taint left over from some ancient kingdom millennia ago." She said this in a very sarcastic manner, making it clear what she thought of it all. "If it wasn't for the fact that they're pretty powerful even by magical girl demon hunter standards, I'd just find it funny, but they are genuinely dangerous. Plus, they cause even more damage to the fixtures and fittings than most. I don't want that sort of thing going on where I live."

The female one that had giggled said tiredly, "Why won't they believe we're not-evil demons here to eat the chocolate? We've told them enough times." Even Nabiki laughed at that. "We bought the stuff fair and square. The local supplier seems perfectly happy to trade coffee and chocolate for gold and silver." She looked very miffed.

'Yori' shrugged. "They're idiots. I've told you before. The best thing is to make sure you're gone by the time they turn up."

"We're just about done, actually," Uthryyl said, looking around. "One more van-load outside, then we can spin up the portal and take everything through." He thought for a moment. "If you and Chou could help us unload it we could save some time." 'Yori' glanced at her disguised wife and nodded.

"Sure. No problem." The lizard-like demon went over to the roller door to the outside loading bay and flipped the switch that raised it, while his companions grabbed several more empty carts and wheeled them over. Soon all four demons and the three humans were unloading the van, only taking a few minutes to get the carts packed. Once the empty van was locked again and the door was lowered, they arranged the carts into several neat lines. All four demons took up positions at the corners of a ten-metre square and concentrated. Nabiki could feel a static charge building up in the large room, a slight wind springing up and blowing some dust around. Blinking in surprise she watched from a safe distance as a point in the middle of the square, about a metre off the floor, began to glow.

Within seconds there was a large vertical tear in the fabric of reality hanging in the air in the middle of the warehouse, the bottom edge at floor level. The demons relaxed once the portal was established. "You're getting better at that," 'Yori' commented casually, making the brunette stare at her. Personally she was finding the whole thing pretty damn strange, it was only the fact that she'd been brought up in Nerima that stopped her running screaming into the night. Uthryyl grinned at the praise.

"Thanks. It's not easy, the power requirements are pretty significant, but it should be stable until we shut it down. Right, you lot, start taking the stuff through." The other three demons grabbed a cart each and pushed them towards the portal, the first one to reach it disappearing with a slight flash of light and a faint crackle. As Nabiki watched with amazement the other two did the same, only to reappear within a few seconds to take more carts through. There were enough that it was going to take several minutes to transfer the entire load. "Can I ask a favour?" the demon said. 'Yori' nodded.

"Sure."

"Could you arrange to take the van back to the rental company, and the keys for this warehouse back as well? It's all paid for, we rented both for a month. I don't want to leave any bad feeling
behind, it's not good business." At the girl's nod he handed her an envelope and two sets of keys, which disappeared into her ki pocket. "Thanks."

Nabiki was still trying to work out how the hell something that looked like *that* rented a van, even in Minato, when the roof fell in.
Chapter 11

It wasn't the entire roof, but a pretty good chunk of it landed on the floor narrowly missing everyone, making one hell of a bang. Dust filled the room as five figures dropped through the hole in the ceiling and landed lightly on the floor, pointing an assortment of clearly mystical weapons at the demons. For a second there was silence as the two groups stared at each other. Nabiki recognised the skimpy colour-coded uniforms of one of the most famous magical girl groups, one that was as famous for it's collateral damage as anything else. One girl at the back of the little formation muttered, "Oh, crap. It's Yori." The one in front, the obvious leader of the group, apparently didn't hear this, opening her mouth and beginning a flowery speech about smiting the evil while striking a silly pose, only to nearly bite her tongue off when an absolutely furious 'Yori' appeared in front of her so fast no-one even saw her move.

"WHAT THE FUCKING HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING YOU GODDAMN IDIOTS?!" she roared at the blonde from less than twenty centimetres away, almost making her twin ponytails flap in the breeze. The girl shrank back in surprise, worry and no small amount of fear suddenly crossing her face. "Someone is going to have to fix that damn roof, and I'm not going to be the one to pay for it!" the black haired martial artist continued at slightly lower volume but with no less fury in her voice, along with a distinct tone of command which seemed to make them all listen even though they clearly didn't want to.

One of the other girls in the group, the one who had spoken earlier, said quietly, "I told you this was a bad idea. She really doesn't like us." The one standing next to her, another blonde, nudged the girl, who Nabiki saw looked vaguely like a younger version of Akane, hard in the ribs, making her grunt in pain and glare at her compatriot.

At the front of the group, 'Yori' was haranguing the blonde leader who almost looked ready to cry. "I told you last time, stay the hell away from here. If there's a real threat, I will deal with it. NOT YOU! Every time you stupid bitches turn up someone gets hurt, or their house gets blown up, or their car gets destroyed. Most of the time it's all over something completely ridiculous as well. You come barging in, firing off energy attacks every which way, chasing some poor sod just because he or she looks a bit different. Last time three people ended up in hospital and about half a million of someone's yen was needed to fix the road and that shop. All over a guy who just wanted to see some movies."

"He was a demon..." the girl ventured. 'Yori' glared at her.

"He was a tourist! There was no intention of causing any damage, or hurting anyone. He even paid for his ticket! The only people who got hurt, YOU hurt. If I hadn't stopped you you could have killed someone. Fucking hell, you girls are hard of understanding. STAY AWAY FROM MY HOME AND MY FRIENDS!" She yelled the last few words at the top of her voice, making the poor blonde flinch away.

One of the girls at the back of the group raised her weapon and began to point it at the furious martial artist, only to stop dead when a voice in her ear said quietly, "Don't even think about it." She rolled her eyes to the side to see a dangerous looking gold-white light playing about the hand, pointed directly at her head from mere centimetres away, of the black-haired girl's companion, who she would have sworn was nowhere near her until now. Static tingled along her neck, making the hairs stand up. Swallowing hard, she slowly lowered her weapon again. The other woman nodded, but didn't otherwise move.
The blonde leader tried again. "But these are demons as well. They're corrupting the purity of the city." 'Yori' screamed in frustration, grabbed a double handful of the blonde's hair and viciously head-butted her between the eyes while growling in a way that made even the demons look nervous. Nabiki winced, as did all the rest of the blonde's comrades except the short haired one who had commented earlier, who for some reason seemed somewhat satisfied. When the blonde with the silly hairstyle struggled to her feet, clutching her bleeding nose and whimpering in pain, the martial artist gave her an enraged look.

"They're shopping." She stomped over to one of the carts, picked up a crate of chocolate bars, brought it back to the other girl and waved it in her face. "They love chocolate and coffee, but it's not available where they come from. So they buy it here. Buy it! You understand? Give money, get thing?" Handing the crate to Uthryyl who was watching with a wide grin on his toothy face, she spoke as if explaining things to a small and rather dim child. "This is all their property. They own it. The warehouse is rented by them. The van is rented by them. It's all completely legal. YOU are trespassing, and have caused criminal damage to the building. You could have killed someone with that stupid move!" She pointed at the roof, or at least the hole where quite a large part of it used to be. Stepping back and crossing her arms she glared at all five girls, who seemed a mix between scared, worried, and embarrassed. Their leader had substantial pain added to the mix.

The demons had resumed moving their purchases through the portal, stopping occasionally to watch the black-haired girl give the demon-hunters a damn good talking to. It seemed to amuse them considerably. The leader of the group was still staring at 'Yori', who was so furious she was visibly glowing, outlined in a nimbus of purple-white light. It made the other girl extremely nervous. She remembered the last time she'd seen the black-haired girl this angry. That hadn't ended at all well for herself and her friends...

Three of the remaining girls were watching the demons go back and forth through the portal, every now and then sparing the fifth member of their group a glance. She was standing completely still, staring straight ahead while sweating profusely, very conscious of the threat from the blonde right next to her, who hadn't moved a millimetre. Eventually the demons finished transferring their goods, two of them going through the portal and not returning. The other two, the female one and Uthryyl, approached 'Yori' who was still glaring at the blonde leader. "We're done here. Are you going to be OK?" She nodded, not taking her eyes off those of the other girl.

"Yes. I'm sorry about all this mess. It won't happen again." The tone of her voice made it very clear than it damn well better not happen again. The girl she was glaring at looked at the floor, embarrassed. "Take care, Uthryyl. Give my best to your wife." He smiled and slapped her on the back.

"Thanks, Yori. Sorry about the trouble. We can sort this out next time, if that's all right. See you later." Walking over to the portal he waved, as did the female, before they disappeared through it. A few seconds later it shrank away to nothing with a faint pop.

"Right. You lot, you're clearing all this up. I'm going to go over there and watch until you're finished. If you're very lucky I won't tell the insurance company where you live." One of the other girls, one with long flowing black hair, snorted dismissively at this. The martial artist fixed her with a look that made her quail, raising one eyebrow. Prowling over to her with a graceful and dangerous gait, she leaned close and said something to her that made her go white. Nabiki could just hear what sounded like a list of names and addresses. The other four girls paled as well, exchanging worried looks. "Aside from anything else your operational security is a joke," 'Yori' commented sourly. She glanced at the one that looked a little like Akane. "You're the smart one, I'd have thought you'd have worked all this out." The girl gazed at her boots, very embarrassed.
Waving at the large pile of metal panels and support beams on the floor, 'Yori' invited them to get to work. Slowly, they walked over and began to pick up all the rubble. Nabiki helpfully handed the leader a broom she'd found leaning against the wall, smirking a little. It was close to performance art, the way that the disguised Ranma had dealt with the group. Once she'd gotten over the possibility of personal danger she'd found the entire thing extremely funny.

It took the team of magical girls nearly an hour to tidy up to 'Yori's' satisfaction. When they were finally finished, sweating and covered in dust, she walked over and inspected the work, looking up at the hole in the roof with a grunt of irritation. "God, you lot aren't subtle, are you?" She shook her head in disgust. "I'm serious. Do this again and you really won't like what I'll do. You won't like it at all." Picking up a hundred-kilo piece of steel girder as if it was weightless she started to whittle the end into a point with a short energy beam coming from her right hand. All five girls froze, staring in horror. "Now sod off."

They looked at each other then slowly filed out the exit. When she was sure they were gone, 'Yori' tossed the girder, or what was left of it, back onto the pile of debris with a clang. "Fuckwits." Nabiki walked over smiling.

"That was pretty funny. Are they all like that?"

"No, luckily. Some are nearly as bad as far as their lack of common sense goes, but don't have the raw power of that bunch. It's a good thing the others didn't come, there's several more of them. This lot seems to be the core though. They cause so much damage you wouldn't believe it." Sighing, she added, "One or two of the groups are actually pretty sane. My friends, for example. Some of them are batshit crazy. That lot is about in the middle sanity wise, near the bottom in common sense and respect for other people's property. They started off well, but got more and more over the top as time passed." Looking around the damaged warehouse she shook her head in irritation. "This is going to be expensive."

Nabiki looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"She means that we're going to end up paying for the repairs. Again." 'Chou' also sighed. "This place was rented by some friends, so we're going to arrange to get it fixed. We don't want Uthryyl and his people to end up with a bad reputation, they're decent people. The next time they come we'll get reimbursed but in the mean time we'll have to get this dealt with."

"How on earth did you end up friends with demons?" her sister asked, very curious. 'Yori' smiled.

"Quite easily, actually. I met them when they were buying a lot of ice cream a year or so ago. It turns out that their people have an enormous sweet tooth, and a massive caffeine habit. It's cheaper for them to import it from here than most other places they could get it, so they were in the middle of moving a couple of truckloads of ice cream through a portal when I detected it and went to have a look. We got to talking, they offered me some..." Nabiki cut her off with a laugh.

"Ah. I can see where this is going. The way to your heart is definitely paved with ice cream." Both 'Yori' and 'Chou' giggled.

"True enough. Anyway, they're friends of ours, and this is the second time that bunch of twits has crashed the party. There won't be a third one." Her face had hardened a lot. "Next time they try something like this I may start removing limbs." She glanced at her wife with a sudden smile. "I saw you threatening that fool earlier. Nicely done." The blonde smiled happily.

"Thank you. I thought it was a bit overdramatic myself, but she seemed to believe me." Her sister was grinning at her. She'd thought it was pretty impressive herself. "Shall we go and look around
the neighbourhood for a while on the way home?" 'Chou' asked her sister. Nabiki stared at her.

"OK. But no roof-hopping! Clear?" The other woman nodded with a smile, while 'Yori' looked puzzled. They left the building, the black-haired girl locking it behind them.

"I'll take the van back tomorrow and arrange to get the roof fixed as well." She looked at Nabiki. "We use a firm of contractors that started in Nerima, oddly enough. They know a lot about repairing damage from... unusual causes." The middle Tendo laughed.

"Not surprising. Unusual causes in Nerima are so common they're the usual causes." A thought struck her, making her ask, "I'm surprised you didn't detect those girls before they dropped through the roof. I'd have thought it was well within your abilities." 'Yori' looked annoyed.

"It is, but the inter-world portal kicked up so much interference it masked them until it was too late. If I'd been a couple of hundred metres from it I'd have felt them coming from a kilometre away. They radiate so much magic it's ridiculous. How they ever manage to sneak up on demons or anyone else reasonably sensitive who isn't standing right next to an active portal is beyond me." The three women slowly walked back in the direction of the apartment building, one or other of the married pair pointing out things of interest on the way. Half-way back they stopped to watch as a group of very drunk students spilled out of a bar near the university, shouting and laughing. 'Yori' shook her head in disgust.

"I really don't see the point in getting drunk. I can almost understand drinking with some friends to relax a little, if that's something you enjoy and can stand the taste, but to deliberately put yourself into a state like that...?" She waved at a couple of young men who were staggering about the road, causing the light traffic to slow down amidst considerable sounding of horns. "That's just stupid." One of the men fell over in the road in front of a truck moving fast enough that it probably wouldn't be able to stop in time and she sighed, then jumped into the road, scooping him up and springing back to safety in one smooth motion. "Stop being an idiot, you idiot," she snarled, slapping his face a couple of times. Propping him on his feet she pushed him towards his friends who were watching in drunken disbelief. "Take this fool somewhere safe and make him lie down."

The young man staggered forward, landing in the arms of two other slightly less inebriated students, who held onto him while staring at the three women. One of them smiled at her, while the other frankly leered. "Thanks," the smiling one said. "We'll take him home."

"Would you like to come with us?" asked the leering one in a salacious manner. His colleague kicked him in the ankle quite hard.

"Shut up, you idiot," he said out of the side of his mouth, while still smiling at the three women who were watching him with interest. "Do you have any idea who that is?" His friend smirked, looking at the black haired girl's chest.

"Someone I want to get closer to." The saner one's eyes widened, while 'Yori's' narrowed.

"Shut up, shut up, shut UP!" the first one whispered frantically. "That's Yori and Chou. For fuck's sake don't make them angry." His friend's eyes snapped to the smouldering ones of the martial artist and he gulped.

"Oh, shit," the young man mumbled, while Nabiki watched with cold amusement. 'Chou' had her hand on her female husband's shoulder, just in case. "Um, I'm really sorry, Miss Yori." He swallowed again. "Thanks for saving Jirou." Glancing at his friend he licked his lips, then pointed in a random direction. "We'll just be going now." The pair beat a hasty retreat with their semicomatose burden, head hanging and feet dragging, slung between them. When they were safely
away Nabiki snickered.

"Well, 'Yori', you seem to have something of a reputation around here." Her sister laughed, releasing her husband.

"There were a few, um, incidents when we first moved in. She's still not used to being approached like that yet and tends to react... abruptly." Both sisters looked at the black-haired young woman who was gritting her teeth and watching the three men disappear into the distance. Nabiki nudged her.

"Take it as a compliment and let it go." The girl relaxed slightly, sighing.

"Sorry. It wouldn't normally upset me so much but I'm still kind of pissed off after what happened at the warehouse."

"You did seem to be pretty mad in there. I mean, head-butting a famous magical girl in the face? That's an interesting martial arts move." Nabiki had found it quite amusing, more for the expression on the girl's face than anything else. She certainly hadn't been expecting it. 'Yori' blushed.

"It was kind of spur of the moment. Those girls wind me right up, that one particularly for some reason." She chuckled. "Anyway, it worked. It wasn't elegant, I'll admit, but it was effective."

"I think you broke her nose."

"Oh, they're pretty tough. They've got some magical healing abilities as well, she'll get better. But hopefully she'll remember the pain and not be quite so eager to punch holes in other people's roofs next time." They walked along the street past several other bars and a couple of nightclubs, whose bouncers all nodded respectfully to 'Yori' as they passed. She stopped and chatted briefly with a couple of them who seemed to know her. Nabiki looked at her sister with her eyebrows up a bit.

"For the last year or so, ever since 'Yori' has been seen out and about, she sometimes gets involved in dealing with the locals who can't handle their drink. The bars and nightclubs like it, she doesn't involve the police but shuts down any trouble very quickly. That's another reason she has something of a reputation. Most of the second year and older students know her, or at least know of her, and are very polite." She grinned. "Or just run away when they see her coming." The younger Tendo laughed, easily able to picture this. Rejoining them the martial artist looked amused.

"Apparently the word got around that I'm in a bad mood and people are suddenly being very careful not to start fights." Giggling, they moved on. After a while Nabiki was wondering how they intended to get back into the apartment without anyone seeing, but just as she was about to ask, both her companions stopped dead, turning and looking off to the right. "Damn. Now what?" 'Yori' said grumpily, getting annoyed all over again. 'Chou' glanced at her.

"It feels familiar." She nodded. Nabiki watched both of them wondering what was happening.

"aaaaaaaaAAAlAAAHHHHH!" The scream grew closer and louder, causing all three of them and several bystanders to look up. A figure flew over the roof of the building next to them with it's limbs flailing, crashing into the road before even the martial artists had time to react. 'Yori' and her wife ran over to the crater in the road, Nabiki following more slowly. When she got there they were helping another young woman to her feet. She was dressed in a now rather tattered outfit that was even less there that that of the previous group of magical girls, and looked extremely battered. She'd obviously been involved in a major fight. The fall hadn't improved her either. Her left arm was clearly broken and she was covered in wounds, a couple of which appeared quite bad. The various bystanders, having recovered from their shock, cleared out with alacrity.
"Yori," she gasped painfully. "I'm sorry, we couldn't think of anything else to do. This one is really bad. We're herding it this way. Help." 'Yori' seemed shocked at the state of the girl, Nabiki realising from her expression that she obviously knew the auburn-haired female. Spotting a familiar looking bracelet on her arm she also realised that this must be one of the group that the martial artist considered friends. Just then there was a crash of falling roof tiles and all the women spun, looking up to see something horrific falling off the roof of a building down the street, followed by three more girls dressed identically to the one bleeding in 'Chou's' arms. The creature landed on a parked car, crushing it flat in an explosion of flying glass, before rolling off what was left and slowly getting to it's feet. Nabiki stared in horror.

Unlike the chocolate-loving demons from before, which after the initial shock of their appearance had seemed fairly harmless and just a bit odd-looking, this thing was clearly not only very alien but extremely dangerous. Some three metres tall and covered in dark green chitin forming an exoskeleton, it loosely resembled a very large insect, but with only four limbs. All four terminated in vicious claws that dripped blood. The limbs were out of proportion to the body looking far too long. The head was a nightmare, something that would haunt Nabiki's dreams for months. Four huge compound eyes on short stalks swivelled around tracking each girl independently while a set of mandibles worked against each other, dripping some sort of liquid and occasionally uncovering a mouth that seemed to also have an unnecessarily large number of teeth in it. A long tail moved fluidly behind it, the end having several long spikes coming out sideways. This was clearly able to be used as a weapon as it also had blood on it.

The thing leaned forwards and roared at the three girls, who raised their various weapons and stepped forward. The one 'Chou' was holding gasped out, "It regenerates too fast. It's killed at least five people that I know of, and wounded several more. We found it eating one of the bodies. No idea where it came from, never seen one like it before. We've been trying to put it down for an hour so far. The portal it came from closed, we can't send it back." 'Yori' nodded grimly.

Glancing at her wife and her wife's sister, she ordered, "Take Tamiko over there and see if you can do something about that arm. I'm going to try to get this thing to follow me to the park, there's too many people in the buildings around here to deal with it properly." 'Chou' looked worried but nodded, gently supporting the wounded girl. The disguised Ranma spared her a quick smile before turning to look at the monstrous creature. "HEY! Ugly thing!" A ball of ki shot from her hand and blew a crater in the demon's back, provoking it to produce a hissing scream that made everyone's ears hurt. Whipping around much faster than one would expect from it's size it fixed all four eyes on the black-haired girl, who muttered, 'OK, that got it's attention at least." The three magical girls on the other side of the thing started to move towards it but stopped when she looked at them and shook her head.

Stepping closer she fired another ki ball at it, hitting it in the chest. Once more the resulting explosion made it stagger slightly, screaming in rage. Nabiki watched wide-eyed from the sidewalk next to her sister, shocked by the noise and also the way the crater in the exoskeleton rapidly filled in, leaving no trace of a wound. "Damn. It really does regenerate quickly." 'Yori' commented. Suddenly breaking into a run she shot towards the thing before it could react, blurring out of the range of normal vision. There was a flash of purple-white light forming an arc and half it's left arm dropped onto the road. Yet another scream followed her attack, this one sounding very angry. Everyone watched as the arm regrew in a matter of seconds. The body part lying on the road dissolved into a foul-smelling liquid almost immediately.

"Oh my god", Nabiki breathed, horrified and scared. The thing took a couple of steps forward, slashing at the form of the martial artist, much faster than a normal person could have evaded but far too slowly to have any chance of tagging her. She moved out of range easily, then darted back in and cut off it's right arm with her ki beam. Nabiki thought hysterically that George Lucas would
be after her for copyright violations if he ever saw this, the 'light-sabre' effect was very impressive. It even made a humming noise. In a detached state of mind she wondered if that was deliberate, for effect.

Once more the removed limb regrew in seconds. The creature was beyond furious by now, and had entered the scene in a pretty bad mood in the first place. Abruptly moving much faster than it had up until now it only just missed 'Yori', who barely got out of the way in time. With a hard smile she produced a second energy sword in her other hand, each one about two metres long, then proceeded to remove all four limbs in a dazzling display of skill. The torso of the thing dropped to the road roaring in pain and fury, only to rise to it's regenerated feet ten seconds later. Moving back she waved her energy weapons at it, beckoning it forward. The thing eagerly took the challenge, charging forward with a roar, following her as she turned and ran. The other three girls looked at each other, shrugged, and dashed after them.

Nabiki stared, then turned to look at her sister who met her eyes with a worried gaze. "Is she going to be all right?"

"I hope so." The older sister turned her attention to the wounded girl in her arms, who was gently bleeding all over her clothes, having slipped into unconsciousness during the fight. Lowering her to the pavement 'Chou' inspected her carefully, then placed her hand over the worst of the wounds. Golden light flared beneath her palm and Tamiko twitched. Watching with amazement, Nabiki gasped when her sister removed her hand to reveal the wound had closed up and now looked like it was a couple of weeks old at least.

"Good god, Kasumi," she said quietly, "That's the most impressive thing yet." Her sister smiled but shushed her.

"Chou. Please, it's important." Nabiki smiled slightly, embarrassed.

"Sorry. But, that's really amazing. Ra... 'Yori' mentioned how she'd come up with it, but aside from that night I've never seen it in action. And my mind was sort of occupied at the time." Her sister glanced briefly at her and nodded, most of her attention on healing another wound.

"That's all right. Yes, it is amazing. It was one of the more difficult things to learn, it takes fine control and a certain mindset that she is a master of but most people find quite difficult to achieve. She's better at doing it without scarring, I'm faster." Finishing with the deep wounds, she turned her attention to the broken arm. "Here, hold her arm in this position. Don't move." Both hands glowed and Tamiko convulsed in pain even unconscious. "Hold it still!" she snapped. Doing her best, Nabiki leaned on the girl, maintaining her grip on the arm above and below the break. After thirty seconds or so 'Chou' leaned back, sweating a little. "That should do it. It's going to be pretty tender for a few days but it's mostly healed. We can finish that up later."

Reaching down she placed her hand in the middle of the girl's chest, once more golden light flaring around it. A few seconds later Tamiko's eyes opened. "Chou?" she asked weakly, looking up at the two faces gazing at her with worry. Suddenly sitting up, she grabbed her head in both hands, yelping in pain. "Owww!" She looked around, then flexed her arm. "Thanks. Where are Yori and the others?"

"She led it off to the park to get it away from people. I think she's going to do something impressive to it and didn't want to wreck the street," Nabiki said. Tamiko looked curiously at her, her eyes widening when she spotted the bracelet the brunette was wearing.

"Who are you?" she enquired. 'Chou' smiled at her.
"This is my sister."

"The mercenary one? Or the violent one?" the auburn haired magical girl asked with a quizzical expression. Nabiki flushed.

"The mercenary one," 'Chou' said with a laugh. Glancing at her sister who looked irritated, she amended her statement. "Formerly mercenary one. Be nice, I missed her." Tamiko nodded, grasping her head again with a pained expression.

"Agh. I need some serious painkillers." Struggling to her feet aided by the blonde, she limped around in a circle testing her injuries, stopping after a moment and inspecting her clothes. "Damn it, I only just repaired this after the last time. Now look at it!"

The magical girl and the martial artist sister suddenly froze, then turned to look down the street. "Hell, that's going to be big," Tamiko whispered in shock. Nabiki thought she could feel something weird, as if her head was picking up static like a badly tuned TV. Almost immediately a purple flash like a huge electrical discharge lit the entire street, followed by a rising flare of purple-white light from somewhere a kilometre or so away beyond the buildings. Seconds later the sound reached them, an echoing bass thump that rolled down the street making everything vibrate. Nabiki jumped, watching in horror. Ranma had done that? It looked and sounded like a small nuke had detonated. Both her companions winced and held their heads. "Damn. How much power did she put into that for god's sake? It felt like enough to vaporise a building." Tamiko shook her head, tilting it to one side as if trying to get water out of her ear.

"That's left a mark," 'Chou' said with a tired smile. "At least it wasn't in the middle of the road." They started walking in the direction of the blast, both the Tendo girls assisting the other one who was still unsteady on her feet. The trip to the park took several minutes, the injured female warrior was limping badly still, but they eventually reached it. A few people including three policemen were standing on the pavement watching four figures on the grass to one side of a substantial hole in the ground. Nabiki stared in disbelief. The crater was nearly twenty metres across and at least one and a half deep in the middle, lined with what looked like dark glass. She could feel the heat coming from it from fifty metres away. There was no sign at all of the monster. 'Yori' was kneeling on the ground a few metres from the crater looking at it, while the three remaining members of the group of demon hunters sprawled on the grass, looking like they'd simply fallen over from exhaustion. 'Chou' nodded to one of the policemen as she walked past supporting Tamiko and he returned the nod, moving out of her way respectfully. Nabiki kept quiet and went along with it. As they approached 'Yori' stood up, stretching and grunting in mild discomfort.

"Damn, that thing hit like a wrecking ball," she commented, rubbing her side. Her clothing was torn and there was some blood on it. 'Chou' left Tamiko in her sisters care and moved quickly to support her husband, inspecting the wound carefully.

"Doesn't look too bad, it's mostly healed already." She glanced at the crater with her eyebrows going up. "Was that much power completely necessary?" she asked mildly, giving the other woman a look. 'Yori' nodded slightly shamefacedly.

"I may have overdone it a little. But it was really tough!" she pleaded, looking guilty. Her wife smiled.

"I hope the park authorities don't complain too much, that's all."
"They can fill it with water and make another duck pond," the black haired girl said with a quick grin. "It's probably saved them money in the end." 'Chou' shook her head with a long-suffering expression.

"I suppose we should be grateful you didn't light that off in the middle of town." Releasing her husband she glanced at the three magical girls, who were now sitting up and talking. "Are they OK?"

"More or less. I think Aiko may have some broken ribs, that thing kicked her into a tree pretty hard, but it's mostly just cuts and bruises." She looked around, then walked over to the policemen, Nabiki trailing her curiously. Behind them 'Chou' and Tamiko joined the other girls, the Tendo woman quickly checking them over and healing anything serious. "Hi, Sergeant. Sorry about the noise." The man looked at her with a neutral expression, then significantly at the large crater. She blushed. "And the hole." The policeman smiled slightly, one corner of his mouth rising for a moment.

"That's all right, Yori. I saw what you were fighting, I'm just glad we got away with only some minor civic remodelling. Compared to what happens in the rest of the ward this is nothing." He stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it around. "Mind you, I'm going to have trouble hearing for a week after that." She grinned.

"I'll stop by the station tomorrow and give you a report, if that's OK? Also, there's a squashed car and a damaged roof back by the sports bar, you know the place?" He nodded. "Let me know who the owners are and I'll pass on the details." They shook hands and the police left. Nabiki had watched all this with a certain bemusement. As they walked back to rejoin her sister and the four female warriors, she looked curiously at the martial artist.

"That seemed remarkably painless." 'Yori' smiled.

"Yes, we have an arrangement with the police, they're nearly as pragmatic about this sort of thing as the ones back in Nerima are. I do my best to keep the collateral damage to a minimum, they keep everyone else out of it. They're not stupid, they know full well when they're out of their league and stay well back. Most of them seem to appreciate us dealing with the odd problem for them. Since we moved in the rate of damage from this sort of thing dropped off a cliff which has made pretty much everyone in the area grateful. We get cut a lot of slack when something does go wrong, like tonight, as a result."

"What was that about the car and the roof?"

'Yori' sighed a little. "Insurance claims can be difficult to work out around here. It's not fair to deprive someone of their car, for example, just because some stupid monster from one of the lower hells decided to land on it and the insurance won't pay up. If we have to, we sort out the damage claims. Sometimes it's just a matter of going to the insurance company and asking nicely." She grinned nastily, making it clear that 'nicely' might be a variable. "Worst case we pay for it through a trust we set up a couple of years ago. Local businesses contribute to it as well, a second line of insurance in a way. It doesn't get talked about much outside the area, no one wants to upset the cart, but people are pretty pleased about it around here. That also goes a long way to keeping them happier."

"You seem to have things well in hand", Nabiki commented, impressed. The thoroughness of the arrangements was remarkable. 'Yori' nodded glumly.

"Pretty much. I just wish it wasn't needed. I don't seem to be able to go anywhere without some weird shit happening sooner or later. At least around here everyone is more or less used to it."
Arriving at the group of women, all of whom were now standing, she looked around. "Nice to see you guys again. Pity you didn't call ahead." They all smiled painfully.

One of them, a short brunette with blue eyes, sourly said, "It's not like we had a choice, Yori. That thing was handing us our asses on a plate." The martial artist chuckled. "I can see. You look like you've been through a blender. Where the hell did it come from?" The young woman shrugged in a disgusted manner.

"Not a fucking clue. We were out dealing with some pretty innocuous stuff, some Yakuza thugs who were robbing a jewellery store, when we detected the portal opening. We went to find out what was going on, thirty seconds later we were in a fight for our lives." An unhappy expression crossed her face. "It had already killed at least five people in a house. Then it started eating them." Everyone looked upset and disgusted.

"We need to find out where it came from, why, and how. One was bad enough, if more turn up that would be a problem." 'Yori' thought for a moment, then added, "And if someone brought it here deliberately I would like to talk to them." Everyone noticed she was glowing slightly and stepped back, except for 'Chou' who moved closer and hugged her. After a moment the faint aura subsided.

"Later, love. Right now we need to get out of here." Looking around at the dozen or so spectators still watching from a distance, she motioned slightly with her head. Her husband followed her gaze and nodded in a tired manner.

"True enough." Glancing at the group of skimpily dressed magical warrior girls, she asked, "You guys want to come back and rest?" They exchanged glances and agreed. "Aiko, do you have enough power for a teleport? We can drop the wards for a few seconds from here." The short brunette pulled out a golden talisman in the shape of a pair of wings, hanging on a chain around her neck, and looked at it for a moment.

"I'm low. If you can give me a boost we should be OK, though." 'Yori' reached out and held the thing with her fingertips briefly, a bright purple glow running over it and then subsiding.

"Is that enough?" The girl nodded.

"More than enough. Thanks." 'Chou' concentrated for a moment then glanced at the girl. "The wards are down, you've got ten seconds. Aim for the practice room please, it's easier to clean." Motioning her sister over from where she was watching a couple of metres away, she moved closer to the girl herself as did the others.

Aiko looked around to make sure everyone was in range. "OK. Get ready. 3.2.1." There was a flash that left the spectators rubbing their eyes. When they could see again the park was empty. They all looked impressed, then wandered off in small groups comparing notes and rating the evenings excitement. Everyone felt it scored at least eight out of ten.
Nabiki staggered across the polished wooden floor of the practice room, collapsing near the wall with her head spinning. "That was worse than the roof-hopping," she mumbled, lying on the floor watching the ceiling gently spin. Her sister reverted to her normal appearance with a sigh, walking over and kneeling beside her.

"It will pass quickly. The first time through a teleport is always disorienting. I threw up for ten minutes the first time I experienced it." Kasumi patted her sister on the shoulder, then got up and returned to the others. Aiko was sitting on the floor with an exhausted look on her face, Ranma in her normal female shape squatting beside her healing her ribs. She looked up at her wife.

"I think these guys should stay the night, they're in no shape to go home right now." Kasumi nodded agreement.

"I'll get the guest rooms ready. Two of you are going to have to share, if that's OK?" She looked quizzically at the magical girl group. Tamiko glanced at Aiko, then smiled.

"I don't mind sharing with Aiko if she's OK with it." The brunette agreed, wincing as Ranma finished healing her ribs.

"Ow. Thanks, Ranma." She got to her feet with some aid from the red-head. "And thanks for helping us. That thing was a handful. If you hadn't been here it could have become unpleasant." She looked curiously at the martial artist. "On the way over, even in the middle of all that, I could have sworn I felt a portal form."

"Yes, it was Uthryyl and his crew on another shopping trip." Aiko laughed painfully, clutching her side.

"I hope they left some chocolate for the rest of us. That's the third time this year. He must be making a fortune at home from it." Ranma smiled.

"Probably. He certainly seemed in a good mood. Until you know who decided to drop through the roof." She gave a quick description of the intervention of the other group of magical girls and what had happened. Aiko started laughing again, as did the other three.

"Seriously? You head-butted her?" A slightly embarrassed but also amused Ranma nodded.

"Right in the face. Broke her nose. She looked like someone had eaten her puppy." The warrior women howled with laughter, as Nabiki sat up and watched, feeling much better. There didn't seem to be much love lost between the two groups, she reflected with interest.

"Serves them right. That blue-haired girl is all right, but most of the rest of them are gung-ho idiots. I'm constantly surprised they haven't killed any innocents yet," Tamiko said with a frown. "It's only a matter of time." Ranma sighed.

"I know. Their stupid prophecy seems to have made them believe anything they do is for 'The Greater Good'." She made little air quotes in a sarcastic manner. "No common sense, they just jump right in. If it wasn't for the fact that they seem to have quite a high hit rate on real problems I'd be even more annoyed about it all. I just wish they'd go on a course on threat assessment or something, not simply dive in guns blazing at the smallest hint of something from another world. It makes relations with legitimate travellers very difficult. I keep having to apologise to someone they've had a go at." The expression on her face made it clear she wasn't impressed. Nabiki giggled.
at the concept of magical girl training courses, wondering wildly if this was something the Minato universities should teach. Glancing at her Ranma quirked an eyebrow. She couldn't work out how to explain her thought so just shrugged helplessly.

The red-head grinned, having some idea of what she was feeling. This must all be a bit much for her. "Exciting night out, hmm, Nabiki? Was it what you were expecting?" The brunette laughed a little hysterically.

"Is it always like this? If so, how exactly have you gained by leaving Nerima?" Ranma snickered.

"No, tonight was weird even for this place. Not the weirdest night I've ever had, even back in Nerima, but pretty strange. Most of the time it's much quieter, I went to quite a lot of trouble to make sure of that." She looked at the various people standing around her. "Come on, let's go and sit down. You guys can wash up, we have some robes you can borrow, then Kas and I can finish healing anything that needs it. Anyone want something to eat?" Several heads nodded. The entire group went into the living room, then split up, Nabiki slumping onto the sofa with a sigh, the four magical girls heading for the various bathrooms. They clearly knew their way around. Shortly the middle Tendo sister was alone in the room. She leaned back and closed her eyes, thinking on the last few hours with wonder. A few minutes later, half-asleep, she heard light footsteps and opened one eye, then the other when she saw it was her sister. Kasumi sat beside her handing her a cup of tea.

"I know you prefer coffee, but this is less likely to keep you awake," she commented with a small smile, sipping her own cup. Her sister took the offered tea and tried it.

"Thank you." They sat in companionable silence for a little while. Eventually Nabiki turned her head and studied her sister, who returned her gaze with a familiar unreadable smile.

"You have a very strange life," she commented. Kasumi merely sipped her tea. "I mean, we just teleported from a park a kilometre away into your house, after your husband, who was female at the time and disguised with a shape-shifting illusion spell, blew an enormous crater in the ground in the process of disposing of some weird man eating monster from a different dimension. There are four magical girls using the bathrooms right now. That same husband is more of a magical girl than they are!" She shook her head. "Not to mention the demons with the rented warehouse full of chocolatey goodness, which they're exporting to hell or something like that. And the other magical girls, and everything else." She drank some more tea. "It's weird." Kasumi grinned at her.

"It's never boring." Nabiki nearly choked as a sudden attack of the giggles caught her. When Ranma came in a minute or two later having showered and changed her clothes, she looked at the two sisters giggling together on the sofa with a raised eyebrow. Nabiki pointed at her and whispered something to her sister which made them laugh until tears ran down their faces. The red-head shrugged, heading for the kitchen.

Eventually the whole group of seven people was sitting around the table, having a late meal. Nabiki wasn't hugely hungry, since the meal earlier had been quite large, but still ate something, while the others were ravenous. She looked around the table at the two familiar faces and the four new ones. She knew the names of two of them, but the other two hadn't said much yet or introduced themselves. The group seemed to have a higher average age than the ones that had dropped in on the warehouse, looking like they were late teens to early twenties. The other lot had been around sixteen or seventeen. Ranma noticed her glances and correctly interpreted them.

"That's Fumiko and Misaki." Fumiko, a tall girl with short dark hair dyed blonde at the tips and grey eyes smiled at her over her chopsticks, while Misaki, who looked similar enough to be either a sister or a cousin, but with light brown hair and almost black eyes, was concentrating too hard on
"Forgive her, we haven't had much to eat today. She's permanently starving anyway." Fumiko grinned, then went back to eating.

"She doesn't do much more than grunt either," Aiko commented with a sly smile. Misaki stopped eating and glared at her, then shrugged with another grunt and went back to shovelling food in as fast as possible. Everyone laughed. "Case in point," the short girl said, giggling.

Ranma shifted to male, getting up to refill the teapot. Tamiko watched him leave the room, shaking her head in wonder. "I don't think I'll every get used to that no matter how many times I see it." She glanced at Kasumi with a grin. "So which do you prefer in the bedroom?" Everyone stopped eating and stared at the eldest Tendo, who blushed. After a moment she produced a small, remarkably perverted smile and sipped her tea, not saying anything. Tamiko laughed and saluted her with her chopsticks, resuming her meal. Nabiki studied her sister for a while, wondering, as Kasumi met her gaze evenly. Deciding it was none of her business while at the same time being quite curious, Nabiki went back to eating as well. When Ranma came back he was met by six grinning women.

"What?" he asked, feeling slightly worried. They all burst out laughing. "Women are weird," he muttered, sitting down amidst even more laughter. The young man sat and sulked for a moment, feeling surrounded, before looking at Nabiki. "I'm going to have to relieve you of that bracelet." She smiled, slightly disappointed.

"I was hoping you forgot."

"I'll just bet you were." He smirked. "But I think a Nabiki Tendo with effective invisibility might be a bit too much for Nerima." Laughing, she removed the device and handed it over. "If you ever really need it let me know, I think we could help you out." Making it vanish he poured more tea for everyone.

Nabiki noticed a few minute later that she seemed to have massive difficulty remembering the faces of the four newcomers. When she looked at them directly, everything was perfectly normal, but seconds later she found their faces were just a blank spot in her mind. Aiko noticed her looking at them intently, then away, furrowing her forehead in an attempt to remember. "It's the bracelets. Ours are still on. While you were wearing one it neutralised the effect, but because you weren't present when they were activated it still affects you." She glanced at Ranma and Kasumi. "Can we trust her?" They looked at each other before nodding. "OK." Something indefinable changed about her. Nabiki inspected her for a moment trying to work out what it was, then glanced away. This time she could remember her face.

"That's very strange. I can see how it would be useful, though, in your line of work." The other three also deactivated their identity masking devices. Tamiko spoke up.

"We have to be careful. You start to get very paranoid when you think about how some people might want to seek revenge, or attack you, something like that. You get a lot more paranoid when you think about your families, especially if they don't know what you are and what you do."

"So how does one become a magical girl, anyway?" Nabiki asked curiously. Indicating Ranma with a finger, she said, "I know how he did, but what about the rest of you?" Ranma looked insulted.

"I am not a magical girl." His sister-in-law stared at him.

"Really? A man who magically becomes female? Who uses illusion magic without even thinking
about it? You're more a magical girl than they are." The four females turned to look at him with interest.

"She's right," Fumiko said with a grin. Misaki nodded, still eating. The grunt this time was affirmative. Sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms defensively the martial artist grumbled.

"Not a magical girl," he muttered to himself, staring daggers at the innocent plate in front of him. Laughing, Aiko turned back to Nabiki. Kasumi leaned over and put an arm around her husband comfortably, but her eyes were twinkling.

"It varies. There are all sorts of stories, some based around reincarnation, old gods or demons, or magical artefacts from the deep past. In our case it was sort of a mix, a statue of an ancient being, no one knows if it was a god, a demon, an alien, or what. We ran across it on a school trip years ago in a museum in Kyoto. One thing led to another, we kind of got caught up in a spell gone bad, next thing you know we have these weapons and some magic powers and tools. It was a bit of a shock. For a while we tried to pretend it never happened, but the weirdness kept finding us. In the end we didn't have much choice."

"Who decided on the uniforms?" Nabiki was smiling a little, they really were extremely immodest. She could see why Ranma had found them so irritating. Aiko groaned.

"Not really our choice. When we use the magic, which gives us a large boost in speed and strength, our clothes turn into those things. Unfortunately they don't change back." The girl appeared annoyed. "I lost several really nice outfits because of that at first." She sighed. "Unlike some magical girl uniforms these ones aren't armoured or anything useful like that. They just expose as much skin as possible. Whoever designed that spell was a real lech." Tamiko laughed.

"She hates them. I don't mind, but I've got nice legs." All three of her team-mates gave her nasty looks, while Nabiki giggled.

"So why were you annoyed about having to repair the uniform earlier, if you can just make new ones?"

The auburn-haired girl looked at her as if she was mad. "Clothes are expensive! I don't want all my nice dresses turned into more uniforms."

"Ah. I see." It seemed a fairly silly argument but she could accept it.

"Some magical girls get fancy transformation sequences with pretty lights and sounds. We have to find somewhere to change, or lose yet another set of clothes." Aiko seemed pretty grumpy about the whole affair. Brightening up, she grinned and glanced at Ranma. "At least that meant we had spares when Ranma stood in for me. We're even about the same size." Everyone looked at the martial artist again, who looked embarrassed. Nabiki nearly lost it again, picturing him in female form wearing one of their uniforms. Having seen one she found it even funnier than when she'd imagined it earlier.

"Perhaps you can model for us later?" she suggested, giggling manically when he glared.

"No chance."

"Oh, come on Saotome! Let us see your long smooth legs!" Kasumi collapsed in laughter, her sister not far behind her. The other four were giggling, even Misaki having to stop eating for a moment.

"It's not funny. Shut up." He crossed his arms again and glared at them which only made them laugh harder.
When the laughter died down, Tamiko glanced at Nabiki, then at Ranma. "If Nabiki here has found you, does that mean you're going to approach your family now?" Kasumi and her husband looked at each other. With a sad sigh, Ranma shook his head.

"I don't think so. To be honest, if I never see any of them again it wouldn't worry me much. I know Kas misses her other sister and her father, but as for me... My father is a child abusing drunkard, while my mother is missing some fairly important marbles. Akane very nearly drove me to commit either suicide or murder." They all looked sympathetic, and a little scared by the concept, knowing damn well how dangerous the martial artist was even when not homicidally angry. "As for the rest of that lot of lunatics? Cologne is a manipulating bitch, if we're being polite. Oh, sure, I learned a lot from her, and I think she still has a lot I'd love to learn, but anything she ever taught me came with huge strings attached. Shampoo is in many respects a nice girl, and a fine warrior, but she's as obsessive as Akane about me although less obvious about it. Mousse is as obsessive as that about her, and is that obvious. Ryoga is just a pain. Ukyo... Her I kind of miss."

Falling silent he reflected on the chef. "She was pretty, intelligent, a good martial artist, and a very good cook." Turning his head to look at Kasumi, he added, "I already have one of those, though." She held his hand with a pleased smile. "I hope she and Konatsu make a go of it, I really do. They're both good people, probably the best of that lot." He thought about what he'd said, then shrugged. "No, all things considered I'm in no hurry to ever meet any of them ever again. The only ones I could stand either came with me or eventually tracked me down." Grinning at Nabiki he squeezed Kasumi's hand, then picked up his chopsticks. Aiko looked at his wife.

"What about you, Kasumi?" She looked sad.

"I would like to see Akane and Father again. I do understand what Ranma means, I know what he went through. But they're my family. One day, perhaps."

"Except for Akane, the rest of them do seem to slowly becoming more sensible," Nabiki commented. "Father and Genma seem to be doing fairly well as teachers, I think. It's definitely been good for our father, he's much more like the person I remember from when I was little. Genma is still a lazy idiot, but he's actually working now. It's made quite a difference." Ranma listened with a neutral expression.

"This may be true. But I can never forget what he put me through in the name of training. Oh, it was effective, I'll give him that. But I'm pretty sure that there are methods equally as effective that are less psychologically damaging." Shaking his head in disgust, he ate a few more bites. "A couple more years of him, and I would either have snapped and slaughtered everyone in Furinkan, or killed myself. Or both. Akane and the rest were pushing that timetable to a matter of weeks." The dark-haired young man put his chopsticks down and stared at his bowl, while everyone else looked at him uncomfortably.

"It was so close. So very close. If things had worked out even slightly differently..." Putting down her own chopsticks Kasumi got up and knelt next to him, putting her arms around him.

"It didn't happen then and now it never will, my love. You've grown past that. The man I love is so much better than what those people tried to force him to be. I'm more grateful than you can possibly imagine that I was finally able to see that." Ranma looked at her for a long moment while the others watched, before his hand came up to cup her chin.

"If it wasn't for you... Don't ever leave me, Kas."

"I won't." There was silence for a while, before she returned to her own chair and they resumed eating. The mood, which had become somewhat melancholy, quickly improved as Fumiko started
telling dirty jokes, rapidly reducing them to tears of laughter.

After the meal the whole group retired to the sofa, which was just large enough. Swapping stories of ever more unlikely events, the four girls and Ranma and Kasumi tried to top each other, while Nabiki listened with amazement. Some of the stories sounded insane even to her, but she was assured they were all true. Eventually, Kasumi looked at her watch. "It's nearly one AM. I need some sleep, and I'm sure you four must be tired as well after tonight." Aiko nodded while Misaki yawned hugely, setting off everyone else.

"Very true. Thanks for the meal, and the beds. See you guys in the morning." The four girls trooped off to their various bedrooms, quietly talking amongst themselves. The three people left behind looked at each other.

"This has been a very unusual day. But, aside from the moments of extreme terror, a lot of fun." Nabiki grinned tiredly at her sister and her brother-in-law.

"When do you plan on going back?" Ranma asked. The brunette considered the question. "There's no hurry," he hastily added. "I'm not trying to suggest you should leave. I know you and Kas still want to talk as sisters." Nodding, Nabiki grinned at him.

"Don't worry, I know what you mean. I was thinking probably tomorrow afternoon. I can catch a train at about three, if I remember the timetable." She'd explained her roundabout method of travelling, which Ranma approved of from a security viewpoint. It was rather tedious though.

"Would you like me to ask Aiko to teleport you back? Or at least to somewhere close to home, it would cut a lot of travel time." With a slight shudder Nabiki remembered her first experience of teleportation. Kasumi looked at her, correctly deducing from her expression what she was thinking.

"It won't be nearly as bad the second time. You'll only feel a bit dizzy for a second or two. Trust me." Reluctantly, she did, and nodded.

"Thanks. That's probably a good idea."

"OK, I'll ask her in the morning." Looking at his wife, he added, "I'm heading for bed. See you in a while." The martial artist stood and with a wave to his wife's sister left the room. Left alone, Kasumi and Nabiki looked at each other.

"You must visit more often, sister," Kasumi said with an impish smile. "All sorts of interesting things happen when you're here." She giggled, Nabiki joining her for a moment.

"I'm not sure I could take much more of that sort of 'interesting thing', sis. I'm amazed you seem to enjoy it so much." The two of them talked for another half hour, before heading off to bed. Kasumi gave her sister a spare set of pyjamas, which she quickly changed into before sliding under the covers. Turning out the bedside lamp she was asleep almost instantly.
When Nabiki emerged blinking into the light the next morning, fairly late, she found Ranma and Tamiko in the kitchen making breakfast. The martial artist handed her a cup of coffee with a grin. "You still need this to get revved up in the morning, I see." She took it with her eyes half shut, drank half of it in one go, then nodded.

"Thanks. I really can't get going without caffeine." Leaning against the wall next to the door she watched the others work for a moment. "Where are Kasumi and the rest? And for that matter, have you seen my clothes?" Looking down at the pyjamas she was still wearing she admired the pattern for a moment.

"Your clothes are in the dryer, Kas washed them before you got up. They'll be done in about twenty minutes. Your sister is in the practice room beating up the rest of the team." Tamiko giggled.

"She calls it training them, but we all know she just likes showing off." Ranma grinned. "I taught her well..."

Laughing, Nabiki left to track down her sister, who was as advertised giving Aiko, Misaki, and Fumiko a hard time. The three magical girls were armed with bo staffs, standing in for their normal weapons, with which they were frantically attempting to hit Kasumi. Not very successfully as it turned out. One or two blows landed but the majority either missed completely or were deflected easily. "Stand still, damn it!" shouted Fumiko, swinging wildly. Kasumi giggled, jumping over the swing and tagging her on the top of the head. Nabiki watched from the door, coffee forgotten for the moment, as her normally reserved elder sister jumped around the room like a grasshopper on PCP, making a complete mockery of the entire group. Shaking her head she sipped her drink, settling down to watch.

Eventually Aiko managed to land a decent blow, making the older woman stop and congratulate her. She looked pleased that one of them had finally got her. The other two grumbled about it while Aiko smiled. "Damn, you're quick," she commented.

"Thank you." Kasumi bowed, happy with the praise. "Breakfast should be ready now. Shall we go and eat?"

"I'm going to have to shower all over again," Fumiko complained, handing her staff to Kasumi and heading into the living room. Misaki grunted agreement, pulling an apple out of her pocket and taking a bite out of it. "Don't you ever stop eating?" her friend asked peevishly. "Why you're not as fat as a hippo I have no idea." Aiko watched them go with a smile, then helped Kasumi put the staffs away in the storage room. Walking over Nabiki looked at her sister with renewed awe.

"You're amazingly good," she said. "It's very obvious that Ranma trained you, it's like watching a taller brunette version of his female form in action. It would drive Akane nuts." Kasumi smiled slightly, then looked a little sad.

"That's a pity. Poor Akane."

"That's the violent sister, correct?" Aiko asked curiously. Both sisters nodded.

"I'm afraid so. She has... impulse control problems is a polite way of putting it." Kasumi shook her head in worry. "Enough training to be very dangerous, not enough to have any discipline, anger
control issues, and sufficient strength to pick up a small car and hit you with it." Aiko winced.

"Ick. That sounds like a real problem."

"It could well become one," Nabiki said, as they headed back to the front of the apartment. "I hope it doesn't, she's got it in her to be as destructive as that thing last night. And I really don't want my baby sister to get turned into a smoking crater because it was the only way to stop her."

"Oh my, Nabiki!" Kasumi gasped, suddenly sounding exactly like the middle sister remembered from her younger days. She started laughing, which caused both the other women to stare at her as if she was insane. It took several minutes to explain what was funny. Tamiko was in the process of bringing several plates full of breakfast to the table. Everyone sat, while she went back to the kitchen, returning shortly with Ranma, both of them laden with more plates. Breakfast itself was a leisurely affair, no one was in any hurry to finish. They talked for nearly an hour after finishing the food, Kasumi getting up at one point to empty the dryer and iron Nabiki's clothes for her.

Handing them to her, neatly folded and still warm, she looked at the demon hunter team. "We probably have some spare clothes for you as well if you need them. Your uniforms are a bit tatty."

"Will you lend me a dress?" He frowned while the others laughed.

"Not my favourite blue silk one," he said, making them all stop and stare at him, while Kasumi giggled and he suddenly smiled. No one had expected that response. "I've got some spare jeans and a top that should fit."

"My clothes should fit the rest of you." Fumiko looked happy.

"Thanks, Kasumi. Those uniforms are bad enough without walking around with half the rear torn out."

Turning to Nabiki, Aiko said, "Ranma asked me if I could take you most of the way to Nerima when you leave. Is the central train station in Suginami close enough?" The middle sister nodded.

"That's fine. It's only twenty minutes from Furinkan."

"OK. Ranma will call me when you're ready and I'll teleport back here, then take you there." She looked at the martial artist, who agreed. "We need to get the timings just right. This place is warded to an absolutely insane level, and if the anti-teleport wards aren't down, you don't bounce so much as splash." She shuddered, picturing the result. Nabiki suddenly had second thoughts.

Correctly divining her worries Kasumi reassured her sister.

"It's perfectly safe. We leave a hole, Aiko teleports in, then out again. There's no danger. It's only people we're not expecting who would have problems, and all the ones we want coming by know enough to call first. The list is very short."

Looking bemused Nabiki commented, "I still find it difficult to accept you even have a list of people you don't mind teleporting into your home! It's insane." The others grinned at her.

"This lifestyle takes a bit of getting used to," Fumiko smiled. "You do eventually. In any case, Ranma has told us all sorts of stories of Nerima, that place is even nuttier than here! Surely you got used to that?"

"It didn't affect me so directly, in most cases," the Tendo woman replied. "It was more something that got Ranma and Akane, or people like that. You know, crazy people who knew what to
Once the breakfast was finished, Kasumi went to dig out the clothes they were lending the girls, while Aiko and Tamiko helped Ranma clear the table and clean up. A little while later they went into the practice room again. The girls, now dressed in the borrowed clothing with their damaged uniforms in a bag that Misaki was holding gathered around Aiko, who glanced around at them then looked at Nabiki. "Let me know when you're ready, OK?" Switching her gaze to Ranma and Kasumi, she smiled her thanks. "Sorry about dropping all that on you last night, but thanks very much for the save. And the meal, the room for the night, and the clothes! I'll bring them back when I come to pick up Nabiki." A second later the group of young women disappeared with a bright flash of light, causing Nabiki to swear in shock and rub her eyes. She was irritated to notice that Ranma and Kasumi had looked away at exactly the right moment.

"You couldn't have warned me?" she complained. Ranma shrugged.

"Sorry. I thought you knew."

"How the hell would I know?" she snapped, wiping her watering eyes again. Kasumi handed her a handkerchief.

"OK. Now you know." Ranma grinned at her. She glared a little, but relented when her sister smiled at her as well. Muttering to herself she followed them back into the living room. Walking over to the main window Ranma looked out, then turned back to them, becoming female in the process. "I'm going to go and return Uthryyl's van now. Plus I need to arrange to get the warehouse roof fixed and tell the property agency what happened." She sighed, looking irritated once more. "Damn magical girls." Taking on her Yori aspect she opened the balcony doors, faded from sight, then presumably jumped over the edge. Nabiki shook her head in amused wonder.

"Doesn't she ever use the door like a normal person?" With a giggle Kasumi moved to close the balcony doors again then sat on the sofa.

"Not if she can help it." Sitting beside her Nabiki looked out the window for a while before turning to her sister who was watching her with a familiar serene look.

"Your friends are interesting," she commented.

"They're very nice people. They attract nearly as much insanity as Ranma does, the poor things, but at least there's several of them to deal with it. My dear husband had to handle everything nearly single handed for so long." Sighing, she looked around the room for a moment. "It's such a shame he went through all that. He deserved better. But at least now I think he has it. I know I do."

"I will admit, crazy abilities and all, I've never seen you, or him, so happy as you two are now." Nabiki leaned against her sister, who put an arm around her. "I'm so very happy I found you again. I thought you were gone forever." With some surprise she found she was crying again. Kasumi hugged her for a long time while the tears slowly ran down her cheek. Eventually they began talking in the intimate way two close sisters do, going over all the things that had happened on both sides during the last three years.

At one point Kasumi studied her sibling for a moment, then asked, "Has there been anyone in your life, sister? You haven't mentioned a boyfriend, or even any dating." A smile crossed her face. "Or a girlfriend." Nabiki flushed a little.

"No, nothing like that. I like boys." She looked back at her sister. "Not that there's anything wrong with liking girls, but it's not me." Sighing, she added, "I haven't really had time for romance. I've
been on a few one-off dates with various people, but nothing that would lead further. The situation at home, work at university, you know. I just don't seem to have much time for personal relationships.” Kasumi put her hand on her sister's knee.

"You should make time. You need companionship, I think."

"Perhaps." Nabiki looked away. "How am I going to find anyone who could understand the sheer insanity of my life?" With a nervous giggle, she looked back. "It's nothing as mad as yours, true enough, but compared to most people it's pretty strange. Akane, Genma, the martial arts, all that stuff. Even just living in Nerima is enough to scare off some people when they hear about it. The place has something of a reputation, you know. There's that whole guilt by association thing going on." Kasumi nodded understandingly.

"I know what you mean. Minato has it even worse, it gets reported more widely. Mention you live here to someone from almost anywhere in Japan, and certainly anywhere in Tokyo, you get some very funny looks." She laughed lightly. "It would be a lot more irritating if we weren't part of the weird side. In our case it's mainly amusing."

Nabiki snickered. "I can see that."

"What about Akane? Has she found any romantic possibilities?" Nabiki shook her head with a heavy sigh.

"You know better than that. She's completely hung up on Ranma, for a start, even after all this time. Leaving that aside, I really think she hasn't got more than a child's understanding of love and romance, never mind anything at all to do with sex. The whole concept is something we've all learned to avoid mentioning, it invariably sets her off in a rant about perverts. I don't know why but I think her emotional and sexual development stalled at about thirteen or fourteen." Falling silent for some seconds, she hesitantly added, "I also kind of think that she might like girls." Kasumi looked interested but not surprised.

"As you said, there's nothing wrong with that."

"I know it, and you know it, but I don't think she can accept it. Either that homosexuality isn't wrong in the first place, or that she herself might have feelings along those lines. I have a suspicion that's why she reacted so negatively to Ranma and his curse. I always got mixed messages from her, she clearly found him attractive in both forms when her guard was down, but as soon as she realised what was happening she instantly got all defensive, then angry. Particularly when he was female."

Her sister nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible. Ranma has made similar observations. I know I'm not attracted to women in general, but I have no real preference to my husband being male or female at any given moment. It's the Ranma inside I love. What he or she looks like on the outside is irrelevant. But it's certainly true that some people would have a lot of difficulty with that. If Akane is a repressed lesbian, or merely bisexual, it would go some way to explaining some of her past behaviour." She looked sad. "Poor Akane. It must be very lonely inside her head." The sat quietly for a while occupied with their own thoughts on the matter before changing the subject.

By the time 'Yori' came back several hours later, this time entering from the practice room after presumably landing on the roof from the adjoining building, the sisters were laughing together, looking through a photo album that Kasumi had retrieved from the study, which contained pictures of their childhood. Dropping the illusion and changing back to male, Ranma looked at them with affection before going to make some tea.
Sitting down with them and handing out cups of tea, he sighed in relief. "I needed this."

"Did you have any trouble?" Kasumi asked.

"No, not really, it was just tedious." Putting his cup down he stretched a little, then leaned back comfortably. "I took the van back fine, handed over the keys, and even got a small refund since Uthryyl had rented it for another week." Nabiki looked inquisitive, the comment reminding her of something that had been bothering her.

"How could someone who looks like they did just walk into a vehicle rental place and rent a van?" she asked curiously. "Even in Minato? Or possibly, especially in Minato, seeing as it apparently has a demon problem. Even in Furinkan they would have stood out a bit." Ranma laughed.

"True, although I suspect that while people would have looked twice no one would have said anything back in Furinkan, or most of the rest of Nerima. Bearing in mind the number of people with, um, non-standard features, that we came across they're more or less used to it. Around here, though, you're both right and wrong. Yes, there are quite a lot of not particularly human visitors, some of which are ones you don't really want visiting. But on the other hand, quite a few of them are completely fine, and even profitable. There are a fair number of people that are well aware of this and are quite happy to provide services to those visitors, since they normally pay well and on time." Picking up his cup he drained it then poured himself some more. "Uthryyl is pretty cautious. He has a spell that disguises them from people who might be hostile. It's not as effective as our illusion spell by a long shot but it works pretty well. It's quite surprising how many people can see through it, as a result of being OK with them."

"I didn't notice anything at the warehouse." He nodded.

"Because you weren't hostile, and were fine with the concept. If you'd come across them without prior warning it might have made them look like normal humans, it might not. You're pretty open-minded after all. Akane would probably always see them as human unless the spell was deactivated, though. She's a lot less tolerant of things she doesn't understand or expect."

With a sad sigh Nabiki agreed. "It wasn't always like that."

"I know. I wish things hadn't deteriorated so much." All three of them fell silent, reflecting on the youngest Tendo female. "So, I took the van back, then went and spoke to the contractors. They came to the warehouse to measure up and give me a quote, but I had to wait for a couple of hours. Although they're pretty busy at the moment they've fitted the job in for about three days time, and think it should take about two days. The material costs are the killer, almost all the stuff that fell in is too damaged to be reused." He looked very annoyed about this. "After that, I went to the police station and gave Sergeant Harada a report on last night, got the details of the owners of the car and the building that were damaged, then talked to the insurance companies. One of them is fine, the car insurer was more problematic. It took a certain amount of persuading to make them see their way clear to doing the right thing." He grinned toothily. Nabiki laughed.

"So you put the fear of god into them?"

"No, better, I put the fear of me into them. Or at least Yori. They caved in the end." Snickering, Nabiki wished she'd seen all this. It sounded interesting.

Ranma seemed to think of something. "Oh, yes, while I remember." Pulling something from his ki pocket he quickly scribbled Nabiki's name on one half of it, then folded it along a perforated line and tore off the other half, giving it to her. She found herself holding something that looked like a business card, which had both a telephone number and an email address neatly printed on it, above
two strings of apparently random digits. At the top was one word, the name 'Yori'. She looked at it curiously as her fingers tingled for a moment, then laughed.

"Yori has business cards?" He grinned.

"Of course! How else can people who need her get hold of her?" Shaking her head with amusement, she pointed at the random assortment of letters and numbers.

"What's this for?"

"It's a password. Two, actually. Each card has different ones, they identify who I've given it to. Quote that in any email or when leaving a message and I'll know it's genuine. Use the top one normally. If for any reason you somehow get forced to use it, use the second one. That indicates you're under duress."

"Ah. A flaw in your plan. What happens if someone steals it or I give it to them?" He looked smug.

"Try it." Kasumi held out her hand with a small smile of her own. Puzzled, Nabiki handed her the card, watching in amazement as the writing on it immediately disappeared. When she accepted it back the writing reappeared.

"Wow. That's incredible." She suddenly laughed, making him look puzzled. "And you say you're not a magical girl. You even have magical business cards!" He looked annoyed, but then reluctantly smiled.

"One point to you." Pleased, she gave him a thumbs up. "It's a spell cast by a mage I helped out a while ago. Apparently something like it is used quite a lot in high-end magical documents. Even some governments use it, the ones that acknowledge the existence of magic anyway. Like ours. It's not completely unbeatable, but you have to be VERY good to trick it." The brunette produced a puzzled expression.

"But, all I have to do is hold it up to someone without letting them touch it, surely?"

He grinned. "No, that doesn't work either. The spell also works in a similar way to the disguise spell from the bracelets. Only the person holding it can read it, anyone else sees a blank card, as do cameras."

"Hmm." Impressive as it was, Nabiki was sure there was a way to beat it. It was more from the mental challenge than anything else. "OK. I memorise the password, then tell someone." She looked pleased. Ranma shook his head with an infuriating smirk.

"You can't."

"Of course I can." She stared at the card for a moment, committing the twenty characters to memory. Turning to him, she opened her mouth, then stopped. For some reason, the string of characters was suddenly absent from her mind although it had been there seconds ago. "Shit."

"Like I said, it's a really good spell. If your intent is to tell someone else, even read it to them, it kind of scrambles itself in your mind. You can memorise it, just not tell anyone what you've memorised." Looking at the card with considerable respect and a certain amount of wariness, she studied it.

"That seems like a hell of a lot of effort to go to for a business card. Isn't a spell like that very difficult to work?"
"Oh, it's not easy, definitely. Not many magic users even know how to do it, never mind have the finesse to actually make it work. I printed up a fair number of the cards and he put the spell on them in bulk. It doesn't need to be done to each one individually, that would be ridiculously difficult. Kasumi has some as well, we each have enough for several different personae. The tear off bit," he held up the half with her name on it, which she could see also had the same passwords on, "is my record of who has each one."

Putting it in her pocket, she grinned at him. "You have the most elaborate security of anyone I've ever met."

"Thank you." Drinking some tea, he put the cup down again. "To be fair, this was Happosai's idea. He has some very good ones."

"So where is the little pervert at the moment?" Ranma shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine. He drops in from time to time, often without any warning, but not much at the moment. I don't know what he's up to right now. Last time he came by was just before our wedding. He'd been visiting some friends in one of the demon worlds for a while." Nabiki's eyes widened. "Then I think he was off to annoy the females of Brazil for a while, but after that? No idea."

They talked for a while, then Kasumi went to make some lunch. Nabiki looked at her watch and checked her timetable, deciding that she'd leave at about four, which would let her catch the train from Suginami central station to Furinkan. The helpful offer of teleporting there would cut a considerable amount of effort out. Smiling to herself at the thought that she lived in a world where people could casually offer to teleport you at all, she shook her head. "This is so weird."

Ranma watched her, amused by her muttering. "You get used to it, I promise."

"Easy for you to say. Your entire life has been one weird thing after another. Up until about five years ago mine was relatively sane." The middle sister gave him an arch look. "In fact, I seem to remember that it was your arrival that made everything start to go absurd." The martial artist smirked a little.

"You're entirely welcome."

"You're an idiot." They grinned at each other. "I'm going to miss this. The last day or so has been more fun than I've had in a long time. Despite my crazy sister and her roof-hopping."

"Keep in touch. We've got your cellphone number, you have my special one. Kas will give you hers as well. It's off a lot of the time, but you can always leave a message, I check mine regularly. If it's on I'll answer. I promise if you need anything I'll help you out."

Nabiki moved to the dining table as Kasumi came out of the kitchen. "This is all so much trouble just to avoid half a dozen or so people." Helping his wife with the food, Ranma smiled unhappily.

"I know. Hopefully one day we can relax it a bit. But until then, this is the best way."

After lunch, she helped her sister clean up, then walked around the living room looking at the various prints and pictures. Stopping by the balcony doors, she stared out at the university for a while. Ranma and Kasumi sat next to each other on the sofa and watched her, his arm around his wife's shoulders. "You can come back, you know, sister," Kasumi said, amused at the way her younger sibling seemed to be trying to lock every detail of the apartment in her memory. Nabiki turned and smiled at her.
I know. I will. But I doubt it will be very often for a while at least, the situation at home is too fragile to risk someone finding out." Moving to sit beside them she held her sister's hand for a moment, squeezing it. "I missed you for so long, now that I've found you again I don't want to leave." Kasumi smiled gently at the younger woman.

"I understand. Perhaps we can visit you at some point, maybe at the university? We can disguise ourselves well enough now that there's not too much risk." She glanced at her husband, who nodded.

"That's certainly possible. Appearing as ourselves anywhere outside this building isn't a good idea for the foreseeable future, but Maiko and Rika do go outside Minato occasionally. As do Yori and Chou, and several other people you haven't met yet." He snickered. "We're a two-person multiple personality disorder. We could even come up with some new ones just for you!" Nabiki laughed.

"Just leave Zythra'a at home, please. I think she'd cause more than a little confusion at the university dorms, even if she was just visiting." The martial artist laughed delightedly at the thought.

"Oh, all right," he replied in mock-disappointment.

Kasumi gave her a similar card to the Yori one, this one having the name 'Chou' on it. After some thought, and a brief discussion with Ranma, she also wrote down her 'Rika' cell number. "I have this one with me when I'm at university. It should be safe enough letting you have it, lots of people do. Please be sure to use the right name when you talk to me on it though." Nabiki giggled.

"I have to keep track of so many names with you two. I feel like I've met dozens of people in the last day, but most of them are you or Ranma! How on earth do you keep it all straight?"

"It isn't easy, but practice helps," her sister giggled back. They hugged, then Nabiki stood.

"Well, I guess I'm ready to go." Ranma nodded, pulling out a phone and turning it on.

"I'll call Aiko." After a short conversation and a moment's concentration, he lowered the wards and a flash came from the direction of the practice room. A few seconds later Aiko walked into the living room.

"Hi, guys. Ready to go, Nabiki?" The brunette walked over to her, but turned when Ranma called. He handed her the disguise bracelet again.

"Here. Use this, so no one can identify you when you arrive. You can go somewhere private with Aiko at the station and give it back to her, if that's all right." Once again impressed at the thoroughness of his security precautions Nabiki took the bracelet from him and slipped it around her wrist.

"Thanks." She impulsively hugged him and after a moment's surprise he returned it.

"Take care, Nabs."

"Don't call me Nabs." She grinned at him. Kasumi got up and hugged her again as well. Releasing her sister, she inspected them both, then smiled. "I'll be back. Take care, you two." Quickly turning so they wouldn't see the tears in her eyes she nodded to Aiko. The magical girl smiled at her understandingly, handed Kasumi the bag containing the returned borrowed clothes, then led her into the practice room. A bright flash reflected down the hallway and they were gone.

In the living room, Ranma stood with his arms around his wife, who was also crying a little.
Chapter 14

On the train back to Nerima Nabiki reflected on the last thirty hours or so. It had been worrying, fun, terrifying, hilarious, frustrating, inspiring, vomit-inducing, and overall something she was extremely glad she'd experienced. Everything had started with a suspicion derived from police reports and media coverage. What she'd found was so far beyond what she'd expected or even hoped for she was still trying to come to terms with it. The most important thing by far was that she'd found her sister, after all this time. And her sister's husband. It was just a pity she couldn't tell anybody.

'My brother in law,' she thought with a private smile. 'I kind of expected that one day, but not from that direction. Good for you, Kasumi.' Staring out the window as the familiar sights of south Nerima slipped by, she pondered what it all meant. Ranma had indeed given her a cheque for the amount she'd mentioned he still owed her, which made her smile. During their long talk, Kasumi had passed on the access details and card for an account with a considerable sum in it. It turned out that they had several such accounts with fairly anonymous names attached for emergencies. Looking at the debit card with interest she ran her thumb over the embossed numbers then put it back in her wallet.

As she'd told Kasumi, she was very hesitant about bringing a sudden windfall into the Tendo household at the moment for several reasons, the most important of which was upsetting the status quo. Leaving aside Akane's growing mental problems, to which she still hoped to find a solution, things were slowly improving. A sudden influx of liquidity could well undo all the good that time had rather unexpectedly produced. At least, in the case of a genuine emergency, the resources were there. 'Therapy. That's certainly an idea. I wonder if I could persuade Akane to talk to a therapist of some sort? That would be a good use of the money. If Ranma of all people can benefit from it, perhaps my nutty sister could.' With a slight shrug she got up as the train slowed. It was something to consider.

Walking back to the Dojo, still thinking about the whole affair, she unexpectedly found herself entering total chaos. The cause of it was quickly identified when she heard the grating laughter. "Oh, damn it, why now, Kodachi," she groaned, watching as the crazed gymnast bounced around the yard chased by the equally crazed figure of her younger sister, who was practically frothing at the mouth from fury.

"Get back here you stupid cow!" Akane screamed, swinging a huge mallet wildly at the other woman, who skipped out of the way with little effort.

"You're still a graceless peasant, Tendo," the black-haired woman taunted, emitting yet another nerve-jangling laugh. Nabiki winced at the sound. With a sigh, she turned to enter the house, cringing at the noise of a missed mallet strike punching a large hole in the garden wall. Inside, She found Nodoka in the kitchen cleaning the sink, every now and then sighing to herself. The auburn-haired older woman looked up as she came in.

"Hello, Nabiki. Did you have a nice time with your friend?"

"Yes, Auntie, it was wonderful to see her again. And her partner." Nodoka looked at her suspiciously.

"Partner? Business, or..." Nabiki laughed. The older woman's expression was amusing.

"Not business. More like life, I guess."
"I see." Nodoka's expression was somewhat disapproving. She turned back to her task. "I can't say I think such things are very appropriate."

"Oh, Auntie, 'such things' are fine. They're a lovely couple and love each other more than almost anyone I have ever met." Nodoka's expression softened slightly.

"What do they do?" she asked.

"They're both studying different fields of medicine. Eventually they'll be doctors." The older woman looked approving.

"That's a very good career choice." She sighed a little. "It probably makes their mothers very proud. Everyone wants their children to do well." She seemed wistful, Nabiki having a fairly good idea who she was thinking about. Putting her hand on the other woman's shoulder for a moment, she smiled reassuringly, then changed the subject.

"What's all the excitement outside about?" Nodoka's expression changed to one of irritation.

"Oh, that annoying Kodachi Kuno dropped in on us about half an hour ago, ranting about the usual things. Where had we hidden her darling Ranma, shouting about the red-haired harridan, you know the routine. She must be bored, she hasn't done anything like this for a long time. Akane immediately lost her temper and attacked her, which only made the whole situation worse. My blasted husband and your father didn't help, they had their students watching and taking notes, and bets. That really made Akane angry, I'm afraid, as Soun was betting against her. She knocked him unconscious, then did the same to Genma when he laughed. Their students tried to defend them but simply aren't good enough yet, so they all ended up in the pond as well." She paused, looking reflectively out the window. "It's very odd how all the fights around this place seem to end up there. I wonder why?" After a moment, she gave up trying to work it out.

"That was about ten minutes before you arrived. Akane and Kodachi have been chasing each other around the grounds ever since. With a little luck they'll wear themselves out and stop soon." Both women winced as a loud crash shook the room. "Hopefully before the house collapses." Another crash came making the cups in the cupboards tinkle against each other.

"For fuck's sake, this is ridiculous," Nabiki snarled in anger, ignoring Nodoka's expression at her swearing. Stomping outside she shouted at the top of her voice, "KNOCK IT OFF YOU MORONS!" Kodachi and Akane both stopped dead, staring at her. Ruthlessly suppressing the sudden urge to giggle as the memory of 'Yori' yelling at a similarly shocked group of magical girls came to her, she glared at them both. Trying for the same note of command in her voice, she continued, "Kodachi, go home before I charge you for the damage. No, on second thought, I am going to charge you. I'll send an invoice. Now push off and find something else to amuse yourself with." Dismissing the woman with a glance, she was grinning on the inside at the expression of haughty irritation combined with uncertainty that crossed her face.

"Akane, please stop letting her tease you. Look at this place!" She waved her hand at the damage. A tile slid off the roof and shattered on the flagstones, making both of the fighters twitch. Nabiki successfully managed to ignore it. "Your job doesn't pay enough to allow you to indulge in this sort of thing, and I'm certainly not going to fund your little rants. Not any more. You've already knocked out father, Genma, and all their students. What happens if the students decide to give up because of that? Did you think about that?" Shame passing over her face, Akane shook her head, staring at the ground. She jumped as another tile shattered.

"Try to be more sensible. We can't afford to have you wreck the damn place every time you get pissed off. Grow up! You're nearly twenty two years old, you're not a child any more." Shaking her
head in disgust, she added, "You can clear this up. When you're done I'll work out how much your share of the damage comes to." Akane looked at her in shock, starting to speak. "No, I'm serious. Now start cleaning," Nabiki snapped, causing her to close her mouth and slump. Turning her head to stare at the Kuno woman, Nabiki asked sarcastically, "Are you still here? In that case, you can help her clean up." She reached inside the door and grabbed the broom, tossing it to Kodachi, who caught it in a sort of dazed reflex. The two fighters looked at her, then at each other, before mechanically beginning to clean up the mess, without saying anything. She watched with her hands on her hips for a minute or two before nodding, satisfied. 'Thank you, Yori. I learned a lot.' She smiled coldly at them then went back into the house.

Nodoka stared at her with mixed surprise and approval. "That was... impressive. How did you learn to do that?"

With a satisfied grin Nabiki responded, "My friend's partner is, well, very forceful when she wants to be, especially with troublemakers. People listen to her whether they want to or not. I saw her dealing with some overenthusiastic people last night and thought her method might work here. I'm glad to say it did."

"Well done." The older woman smiled at the younger one, clearly pleased.

"Thanks. I suppose I'd better go and check on father and the other idiots." Nodoka tutted at her comment but looked amused. Going out into the Dojo, the middle sister looked around with irritation. There were several new holes in the walls and a couple in the floor, evidence that Akane had been making free use of her mallet. She made some notes on the extent of the damage, then went to look for the human casualties. Soun was lying on the grass next to the pond, mumbling to himself, while Genma, currently a panda, was floating on his back in it, blinking at the sky and looking as puzzled as a panda can. The five students were arrayed around the water, groaning and soaked. Nabiki stood and studied them with a disgusted expression.

"You lot are useless. Seven of you, two very experienced martial artists and five pretty decent students, and you couldn't handle one irritated Akane?"

Genma held up a sign that read, #She's insanely strong, you know#.

"That's no excuse. Next time, try harder. Or I'll start billing you lot for the damage as well." Snorting with derision, she turned and left, inwardly very relieved that there didn't appear to be any serious injuries. 'This time. What happens next time?' Despite what she'd said she knew full well that it was next to impossible to stop Akane when she was enraged. They'd done well to even slow her down. Returning to the yard she watched Kodachi and Akane still clearing up their mess, slightly surprised they both hadn't run for it the moment she turned her back. 'Wow. Yori's technique of yell a lot and not take no for an answer really works.' She resolved to try to keep on top of her sister from now on, if one good talking to worked so well. The fact that Kodachi of all people had also been intimidated enough to do manual labour was astounding. 'I'll have to let Ranma and Kasumi know about this. It'll amuse them if nothing else."

The brunette went into the house and up to her room, where she turned on the computer and waited for it to boot, idly spinning her chair around and looking out the window. When the familiar desktop came up she typed in her password, then spent the next hour carefully deleting every report, email, and media file she had gathered during her search for the two missing people. Going over the computer one last time very deliberately, in case she'd missed anything, she then pulled out her backup disks and reformatted them all twice, just to be sure. Starting a new backup going to save the current state of the rest of her data, she rummaged around in her desk and closet to find any printouts that might have potentially incriminating evidence on them, then shredded them. She'd
burn the remains later.

It went against her normal practice, but she felt it was best to make sure that there was no chance that anyone else could use her research to find the pair. Not only was she worried about them should that happen, she'd been quite serious about her comments on the possible repercussions to Akane and the rest. Finally satisfied that every scrap of data that had led her to her quarry was permanently gone, she then spent some time researching therapists who had experience dealing with anger management issues. This took another couple of hours, but she ended up with a short-list of five names she resolved to call the next day.

Turning off the computer she rose and looked out the window. Akane and Kodachi were still working, although it looked like they were nearly done. Smiling with considerable amusement she went downstairs and watched from the porch as they finished up. "Well done. Right, I'll get estimates for the damage and get you both bills for your share. Akane, you have two months to pay. Kodachi, I expect payment by the end of the week or you will have a major problem. Do you both understand me?" The two young women glanced at each other, then nodded, uncharacteristically quiet. "Good. In future, if you want to play, go and do it in one of the vacant lots where no one will mind. There's a lot of them around here. If you start anything in the grounds of the Dojo, there is going to be serious trouble. AM I CLEAR?" She snapped the last three words with the volume and command of a good sergeant-major, making them jump. Again, they nodded.

"Good. Kodachi, go home. Akane, go inside. Dinner is nearly ready." Turning on her heel she walked back into the house, grinning at Nodoka who had come out of the kitchen to listen with a peculiar smile on her face. The older woman nodded respectfully to her.

"If you wish, you can borrow my katana if you have to do this again. I always found it made people... more respectful." The older woman grinned quickly, then went back to an almost Kasumi-like smile.

Surprised, Nabiki considered the offer for a moment. "Thank you. Hopefully it won't be necessary but it's nice to know the option is there." Nodoka gave her another surprisingly respectful and slightly curious look before going back to the kitchen. She got the distinct impression that she'd scored some serious points with Ranma's mother. Behind her she heard the sound of Akane entering the house. Turning she looked at the younger woman, who glanced at her then away, still looking ashamed.

"I'm sorry Nabiki. She makes me so angry, though. Why did she have to come here?" The young woman sounded simultaneously plaintive and petulant. Nabiki sighed. While she had some sympathy for her sister the fact remained that Akane over-reacted enormously to even the slightest insult.

"I know how irritating Kodachi is. But that doesn't excuse you knocking huge great holes in the house and the Dojo. It's going to cost a lot of money to get them repaired. Father and Genma can't use the Dojo for teaching until the floor is fixed, so that's less money coming in right when we need it. Never mind any potential loss of students." She studied her sister, who was fidgeting like a ten year old called in front of her mother. Suddenly getting an inkling of how Kasumi must have felt all those years she felt ashamed. "You must control yourself better. You've been doing quite well the last few months, don't let Kodachi ruin it, OK?" Akane nodded slowly, still not meeting her sister's eyes. "And if you really have to fight her, please do it somewhere else? Somewhere you won't damage anything important?" Once more the blue-haired girl nodded.

"I'm sorry, 'Biki." The diminutive form of her name made Nabiki smile, Akane hadn't used it in years. Stepping forward she closed the gap between them and hugged her embarrassed sister. "I
forgive you. But you're still paying for your share of the damage." With a final nod, Akane hugged her back, before going off to the bathroom to clean up.

At the dinner table, Nabiki ate slowly, looking around at the various people in the room. Nodoka was in an oddly pleasant mood, occasionally giving her interested looks. Genma was currently human and still looked slightly stunned, while her father was concentrating on eating and seemed to be using what attention he had left to think about something. Akane was quite withdrawn, eating her food quietly and saying nothing. As the meal drew to a close, the brunette sister cleared her throat. Everyone looked at her.

"I've been giving this a lot of thought, but today's little amusement has pushed up the timetable." Looking at her father, then her sister, she went on, firmly although with sympathy, "Akane, you have a serious problem, one that seems to steadily be getting worse. This latest episode could have been very bad, and I'm terrified that the next one will be worse. You get too angry, too easily." Pausing she tried to gauge her sister's mood, which seemed to be more apathetic than angry. Delicately, she added, "I think we need to serious consider getting you some professional help for your anger control problem, before something permanent happens." Her sister sat still for a moment as her words registered, then looked at her with a mix of anger and sorrow.

"I'm not crazy." Nabiki shook her head.

"I'm not suggesting you are," she replied, while thinking, 'Not out loud, anyway. But you're heading that way.' "But even you must admit that you get angry extremely easily, and express that anger in a very destructive manner." The blue haired girl opened her mouth with a nasty retort ready, then to Nabiki's considerable surprise, stopped and thought. 'That's a first,' she thought in wonder. After several seconds, Akane tried again.

"Some people really get on my nerves," she said quietly. "They make me furious, I just boil over." Her sister nodded.

"And then you try to hit them. Luckily, so far most of the people you have managed to hit are the rare ones that can take it. But what happens when you go after an ordinary, non martial artist person. Someone just walking down the street, for instance? Or one of your friends, like Sayuri? Or me? You do realise, I hope, that the sort of damage you just caused to either of them," she waved a hand at the two fathers, who were listening intently, "would kill almost anyone else with a single hit? What you did to Ryoga would have pulped any normal person. What you used to do to Ranma would have killed any lesser mortal dozens of times over." She stopped again as Akane's eyes flashed at the mention of the martial artist, wondering if she'd made a mistake. Hoping not, she went on, pressing her advantage while Akane was in this unusually receptive mood.

"There have been so many times you could have, with one thoughtless action, become a murderer. Do you want that? I certainly don't. Your honour, the family honour, would never recover. But more importantly, I don't want my little sister to have that on her conscience." Her sudden rage subsiding, the younger woman sat back, mollified by her sibling's obvious and genuine concern.

"It's all Ranma's fault," Akane muttered half-heartedly, resorting to the tired old formula. Nabiki stared at her incredulously.

"How? How could it possibly be Ranma's fault? He's been gone for over three years, Akane. Face it, you will most likely never see him again, and if you're honest with yourself you know why. You weren't the only reason he left, we all share that shame, but you were one of the biggest reasons and the trigger. You nearly killed Kasumi! If it hadn't been for Ranma you would have succeeded. That's what I'm afraid of. If you could try to hit Kasumi of all people with your full strength, without even thinking about the results, it's only a matter of time before you do it again to someone
else, and this time there won't be a miracle. There will be no Ranma to save you from the rest of your life either in jail or on the run. That sort of luck only happens once in someone's life, and you used yours up that night."

Akane's face unexpectedly crumpled and she began crying, leaning forward and resting her head on the table narrowly missing her plate. With a sigh Nabiki moved to sit beside her, putting her arm over her back and comforting her. "Oh, 'Biki, I'm sorry. I can't help it. I try to stop myself but I just can't. If Ranma was here he could stop me. Why did he leave? Why did he take Kasumi with him? I miss her so much." Helplessly, the older Tendo woman stroked her sibling's back and looked at the three adults, who peered back with various expressions. Nodoka was both sympathetic and slightly irritated, Soun looked ready to cry himself, while Genma was watching Akane with an oddly speculative look on his face, like he'd never really seen her before. Meeting her eyes he said nothing but simply watched. Trying to silently pass on the message that if he tried anything that hurt her sister she'd gut him like a fish, she smiled slightly in satisfaction when he paled a little.

The youngest Tendo sister cried for a long time, deep heaving sobs that spoke of despair. Nodoka and Soun cleared the table, sparing the two young women concerned glances, as Genma stepped out of the way and continued to watch quietly. After twenty minutes or so he nodded to himself and left the room. Watching him go, Nabiki wondered to herself what he was up to. Still holding her sister she waited for her anguish to subside. When she eventually stopped crying and lifted her head her eyes were red and bloodshot. The older sister handed her a cloth to wipe her eyes with. "Are you all right?" she asked with sympathy.

"No. Not really." Her sister looked at her with raw honesty in her eyes, for perhaps the first time in years. "I'm sorry. It was just too much. Kodachi, then Father and Genma, then you."

"I didn't mean to upset you, sis. But it needed to be said." Akane nodded slowly, still looking upset.

"OK. What do you want me to do," she asked quietly and unusually passively. Her sister looked at her with an evaluating stare.

"I think, as I said, that we need to get you to see someone who can help you, before this goes too far. If you carry on like this, someone is going to get badly hurt, and it could just as easily be you in the long run. If I find a suitable therapist, will you go? Please?" The blue-haired woman watched her face for long seconds, then stared at the table, wiping one eye with the back of her hand.

"Yes." The response was so quiet Nabiki could barely hear it.

"Thank you." Akane looked briefly at her, a hint of a smile crossing her face for a moment, before it reverted to unhappiness again.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Nabiki?" The older woman shook her head.

"No, I don't, not really. But I think you're heading into a very dark place, unless we do something before it's too late. I should have insisted on this a long time ago, and I'm sorry that I've let it get to this point." Her sister nodded absently.

"I miss her."

"So do I," the middle sister said, feeling very guilty. The urge to blurt out their eldest sister's whereabouts was almost overwhelming, but she ruthlessly shoved it down in the certain knowledge that it would not only betray a promise but without doubt make a bad situation far worse. Akane nodded again.
"Every day, I get up, expecting her to call me for breakfast. Every day, I go to bed wanting to say goodnight to her. It's horrible. I feel so guilty. I nearly killed her, Nabiki!" Her voice suddenly rose, animation coming back into her features for the first time since she'd started crying. "I didn't even think, I just pulled out a mallet and swung at her. It wasn't until after I'd started the swing that I even saw who I was trying to hit, and by then it was too late." She was trembling, whether in fear, anguish, guilt, or a combination of all three Nabiki couldn't determine. "I nearly killed my sister," she said quietly. Putting her head back on the table she sighed. "I'm a terrible martial artist, a terrible person. Everyone is better than me. All I can do is smash things. Even Kodachi is better than me."

Her elder sibling watched her sadly. "It's not a contest, Akane. You have the makings of a good martial artist, by most standards a very good one, but you have to face up the fact that there will be people who are better. Don't try to judge yourself by the standards of Ranma, for example. He's in a class of his own, so far beyond anyone else it's almost silly. But he paid a very heavy price to become that good, one he never even knew he was paying until it was too late." The younger woman looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

"I know. When I think about it like that, I know. But it was so difficult seeing him do things without even trying that most people never be capable of. And all the others. They're all incredibly good as well compared to me. It makes me feel... small and worthless." Her brutally honest self-criticism made her sister both sad, and feel that it was about time she faced some of her inner issues. Perhaps there was hope for her yet. If only she would stick to her promise of therapy when she cheered up. Feeling a little guilty for pushing when she was obviously on the verge of a breakdown but knowing it might be the only chance they'd get, Nabiki spoke again.

"You have to talk to someone about all this, as honestly as you're talking to me now. About everything. What you did to Ranma, why he left, what you nearly did to Kasumi and why she chose to go with him as a result. Why you're so angry all the time, lashing out at people for the smallest things. It's not healthy for you, and it sure as hell isn't healthy for anyone else." Akane smiled briefly.

"It wasn't for Ryoga." With a chuckle, Nabiki grinned at her.

"Well, to be honest that one was almost justified. I'm glad you didn't succeed in killing him, for your sake rather than his, but I'm not sorry you beat the crap out of him. He'd done some very underhanded things to you and to Ranma for years. You know poor old Ranma tried very hard to let you know about Ryoga's curse, but couldn't tell you straight because he'd promised the pig he wouldn't reveal a weakness?" She could see from the shocked expression that her sister had never considered this. "Every time you hit him for 'teasing' or 'bullying' P-Chan, he was trying to protect your honour, but couldn't because his own got in the way." She shook her head. "Poor bastard."

Fresh tears welled up in her sister's eyes and for a moment she wondered if she'd gone too far. "Don't cry, Akane. It's in the past and we can't change it. What's done is done. We just have to get you fixed up somehow so nothing like this ever happens again. OK?" The younger woman looked at her with teary eyes and nodded, unable to say anything. Debating with herself for several seconds, Nabiki finally decided that she had to say the last thing that needed saying.

"I've also decided that I'm not going to look for Ranma and Kasumi any more." Shock once more filled her sister's eyes, but she carried on, not letting her speak, "It's not doing us any favours. We've been treading water, trying to turn back the clock, for more than three years now. If I haven't found them by now I never will unless they want to be found, which they obviously don't." 'All too true, but I can't tell you that. I'm sorry, Akane.' "Aside from the cost, it's causing you a lot of harm, I think. You have to face the fact that they're gone, quite possibly permanently. You have to move
on with you life, as do the rest of us." 'And I feel like a total bastard saying that, knowing what I do. But at the moment it's for the best.' Gently, she put her hand on Akane's. "With luck, one day they might come back to us. But it will be on their terms. Do you understand?"

The young woman searched her face with her eyes, seeking the truth of what she'd said. Hoping desperately that her inner thoughts weren't visible from the outside Nabiki schooled her expression into a cool but sympathetic one. After several long seconds Akane dropped her eyes. "Yes. I understand." Eventually, she stood and walked to the doorway, stopping and speaking without turning, "I'm sorry I disappointed you, 'Biki." Leaving the room she went up the stairs and a moment later her sister heard the door to her bedroom close softly.

"Oh, Akane," Nabiki sighed, shaking her head sadly. Hearing a noise at the door to the kitchen she looked up to meet Nodoka's eyes.

"You did well, my dear. That can't have been easy." The middle sister looked at her for a moment before slumping back into her seat.

"Not easy at all. Very hard indeed, would be a better way of putting it." The elder woman walked over and sat down facing her.

"I think it was something that was long overdue. That poor girl is a tortured soul in some ways, she needs help. I don't think any of us here are able to give her what she needs. Perhaps an outsider can." Looking curiously at the other woman, she asked, "Are you really giving up on your search for Kasumi and... my son?" She stumbled a little on the last few words. Nabiki nodded.

"Yes. As I told my sister, it's not doing anything useful and in fact causing quite a lot of harm. Not to mention costing a fortune, even with hijacking the Kuno idiots' investigators." Nodoka smiled slightly at this, then looked serious again, as well as a little depressed.

"That's a pity, but I can see your point." She sighed a little. "I would like to see him again one day. I know Genma would as well, he misses the boy even if he doesn't show it." Nabiki looked at her with mildly annoyed interest.

"Your husband is a very large part of why he left." To her surprise the other woman didn't take offence, merely nodding with another small sigh.

"Oh, I know. It may have been your poor sister who triggered the whole thing that terrible night, but we all bear various proportions of the blame. It's a stain on my honour I will take to the grave." They sat in silence for a while, Nabiki reflecting on the older woman's words. There was a surprising amount of self-realisation in them considering the source. She had always considered Ranma's mother to be too full of her own rigid ideas about 'manly' behaviour to ever think that she played some part in what happened, but apparently over the last few years she had come to understand the consequences of her actions to some degree at least.

Whether that would stick if Ranma ever did come back was unknowable until and unless it happened, of course. She didn't think it likely that it would, at least in the short term. Her conversation at their apartment had made it clear that the martial artists still harboured strong feelings over the matter, which she couldn't blame him for. She felt considerable shame for her own part in the entire affair. It had surprised her quite a lot that not once had either he or Kasumi mentioned that in anything other than passing, with no malice. In her own opinion she didn't deserve such fair treatment.

Eventually Nodoka broke the silence. "Isn't therapy expensive?"
Looking up from her thoughts Nabiki replied, "It should be covered by our health insurance, as it's clearly an urgent problem. We'll have to pay a certain amount, but I have some emergency money that should cover it. The biggest problem is going to be finding a therapist who can understand the nature of the problem, and the potential danger. I've looked up some names, I'll make some phone calls tomorrow. Hopefully someone can see her fairly soon."

Nodoka stood, then smiled. "You seem to have taken on the role that Kasumi filled very well, Nabiki. I hope that Akane can be helped." A few seconds later the middle sister was alone with her thoughts.
Chapter 15

Shampoo sat next to Cologne in the closed restaurant, sighing with relief that the evening rush was now finished. Business was going very well, but by the same token she was working very hard. The three extra waitresses they’d taken on in the last year helped hugely but she couldn't help thinking back to when Ranma had filled that role for a few weeks so long ago. She had been unmatched at the job. These girls were extremely good but not in the red-head's class. 'No one is;' she thought to herself wistfully. 'I hope he's all right.' Once more she sighed, for different reasons.

Cologne was watching her sympathetically. "It's been a long day. You and the girls did very well, even the boy worked hard. I just wish he'd wear his damn glasses all the time, it gets embarrassing when he offers a discount to a pretty girl that turns out to be a fifty-year-old businessman from Kobe." They both snickered, that had been very funny. Not for Mousse, of course. He'd been walking around with a red face for more than an hour. The young woman with the long lilac hair studied her great-grandmother for a moment, then turned to look out the window.

"I don't suppose you've had any luck?" she asked casually, not needing to say more. Cologne shook her head.

"No. To be honest, I'm completely out of ideas. I've tried everything I could think of, and everything anyone else in the village could come up with as well. Nothing has worked at all. Whoever is protecting son-in-law and the Tendo girl is better than I am." She scowled, the admission was hard. "I wish I knew who that was. And how they've done it. A huge amount of effort has been put into making those two vanish, it's a bit worrying when I think about it. In some ways the most mysterious thing is how on earth he could ever have found such effective protection. I'd never have believed he knew anyone so powerful. Even Herb or Saffron wouldn't be so effective at hiding him. And I know it's neither of them. Herb might have helped, they have something approaching a friendship, but I've talked to him and he's as puzzled about it as we are. Saffron most likely wouldn't, although he's also curious." She laughed a little.

"And, I think, a little scared of the boy. Ranma gave him a real shock doing what he did. Even though I suspect it was a bit of a lucky accident in some way, the fact remains that he somehow beat one of, if not the, most powerful entities in China. Nearly killed himself in the process, of course, but he won." She shook her head in respectful wonder. "What an asset he would have been."

After a moment, she continued thoughtfully, "If it's Happosai, I badly underestimated him for a very long time indeed. I always knew he was a tricky little bastard, but the level of subtleties in play here are remarkable. As is the raw power. If it's not him, I'm completely at a loss. It has to have something to do with that deviant, the timing of his disappearance is too coincidental, but..." She shrugged. "Hopefully one day it will all make sense."

"Nabiki told me a few weeks ago that she'd given up looking." Cologne nodded.

"I heard. I'm not entirely sure I believe it, she's not the type to give in easily, but what with their financial issues and all the trouble with young Akane, it's quite possibly true. It's been a long time and that one always did have a shrewd eye for practicality. She probably decided it wasn't worth the effort any more. Give her another few years, she's going to be a formidable opponent."

Shampoo turned to look at the elder. "What do you think about the situation with Akane? I also heard that she was seeing a doctor for her anger problems."
Cologne looked thoughtful. "Yes, that I do believe. It's a good thing, I think. While she's always been a problem to us, I never had any personal issues with the girl. She showed considerable promise at one point. With a proper Amazon upbringing she'd have been a formidable warrior. But lacking that, she's certainly become a hazard to both herself and everyone else in the area." The old woman snickered. "I was very impressed with what she did to the pig boy. He definitely had it coming. He's one of the toughest people I've ever encountered and she beat him to a pulp. No real technique, but damn, she hits hard when she gets worked up." Shampoo giggled a little, she didn't often hear the old woman talk like that.

"I hope the doctor can help her. She's always been a rival, but it's a horrible thing to slowly be going insane, and to be a danger to your own family." Shampoo shivered. Remembering that horrible night so long ago, she thought about the expression on Akane's face when she realised she'd nearly killed her own flesh and blood. Cologne looked at her for a moment, thinking about the same thing.

"So do I. I wouldn't like to have to deal with her if she did go berserk. To be honest, I'm not completely convinced I could, without causing permanent damage."

Nodding, Shampoo reflected on the truth of the statement. While she herself was undoubtedly a better-trained warrior than Akane was, she was honest enough to admit to herself that she was both somewhat out of practice and also outmatched by the sheer power of the girl. She'd probably prevail in an all-out battle, but only by resorting to lethal methods. Overall it wasn't something she ever wanted to try if it could be avoided. Aside from anything else, she felt rather sorry for the other woman, Ranma's spectacular departure with her sister had affected her badly, even if it was mainly her fault.

Changing the subject, she asked, "Did you see the local news last night? There was another monster attack in that weird Minato place. Some horrible-looking thing with huge claws nearly killed half a dozen people, until some of those strange magical girls that run around there so much blew it up. There was some video of them attacking it, it wasn't very clear but it looked like it caused a lot of damage. The funny thing is that afterwards one of the magical girls was yelling at the ones who stopped the thing, because they caused so much damage themselves. Three buildings collapsed and more people were hurt by them than by the monster." She giggled. "The girl was furious. You should have heard what she was saying. She was only a little thing, shorter than I am, with this really black hair with a pretty blue stripe in it, but she had a mouth on her like one of the battle mistresses from the village. The others looked so embarrassed, and more scared of her than the monster. She even made them clear up the street afterwards."

Cologne laughed. "Impressive. Perhaps we should try recruiting her?" Shampoo shook her head hastily.

"I really don't think that would be a good idea. From what I saw, if she ever got to the village she'd be running the place inside a month." She giggled again. "But it was very funny. Even the reporter was laughing. Apparently this Yori girl and a friend are known for keeping the others in line and they're not at all afraid to knock heads together if they think someone is being stupid, they also seem to have the power and ability to make it stick. She doesn't like being interviewed and they can't seem to get a good picture of her face, but from what the reporter was saying she's built quite a reputation in the last couple of years."

"It's about time some of those girls started taking responsibility for their actions. It's a very odd place, Minato. Not quite as odd as Nerima, true, but I went there a couple of times and there do seem to be quite a few visitors from other worlds wandering around. Most people don't seem to realise it. I'm not sure why so many demons end up there, but I'm glad its there and not here."
Cologne shook her head. "I'm too old to go hunting demons." Shampoo glanced at her with a mischievous grin.

"You haven't got the legs for the costume, either." Her great-grandmother bopped her on the head with her staff while laughing.

Arriving home for the weekend, Nabiki stopped just inside the front door to take her shoes off, then sniffed. "Agh. What the hell...?" Pinching her nose she followed the revolting miasma to the kitchen where she found a coughing Nodoka scrubbing a pan under copious amounts of water in the sink, through which bubbles of reddish gas were popping. She groaned. "Let me guess. Akane snuck in and tried to cheer herself up by cooking again?" The older woman turned to nod at her, her eyes streaming.

"I'm afraid so." Taking an incautious breath the auburn-haired woman immediately regretted it, dropping the pan into the sink as she went pale green. Staggering back and pulling her rubber gloves off she leaned heavily on the kitchen table attempting to keep her lunch down. "This may be the worst one yet," she said, once she'd forced her stomach to stay on-side by sheer willpower. "My husband is being sick, your father is lying in his bed unconscious. The only saving grace is that Akane tried some herself and has been on the toilet for the last two hours." She produced a sickly grin. "I shouldn't take pleasure in it but I am quite glad she caught herself in the whole thing. I thought we'd managed to persuade her to stay out of the kitchen."

Nabiki sighed as she watched the pan gently dissolve in the now highly-coloured water in the sink. She was slightly surprised that the sink itself was still intact. Ceramic was apparently more resilient than stainless steel. "This is ridiculous. It's the third time in two months. I'm getting tired of replacing the pots and pans, it's expensive."

"It least this time nothing exploded." It was cold comfort. The smell became too much for both of them and they hastily flung open all the windows before retiring to the porch. Gasping for breath they waited for the room to clear of the appalling stench. "Your sister has an undeniable talent, but it certainly isn't as a chef. A chemical warfare expert, possibly," Nodoka quipped, leaning against the wall still looking rather green. Nabiki half-smiled, trying not to retch. She didn't often hear the older woman make jokes.

Eventually the smell died down to merely ghastly and the two women re-entered the house. The sink was full of a noxious liquid that had iridescent patterns lazily tracing their way across the surface, reflecting the sunlight from the window into oddly beautiful shapes and colours on the ceiling. Looking at it cautiously from a safe distance they waited for something else to happen. Nothing did so after a minute or so Nabiki approached the sink with a wooden spoon in her hand, the handle extended, then carefully hooked the chain to the sink plug with it. One quick yank, and... the remains of the chain pulled out of the liquid sans plug. "Damn." They looked at each other.

"Well, I'm not putting my hand in there," Nodoka said forcefully. Nabiki couldn't blame her in the slightest, especially after having seen the contents of the sink eat a stainless steel pot.

'It was one of the good ones too,' she mused, irritated. 'Why the hell does she always use the expensive cookware for her chemistry experiments?' With a sigh she rummaged around in one of the cupboards for the heavy-duty corrosive-proof gloves she'd bought after the last such episode, pulling them on. They were very thick, came up to her elbows, and were made of a synthetic supposedly proof against almost anything. Not entirely trusting the manufacturers claims she stuck her left hand into the liquid, fumbled around for the plug and pulled it out as fast as possible, then
turned on the cold tap and rinsed the glove off hastily. The surface was already starting to bubble. "I hope it doesn't eat the pipes as well," she muttered, dropping the gloves on the draining board and watching the fresh water fume and hiss as it washed the stuff away. She turned the flow up a bit.

"How the hell does she do it?" the older woman asked. "That was, apparently, meant to be fish stew. Not something from a science fiction film. I've got no idea how you make something like that from the contents of a kitchen, even if you added the contents of the cleaning shelf." Nabiki shrugged helplessly.

"Not a clue. She's getting worse, as well, or possibly better if your goal is the creation of the ultimate solvent rather than dinner." With a sigh she picked up the left glove between thumb and forefinger by the cuff, inspecting it. Every part of it that had been immersed was now bleached, the surface looking rough although apparently still intact. "These at least seem to work. Once at any rate." She tossed them back into the cupboard. "I assume from all this that her latest session with the therapist didn't go as well as could be hoped?"

"No. From what I gathered the poor doctor managed to set her off on a major rant, they had to dart her again. Once the drugs wore off she had a massive headache and felt depressed. So she decided to surprise us with lunch." The auburn-haired woman chuckled mournfully. "It was a surprise, definitely. But it most certainly wasn't lunch."

"Damn. It's been four months so far. At least this doctor hasn't needed therapy of her own yet, unlike the first two." She shook her head ruefully. The youngest Tendo sister had, to be fair, stuck at going to therapy. The problem was that it didn't seem to be having much effect. Oh, certainly, the random outburst of rage in the household seemed to have died down a fair amount but she suspected that was more because she was having them in the hospital instead. 'At least they finally came up with the idea of a dart gun, although it's a bit weird they had to borrow one from the zoo. And powerful enough drugs.' The first time someone had snuck up behind her when she was going off on a full-bore screaming fit with a syringe full of some sort of happy-juice was the last, all it had done was make her even angrier for a moment, then start giggling while she trashed the place. The doctor was in need of tranquillizers of her own by the time the young woman had calmed down.

The only good thing was that the medical people started taking Nabiki's warnings of how dangerous the slender young woman was more seriously after that. Seeing a fifty-five kilo female pick up a two hundred kilo steel desk that was actually bolted to the floor, without apparently even noticing the bolts snapping, and throw it completely through an exterior wall merely because she was a bit miffed, drove home how strong some martial artists were. Even not very good ones like her sister. What they used now to take her down in the event of an 'episode', as they rather euphemistically termed such events, was enough soporifics to drop a charging rhino. "And even then it would be out for hours. She wakes up ten minutes later looking like she's a little drunk," one of the medical technicians, chosen for his sharpshooting skills more than anything else, complained with wonder and a certain amount of bitterness. At least the young woman was normally calm again by that point.

If it hadn't been for the fact that the hospital obviously wanted her to spend as little time as possible on their premises she'd probably have been committed by now. As it was it had taken some considerable persuasion by Nabiki to make them continue the sessions. While there had been some improvement in the first few weeks, that seemed to have plateaued some time ago, which was extremely frustrating for all concerned. The latest therapist was trying a whole range of anger and emotional management techniques, coupled with a complete pharmacopoeia of mood-stabilising drugs, without a huge amount of luck so far. To her credit she hadn't given up yet, though. One
major problem was that Akane seemed to metabolise the drugs so fast they barely had time to work. Enough Prozac to make most of Nerima mellow out for a week would affect her for a couple of hours at best.

The young woman was genuinely trying to become less irritable, which impressed her sister, but didn't find it easy. Overall Nabiki would take any improvement she could get but would have been a lot happier if there was more of it. And if when her sister became depressed because of the lack of progress she was making she didn't try cooking!

Both women jumped back as a deep rumble came from the pipework, heralding the sudden blowback through the drain of several litres of water that sprayed all over the room. Dripping wet and very annoyed, Nabiki stomped off to change her clothes, muttering obscenities to herself, while Nodoka sighed and began to mop the floor.

By dinnertime that evening Genma had recovered sufficiently to be ambulatory and Soun was sitting in the corner of the living room sipping some green tea while looking rather green himself. Neither of them was at all hungry. Akane had finally come out of the bathroom looking pale, wan, and extremely embarrassed. She apologised quietly to both her sister and Nodoka before going to bed early. The two women enjoyed a quiet meal, while Soun watched with a faintly nauseated expression and Genma had to leave the room entirely. "I'm going to visit friends early tomorrow morning, Auntie," Nabiki said as they cleaned up after the meal. "I probably won't be back until the next day, around lunch time."

"Is it your friend and her... partner... again, dear?" Nodoka enquired, the pauses almost unnoticeable. Nabiki was inwardly slightly irritated, the older woman seemed to still have problems with the concept of same-sex relationships, but to be fair to her was doing her best not to show it. She nodded.

"Yes. I haven't been able to catch up with them since that first time, too much to do what with Akane and university. They called and invited me out to dinner, and to be honest I need a bit of a break."

"Have fun, Nabiki. Try not to get into trouble." Nodoka looked at her sidelong, a slight smile playing at her lips. It took the younger woman a few seconds to realise she was being teased. Since the time she came down hard on Akane and Kodachi, the older woman had been treating her as much more of an equal than before, which included showing more of a sense of humour that she would have expected. She grinned back.

"I'll do my best."

"Are you going anywhere near Minato?" the auburn-haired woman said. Slightly worried, Nabiki raised her eyebrows questioningly. "Only it seems to be a bit dangerous at the moment. I saw another report on the news just before you got home about some sort of monster attack. That's the fourth one in the last three months."

"I'm not sure where the restaurant is," Nabiki said truthfully, ducking the main thrust of the question. "Four?" she asked after a moment. "I'd only heard about two." Ranma's mother nodded.

"Yes. There may have been five, in fact, but the reports of what might have been the first one are very uncertain. It was at the same time you first visited your friend, you probably missed it." Nabiki bit her lip, thinking that she'd only barely missed it. Or, more accurately, been missed by it. "The report on the news was very interesting. For some reason they seem to have a lot of attractive girls in very unsuitable clothing running around dealing with all those monsters they keep getting. I always thought that was a bit exaggerated, but apparently it's true." She made a tutting noise.
"What are their mothers thinking letting them out in public wearing so little? It's very unseemly."

Nabiki turned her face away trying not to giggle. 'If only you knew...'. Picking up the last of the plates she carried them into the kitchen. "I've heard that Minato is nearly as strange as Nerima," she commented, trying to keep the amusement out of her voice. Nodoka followed her and began to fill the sink with hot water.

"They don't seem to have many proper martial artists," the other woman said absently, putting a squirt of soap into the water and turning off the tap. "I saw some of the film they had of one of these groups of girls fighting the monster, they're not nearly as good at fighting as, for example, Shampoo is. If it wasn't for their magical powers I think they'd get into a lot of trouble." She paused with her hands in the water, looking reflectively at it. "Some of them do seem to be very good, though. There were two girls, the only ones I saw who seemed to be dressed appropriately, who obviously knew exactly what they were doing. They didn't seem to think much of the other girls either, one of them was shouting at them like a drill sergeant. The others seemed quite frightened of her. I'm not surprised, she had a very impressive presence." Nabiki was having immense difficulty not dropping to the floor and howling with laughter.

"Her friend was very pretty, actually they both were, but the little one was also a bit severe. She should smile more often. The taller blonde one didn't say much, but she seemed to worry the other girls nearly as much as the small shouty one." Nabiki made a weird little noise between her teeth, her eyes bulging with the effort of keeping her mouth shut. Nodoka didn't seem to notice. "The small girl had beautiful hair from what I could see on TV, although I'm not sure about the blue highlighting, and a lovely figure. I think she needs to be a little less forceful, though, or she'll never find a husband, men are intimidated by a woman who speaks her mind," Nodoka mused while behind her Nabiki rammed the dishcloth she was holding into her mouth in an attempt to stay quiet, her shoulders shaking.

"Still, she did seem to know what she was doing. It was quite amusing the way she made the other girls pick up all the debris their attack left behind, then apologise to the man whose car they'd damaged. She seems to have considerable civic pride. It went down well, all the bystanders who saw it looked very pleased." Shaking her head she resumed washing the dishes. "It's an odd place, Minato."

Nabiki needed a good five minutes before she could begin drying the dishes.
Chapter 16

"...and then she said, 'Men are intimidated by a woman who speaks her mind!'" Nabiki leaned weakly against the back of the bench in the roof garden, laughing so hard she could barely gasp out the punchline. Kasumi had both hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with mirth, while Ranma was rolling on the ground laughing like an idiot. Eventually the martial artist gained control of himself and managed to sit up. Wiping tears from his eyes he grinned at his sister-in-law.

"Thanks for that. I needed a good laugh. She really said all that?" Nabiki nodded, still chortling to herself. She'd arrived half an hour ago, pressing the intercom button at the main door and being admitted immediately. After greetings had been exchanged and an offer of coffee had been made and accepted, the three of them had gone up to the roof to enjoy the early autumn morning. It was just beginning to become cooler, so they wanted to make the most of the sunny day. Catching them up on the various events in the Tendo household had led to the final anecdote.

Kasumi slumped down beside her sister, giggling furiously, watching her husband with twinkling eyes. "Never find a husband..." she said to herself, making him look at her with amusement. "That's quite likely. She's a perceptive woman sometimes, your mother." He nodded, grinning, as she started giggling again. Nabiki watched them fondly. Her sister suddenly stood, approached the snickering form of her husband, then shimmered into another form, one that Nabiki hadn't encountered yet. Tall, blonde, very handsome, the man knelt in front of the martial artist, who watched with amusement. "Ah, my beautiful wench, marry me!" the disguised Kasumi said in a rich baritone. As Nabiki watched, eyes wide and a laugh bubbling up inside, Ranma became female, standing and holding the hand of his currently male-appearing wife.

"My dear sir," she said in a haughty way, "I could never marry someone who did not respect me speaking my mind."

"I find you intimidating, 'tis true, but I believe I can overcome that." The other hand of the blonde man was pressed against his brow melodramatically.

"See that you do, or we have no future together," Ranma pulled her hand back sharply, staring at the figure kneeling in front of her disapprovingly. Nabiki couldn't take it any more, roaring with laughter and sliding off the bench. Kasumi started laughing as well, the baritone voice sliding upwards in scale as she resumed her true appearance. The red-head slipped to her knees and hugged her wife, tears of laughter running down her face.

"You two would make her brain melt and run out her ears," the middle sister gasped out, holding her stomach. "If you ever get tired of beating up monsters and magical girls, aim for the stage. Or perhaps the movies." Ranma grinned, standing and pulling Kasumi to her feet. They bowed to the laughing brunette, then simultaneously curtsied, just to be sure. She howled again, nearly unable to breath. "Stop, please stop. I'm going to have an accident."

The three young women finally stopped giggling some minutes later, with difficulty. "I missed this," Nabiki said, looking at the other two. Her sister looked back sympathetically as they sat together on the bench.

"It's not been easy back in Nerima, has it?"

"No. The situation with Akane is, um, not going as well as I'd like. You know I managed to get her to agree to therapy?" They both nodded. "She's still going, so that's good, but it doesn't seem to be having much effect recently."
"We've had some reports of what's been going on, but not everything. We did hear that you gave her and Kodachi a bloody good talking to when you got back last time." Ranma smiled at her, thinking about what she'd heard. It sounded like the middle sister had been channelling Yori rather well.

"Yes, that was sort of funny. A pure fluke that everything happened right then, while you and those magical girls were fresh in my mind." She giggled again. "You should have seen Kodachi's expression. She had no idea how to deal with it. I really didn't think it would work, with either of them, but it did. Remarkably well. The Kuno idiot has been treating me quite respectfully ever since. So has your mother. Did you know she offered me the use of her katana if I needed some, ah, visual aids?" Ranma stared, then laughed.

"Wow. You must have impressed her."

"I think so. She had a weird look on her face afterwards, she heard the whole thing. To be honest she seems to be getting slightly more normal as time goes on. Sometimes she even makes jokes."

The red-head looked surprised.

"Are they any good?" Kasumi asked curiously. Nodding, Nabiki smiled a bit.

"Sometimes she can be quite funny." Her face fell after a moment. "Unfortunately, the immediate aftermath of that little lecture was that Akane nearly had a breakdown. True, it got her to agree to go to therapy sessions, but I was worried about her for a while afterwards. She was very depressed for a couple of weeks." The brunette explained about the ups and downs of the youngest Tendo undergoing therapy.

"A dart gun?" Ranma asked in disbelief. She nodded.

"Yep. It was the only thing they could think of. That first time a security guard came in and tried a taser on her. She didn't even notice. Just kept giggling and breaking things. In the end they had to evacuate that wing of the building and wait for her to get bored. After that, once I talked them into trying again, they spent quite a long time coming up with other ways of dealing with her if she went off the deep end again. That was the only thing that worked at all. The darts have enough sedatives in to stun a whale, but she shakes them off in a few minutes. The doctors can't believe it, but have to accept it." She shook her head, almost proud of her younger sister. Ranma and Kasumi glanced at each other with raised eyebrows.

"I'm kind of impressed that she's still sticking at it. That shows more discipline than she ever showed for the art." The martial artist shrugged a little. "Perhaps she's not beyond saving there either."

"Your father seems to think that's true." At the red-head's quizzical look, she explained, "The day it all came to a head he was watching her with a weird look, it was like he was seeing her for the first time in some way. He didn't say anything about it then, but I caught him looking at her in a sort of evaluating way several times over the next few weeks. I finally got annoyed and cornered him, then forced him to explain." She giggled. "He seems a bit scared of me now for some reason." Ranma grinned. "What he finally admitted is that he thinks that Akane has a lot of potential, but like you've always said, didn't have the right mental outlook to really learn much more than she has done already. But after she agreed to go to therapy, and more to the point has kept at it despite all the setbacks and disappointments, he seems to think that she might be developing the right mindset."

"I wouldn't trust him further than I could throw him," Ranma cautioned. Nabiki looked at her with raised eyebrows.
"In your case that's a fairly impressive distance, but I get your point. I don't. But everything else aside, he is a very good martial artist. Not a very good person, but... He taught you, after all, and while I know that a lot of what you can now do is a result of other people's teaching and your own work, he got you started. Perhaps he could help Akane. Perhaps not. I'm not even going to let him try until she's made more progress." She fell silent for a moment, as the other two glanced at each other. "The thing she really lacks is discipline, as you've said for years. A combination of therapy and some real martial arts tutoring might do something to fix that." She sighed a little helplessly, waving her hand at her sister.

"If only she had the ability to learn that you have. I still can't believe how good you got in such a short time." Kasumi looked pleased, while her husband smiled.

"Don't forget, Kas wasn't starting from scratch by a long way. You all had quite a bit of Anything Goes training when you were younger, that laid the groundwork very well. Akane may well have been the only one who kept at it, even in the half-assed way she did, but Kas learned a lot back then. And she's done quite a bit of Tai Chi and the like since as exercise." She looked seriously at the brunette. "All three of you Tendo women already knew more about martial arts than most people will ever learn, it's just that two of you simply didn't have the actual practice. You know a lot of the theory, in effect. I was able to build on that." She laughed a little. "That said, Kas is exceptional by any standards. I know how good I am, it's a gift added to a hell of a lot of practice and pain, but if she had gone through the same training I did from the same age, I sometimes wonder if she might even be better. She also has the gift, in spades." Her wife now looked embarrassed at the praise.

"I'm not that good," she protested mildly. Ranma looked at her with an amused expression.

"Oh, trust me, you are. I know I'm a good teacher, but even taking that into account you've learned much more in a far shorter amount of time that I could ever have hoped for or expected." She put an arm around her wife and pulled her close. "It makes me extremely proud, and also feel that everything was ultimately worth it." Nabiki watched them for a moment with a small smile.

"You two are incredible," she said softly. "And very lucky." Kasumi put the arm that wasn't occupied with holding the red-headed woman who was her husband around her sister.

"I know. More lucky than I can believe, sometimes." Squeezing her sister a bit, she looked at her serenely. "I hope that one day you find someone you will love as much. I'm sure you will."

Ranma grinned at her past his wife. "Hey, Nabiki, there's a good chance that you would be quite good at the art as well. It's in your blood, that much I'm sure of. I could teach you, or Kas could. Interested?" She stared at the other woman, very surprised. The thought had never really entered her mind. After a long moment she shook her head.

"I don't know. Do you really think so? I find it hard to believe I could ever do anything like the things I've seen you and Kasumi do. It's like magic."

"Well, to be honest, some of it is magic," the young woman said with a grin, turning back into a young man. Nabiki sighed in exasperation.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, you twit." He grinned again. "Mind you, that disguise spell might come in handy." The martial artist looked thoughtful.

"I'm not sure I could teach it on it's own. It needs a lot of ki ability as well as the magic manipulation, and I don't know any way to get either of them without the martial arts as well." He fell silent, pondering the idea. Eventually he shook his head slightly. "I'd have to think about it
some more. It might be possible, but I really don't know for sure. The way I do magic is so different from the way a normal mage does they keep on insisting that it isn't magic at all. But they don't seem to know what it is. I know it's not ki, or at least not very much ki, so if it's not magic either..." He shrugged.

"Trust you to be so confusing that even a wizard or something thinks you're weird." Nabiki giggled at the satisfied expression that crossed his face at her comment.

"I do my best."

After a few more seconds, she shook her head again. "I'm really not sure. There are so many practical problems, aside from anything else. Having to be so careful when I come here is the biggest one. Thanks for the offer, but I'd need to think about it a lot more." He nodded.

"Fair enough. The offer stands, though. And if I figure out how to teach ki, or magic or whatever it is, on it's own, I'll let you know." Pushing himself to his feet, he looked down at the two women. "Speaking of the Art, it's time for practice, student." Kasumi smiled at him coyly.

"Oh, grand master, is it that time again?" Giggling she held out her hand and he pulled her to her feet. Nabiki watched them with amusement.

"Strange, you two. Very strange." Laughing they descended into the practice room, the two martial artists going off and changing into their exercise silks while Nabiki made herself another cup of coffee. Sipping it she wandered back to the practice room and watched as they sparred for an hour or so, marveling at the speed and precision of their movements. It was genuinely beautiful, a potentially deadly dance that only needed the right music to be a work of art in more than name.

The sound of blows being deflected made her wince at first, noises like that shouldn't come from a human body. At least without being immediately followed by screaming and a lot of blood. These two didn't seem to even notice, which was genuinely impressive and slightly worrying. After a while she stopped twitching at each thump and crack, sitting back and enjoying the show. It was far better than anything she'd even seen on television or in a movie. 'It makes Hollywood movies look like amateur work, and this is even better because none of it is special effects,' she thought. 'They could make a killing as stunt people, never mind that incredible acting ability.' She shook her head in wonder. 'That's just freakishly effective.'

Once the two had run the gamut of hand to hand moves, they suddenly started bringing out the special effects. Nabiki frankly stared in disbelief when they stepped a couple of metres apart and took up something similar to a fencing stance, with energy swords abruptly appearing in their hands. "Holy shit!" she squeaked. Kasumi glanced at her with a smile. "You've gotten better at that, haven't you, sis?" the middle sister asked, when she got over the shock.

"Yes, it took a lot of practice, but I can finally control it quite well." She waved her 'light-saber' around with a deep hum coming from it. It was a meter and a half of her familiar golden-white ki in the form of a rod about two centimetres in thickness. Ranma had a similar one, except that his was a pale bluish colour. Nabiki watched them with a worried expression.

"If you slip, you'll chop each other to pieces," she said, feeling nervous. Ranma smiled reassuringly at her.

"No, it's safe. The power level is very low, they just tingle. Look." He held out his arm and Kasumi waved her energy beam across it. The solid-appearing rod of light passed smoothly through his arm without leaving a mark.
"Amazing. So you can set it to stun or kill?" his sister-in-law asked with a grin.

"More or less." He laughed. "It's more along the lines of slice or dice, but at low power it doesn't cause damage. Looks impressive, though." She nodded vigorously.

"Damn right. It's incredible." A thought crossed her mind, and she asked curiously, "Is the sound deliberate?"

"Kind of. At higher power it does make a weird noise, I think it's due to the air being heated and pushed out of the way. But you can also deliberately force it to make sounds. Blame those movies. I couldn't resist, and Kas thinks it's fun." He waved his energy sword around, the light and deep throbbing hum when it moved making a very convincing effect. With a grin he did it again and this time it produced a turbine-like whistle. "With a lot of work I could probably figure out a way to make it play music, but that's just getting silly." Nabiki stared, then laughed.

"I know I keep saying it, but wow. And also, you really are very odd." He bowed to her, amused.

"What about the colour? That," she pointed at his energy blade, "is the same colour I've seen your ki attacks have before, but when you were Yori it was bright purple. And Kasumi's is that nice golden colour."

Looking at the beam of ki coming from his hand, he nodded. "Originally the ki colour was related to emotional state. Blue was confidence, for example, while green, like Ryoga always produced, was depression and sadness. Akane, when she manifests a ki aura, always made a dark red one, which is of course anger." He sighed a little at the thought. "There's a school of thought that says that using emotionally-linked ki can be dangerous, that it can reinforce those emotions. Like in Ryoga's case, because he's depressed his ki reflects that, but by producing ki attacks using it the feedback makes him even more depressed, and so on."

"That sounds nasty," Nabiki commented, thinking about it.

"It is. But I'm not sure it's completely accurate. Oh, there's some truth to it, definitely, but it's not the whole story. Becoming dependent on being in a particular emotional state to produce ki attacks I suspect is the bigger problem. If you only know how to produce anger ki, you tend to stay angry so you can use it. I think it might be the other way around than people think, not that the emotion is produced or reinforced by the ki, but that emotion helps produce the ki and you subconsciously become convinced that you can only do it when feeling that emotion." He shrugged. "In some ways it may not matter which way around it is, if you don't take steps to deal with it either one will cause major problems. I came to realise this years ago, and finally managed to separate the emotion from the ki completely. It wasn't easy, when you've been taught, or taught yourself, that the two are closely linked, it takes a lot of practice to unlearn that link."

He looked at his wife who was listening with interest. "When I taught Kas the basics of ki manipulation I was very careful to make sure that I didn't connect it to emotional state. As a result she never learned the bad habits I did. That probably sped up her mastery of it a lot as well, which was an unexpected benefit. It took longer to get her started, but once she got the idea progress was very fast."

"So the colour is more personal preference than anything else?" Nabiki found the concept amusing. He nodded with a smile.

"Pretty much. I like blue, Kas likes that remarkable golden colour. It took her ages to get it just the way she wanted it." He held his energy beam out in front of him and Nabiki watched as it slowly cycled through the entire spectrum. The sight was weirdly beautiful. "When I'm Yori, I use the purple colour because it's not something that people would associate with Ranma, and it really
stands out. Kind of matches her eyes as well."

"So what about the intimidating glow when you get really angry?" The martial artist looked slightly embarrassed.

"Well, I'll admit that very strong emotions do make me... sort of... leak." Kasumi and Nabiki both giggled. "When your reservoir gets full enough, being really angry can make a small amount to kind of overflow, which makes the glow. That's where the battle aura comes from. Sometimes it's deliberate, but it can also be subconscious." He smiled a bit. "I have pretty large ki reservoirs as it happens. It's the side effect of ki usage, the more you use it the more you can use. A little like building up muscles through exercise. So far, as far as I can tell, there doesn't seem to be an upper limit. I'm sure there is one, there has to be, but I haven't found it yet. When I bumped into Herb the first time, for instance, his ki resources were so far beyond mine it was scary. The second time, I was a lot closer. He still had more, but I was closing in. Now... I'm not completely sure, but I suspect I outclass him in sheer ki output by a considerable amount. But available power is only part of it. You also have to have the ability to use that power effectively. Saffron had a lot more than me, for example, both ki and magic, but I still beat him. I figured out a way to use what I had in a way he wasn't expecting or prepared for, and that was all I needed."

He laughed slightly maliciously. "I could probably just crush him with sheer power now, but I still think that it's better to use what you have as efficiently as possible, rather than rely on overwhelming force. That's where most of those magical girls go wrong, they just jump in and blow the hell out of everything, basically carpet bombing the area, when something like a sniper might be more appropriate." Nabiki raised her eyebrows.

"I seem to remember you nuking the park only a few months ago, to get rid of one monster." The young man got an embarrassed expression while his wife started giggling.

"Um, yes. I might have overdone it a bit that time." He looked guilty. "But in my defence it was a very tough beastie."

"Might have overdone it? You left a twenty meter glass crater in the middle of the park! How much more could you have overdone it by?" Nabiki laughed, then suddenly stopped when Ranma and Kasumi exchanged odd glances. "Oh shit."

"Umm." He turned off his energy sword and scratched the back of his head.

"How much bigger could you have made it?" Nabiki asked slowly. They exchanged glances again.

"Umm..." She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"It's a lot, isn't it? And don't say 'Umm'." He smiled a little.

"Well..." She sighed loudly. "Yes, it's a lot." He paused again. "Really quite a lot."

"How much is a lot?" she asked, not entirely sure she wanted to know.

Turning to look out one of the large windows at the park behind the building, he pointed to the other side of the large expanse of green and trees. "I'm not completely sure, but I think the other side of the crater would be over there somewhere." She stared.

"From here?" He nodded. "To over there?" He nodded again. Standing, the middle Tendo walked to the window and looked at the park carefully for some time, before turning back to inspect the fairly innocuous young man standing in the middle of the room. "That must be over half a kilometre!" Yet another nod. "Fuck me," she said faintly, sliding down the wall to sit at the base of
it, staring at him in horrified amazement. For some reason she didn't doubt his claim at all.

"I could probably only do it once, before I ran out of power completely," he said, making her laugh slightly hysterically.

"Oh, that makes it fine then." Shrugging, he looked at his wife, who smiled slightly. After some moments, she said in a vaguely amused voice, "You're so far beyond the normal martial artists and magical girls it's not even funny." Giving him a hard stare, she added, "I've never met anyone whose abilities should be measured in megatons before." He chuckled, walking over to sit beside her.

"It's kind of scary when you think of it like that. If it's any help, Happosai is nearly as powerful, and he's never blown up a city. Herb could make a pretty big hole as well."

"You blew up a mountain. Twice."

"Ah. Well, yes, there is that. But it was an accident."

"Twice."

"Yes."

"OK, then." She giggled, and he snickered a little. "When most people have a bit of an oopsie, they need to replace some dishes or something like that. Not redraw maps." This made him laugh. Indicating her sister, she asked, "How big a hole can you blow in the scenery?" Ranma glanced at his wife with a smile.

"We haven't had cause to find out yet. Probably only a little one, perhaps ten or fifteen metres across?" Nabiki stared at him once more, then at her sister.

"I was joking, damn it!" She inspected the gently smiling taller woman for a long moment. "Really, sis?" Kasumi nodded.

"I believe so. As my slightly disturbing husband said, the more ki you use the more you can use, and I've been practising a lot since you were last here." She vanished her own energy beam and sat down beside her sister as well. "We've run into several more of those monsters, and twice we've had to deal with them ourselves. The other two times we had to deal with the magical girls who dealt with them. Neither group was very responsible, they caused a lot of damage, so we had to be quite firm with them." She smiled gently at some memory. "It was quite funny. Yori made one group cry she was shouting so much. Everyone else was laughing." The woman looked at her husband. "You really should be less strict, they seemed very upset." He shrugged with an annoyed expression.

"They were being stupid. OK, they managed to destroy that thing, but they wrecked three perfectly good buildings in the process and totalled at least a dozen cars. It was a miracle that no one was killed. Then they were just going to walk away thinking that they'd done their bit. They give the rest of us a bad name."

"Still, you were a little harsh. That group is normally nowhere near as clumsy." Her husband sighed.

"I know. I guess I'll try to make it up to them the next time. Assuming they don't screw it up again." Nabiki was listening with a smile, hearing them talking about making the sort of people most normal citizens would run away from cry just by telling them off was very entertaining.
"Have you found out where those things are coming from? I haven't seen the news reports, I keep missing them, but from what I've been told they sound like that thing in the park." Ranma frowned.

"They are. Identical. They pop up randomly, there doesn't seem to be any pattern I can see yet. Two of them other than that first one close to here, inside our patch, two more outside but close enough I had to go and check them out. Aiko has done some research as well, but we can't find any records of anything quite like them. The portals open, one comes through, and they close again. The things just attack anyone close enough. They don't seem to be much more than very aggressive animals."

"Is it a deliberate attack?" The concept was alarming.

"I'm... not sure. It might be, but it's so random I can't really see the point. I suppose it could be considered a bit like some weird mystical form of terrorism, but it seems like a pretty large amount of effort to go to for not a lot of result. Once you know the trick they're not too hard to put down, you need to evaporate at least fifty percent of the body mass including the head in one attack. Most of the magical girls can manage that one way or another. The problem is that some of them miss." He scowled. "Three times. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the damage. How the hell do you miss something that size three times? They're not that fast."

"If it's not deliberate, why are they coming here? And where from?"

With another shrug he said, "Your guess is as good as mine at this point. One of the nastier demon worlds, certainly, but not one I'm familiar with. About the only possibility that makes any sense to me is that it's either some form of accidental transport, or a weird natural occurrence. Portals do sometimes open spontaneously, but five in a row in such a small area seems a bit unlikely. I guess it's not impossible. About all we can do is deal with them when they come through, and hope that either it stops, or a portal opens close enough to someone who can work out the origin that it can be permanently dealt with."

The young man shivered a little. "I'm just damn glad that so far all of them have appeared around here, where there are people that can deal with the things. If one came through in the middle of the Tokyo business district there would be carnage before anyone could get there and stop it. They've already killed seven people. None in the last three incidents, thankfully."

The thought of one of the things she'd witnessed suddenly appearing in the middle of a shopping centre was enough to make Nabiki's stomach turn. The sat in silence for a moment reflecting on the situation, before the two martial artists got up and resumed their practice. Nabiki watched with interest and amusement as they leapt around slashing at each other with humming energy blades, which made vicious crackling sounds when they intersected. The sight rapidly drove away the somewhat depressed mood she'd fallen into during the earlier discussion of otherworldly man-eating monsters.

After half an hour of practice with the blades, they each produced another one in their other hand, then proceed to have at it while dual-wielding 'light-sabers'. Nabiki stared open-mouthed. Ranma was clearly better at it than his wife, but she was no slouch either, if nothing else the sheer speed was unbelievable. 'Good grief. That's probably the most amazing thing I've ever seen,' the brunette thought to herself, watching her sister do a double somersault over the head of her husband while simultaneously blocking one energy blade with both of hers. His other one penetrated both her defences and her the instant she landed, making her stand looking at the beam of light going in the centre of her chest and out her back with irritation. "Damn," she muttered. Nabiki had both hands over her mouth, for a horrifying second she'd thought that the woman was in serious trouble before remembering that the blades were harmless.

"Not bad, Kas. Not bad at all. You're getting better very fast." Ranma turned off his blades and
embraced his wife, who still seemed a bit annoyed.

"Not fast enough." She hugged him back. He laughed.

"Always the perfectionist. Come on, against almost anyone else you'd chop them into little bits." The thought clearly cheered her up while making her sister look slightly nauseous. "Right, I think that's enough for now. It's time for lunch." Standing, Nabiki accompanied them into the living room. Once they'd changed and showered, Kasumi prepared a light meal, which they slowly ate while catching up on all the things that had happened over the last few months.
Chapter 17

"Have you had much contact with the Amazons recently?" Kasumi asked her sister, while Ranma washed the dishes and listened. They were in the kitchen, putting things away, the elder Tendo showing the younger where things went. Nabiki shook her head.

"Not all that much in the last couple of months. Shampoo dropped by a while ago, just to say hello. Her Japanese is pretty good now, all that practice paid off. She's frustrated with Mousse again, he's still pining after her like, well, like she pines after him." She jerked her thumb at the young man with his hands in the hot soapy water, who looked mildly amused. "We were talking about Akane and the problems with the hospital. She thought the idea of having to use a vet's dart gun on her was very funny. Akane didn't, not very much, but took it in good humour for her." She laughed a little. "They've almost become friends in some weird way. As long as the subject steers clear of either Ranma or you they can have a civilised conversation."

"What about Cologne?" Ranma asked, drying his hands and turning to them. Nabiki looked over her shoulder.

"I haven't seen her for some time. She keeps to herself pretty much. Since I haven't been to the Café in a while there's been no real reason to see her."

Kasumi closed the last cupboard, then went back into the living room with the other two following her. They sat down on the sofa. "Any signs of Ryoga?" Ranma was quite curious.

"No, thank god. I haven't heard anything from or about him for more than a year now. I hope he stays away. Personally I never much cared for him anyway, but leaving that aside, any gains Akane is making would be ruined at the merest hint of him showing up. Even more than with you." She shuddered. "It would be absolute bloody chaos. Kodachi was bad enough, although that did work out in the end. Ryoga... No, the best thing would be if we never see him again."

"I doubt we'll be that lucky," Ranma said darkly. She nodded glumly. The part time pig did indeed have a nasty habit of turning up at the worst possible moment.

"It's been quite quiet, really. I haven't run into Tatewaki for weeks, and even when I did he was surprisingly polite. Almost sane. Ukyo and Konatsu seem to be settling down to a nice life together, I wouldn't be at all surprised to get a wedding invitation at some point. The only real trouble has been Akane flipping out every now and then, but even there she's at least breaking things at the hospital rather than home." Kasumi looked at her with a slight smile.

"Have you been able to get the Dojo repaired properly yet?" Her younger sister nodded, pleased.

"Yes. Finally, after close to four years, it's completely repaired. The amazing thing is that it was paid for by the profits from our fathers teaching. They've picked up four more students in the last month or so, which means they're actually turning a profit. Not a huge one, but still... I never thought that would happen. They run two classes now, a beginner one and a more advanced class, taking turns to teach them." She laughed. "They still insult each other regularly, and have fights almost every day. The students seem to enjoy it. To be honest, I think they do as well."

Ranma seemed both surprised and impressed. "I'm genuinely amazed that they've stuck to it for so long. No disrespect to your family, but your father never struck me as someone who could cope, well, at all really, to say nothing of the problems of running a business. And as for mine..." He shrugged. "You know my feelings towards him." Nabiki smiled a little.
"Only too well. I share a lot of them. But I will admit he's surprised me. He was the one to pull my father out of a bottle of sake years ago, and in many ways the driving force behind them taking up teaching again. Not that he's much of a role model but he does seem to have tried to improve himself. Now he's just a waste of space, not a waste of oxygen as well." Both Ranma and Kasumi grinned. "And as for Father, I've shared your opinions of him for a long time. He's our father, but he's also been pretty useless since mother passed on. She would have been very disappointed." The young woman frowned a little, momentarily depressed. "But he's definitely getting better. I really hope that this change sticks for good. I'd like to have my father back again." She looked at Kasumi, who nodded.

"So would I." She looked sad. "I do wish I could visit him, and Akane as well, but..." Ranma put his hand on hers.

"One day."

There was silence for a while as they busied themselves with their own thoughts, ultimately broken by Ranma. "So, most people seem to be getting their lives in order. Good for them. It's a pity it took... that... to trigger it." He winced at the memory. "I'm still in no hurry to meet up with them again, but it sounds like it might not be impossible eventually. We'll see." He cast an interrogative glance at the middle sister. "How's your own studies going?"

"Pretty well. The accountancy and financial operations courses are both interesting and quite easy. The advanced math is, um, advanced. Not easy at all, but I'm managing. All the computer courses are a lot of fun."

"What do you intend to do when you graduate?" Kasumi was quite curious. Nabiki made a small gesture, expressing a certain amount of uncertainty.

"I'm not sure. When I originally decided on these courses a few years ago I was kind of thinking stock broker, financial advisor, that sort of thing. I mean, I like money." She grinned as the other two nodded knowingly. "But since I started, and more to the point since one somewhat traumatic night nearly four years ago, I've been wondering if there might be something a bit more rewarding in other than the purely monetary manner." Her sister inspected her with interest, then glanced at her husband, who seemed surprised.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Again, I'm not sure." She laughed a little. "You know, all that work I did to track you two down, that was a lot of fun. Not at all easy, but it required a lot of computer and people skills, and detective work. More than once I've wondered if I should be using those skills in a career instead of the financial ones." Her sister nodded thoughtfully.

"You could combine them." Responding to the quizzical look from Nabiki, she expanded on her thought. "Forensic Accountancy. That's something I saw on TV. It requires a very sharp mind, I suspect, and also all the skills you either have or are learning. Detective work, but in the field of money." Nabiki sat up and looked very interested.

"Hmm. Now that's an interesting idea. I'll bet it pays pretty well, too." At her sister's slightly exasperated expression, she shrugged. "Hey, I told you I like money." Ranma laughed. She thought about it some more. "That's really not a bad idea. I'll have to look into what's involved." She smiled at her sister. "Thanks, sis." Kasumi looked pleased.

"So, what have you guys been up to, other than slaughtering other-worldly monsters and frightening skimpily-dressed schoolgirls with your frankly terrifying super-human abilities?"
Nabiki grinned at them. Ranma laughed, abruptly becoming Yori.

"I'm not terrifying, am I, dear?" the black-haired girl asked, her aura glowing a slightly radioactive blue-purple as she sat next to her wife, waving one hand around lazily with streamers of purple light coming from her fingertips. Nabiki watched with amused amazement. Kasumi leaned against her contentedly.

"Not in the slightest. To me, at any rate." 'Yori' grinned, her small fangs showing, putting her arm around her wife and changing back to a female Ranma. Nabiki laughed delightedly at the effects.

"I just can't get over how convincing you are in all these different identities. How you manage to keep it all straight is beyond me. And, yes, you are damn terrifying when you want to be, as you very well know." Ranma nodded pleased acknowledgement of the comment.

"Thanks. It was a lot of hard work."

"I like the visual effects. Is that new?" She nodded again.

"Yep. I got a bit bored a while back and tried to find out what else we could do with this ki/magic combination thing, whatever it actually is. It drives the mages I know to distraction, most of them pretend it doesn't exist now. One of them even looks physically ill when I mention it in his presence." She giggled. "I'm pretty sure it really is magic, because I know damn well what ki is and it's not that, even though it uses ki for control and direction. But it's some sort of magic that doesn't agree with the normal method." Nabiki laughed.

"I still have difficulty with the concept that there is a 'normal method' of magic." Her sister smiled, and Ranma giggled again.

"I know. It's kind of weird. But you can't argue with success. It works, whatever other people say. If they don't understand how, that's more a limitation of theirs." She looked amused. "I tried to teach it to one of the more receptive magic workers. She got a huge headache after about fifteen minutes and needed to lie down. After that she refused to even think about it any more. Apparently it's not very compatible with what she uses." The red-head shrugged. "Not my problem. One of the things that seems to upset them is that this method doesn't use spells in the form they are used to, it's more a matter of will, like with ki. The downside is that it can take a lot of effort to work out the right... pattern, I guess is the best word, to produce the effect you want. You have to be able to visualise it, and I think it's in more than three dimensions."

Nabiki was listening with interest and a certain amount of surprise. It sounded very strange, even given the indisputable existence of magic in the first place. "How can you visualise something in more than three dimensions?" The red-head waved a hand airily.

"Oh, it takes a lot of practice. And I suspect a very odd mindset. That might be why no one seems to have come up with it before." She looked thoughtful. "I still find it unlikely that I've invented it from nothing, someone else must have come up with it in the past. But no one I've mentioned it to seems to know about it, and most of them don't believe it until I show them. Sometimes not even then." Glancing at her wife, she smiled. "Luckily it turns out that I can teach it, although probably only to someone else with a particular mental outlook and also a lot of ki potential. It may be that learning one of the 'traditional' forms of magic precludes learning this form. It's a pity, it's a lot more flexible."

Kasumi interjected, "It's very interesting to learn, but like she says, not at all easy. At least at first. Once you master the basic principles it seems to come more easily, but needs a lot of practice to be something you can do quickly. When you do get to that point it's much faster than what I've seen of
ordinary magic." By way of an example she flickered through half a dozen illusory forms in under a second, the shimmering effect associated with the spell continuous. Nabiki stared.

"Wow. Again."

Smiling at her wife, Ranma added, "It also seems to be vastly more efficient in how much energy it needs than most spells. The original illusion spells I used as the basis of this one would take several seconds to run, and a decent mage could do perhaps three or four spells like that before needing to go and sit down. When I showed that demonstration to the mage I was trying to teach, she got a nosebleed. Then she wouldn't talk to me for a month." The young woman looked amused.

"I've been trying to learn to create portals, for quite a while now. Unfortunately, that particular type of spell is in a class of it's own for complexity. Add that to the difficulty of this method when you're adapting a more standard spell, it gets kind of overcomplicated." She shrugged a little once more. "I'll work it out eventually. I may have to start from scratch though." Nabiki listened with interest, it seemed that there was nothing the martial artist wouldn't have a go at.

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" she asked, slightly worried. Ranma looked amused.

"Well, the portals themselves are pretty safe. Where you end up might not be, of course. But I know the co-ordinates to several places that are fine. We've visited Uthryyl's world, for example, and while it's very strange it's no more dangerous than here." Once more Nabiki was surprised, staring at the two other women.

"You've visited other worlds?" Kasumi laughed.

"Oh, my, yes. Only a few times, but it was very interesting." Shaking her head her sister studied the tall brunette with new eyes.

"You haven't even been outside Japan, but you've visited other worlds. Demon worlds." Kasumi nodded, her eyes sparkling. "So very weird," Nabiki muttered to herself. After a moment's silence, Ranma continued.

"Anyway, to answer your original question, I got bored, so I started playing around with visual effects. They look impressive, don't take much power, and can make people really worried which can be useful in a battle. If you can intimidate someone enough you may not have to fight them, they'll back down." She grimaced. "Or possibly wildly overreact and attack all out. You have to judge your opponent carefully." Nabiki snickered, that last bit sounded like the voice of bitter experience. The red-head smiled back ruefully. "It's happened. We all make mistakes." Kasumi giggled.

"That was a particularly impressive one."

"Yes, I know, you can let it go any time now." She glanced at Nabiki who was smiling. "She'll never let me live that one down. Right, yes, visual effects. I worked out a way to make the ki glow persistent, mixing it with the magic, and form it into shapes. A bit like the ki beam but not dangerous, and much more free-form." Holding out her hand she formed a pale blue sphere fifteen centimetres across on it, then gently flipped it into the air. It drifted across the coffee table towards Nabiki, whose eyes widened in shock. About to scramble out of it's path, she stopped when Ranma grinned. "Relax. It's harmless." Warily watching the glowing ball she settled back into her seat. The thing slowed to a halt midway between them, hanging in the air in an improbable manner. 'In much the same way bricks don't,' was the line from a famous book that came to mind, making her giggle for a moment.
She watched with amazement as the sphere of light slowly changed shape, ending up as a perfect cube. Then a pyramid, followed by a torus. Cycling through the spectrum it changed and distorted, taking on many different geometrical shapes, before splitting apart into half a dozen smaller objects, each of which was a different colour. They began orbiting a common centre, each one changing continuously. She glanced at Ranma who was staring fixedly at the little constellation of light she was controlling, sweating lightly. It obviously took considerable work. "That's incredible," the brunette said quietly. Flashing a brief smile at her, Ranma concentrated on her light show, while Kasumi and Nabiki watched, captivated.

All the moving objects collapsed back into basic spheres again, each a different colour, then began moving in more and more complex patterns, forming three dimensional helices and spirals, expanding out from the original point. One of them whizzed past Nabiki's face and, startled, she put up her hand reflexively to fend it off. With no sensation at all it passed right through her hand, making her squeak in shock. "Holy crap!" she muttered, experimentally putting her hand in the way of another one and watching wide-eyed as it went through. "Unbelievable. You've probably invented another art form. All you need is music." The martial artist nodded with a small smile.

The collection of moving lights froze, then collapsed back into a sphere in its original position over the coffee table. A second or two later, it grew slightly then changed shape, quickly taking on the form of a human head. With a shock Nabiki found herself staring at a ghostly life-size replica of her own face. Ranma grinned looked slightly tired. "I can't do full colour yet, I need to graft in some of the illusion spell I think. That should let me create a very lifelike projection, which might have some tactical uses. But it's fun already, just a bit tiring. I haven't fully mastered it so I have to keep thinking about what I'm trying to do, which is hard work." The misty bluish replica of her head vanished, and the red-head sighed. "It doesn't need much power, the difficulty is concentrating on all the different things you need to keep track of at once."

"It's still damn impressive!" his sister-in-law said with wonder.

"Thanks. That's one of the more complex effects, of course. Simpler ones are much easier, and in many cases more intimidating." She held up her hand again, the streamers of light rising from her fingertips like smoke from a recently extinguished candle but much more visible. After a second or two the glow spread down her fingers to encompass her entire hand, making it look quite dangerous. "I can do this with a ki aura of course, but this method is more flexible, and takes less power. Plus you can do this with it." The glow restricted itself to her index finger, and she quickly wrote her name in the air, the Kanji characters hanging in front of her. Once more Nabiki was impressed.

"The funny thing is, this particular trick seems to be quite stable. Once you form the pattern like this, you don't have to do anything else. It just sits there. I'm not quite sure why yet. After a while, depending how much power you put into it, it goes pop, but up until that point it stays put." She waved her hand through the glowing lines in the air. They passed through it without wavering. "I haven't come up with a particularly good use for it yet but it's kind of amusing."

Nabiki grinned. "You could leave notes for each other. Beats refrigerator magnets and bits of paper."

"True." The other woman smiled, while Kasumi laughed.

"I'm still learning it from her, but I can do that bit now," her sister said. She demonstrated, writing her name in the air as well. The golden characters hung placidly over the table. "I can't do the projection thing very well, it's very difficult."

"How long does it last?" Nabiki asked curiously, sticking her own hand out and waving it slowly
back and forth through the writing. Ranma shrugged a little.

"Like I said, it depends on the amount of power. The longest I've tried has been about a day, but I turned it off at that point because I was bored with it. It would probably have run for quite a bit longer. This doesn't have much, it'll disappear in a minute or two. You can stop it whenever you want, of course." She looked slightly worried. "It's possible to pump enough power into it that it becomes dangerous. I found that out the hard way." Looking at her finger ruefully, she added, "It hurt. Like sticking your finger on something very hot, and for me because of that phoenix pill years back, it would have to be hot." Nabiki suddenly stopped playing with the glowing characters. Ranma snickered. "Don't worry, you have to put a hell of a lot of energy into it before that happens. You'd know, you'd feel the corona surrounding it before you got your hand very close." They watched as her glowing name abruptly faded away.

"There you go. Ran out of power." Kasumi's lasted another few seconds, before it too faded.

"You know some really neat tricks," Nabiki said, impressed. The young woman smiled, becoming a young man.

"I know," he said happily. "I can't find much of a use for some of them, but they're good practice if nothing else."

"That writing in mid air one could be profitable. If you could make it last for long periods of time you could replace neon signs with it." She looked at him with a sly grin. "Except for your terrible handwriting." He seemed both amused and mildly insulted.

"It's getting better!" he protested. His wife gently smiled at him.

"Better isn't good, dear." Huffing in mock annoyance he glared at her, while her sister laughed.

"Everyone's a critic."

Kasumi got up to make coffee. Nabiki also stood, wandering to the window and looking out at the view. "You really do have a nice place here." Ranma walked over to stand beside her.

"I know. We're very lucky to have it. I can never thank Happosai enough, he helped far more than I would have believed possible. Things would have been a lot more difficult without him." He chuckled. "I still find it odd thinking that, my first impressions of the little pervert weren't very good." She smiled.

"No one has a good first impression of Happosai. But... after getting to know him, then they really dislike him." Ranma started laughing helplessly, making her smile. After a moment, she looked at him. "I wanted to ask you something," she began, hesitantly. He returned her gaze questioningly.

"Go on," he said, after a pause. She opened her mouth, then closed it, trying to think of the best way to phrase her question. Eventually she decided to just ask.

"Why are you so nice to me? I did some horrible things to you for years. A lot of what happened at the wedding was my fault, I didn't mean for all that chaos, but if I'd thought about it I should have known that it would happen. I just wanted the money. I charged you for all sorts of ridiculous things, I used you for personal gain. I'm not a very nice person. Yet you let me into your home, you trusted me with all your secrets, you gave me money. Why?" She was almost in tears. He smiled gently at her, in a way that reminded her very strongly of her sister, before leading her back to the sofa. Kasumi came out of the kitchen with coffee on a tray, sitting down and watching silently. Carefully, he helped her to sit, then joined her. Holding her hand, he looked at her for a moment
while she searched his face for recriminations, finding none.

"A nice person and a good person are not the same thing. It's better if they are, of course, but it's not required." He smiled as she listened intently. "Yes, you are, or at least were, a very mercenary individual. Cold, efficient, effective. Some people don't like that. Yes, you have done some pretty nasty things to me and quite a few others. You were complicit in the wedding fiasco, that's true. You snuck into my room to take photos of me as a female to sell to Kuno, who is both an idiot and slightly insane. You always had an eye open for a chance to make money from me, and managed to do so on quite a few occasions. None of these are very nice, and several of them are certainly illegal." She stared, as he listed her crimes against him.

"But... You didn't cause the wedding to go to shit. That would certainly have happened with or without you, although you probably made it a little worse. In the end, though, it led to me finally reaching a point in my life where I could be truly happy. As it did with your sister. For that, I can forgive you pretty much anything. There's nothing wrong with being efficient, and there are places where an icy emotionless outlook is essential. While you kept a lot of the money you made from the photos, quite a bit of it went towards running the house, which is good. I wouldn't have let you take them otherwise." Her eyes widened a little and he grinned. "Of course I knew you were there. I'd have been a pretty poor excuse for a martial artist if I didn't notice someone sneaking into my room, never mind pouring water all over me!" She giggled a little nervously.

"Above all, two things stand out to me. One is that to my knowledge, you never lied to me, or anyone else. You may be a master of bending the truth, but you never broke it. And the other is that you, out of all the ones in Nerima after Kas and I left, were in a very real sense the only honourable one. You never tried to hide what you were, you were always true to yourself. You've worked very hard to keep your family together and solvent, when it would have been quite easy for you to walk away. Another thing to remember is that people change as they mature. I know, from what I've seen while we've been watching you all this time, that you had grown up, like we all did. None of us are the same people we were back then. You like money, true, but you don't let it control you. If you had, when Kas offered you a large amount of it, things would have been different." Her eyes widened again and she glanced at her sister.

"It was a test?" she whispered.

"Not completely," her sister said, looking guilty, "but we had to be sure. I was, and Ranma almost was."

"What would you have done if I'd just grabbed it?" She looked between them.

Ranma sighed a little. "More or less the same, but I suspect we wouldn't be having this conversation." She sagged back against the sofa, thinking about what she'd been told. He watched sympathetically.

"We'd have given you the money regardless. I have no wish to see Kasumi's family out on the street, despite how I feel about most of the people back in Nerima. But I don't think we would have been very close. I needed to know I could trust you. Kasumi was sure we could, and I wanted to believe it myself. Like I said months ago, despite all our differences I always sort of respected you even when I didn't like you. Now, I respect you and like you. I really wanted to be proven right, that I could also trust you. I was." She stared at him for a long moment, then hugged him. He returned it with interest, while his wife watched with a pleased smile.

"I'm still not a very nice person," she said quietly into his neck.

"I know, but I think you're a good person, and getting better every day." He chuckled. "Quite a few
people would say I'm not a very nice person either." Kasumi giggled.

"No, that's Yori." Both Nabiki and Ranma looked amused.

"I also learned quite a long time ago, it's best not to hold grudges. Not serious ones, anyway. Look at Ryoga. I never really did anything very bad to him, most of what he blames me for was his own damn fault, but he pretty much ruined his own life following me around threatening to kill me. If he'd just let it go and tried to fix his problems, he might not have such a hard time. He certainly wouldn't have the Jusenkyo curse." Nabiki nodded thoughtfully.

"I have no idea how, with the upbringing you had, you turned out such a decent individual." He looked embarrassed.

"Luck, I suppose." She inspected him closely.

"No. There's a lot more to it than that. Whatever it is, I'm very glad it happened." Kasumi smiled at her.

"So am I. More than you can imagine." The older Tendo handed her sister a cup of coffee, the younger one taking it gratefully. Ranma picked up his own and took a sip.

"Feel better now?" Nabiki nodded.

"Yes. Thank you for being honest with me. And, for everything I did, I'm sorry." He waved his free hand dismissively.

"Forget it. What's done is done. All we can do is affect the present and the future, not the past."

"Very deep. Get it from a fortune cookie?" the brunette asked with a grin. He chuckled.

"Yes, as it happens." This made her burst out laughing to the point he had to relieve her of her coffee until she calmed down.

Handing it back to her, he grinned. "I was exceptionally angry at the time we left, as you can probably remember." She shivered, the burning eyes of the red-headed woman still featured in her nightmares. "But oddly enough very little of it was directed at you. Akane, yes, Ryoga, yes, those damn Amazons, oh god yes. Our parents, the Kunos, you name it. But not so much you. I'd had a lot of time to think under all that rubble, one of the things I'd worked out was that what happened was inevitable. Sooner or later something like that was bound to happen, the way my life was going wouldn't allow for any other outcome. In a sense, your contribution was a good thing in the long run, it sped up the timetable. If things had just festered along like they were, when I finally snapped, it might have been... very bad. Very bad indeed." He stopped and sipped some coffee, his eyes not on her but nearly four years in the past.

"I don't like to think about that. I'm a lot more powerful now than I was then, but even so there wouldn't have been much left of the Dojo. If anything," He shook his head, returning to the present. "It may be that you saved a lot of people by being yourself. Luckily, we'll never know what would have happened." Nabiki studied his face thoughtfully.

"Still, I apologise. It was, if nothing else, rude." He grinned.

"No harm in being rude if you pick your moment. Sometimes it's necessary." Turning to look at the clock over the kitchen door, he added, "The restaurant is booked for seven. It's just after two now, it'll take us about half an hour to get there, unless you'd like Kas or me to give you a lift over the roofs?" She shook her head emphatically, causing him to smile. "So, we've got about four hours or
"Nothing specific. I'm quite happy to sit here and talk, or go out and wander around the neighbourhood. As long as there's no roof-hopping!" She looked severely at her sister, who smiled slightly and sipped her own coffee again. "By the way, where are we going, and who are you going as?" Shaking her head, she added with a smile, "I still can't believe I can ask that without it being stupid."

"The restaurant is on the other side of Minato, near the bay. It's a Thai/French fusion place, which is a weird combination but somehow works pretty well. We've been there a few times when Kas or I didn't want to cook, someone at the university recommended it." Finishing his coffee, he put his cup on the table. "As for who to go as... Hmm. What do you think, love?" Kasumi tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Well, could we see what's on offer?" He nodded.

"Of course." Standing, he walked a couple of metres away, turning to look at the two women. Nabiki was watching with great amusement, while Kasumi seemed to be treating it like someone being asked to pick a pair of shoes. "OK. First, we have this one, a pretty little number I call Asami." The usual visual effect came, leaving behind a slender female, even shorter than Ranma's female form, with shoulder length black hair, dressed in traditional Japanese clothing. Her eyes downcast, she asked in a soft voice, "Does this meet with your approval, Miss Tendo?" Kasumi considered the figure while Nabiki tried not to giggle.

"No. Too short." She flipped her hand dismissively. "Show me a different one."

"At once, Miss Tendo." The girl shimmered, the figure was still female but now much taller, nearly Kasumi's own height. With very short greenish hair, black eyes, and dressed like a stylish biker babe in quite a large amount of form-fitting leather, she cocked a hip and rested her hand on it. "How about Cheiko?" Nabiki started laughing, the young woman looking towards her challengingly. "Something wrong, girly?" She shook her head, giggling furiously.

"No. This is..." Kasumi waved her hand languidly at the figure in front of her, doing a very good Kodachi impression, "too common. Next."

Once more the figure changed. "Hi. I'm Mariko." This woman was about Kasumi's age, around Nabiki's height, but with immense breasts and a very narrow waist. Long lilac hair reminiscent of Shampoo's hung to below her buttocks, swaying around as she moved. Walking across to Nabiki with a feminine gait, she smiled prettily. "Who are you?" The middle sister watched with amazement, too surprised even to laugh. Kasumi tutted.

"No, definitely not. Much too obvious." The young woman pouted, making Nabiki nearly explode with amusement, the expression was too cute for words. "Show me something in a male, medium-large." With a small sigh the girl walked back to her original spot, once more changing. This time there was a good-looking young man standing there grinning at them in a confident manner. He was roughly the same height as Ranma's normal male form, but with shoulder-length wavy brown hair that obviously required considerable hair-care products. His teeth were a perfect glistening white, his brown eyes twinkling. He looked like a movie star. "Is Kenji acceptable, beautiful?" he asked in a tenor voice with a slight Osakan accent.

"Oh, no, that's far too pretty-boy." Kasumi frowned. Nabiki was having trouble breathing by this point. "Next." With a long-suffering sigh the man nodded, wavering into a different person. This one was huge, at least a hundred and ninety centimetres tall, and very muscular. Dark complexioned with hair so short he was nearly bald, he looked at them through deep blue eyes.
"You're hard to please, lady. I'm Shin. Good enough for you?" Slipping over onto her back Nabiki rolled on the sofa laughing hard enough to break something. The different voices, accents and mannerisms were so convincing she had real trouble accepting it was still Ranma. The man, Shin, looked at her with an irritated expression which made her laugh even harder. "You're pretty weird, girl." Kasumi looked appalled.

"No! Definitely not. I said medium-large, that's an extra-large." 'Shin' sighed heavily.

"Women. Never satisfied." He shimmered away to be replaced by a medium height teenager with acne. Kasumi didn't even let him speak.

"No. Too repulsive." Another figure took his place. Nabiki was laughing furiously.

"No. Too short. Again."

"No. Too thin."

"NO! Too fat."

"Oh, for..." She sighed, inspecting the figure in front of her critically, while Nabiki stared in disbelief. "Too many legs." The centaur looked put upon, then changed again. "Ah. Now we're getting somewhere." Ranma grinned at her. The middle Tendo roared with laughter as he walked over and kissed his wife.

"You two are completely nuts. I do hope you understand that?" They nodded, grinning. "If nothing else you've got the best comedy act I've ever seen."

Ranma bowed ironically. "Thank you. I do what I can." Sitting beside Kasumi, he added, "We're going as Rika and Maiko, actually, that's the name the booking is in."

"How many of those are identities you really use?" Nabiki was very curious. Ranma looked amused.

"I've used all of them except the centaur at one point or another, but I only have documentation for Asami, Mariko, and Shin." He snickered. "I'm not sure where I could use a centaur. But it was interesting coming up with it. Blame too much TV."

Nabiki watched him with wonder. "Forget stunt work, you could turn the world of costumes and special effects on it's head." She suddenly looked thoughtful, then very amused. "Hey, the next time there's a comic book convention in Tokyo you could come up with some really weird ones and go. It would blow those weirdo's minds." Ranma got an interested expression. Kasumi nudged him in the ribs.

"We're supposed to be trying to keep attention away from us, dear, not attracting it."

"But, Kas, it would be so funny," he pleaded, winking at Nabiki.

"I really don't think it's a good idea." He sighed.

"You're only saying that because you don't have any good ones." Glancing slyly at Nabiki he saw her eyes widen. Looking back he grinned at the incredibly beautiful mermaid that was curled up on the sofa next to him, her shimmering golden tail wrapped around her body. Putting one webbed hand on his knee, she smiled prettily at him. "OK, you have one good one."

"Good god," Nabiki managed, staring wide-eyed. The mermaid, who she was having trouble
remembering was actually her elder sister, grinned at her, flipping her long green hair over her shoulder with a toss of her head, before shimmering back into Kasumi. "Blow their minds indeed. Un-fucking-believable." Kasumi nodded in acknowledgement of the praise. "I can't get over how amazingly convincing it looks. There's absolutely no indication that it's not real."

"It's a very effective spell," Ranma said with a nod. "I'm still improving it, as is Kas. To be honest, by now it's closer to a shape-shift than an illusion in some ways. It's not really real, but for most purposes you can treat it as such. Sensory feedback is pretty much perfect, all the kinaesthetics work well, and so on. When it's active you really do get most if not all of the physical sensations of the illusory body."

"What about the extra mass? I mean, 'Shin' was at least twice your size, and the centaur probably weighed two or three times that." Nabiki was thinking about how it could possibly work. Ranma shrugged.

"You tell me. It works a lot like the Jusenkyo curse in that respect. We copied some of the, um, programming I guess, from it. That was about the only bit Kas and I could make heads or tails of other than the trigger. You wouldn't believe how complex it is. But I don't really know how it works, just what it does." He shifted to female. "I weigh about twenty kilos less like this than I do as a male. It's completely real. Even though I weigh more than I should do, because my bone and muscle density is much higher than most people's, I still lose mass when I turn female." Changing back to male, he went on, "And I get it back when I become male again. But where it goes or comes from is something I still can't figure out. We could copy it, though."

"So, when you do that spell for most purposes you really become the thing you're pretending to be?"

"Kind of. It feels, looks, and measures real, as far as I can tell. But it's not stable. As soon as you stop powering it the spell evaporates and you're back where you started, which proves it's not a real change. The Jusenkyo change is real, and completely stable aside from the water trigger. It's a biologically complete change in every way. Only the mind stays the same. Genetically, when I'm female it's as if I was born that way, and likewise for male. The illusion spell doesn't go to that level of detail. Whether it could be made to do so I don't know."

"Very weird. Magic is extremely strange." He nodded with a smile.

"Oh, yes. It is that, all right. But very useful as well." After a moment's thought, he added, "Sometimes the mass thing worries me. Kasumi mentioned it years ago, I'd never really thought about it until then, but she's right. That's the weirdest part. The worrying thing is that if you work out how much energy twenty kilos of mass represents, it's a lot. I mean, an absolutely huge amount. Hundreds of megatons worth in explosion terms. If it was really converting mass to energy and back again, the possibility of a... slip-up... don't bear thinking about. Tokyo would disappear completely." They all thought about that with uneasy expressions.

"That's pretty scary," Nabiki said slowly. He nodded.

"Damn right. But I'm pretty sure that it's not working like that. I think it's pulling the mass from somewhere, then putting it back when it's not needed, but where from I have no idea." With a shrug, he added, "Magic does all sorts of weird things that no one seems to have a good answer for. Quite a few spells should only work with completely preposterous amounts of energy, the Jusenkyo curse is just out the far end of that curve. Since they clearly don't need anything even remotely approaching that amount of energy, it must do something else." He grinned a little. "But it's a good question to raise if you want to make a mage go pale. Most of them have never thought about it. When they do, they really don't like it."
He watched her as she laughed. With a slight smile he glanced at his wife, who had been listening with interest. Raising his eyebrows he flicked his eyes at her sister. She followed his gaze and frowned slightly, then gave him a small nod. Nabiki hadn't noticed. Turning his attention back to her he suddenly got a mischievous smile, as did Kasumi. "What?" Nabiki asked, coughing slightly as her voice squeaked. Their grins grew wider in eerie synchronism. She looked at them questioningly until something made her look down. "Holy crap!" she shrieked. Jumping to her feet, stumbling a little, she stared, stunned at the odd sensations. Lifting one leg she looked at the hoof it now ended in. Blue scales covered her legs under the tight black leather. "Gahh! What did you do?" She became aware that her voice sounded completely wrong. Running to the nearest mirror, which was in the main bathroom, she heard and felt the odd sensations of hooves on tile.

Staring back at her was the face of Ranma's demon alter ego, Zythra'a. She looked at it in appalled amazement, opening and closing her mouth and blinking her eyes. Sticking out her tongue she saw it was much too long and also forked. " Fucking hell, this is weird," she said in a voice that wasn't her own. Walking slowly back to the living room she stopped and glared at her sister and brother in law, who were rolling around on the sofa laughing their guts out. " Funny. Very funny indeed. You idiots." She sat again, lifting one leg over the other and feeling the hoof on the end of it curiously. The sensations were completely convincing. "You scared the crap out of me." She ran her hand over the scales on her shin. "This is the weirdest thing I've ever experienced."

Ranma looked at her expression and exploded in renewed laughter. Kasumi was leaning against him giggling uncontrollably. She sat and glared at them with her arms folded until they recovered a little, tapping the talons on the end of her fingers against her elbow. "All done?" They nodded, still chortling. "OK. Can you undo this, please?"

With a grin, Ranma said, "But it suits you, Nabs. Think how you could scare people into doing what you want." She sighed deeply.

"You, Saotome, are a first-class nutcase." He nodded contentedly. She noticed suddenly that she was back to normal. "Thank you. And don't call me Nabs."

"Well? What do you think?" Kasumi finally stopped giggling although her voice was rich with amusement. Nabiki looked at her.

"You are also a nutcase, sis. I don't know which one of you is worse." She thought about it. "I think you could drive someone completely crazy with that little trick, if they didn't know about it. It's damn disconcerting even if you do know about it. But, yes, I admit it's pretty impressive. I could feel everything as if it was real. That's got to be the strangest thing ever." She looked at Ranma. "I suddenly have a lot more insight into what you must have gone through all those years. At least this you can turn on and off with a thought. It must have been difficult when you couldn't." He nodded soberly.

"It wasn't easy. Luckily, you can get used to pretty much anything given enough time. And the right person to help." Putting his arm around his still smiling wife he held her close.
Chapter 18

Finishing off his coffee, Ranma jumped to his feet. "Come on, let's go and do something. I'm getting bored sitting around inside. We've got nearly three and half hours to fill, let's go and wander around outside for a while. Why don't we show you some more of the neighbourhood?" Nabiki looked at him with some exasperation. He seemed rather more full of beans than she expected for a weekend.

"Oh, why not." Standing she looked around for her jacket. Kasumi glanced at her husband, who was peering out the balcony doors at the ground, then smiled. Getting up she disappeared into their bedroom, returning a couple of minutes later as Chou, wearing her grey silk clothing and carrying a small nylon bag. Ranma turned to inspect her, then grinned.

"Good idea. We haven't checked out the area for a couple of days. Clothes for later in the bag?" She nodded.

"Yes, in case we don't get around to coming back, we can change somewhere else. Unless you just want illusory ones."

"No, may as well have the real thing, there wasn't any point in buying them otherwise." He went towards the bedroom himself, his male form melting away into a female one that became Yori before he entered the room. Nabiki watched with amusement.

"You two make all this look completely natural, but it's so incredible. Most people would find it very difficult to believe." Her sister raised an eyebrow, casually flipping her bag into nothingness. Nabiki grinned. "Like that. Do you have any idea how insane that looks? You just made something vanish, for real. But you treat it like you were putting a pair of socks in the drawer." Kasumi giggled.

"I know. Sometimes I find myself thinking this all can't possibly be real. I'm so glad it is." Walking over to her younger sibling she gave her a quick hug. "And I'm glad you can share it with us now. But I'm a little upset you haven't visited more often."

"Sis, you know I wanted too, but what with Akane, my university studies, and basically life in general, it's been impossible. Hopefully things will improve soon." The older woman looked understanding.

"I hope so. It's very nice having you around." Ranma rejoined them in her black silk with the blue stripe. Flipping her long braid over her shoulder having finished adjusting the blue bow Nabiki had seen the last time, she grinned. That expression on the face of her Yori persona was a little worrying, promising a certain amount of potential mayhem.

Nabiki inspected her with interest. "You fixed the clothes, sis?" she asked. There was no trace of the place where it had been torn by the monster the last time. Kasumi nodded.

"Yes, although we each have two or three sets of these." She giggled again. "I like sewing, and Ranma does tend to be hard on her clothes." Her husband looked embarrassed.

"Do you ever go out as a man, then?" Nabiki asked, raising her eyebrows. "Every time I've seen you outside this building you've been female." Ranma laughed.

"Yes, it does seem that way. I do go out as a male, but I have to admit not that much at the moment. I'm attending university as a woman as you know, which accounts for a lot of my day, and Yori
takes up quite a lot of the rest, at least in the last few months. What with these demon attacks or whatever they are, and having to deal with various oddly dressed idiots prancing around the place breaking things, I've been either Maiko or Yori almost all the time I've been out for weeks." She shrugged slightly. "Not really much of an issue, it's just what's happening right now. It will probably calm down sooner or later. These things seem to go in waves."

Glancing towards the balcony doors for a moment, Nabiki looked back to the black-haired woman and asked with a grin, "Planning on jumping off the balcony again? Or are you going to use the front door like a real person."

"I think, just to make you happy, we can go out the front door." Appearing amused Ranma pulled out a familiar bracelet. "But I think we'll be invisible. And you should put this on, it's probably not a good idea to associate Nabiki Tendo with Yori and Chou as well as Rika and Maiko." With an understanding nod Nabiki slipped the bracelet over her wrist, then held it out to be activated.

"This thing really is very useful," she noted, looking at it once more.

"Very much so. And no, you still can't keep it." The brunette looked both amused and disappointed once more. Laughing, Ranma led the way to the door to the hall. "Remember, outside it's Yori and Chou, OK?"

"I know."

"Just checking." They smiled at each other while Kasumi laughed. After stepping out of the elevator, Ranma stopped her sister-in-law. "OK, I'll cover you with my cloak. Stay close, no more than about a metre away, until I tell you, all right?" She nodded with slight trepidation, stepping closer. Noticing the black-haired girl grinned. "Don't worry, you won't feel it, but it produces a slightly odd change in the light. Ready?" A second later the ambient light did indeed change, darkening a little and changing in colour in a way that was very hard to pin down. Following the other woman from immediately behind she stepped out the main door. Quickly looking back she couldn't see any sign of her sister, just the door swinging closed.

'Very strange indeed,' she thought to herself as the pair of them walked down the street, the small number of pedestrians in the area looking right through them. 'Yori' occasionally stepped to the side to avoid someone coming directly at them, which made her have to be quick on her feet to stay close enough. After a couple of minutes they stepped into a narrow alley between two buildings and the light suddenly returned to normal. She looked around to see her sister fade into view behind them.

"That's an odd experience," she said. 'Yori' grinned.

"I know. You don't have to be completely quiet, by the way, it covers sounds as well, at least to a point. If you started screaming and shouting someone might hear something, but not much otherwise." She looked towards the street. "OK, we may as well head for the shopping area, see if anything interesting is going on. I want to talk to a couple of people in a bar there anyway." The three women walked back down the alley, emerging onto the residential road and turning left. As they walked 'Chou' pointed out sights of interest and gave her sister some of the history of the region.

Entering the more commercial part of the area they walked along a side street heading for the entertainment district. This section of Minato ward was set up a lot like a small town, within the larger city area, itself a part of the greater Tokyo metropolis. Very similar to Furinkan within Nerima but more affluent, there were a lot of trees and green areas, while the passing vehicles were mostly quite expensive ones like BMWs and other imports, or high end domestic models. Just as
they reached the street along which were many of the bars, restaurants, and nightclubs of the area, most of which hadn't opened yet. 'Yori' swore slightly and shot off across the road, 'Chou' following her almost instantly. It happened so fast that Nabiki had barely noticed what was happening before it was over.

An expensive and shiny bright red open-topped sports car, driven by an obviously well off young man in his mid twenties accompanied by a good-looking young woman who appeared to be a foreigner, perhaps Italian from what she could see of her features, had narrowly missed running over two small children who had been crossing the road. 'Yori' and 'Chou' had grabbed them out of the way just in time and were now kneeling down comforting them as their worried parents ran across the road from the shop they'd all exited moments before. The driver of the car had panic-stopped far too late, having apparently driven through a traffic light that had been in the process of changing from yellow to red at the time, and was now sitting looking simultaneously relieved and annoyed. Nabiki walked over, having checked the passing traffic for more like him, approaching her disguised sister and sister-in-law.

"Are they OK?" she asked, looking at the young boy and girl, who seemed to be about ten or so. Obviously brother and sister, the boy was comforting the girl while looking at the two martial artists with wide eyes. 'Chou' nodded, standing up.

"Yes. Just a little frightened." She turned to glare at the young man in the sports car some fifteen metres further down the road, who noticed and went pale. "No thanks to that idiot. If we hadn't pulled them out of the way he'd have hit both of them." The children's parents ran up and grabbed both their offspring, hugging them with relief before turning to the three women. The man's eyes widened, he clearly knew who they were.

"Thank you so much, Yori, Chou. It's young people like you who make me very pleased to live here," he said, bowing to them both formally. 'Yori' bowed back, as did her wife.

"You're very welcome." She turned to glare at the driver of the car, who looked extremely worried by this point. He was close enough to have heard the names which he obviously recognised. Nabiki saw his lips form the words 'Oh, shit', before he put the car in gear and began to pull away.

"Oh no you don't, you bastard," 'Yori' growled, abruptly moving so fast she practically teleported from her position beside Nabiki to one behind the vehicle. Grabbing the rear of the car with one hand she lifted it clear of the ground effortlessly, making Nabiki's eyes widen slightly and everyone else who was watching stare in amazement. "Turn it off. Now." she said, no strain but considerable irritation in her voice. Looking over his shoulder with numb shock the man stared at her in disbelief. She lifted the car higher and shook it a little. "Now." He obeyed. 'Chou' walked over and reached inside the vehicle, removing the keys and dropping them to the ground. Putting the back end of the vehicle gently back down, 'Yori' moved around to stand beside her wife.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, driving like that? The light was going red. That means STOP!" She yelled the last word. He twitched violently, leaning away, a mix of worry and a kind of arrogant superciliousness on his face.

"It was yellow." She glared at him.

"It was yellow, yes, but that means it's going to go red. And there were two children right in front of you. You nearly hit them, which would have severely injured or even killed them. I don't like people who drive like that, especially around here, especially when it involves small children." He was beginning to look annoyed again.

"Look, I slowed down. They should have got out of the way." 'Yori' studied him with irritation, but
it was 'Chou' who reached out and grabbed him by the shirt, lifting him easily to eye level.

Raising her other hand she slapped him quite hard, then did it again. Continuing to slap him on either cheek, making his face go red as his head jerked from side to side, she began speaking. "OK, think of it like this," she said conversationally, while 'Yori' watched with dark amusement and Nabiki stared, slightly shocked but also rather impressed, "do you want me to slow down, or do you want me to stop?" She kept hitting him, not hard enough to cause damage but more than hard enough to hurt.

"Stop. Stop! Please stop," the man gasped out with a pained and embarrassed tone in his voice. By now there were a couple of dozen people watching, many of whom were grinning. Nabiki noticed that one of the bystanders was a police officer, who was wearing the widest grin of them all. 'Chou' dropped the driver back into his seat, then leaned down.

"Now you understand the difference? Slow down and stop aren't the same thing?" He nodded, frightened and in some pain. His companion was watching him with what had become mild contempt from the shock and fright of earlier. "So, next time, when you see a yellow light, what do you do?" Nabiki's sister asked curiously.

"I stop," he said, staring at her like a mouse staring at a hungry owl. She nodded, satisfied.

"Good. Please remember this in future." She was very polite but he could see something in her eyes that made him lean away again. The blonde woman stepped back to stand beside her husband. 'Yori' looked proud and patted her wife on the shoulder. Turning to look at the policeman who was still grinning, she waved to him.

"Corporal Otani? Would you also like to have a word with this person?" The officer walked over while pulling out a notebook. He nodded to both martial artists, then turned to the driver, a professionally blank expression replacing the grin.

"Hello, Sir. Name, please?" Leaving the now very worried driver to the tender mercies of local law enforcement, the two women walked back to Nabiki, who was standing beside the children and their parents. A ripple of applause went through the crowd, some of whom came over to briefly talk to either 'Yori' or 'Chou'. A minute or so later they dispersed and the street life went back to normal, while in the background the driver was being politely given a very hard time by Corporal Otani, who was by this point administering a breath test. The driver's companion had exited the car and was standing on the pavement calling a taxi on her cell-phone while looking at the man with thinly veiled anger.

Nabiki snickered. "That was mean." 'Chou' looked at her mildly.

"Possibly, but it seemed to work." She shook her head. "Driving like that is very irresponsible. It annoys me." Her sister was smiling at her, she'd never have believed the normally very gentle Kasumi to be capable of such things. Finding that she was both gave her a bit of a shock and quite pleased her at the same time. The woman was correct, it was very likely that the man would remember his lesson. Casting a glance in his direction the middle Tendo could see the fellow seemed to be sincerely regretting coming anywhere near the district by now. Corporal Otani appeared to be enjoying himself if his expression was anything to go by. A number of pedestrians were still standing around watching, a couple of them helpfully pointing out that one of the vehicle's rear lights seemed to be broken.

"Say thanks to Yori and Chou, children," said the father, standing with a hand on the shoulder of each of his offspring. They looked up at the two women with interest. The little girl had stopped crying and was staring at both of them with a fascinated expression.
"Thank you Miss Yori. Thank you Miss Chou," they obediently chorused. 'Yori' grinned at them, bowing once more.

"It's our pleasure, kids," she said with a chuckle. 'Chou' smiled warmly at them.

"Remember to look both ways next time, OK?" she asked. They nodded. Turning to their parents she transferred the smile to them, amusing Nabiki with how they seemed to almost fall in love with her. "You have lovely children." Glancing at her husband, she added, "We have to go now, but it was nice meeting you." The two martial artists nodded politely and resumed their travels, Nabiki walking alongside her sister. Behind them the family watched for a moment with pleased expressions before going about their business.

When they were safely away, Nabiki said quietly, "You certainly know how to make a good impression by the looks of it. Do you know all the names of the local cops?" 'Yori' grinned with a nod.

"Pretty much. Over the last couple of years we've bumped into most of them at one point or another. At first they were a bit standoffish, some of the magical girl groups are very rude and dismissive to the police. I think that's disrespectful, most of them may not be able to do what we can, but that doesn't make them any less worthy of respect. They do a difficult job for not a huge amount of pay. We both have gone out of our way to be as helpful as we can. Neither one of us wants to steal their thunder."

'Chou' added, "Setting up the reparations fund and helping out in the community seems to have made a generally good impression. As has keeping in the background as much as possible. A lot of that was because we were and still are trying to keep a low profile, but it seems to impress people that we're not making a fuss about what we do. We just try to help. For instance, Yori stopping fights in the nightclubs seems to please the police since they don't have lots of paperwork to deal with, people seldom get hurt much, and they can concentrate on more important things than drunken brawls. The bouncers like it as well, they have less risk."

Curiously Nabiki asked, "Do the police ever actually ask you for help?" 'Yori' nodded again.

"Sometimes. There have been a few incidents where they've call me or both of us in because they ran into something they couldn't easily handle and thought it was the safest thing to do. I suspect they don't mention that to their superiors outside the immediate area, but I may be wrong. Minato is sort of used to young women with strange abilities, and I've certainly noticed that police outside the vicinity seem to have been very helpful and polite recently, when we've had to intervene. Maybe they've had some good reports about us?" Nabiki shook her head in amusement.

"Well, there have been at least two new broadcasts featuring you two on TV recently, the reporters apparently have had some quite nice things to say about your reputations." 'Yori' looked gratified.

"Yes, that's kind of pleasing." She frowned a little. "I'd prefer not to be on the news at all, but it seems difficult to avoid at the moment what with these damn whatevers attacking. If we have to be mentioned I'm certainly happier to have it be in good terms rather than otherwise."

"You'll be having action figures of you sold soon," Nabiki giggled. 'Yori' grinned.

"They've tried. We shut them down. Chou made sure we got all the relevant protections and trademarks on our likenesses, images, all that sort of thing properly registered right at the beginning, just in case. It was a good idea. Our lawyer has had to send several cease and desist letters in the last year." Her sister in law looked at her with raised eyebrows.
"You really did think of everything." She snickered. "Bit of a pity, though. I could give Akane a Chou action figure for Christmas, or maybe a Yori one. She likes collecting magical girl stuff. And it would be very funny, she'd never know the big joke." 'Yori' burst out laughing. 'Chou' looked slightly disapproving.

"That's not very nice, Nabiki. You shouldn't make fun of your sister like that." After a few more steps she smiled a little. "But, if you really want to, I do have a few dolls of us that one local company made but never sold before we stopped them a few months ago. They were handed over in return for us not taking it any further. You can have a couple." Nabiki nearly stumbled on the pavement, staring at her sister with surprise.

"Really?" She laughed. "Yes, please. That would be great." After a moment's thought, she added slyly, "Shampoo might like a set as well." 'Yori' began giggling helplessly. "Are they any good?" the middle sister asked. Her disguised sibling looked amused.

"Actually, yes, they're very high quality. If we ever decided to let commercial production start on that sort of thing I think we'd let them do it, their product was much better than anybody else could produce."

The three carried on walking, stopping at a few places for either 'Yori' or 'Chou' to have words with various people, including bouncers, shop-keepers, a few more policemen, and the odd passer-by. Nabiki was noticing a common theme of considerable respect and indeed fondness from the various inhabitants of this district towards the two women. It seemed that their reputation was very solidly assured. In return they seemed to know the names of dozens of people from many different walks of life, not to mention things about their lives that made it clear that these were more than just nodding acquaintances. The brunette was very impressed. Her sister and Ranma had obviously integrated themselves into the community pretty well.

There were a couple of other places where they intervened. At one point 'Yori' casually grabbed a purse-snatcher as he ran past after exercising his trade, almost without looking. She picked him up by the back of his coat and carried him along the road like a struggling item of luggage, apparently not noticing his ineffective attempts to escape, relieving him of the purse and handing it back to the older woman who he'd stolen it from. Stopping to talk to her briefly, she shook the minor criminal until his teeth rattled and he stopped wriggling. After making sure the woman was otherwise unhurt she bid her a cheery farewell, then carried on towards a pair of police officers who watched her approach with amusement having seen much of the small drama. Greeting them by name she handed over her captive who glared at her, until she gave him a dark look that made him immediately hide behind one of the officers. They smirked and placed him under arrest which for some odd reason seemed to make him feel relieved.

Grinning, Nabiki watch all this with extreme amusement. Half an hour later 'Chou' suddenly stopped recounting a story she had been telling her sister, staring at a three story scaffolding array that was against the front of a building a little further along the road. Looking at her curiously Nabiki wondered what she'd noticed. Following her sister's gaze she sucked in a breath as she saw one of the workers on the top of the scaffolding teetering on the edge, waving his arms, obviously having overreached himself and on the verge of falling. Her currently blonde sister dashed off at high speed, leaping some six or seven metres into the air to land gracefully on the scaffolding beside the man then grabbing him in one hand and the metal structure with the other. The man, who outweighed her by at least twice stopped his imminent plunge as if he'd been nailed in place. Carefully easing him back onto the wooden boards laid over the framework she waited until he'd re-established his balance, then talked to him for a moment.

He stared at her wide-eyed for a few seconds, obviously shocked and scared, then suddenly hugged
her. His two colleagues who had seen him about to fall but were too far away to have done anything walked carefully along the scaffolding and thanked her as well. Shaking their hands, she stepped off the edge of the scaffolding and dropped lightly to the ground where her female husband and sister were waiting, looking up at her. The men watched with open surprise mixed with respect. Waving up at them, she rejoined her companions. Nabiki gaped a little. While she had become accustomed, years ago, to seeing Ranma casually jump on and off two or three story buildings as if they were a low kerb, watching her elder sister do it was something entirely different. Even with the memories of the first, and hopefully last, roof-hopping trip through the night, seeing it in broad daylight was impressive.

"Holy crap. That was... pretty damn amazing, sis." 'Chou' smiled at her, her eyes twinkling.

"Thanks. It's fun as well." They moved along, heading in a direction that would take them back to the apartment building in twenty minutes or so.

"Do you have this much excitement every time you come out?" her sister asked. The blonde woman shook her head with a smile.

"Not all the time, but it's surprising how many things can go wrong in a busy area like this. There are thousands of people out in the streets, sometimes they have accidents. It was just luck I spotted that poor man in time." 'Yori' snickered.

"My purse snatcher must have been from out of town. It's pretty safe around here now, I got annoyed at all the petty theft when we first moved in and cracked down quite hard on it. This place doesn't have much crime now. There hasn't been a mugging in over a year, the last guy must have spread some interesting stories when he got out of jail." Her wife gave her a long-suffering look.

"You may have been slightly overenthusiastic with him. Dangling him off the top of the university clock tower by his ankle until he promised to give up a life of crime could possibly be considered excessive." 'Yori' laughed, as did Nabiki.

"Excessive, I don't know, but effective, definitely. He apparently found religion after that. Mind you, carrying him up the outside of the tower might have helped." She shrugged. "It was only about thirty metres. I'd have caught him before he hit the ground even if I had dropped him."

"Did he know that?" 'Yori' glanced at her with a faint smile, while her sister giggled.

"Well... I didn't actually say it." Nabiki giggled again. 'Chou' sighed a little, watching her husband walk along with an affectionate expression. "Anyway, what about the one you caught? You broke both his arms."

"He had a gun. You know I don't like guns. And he fired it at me." Nabiki listened, horrified.

"You caught the bullet, didn't you? Then you made him swallow it. Then you broke both his arms." 'Yori' was grinning widely by now. Nabiki had stopped and was looking at the illusory form of her sister as if she'd never seen her before.

"I healed them up when the police came to take him away." 'Chou' seemed mildly defensive. 'Yori' laughed.

"True, but you waited for half an hour before you called the Sergeant. That guy literally pissed himself you were glaring at him so nastily."

"While you were rolling around on the ground laughing your head off." Her wife crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. Nabiki was moving her gaze between them like someone at a particularly
spirited tennis match.

"It was really funny. Especially when you started growing huge fangs and your eyes were glowing red." 'Chou' smiled a little at the memory.

"He was a nasty little man who gives the Yakuza a bad name. Even they don't like people waving guns around." This statement nearly made her sister choke, unsure whether she should laugh or look appalled. In the end she compromised and did both. 'Chou' looked at her with amusement, realising why. "I know some very nice Yakuza people. They were not at all happy with that horrible person." 'Yori' shrugged, nodding.

"It's true. He got a visit from his 'lawyer' in the police station and then pleaded guilty to an awful lot of crimes. He'll be in jail for years." She smirked. "It meant I didn't have to persuade him to do the right thing myself. The Oyabun was extremely angry."

"You know some very odd people," Nabiki commented, surprised yet again despite herself. Both the other women smiled a little.

"Funny, that's what people tell them. No idea why." 'Yori' chortled at the expression on her sister in law's face as they resumed walking.

"Can you really catch a bullet?" Nabiki asked with awe in her voice. 'Yori' nodded.

"They don't move all that fast, at least from a 9mm hand gun. Hell, I can throw something faster than the muzzle velocity of one of those things. Even Akane could probably catch one if she was ready for it. It would just bounce off Ryoga, he might not even notice. I've hit him a damn sight harder than any bullet could, it's like hitting a half-metre thick armour plate. He's pretty tough." Nabiki listened with amazement.

"Akane could catch a bullet?"

"Probably. She's certainly fast enough when she gets worked up. Coordinated enough, that's more of a problem. Strong enough, definitely." It was something to think about. She had no reason not to believe the martial artist, in fact if anyone would know it would be her.

"What would happen if she missed?" 'Yori' shrugged a little.

"I'm not sure. Something from a pistol would probably hurt like a bastard but I doubt it would do serious damage. While she doesn't have very good ki control, she still has quite a lot of power. Nothing remotely approaching what I have, or Chou, or the ghoul and the pervert. Or Ryoga, for that matter. She's right down the bottom of the scale as far as the usual suspects go, but that's still a hell of a lot more than the average man in the street, or even the average martial artist. Just look at how much trouble the hospital has in putting her down for even a few minutes. To be honest I'm a little surprised that the dart gun works, it wouldn't on most of the others or us." She shook her head.

"Yet more proof she's not been applying herself properly." Nabiki stared, then laughed a little nervously.

"Frankly I'm glad that she hasn't. If she was tougher and still had the problems she has at the moment she'd be damn near unstoppable."

"True." They all looked at each other, thinking about what that would be like, then simultaneously shuddered a bit.
Chapter 19

Arriving near the apartment they ducked into another alley, went invisible, and re-entered the building. Back in the living room both Ranma and her wife reverted to their normal appearances. "Coffee?" Kasumi asked. Both the others nodded.

"It seems that we drink a lot of coffee, you know." Nabiki smiled. Her sister laughed.

"We practically run on it at times." She disappeared into the kitchen while Nabiki and Ranma sat. Looking at each other, they smiled.

"That was fun," Nabiki said, removing the silver bracelet and handing it to her companion who accepted it with a nod of thanks.

"I thought you might enjoy it. Like Kas said, things don't get exciting every time but pretty often there's something interesting going on."

"That bit with the car was hysterical. Kasumi slapping him over and over, while politely asking him questions..." Nabiki shook her head, grinning widely. "I'd never have thought she'd do something like that. You've corrupted my sister." The red-head looked amused.

"It didn't take much effort. In my defence that wasn't the intention, but she took to this wandering martial artist and protector of the community deal like a particularly dangerous duck to water." The brunette Tendo laughed.

"I'm very impressed with how well you seem to fit in around here. There are a lot of people who look like they really respect and like you two." Ranma sighed a little, leaning back and putting her feet on the table.

"I know. It's weird, back in Nerima I did much the same thing, but for some reason there weren't a lot of people who even seemed to notice. Not that I was doing it to be noticed in the first place, but still... It's a little odd." Nabiki studied her.

"You know, I did hear various things about that over the last few years, when I was looking for you guys. I talked to quite a few people, some of whom I now know were your agents," she cast the other woman a dark look which merely caused her to smile slightly, "and there were quite a number of nice things said about you. You may not have had many if any friends other than Kasumi while you were there, but I assure you there were quite a few people who respected you a lot." She giggled for a moment. "Oddly enough, a fair few of them were cops. There were some who knew about your curse, as did a lot of the older people around Furinkan, but most of the rest thought there were two of you, possibly brother and sister." Ranma laughed.

"That much I was aware of. I didn't go out of my way to correct them, mainly because it was either too much work or just too embarrassing."

"I can understand that," Nabiki said with a smile, "but my point is that you were appreciated for the good you did as much as you and the others were considered nuisances for all the damage. In fact you were probably on balance thought more highly of than otherwise, certainly more so than any of the rest. One comment I heard was that you were much more professional in your outlook, you took care to minimise the damage and tried to put a stop to the fights as fast as possible." Ranma appeared both surprised and pleased by this.

"Hmm. Interesting. I wish someone had told me at the time, it would have made me a bit happier."
She shrugged a bit. "Doesn't really matter I suppose, not in the long run." Kasumi returned with coffee for all three, handing out the mugs to each woman. Sitting beside her sister she glanced at her husband.

"Feet, dear." Ranma looked embarrassed and took her feet off the coffee table, while Nabiki snickered.

"Sorry."

"Got her well trained, sis," the middle Tendo said with laughter in her voice. Her sister looked amused and nodded while the red-head shot her a dark look.

"It's mutual. She trained me as a martial artist, I domesticated her and made her fit to live indoors." Nabiki collapsed in laughter. Ranma grunted in mild annoyance and crossed her arms, watching them both as they giggled. Standing she pulled her braid around and removed the blue bow, dropping it on the table.

"I'm going to change and have a quick shower. We'll need to leave pretty soon. Kas, can I have the bag? Or should I pick something else?" Her wife smiled at her, retrieving the bag she'd stashed away earlier in her ki pocket and handing it to the red-head.

"No, I think that outfit is a nice one. Can you put mine on the bed?" Ranma nodded, heading towards the bedroom. Nabiki watched her go then turned to her sister.

"What's the deal with the hair?" she asked curiously. "When I came here the first time, Ranma said it was because she was going out as Yori and it was too much trouble to keep changing it. Does she intend to keep it like that permanently?" Kasumi grinned.

"To be honest I think she's rather fond of it," the older woman said softly. "It's become a signature look for Yori, and Maiko as well. It took some time to grow it so long like that even with some ki based help, she doesn't seem to want to bother again. When she's male he doesn't care around the house, and outside, the illusion spell takes care of it. Since she's spending so much time female at the moment for various reasons, it's just easier to leave it like that." Kasumi giggled a little. "I like braiding it for her. It suits her, I think." Nabiki agreed with a smile.

"I guess it's one more thing to distinguish her from the old Ranma, which is probably a good idea as well. You're right, it does suit her face very well both as Ranma and as Yori." After a seconds thought she asked, "don't you worry about it possibly connecting Yori and Maiko, having identical, pretty unusual hairstyles?" Her sister laughed a bit.

"Funnily enough, some time ago someone did kind of make that connection. She completely threw them off with a very convincing fan-girl act, claiming that she really looked up to Yori and wanted to copy her hairstyle. It was so good that several other students at the university now have the same style, complete with the bow at the end. Some of them are even taking up martial arts." Nabiki stared for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"Oh, god, that's hysterical. Ranma Saotome, fashion trendsetter. I'd never have believed it!" Both sisters were giggling hysterically when Ranma as 'Maiko' came out of the bedroom and looked curiously at them. Nabiki inspected her and grinned.

"Very nice. Who picked out the clothes, you or my sister?" 'Maiko' looked down at herself with a smile.

"It was a joint effort. Neither one of us goes in much for fancy clothes, but sometimes you need to
look good.” She was wearing a silk top in dark blue, contrasting with the new red bow on her braid, held in at the waist by a silver belt that looked like very fine chain mail. A skirt, more of a kilt in some ways, that came to just above the knee, in fine wool dyed a deep indigo that became a few shades lighter towards the bottom moved around her legs as she walked around. Her footwear was a pair of calf-length boots in soft brown leather, which had a two centimetre heel. Overall the effect was a restrained and mature sort of feminine style, one that looked very nice in the middle Tendo’s opinion.

"I think that's the most female-looking clothing I've ever seen you voluntarily wear. A skirt? I never thought I'd see the day." The young woman smiled again.

"I know. Kas took some time persuading me. I don't particularly like skirts or dresses, but I have to admit this one looks pretty nice." She shrugged. "I can live with it. Kas likes it." Her wife nodded with a smile.

"It looks very nice, Ranma. I told you it would. OK, my turn in the shower, then we can leave. Nabiki, do you want to freshen up?" Her sister nodded as well. Both Tendos went off to different bathrooms while Ranma cleared away the coffee cups and tidied the kitchen. When they came back, Nabiki glanced at the dark yellow silk dress Kasumi, or 'Rika', was wearing and laughed.

"I'm starting to feel under-dressed here."

"There's a nice top in my closet you can borrow if you'd like, Nabiki. The dark red one, it should go with the rest of your outfit." The brunette smiled.

"Thanks, sis." She quickly changed, returning to the living room. "Right, I'm ready. Shall we go?"

'Maiko' was on the phone calling for a taxi. Thanking the dispatcher she put it back, then turned to the others. "He'll be outside in about ten minutes." The three left the apartment and went down in the elevator, waiting inside the front door until the taxi arrived. Nabiki looked interested, turning to 'Maiko'.

"You don't bother hiding where you live when you're using this persona?" she asked curiously.

"No. 'Maiko' in on record as living here as is 'Rika'. We need somewhere to get our mail if nothing else. All the other personae have different addresses if they need one at all. We use post office boxes, rented accommodation, that sort of thing."

"What about Yori? Does she get mail?" 'Maiko' smiled.

"Oh, yes, quite a lot of it. Fan mail, offers of marriage, requests for interviews, all sorts of things. They all go to our lawyers, who filter out the worst bits, scan it all, and email it to a secure account. 'Chou' gets at least as much.” Nabiki laughed.

"Offers of marriage? Sounds like you haven't escaped some of the more irritating parts of Neriman life then." The other brunette shook her head with considerable amusement.

"It's nothing like as bad, no one is accosting me in the street and professing their undying love in terrible Shakespearean dialogue.” Nabiki snickered. "And I don't have parents forcing or selling me into engagements left, right, and centre. That part I don't miss at all." She shuddered a little.

"The taxi is here," 'Rika' observed, opening the door and signalling to the driver who pulled over a few metres down the road. They exited the building, 'Maiko' making sure the door closed and locked behind them, then climbed into the taxi. 'Rika' gave the driver, who greeted her by name, the address of the restaurant and they settled back, chatting about inconsequentials. The driver, an
elderly man in his late sixties, glanced in his mirror every now and then, smiling at the three beautiful young women in the back of his car.

Driving down a street Nabiki recognised a couple of minutes into the trip the driver pointed out the scaffolding on which 'Chou' had saved the worker's life earlier. The men were now gone, presumably having finished for the day. "Did you hear? Those two magical girls Yori and Chou were out around here a couple of hours ago, Chou saved a guy from falling off that thing. I heard she jumped right on top of it from the ground and grabbed him just before he fell." The old man shook his head in wonder. "It's incredible what those two can do. I saw the other one, Yori, dealing with both a demon and another magical girl a few months ago, she's unbelievable. I studied Akido and Karate when I was younger, pretty good at it as well, but compared to her and her friend?" He sighed. "Not even close. So far from close it's almost depressing."

"What do you think of them?" Nabiki asked, glancing sidelong at 'Maiko' who was listening with interest while appearing to be watching the scenery go past. The driver laughed.

"You don't live around here, do you, Miss?" he asked. She shook her head.

"No, I'm from Nerima. I'm just here visiting my friends."

"Nerima?" he queried, glancing at her in the mirror. "You're probably used to martial artists all over the place there from what I hear. A friend of mine lived there for years, he said it got pretty wild especially around Furinkan."

"True enough. Not as much now as a few years ago, but yes, it's a fairly weird place."

"I can imagine. Minato is very strange as well. We have so many magical girls running around here it's crazy. The thing you have to understand, though, is that Yori and Chou are different. They're polite, respectful, extremely skilled, and best of all, careful. People really appreciate that. They are honourable people. A lot of the magical girls, they're very hard on the community. Oh yes, they do stop some unpleasant things from happening but they cause a lot of damage in the process." He smiled at her in the mirror. "Sometimes they're worse than the thing they're dealing with. It was like that around here. The girls would take out the big nasty demon, but wreck half a street in the process and ignore everything else."

"So these two, Yori and Chou, they're not like that?" Nabiki probed his opinions partly to amuse herself and the others, partly out of genuine curiosity for what an outside agent would think. The driver laughed again.

"No, not at all. They're even better at dealing with the weirdness than almost all of the other groups, they have a lot of power, but they also have restraint and common sense. Some of these other girls will dive in and use a huge amount of force on something that Yori, for example, will deal with in a few minutes, sometimes just by persuading it to leave." Nabiki feigned surprise.

"What, she talks to them, demons, I mean?"

"Yes. I know it sound strange, even for Minato, but I've heard a lot of stories. Apparently even the demons respect her, assuming they're not terrified of her that is. More than once some monstrosity from another world has come charging into the community, taken one look at her glaring at it, and run away again." He chuckled. "She has a very scary glare." Slowing for a set of traffic lights he looked both ways, then turned left. "She's more than happy to resolve a problem just by talking it out. Violence is usually a last resort. Mind you, with her and Chou, when the violence happens, it happens pretty efficiently. Their fights don't usually last long. They know an awful lot about combat, a lot more than most of the others. Not to mention their magical powers which are very
impressive as well."

Nabiki grinned. The man sounded like he had an almost proprietary interest in them. "Someone told me that Yori doesn't like being called a magical girl." The driver laughed again, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes, I've heard that as well. She likes to think of herself as a martial artist. It's true, she obviously knows more about martial arts than anyone else I've ever seen except for her friend, but with all those powers as well she's as much a magical girl as any of them." He grinned. "Don't say that to her face, though, she tends to shout." Nabiki giggled.

"So I've heard. She was on TV recently shouting at some other magical girls." He nodded, looking amused.

"I saw that. It was hysterical. I almost felt sorry for them, they had no idea what to do except stand there looking worried while she ripped into them. The way she keeps the other groups in line and makes them clear up after themselves is one of the things that people really respect. People in our community are proud of them, they show everyone how it should be done. They're our girls and we like and trust them." Meeting her eyes in the rear-view mirror he seemed to be telling the truth. "One of the things people really do appreciate is that they help out with other things than just some damn demon attack. They've saved lives, like today with Chou and that fellow who nearly fell, crime has dropped like a stone since they arrived, even the police like them. Yori has even gone up a tree after a cat for a little girl once, and I've heard she doesn't like cats at all." Nabiki glanced at 'Maiko' who rolled her eyes with a slight smile.

"They sound like good people."

"They are. Pretty much everyone who lives in the area is happy to have them here." He fell silent, thinking about something with a smile on his face, while competently weaving his way through increasingly heavy traffic as they headed for the waterfront. Nabiki looked at her sister who had been listening with an amused expression, then at 'Maiko', who looked slightly embarrassed. Giggling again she settled in for the rest of the journey. Some twenty minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. "Here you go ladies." The driver turned off the meter, while 'Rika' produced the relevant sum with a generous tip. Handing it over with a smile she opened the door.

"Thank you, Miss Nygaard. Have a nice evening." Once they were all out he waved, then pulled back onto the road. Watching the taxi drive off Nabiki snickered.

"Well, you have at least one fan, you guys. He seems very taken with Yori and Chou. From what he says you have a pretty high community approval rating." 'Maiko' was both amused and pleased.

"It's nice to know that normal people think well of us."

"From what he was saying, and the way he was saying it, it's more than just thinking well of you. He genuinely respects you. Sounds like quite a few people do."

'Rika' smiled. "We've had thank-you letters in the past, but he went into a lot more detail than I've heard before." They entered the restaurant, approaching the Maître-de who greeted them pleasantly.

"Hello, Miss Nygaard, Miss Nakahara, it's nice to see you again. Your table is ready, if you'll follow me please?" He led them to a table with a view out over Tokyo bay, seating all three women quickly and efficiently. A waiter was waved over, menus handed out, and he went back to his post. They ordered drinks, 'Maiko' as usual having a soft drink and the other two sharing a bottle of
wine. Nabiki read her menu with interest. The food was indeed a mix of French and Thai cuisine, with many of the dishes apparently a combination. Red curry with escargot caught her eye and she winced. "That's going a little too far, I think," she muttered. 'Maiko' looked over at her, so she pointed it out.

"Umm. No, I think not." The other brunette looked slightly green. Once they had decided on their orders 'Rika' looked around and caught the eye of the waiter who had faded into the background in a very effective way. Once he'd taken their order he bowed slightly and left again.

Looking around at the large room Nabiki raised her eyebrows. "This looks like a very high-end place." 'Rika' smiled.

"It is quite expensive. The food is amazing though, it's well worth it, and the service is first rate. The view is nice as well." The three talked for a while, chatting about their respective university experiences, then came back inevitably to the subject of Akane. The conversation paused while the food was served, but resumed once they were eating. "I'm not happy about what you've told us about the poor girl," 'Rika' commented. "It doesn't sound like she's improving as much as we could hope for. Do you think perhaps a different type of therapy might help?" Nabiki shrugged a little, eating with considerable enjoyment. Her sister was right, the food was remarkably good. She'd have to come back some time. The prices on the menus were high but not unreasonably so.

"I don't know. Probably not. She's pretty set in her ways, as self destructive as they are." She chuckled somewhat unhappily. "Or as destructive to other things as well. I'm glad that's happening at the hospital at the moment, it's given us a chance to get the house fixed up." Pausing for a couple of mouthfuls she chewed with appreciation while thinking. "If we'd been able to get her to this sort of help when she was younger, before it all built up so much, maybe it would have worked better. It still might work, she's only been going for about three or four months now. It might take years."

"How much improvement has there been?" 'Maiko' asked curiously, taking a sip of her lemonade.

"It's difficult to say exactly. I've noticed a difference, and our father says the same thing. But it's not the sort of thing you can put a number to. She doesn't get angry as easily, which is good, but if you do manage to set her off she's as bad as ever." The brunette laughed. "Perhaps I should see if we can get a dart gun for home. Just in case," 'Rika' looked disapproving while 'Maiko' chuckled.

"I think there may be some regulations that would make that a bit difficult," the tall blonde woman said.

"True, I guess. Oh well, it was just a thought." Sighing, Nabiki sipped some wine then refilled her glass and her sister's. "It's so damn frustrating, though. The first few weeks were going very well. Everyone could see an improvement, it was slow but it was there. But then..." She shrugged again. "It just kind of tailed off. Akane is as frustrated as anyone about it, to give her due credit she really does want to overcome this."

"Poor Akane. I wish there was something we could do to help."

"You've already helped a lot. Even giving me the idea, and some insight into how to persuade her to go to therapy in the first place." Nabiki smiled. "The 'yell a lot and don't take no for an answer' technique is a powerful one." 'Maiko' laughed.

"Indeed it is. Please don't use it for evil." They all grinned. After a few more mouthfuls, she said, "I can ask around at the university if anyone there has any ideas on treating severe anger and self-control issues. It's possible that there are some treatments that haven't made it into the mainstream
that would be more effective than what she's having at the moment." Nabiki nodded gratefully.

"Thank you. Anything you can find out would be helpful." She looked thoughtfully at the other woman. "I'm a bit surprised you'd help like that." 'Maiko' raised an eyebrow enquiringly.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, despite what you said about holding grudges, in some ways it sometimes seems you do still have, ah, unresolved feelings I suppose is how people would describe it, towards a lot of the people back home." She smiled at the other woman, adding hastily, "Not that I don't understand why you would. If anyone has the right to feel that way, you do, after what everyone did to you for so long." She looked at her sister for a moment. "Both of you." 'Maiko' laughed gently.

"Oh, I have feelings, all right." She was silent for a moment while the other two glanced at each other then back to her. "It's..." she trailed off, trying to think how to explain it. "I don't think it's a grudge, not like you mean. More a hearty dislike based on experience. I don't really wish any of them ill, not any more. I did for a while but I came to realise, with some help," she glanced at her wife with a smile, "that there was no real reason for it any more. Both of us have moved on, there really isn't much any of them can do to us any more. We both took control of our own lives back, and intend to keep it." She paused for a drink of lemonade. "Ryoga, as the obvious example, does hold a grudge in the true sense of the word. He is completely obsessive in his pursuit of revenge for any slights he rightly or wrongly believes I did to him. That obsession has ruined his life. His curse, a lot of the problems he had before we left, and what happened when Akane found out, all of that can be put down to him coming after me regardless of how stupid it was."

She shook her head sadly. "He's a pretty intelligent guy, a remarkably good mostly self-taught martial artist, and in many ways an honourable man. But on top of that, he's subject to petty jealousy, sudden anger, attacks of depression, you name it. The depression may be a reason for a lot of the rest, I suppose, but his own actions have more or less destroyed any hope of happiness he could have, at least with Akane. Looking back on it, I certainly didn't help at times, I did some things I now regret to him, but in my own defence quite a lot of those were in retaliation for something he did to me. Childish, but we were children." Nabiki listened, remembering some of what the woman was talking about. She'd seen enough of the interactions between the two to know it was basically true.

Ranma had always tended to fall into the trap of ego, especially when confronted by Ryoga, but it was a two-way street. The part time pig had a massive ego of his own, in most respects far bigger than Ranma had as a teenager and for less reason. He'd certainly done some very dishonourable things to the martial artist, many of them revolving around the youngest Tendo girl with whom he was completely obsessed. Using Ranma's own sense of honour against him so many times was a particularly petty thing to do. She wasn't sorry that the guy had finally got the crap kicked out of him, in her opinion he had richly deserved it, but she was sorry for the effect it had had on her sister.

'Maiko' continued, "I don't hate him, even after what he did, but I don't particularly like him as a person. I'll admit that he helped me several times when it was really needed, and for that I'm grateful, but I'm also in no hurry to see him again. The same is true of most of the others. Akane put me through hell, and although I really did love her for a while, that's long dead. I don't want to see her hurt, even so. If we can help her I'm more than happy to do so, even if I don't want to meet her again. The same goes for most of the others. Pop is after all my father and the whole reason I'm a martial artist in the first place, but there's no denying the fact that he's not a good person. I love him as a father, but don't like him as a man, if that makes any sense."
Nabiki nodded slowly, understanding. She had felt similar things about her own father at several
times during her life, for less reason than Ranma had. Loving and liking were certainly not
necessarily synonymous.

"I hope I'm explaining this right. It's not easy to put into words, but it helps me think about it
myself."

"You're making sense." The middle Tendo woman grinned at her sister-in-law. "And a few years
ago I'd never have believed I'd say that about you."

"Ha bloody ha," the other woman said with a smile of her own, as her wife giggled. "And thanks."
She shrugged. "No one is perfect, least of all me. I don't think I'm holding grudges, I certainly try
not to, but there's no getting past the fact that the way people treat you affects the way you feel
about them a long time after the act itself. Quite a few people back there did some pretty shitty
things to me, and while I don't dwell on it, it left me feeling like they were people I didn't want to
see again. And, the nice thing is, I don't have to. I have a life I'm happy with, the best parts of the
old one are still here, the new parts are mostly good, but above everything else no one is pushing
me in a direction I hate." She laughed. "If I was like Ryoga in the grudge-holding area, I'd track
him down and shout, 'Prepare to die, Ryoga Hibiki!' Or challenge Kuno to a sword fight." Nabiki
giggled.

"That I'd pay money to see."

"It wouldn't last long, that's for sure," 'Maiko' said with a grin.

"Do you ever think of going back and seeing the place again? You certainly wouldn't be
recognised." 'Maiko' looked at 'Rika' with a slight smile. Nabiki's sister turned to her.

"As I said the night you found us, we did go back a couple of times. That was about a year after we
left, just to see what had happened. A sort of morbid curiosity mixed with nostalgia, I suppose. We
simply couldn't risk any possibility of direct contact so we watched from a distance. It was mostly
my idea, I wanted to see my family again if only from the outside." She fell silent with a slightly
sad and introspective expression. 'Maiko' looked at her with compassion and picked up the
conversation.

"We've talked about going back again several times since then. When you came, it rekindled a
certain amount of curiosity, I'll admit. We've discussed it, it seems very unlikely that there's any
real risk now, but various things have made it difficult. I think we probably will visit at some point,
though." Nabiki nodded slowly.

"Who would you be going as?" she asked curiously. 'Maiko' grinned, shrugging.

"No idea. We have a lot of choices even with established IDs. Plus we could always make new
ones just for that." A sudden thought struck Nabiki and she looked around with mild worry.

"I just thought of something, is it a good idea to talk about all this stuff in public like this?" 'Maiko'
laughed.

"Took you long enough to think about that." Nabiki frowned, slightly insulted. "No, it's not a
problem. We're both using a very mild form of the cloaking technique, it makes us sort of fade into
the background a little from the point of view of most people. It also screws up listening devices.
It's sort of a habit when we're out. It's something Happosai came up with and showed us, it's much
less power intensive than the invisibility technique. You wouldn't want to be invisible in a
restaurant anyway, you'd never get served!" Nabiki laughed, impressed. "We kind of leave a hole
That's damn useful."

'Maiko' nodded with a smile. "I know. It's not as secure as the invisibility method but we can keep it going without even thinking about it. No one is going to overhear us unless we want them to or they're so powerful they're otherwise pretty noticeable." Nabiki drank a little wine as she recalled the original thrust of the conversation.

"So, visiting Nerima." 'Rika' smiled at her.

"Who do you think we should go as? And who should we see?"

Her sister looked thoughtful. "Well, you could certainly go as you are and come to the Dojo. I've made no secret of the fact that I have an old friend I visit sometimes, who has a 'significant other' of, um, the same genital grouping." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' looked at each other and burst out laughing at her dry description, as she grinned. "Nodoka isn't completely happy with that lifestyle but to give her credit she tries not to be obvious about it. Father doesn't care, Genma probably wouldn't notice, the one who would most likely be offended is Akane." She sighed. "She's still hung up on 'perversion' in sexual matters, although not as much as she was. That's about the only good outcome of the therapy, is seems to be slowly overcoming her attitude to those matters in some ways. Not enough to really help, but I guess any change is progress."

'Rika' asked curiously, "Do you still think she's got lesbian feelings?" Nabiki nodded.

"More so than ever. I can't say exactly why, really, it's just sort of an instinct, but I'm pretty sure she's at least bisexual. Not that she'll admit it even to herself. Possibly particularly to herself. She's built up this whole anti-pervert mindset and anything related to sex at all, never mind same-sex relationships, rubs her up the wrong way."

"Maybe she needs to be rubbed up the right way," 'Rika' said with a sly smile, just as Nabiki was raising her glass to her mouth. The ensuing explosion of liquid only barely missed them all. 'Maiko' dissolved into helpless giggling while Nabiki stared in disbelief at her older sister, who looked back at her with a serene expression on her disguised face.

"I can't believe you said that, sis," the brunette said when she'd recovered. She grinned widely. "You have a strange sense of humour." 'Rika' smiled contentedly and sipped her own drink.

"Hmph. You might be right. I don't know, it's out of my field of experience. She certainly needs to face it one way or the other sooner or later. Perhaps if you two came to visit using these personae she could see there's nothing wrong with it." Glancing at her husband 'Rika' raised her eyebrows questioningly. 'Maiko' eventually nodded with a slight sigh.

"Oh, why not. It might be fun to see first hand what we've read about in the reports." Nabiki smiled.

"Any idea when?"

The other two looked at each other. "Um. Probably not for a few weeks, there's quite a lot going on at the moment we need to keep on top of. We'll let you know, and give you at least a weeks notice,
"OK?" The middle sister looked pleased.

"That's fine." She finished the last of her meal, placing the knife and fork across the plate. "This was a good choice, the food here is superb."

"Anyone for dessert?" Maiko finished her own food, then glanced sideways at the menu lying beside her on the table. "They do some fantastic ice cream, they make it here themselves. The chocolate truffle cake is amazing as well." Rika looked at her with an amused look, then turned to her sister.

"You see? A bottomless pit as far as ice cream goes." Nabiki snickered.

"I suppose I still have a little room left. Hand me that thing, I'll have a look."

"Try the poppy-seed ice cream, it's really nice." Maiko passed the menu to her sister-in-law, who opened it to the dessert section and looked through it. Rika finished her dish, nodding to the waiter who came over and began clearing the table. When he finished he politely waited as they decided on dessert. Nabiki ended up going with the suggested ice-cream, curious to know what poppy-seed ice cream looked like. As it turned out, the stuff didn't look very appetising, it was a dark grey mass that looked more like a pile of wood ash than anything else. However, when she tentatively tried it, she stopped in shock, before eagerly scooping up a larger amount. "Told you," Maiko said with a grin, eating some of her own. Rika had opted for a cherry cheesecake instead, but watched her sister with satisfaction.

"This is amazing," Nabiki nearly moaned, quickly finishing off her dessert then looking at the empty bowl with disappointment. She was debating ordering some more, it was so nice, but decided in the end that the extra calories probably weren't a wildly good idea.

"I know. I've never seen it anywhere else, it's their own recipe apparently." Carefully scraping the bottom of her bowl with her spoon Maiko managed to get a tiny amount more, licking the implement with satisfaction and regret.

They ordered a coffee each and talked for a while, before finishing up. Looking at her watch Nabiki was somewhat surprised to see they'd been in the restaurant for nearly three hours. As Maiko settled the bill she turned to her sister. "Thanks, sis. This has been a very nice evening, and I've found a new place to come back to." She caught a glimpse of the total as her sister-in-law pulled out a credit card and winced. "But not very often." Rika smiled.

"I did say it wasn't particularly cheap. The food is worth the price though." As they left the Maître-de politely thanked them for the business and hoped they would return. The two disguised martial artists thanked him in turn and promised to come back soon. Outside, Maiko looked at Nabiki.

"So, do you want to do anything else now, or just go back?"

"What else can we do?" the brunette asked.

"Well, it's about ten now, there's a big multiplex cinema a couple of kilometres that way, we could catch a movie, or go to a club there. Or just wander around the shopping area, some of the shops are still open now." As she spoke they were slowly walking along the road in the direction she'd initially indicated. The area they were in was fairly commercial but in a quite up-market manner, expensive cars moving slowly along the road and quite a number of people going into and coming out of various restaurants and bars. "Or we could..." She trailed off, looking across the road.

"We could?" prompted Nabiki, turning to look at the other woman while wondering why she had
stopped speaking. She saw that both of her companions were now staring across the road and had ceased walking. Following their gaze she tried to work out what they were looking at.

"Damn. It never stops, does it?" 'Maiko' sounded a bit grumpy. Nabiki finally spotted what she was looking at, there was a small store on the other side of the road through the window of which she could see two men obviously robbing the place, one of them threatening the young man behind the counter with what looked for all the world like a machete, while the other one was leaning over and pulling bundles of Yen notes out of the cash register. Sighing, she looked both ways before starting across the road, followed by the other two. Walking into a service alley that ran down the side of the block of buildings that the shop was on, she handed Nabiki the disguise bracelet once more. "Just in case. Stay back, I'll deal with those two idiots." She shimmered and changed into her 'Yori' persona complete with distinctive clothing while looking annoyed, which on the face of the black-haired girl became quite an intimidating expression. 'Rika' became 'Chou' as well but stayed with her sister as the other woman stomped off down the alley radiating irritation. Curious, after a few seconds Nabiki followed at a safe distance. 'Chou' rolled her eyes a little, bringing up the rear. "We can never just go out and have a nice relaxing evening without someone being a nuisance." Her sister glanced over her shoulder with a smile.

"Does this sort of thing happen a lot?" The other woman sighed quietly.

"All the time. It's very irritating."

"She could have just let the police handle it," Nabiki suggested. The two shared a glance then giggled. "No, that doesn't seem like it's going to happen, does it?" Rounding the corner they stopped where they could see into the shop, which 'Yori' was just entering.

"OK, you two, drop the blade and lie down with your hands over your heads, please," she said in a voice of command. The two men jumped, startled, then whirled to face her. She snickered a little. "You really should pay attention to your surroundings better than that, especially under the circumstances."

"Who the fuck are you, girl?" the large man with the machete demanded, moving it to threaten her. The clerk took the opportunity to dive for cover, after a wide-eyed stare of recognition at 'Yori'. "I'm Yori. And I asked politely. Well, fairly politely." She smirked. The man waved the huge blade in an intimidating manner while his colleague stepped sideways to get clear, stuffing his loot into his pockets while trying to remember why that name sounded familiar.

"Get out of the way, little girl, before you get hurt." Behind the counter the face of the clerk was visible through the door to the two watching women, who saw him wince a little. Nabiki chuckled darkly. "Whoops."

'Yori' cast the man an evaluating glance, then smiled. "Nope." Holding out her hand she projected half a meter of purple energy blade, making him stare and his associate go white.

"Oh, shit," the other man mumbled, suddenly remembering where he'd heard the name Yori before. Dropping to the floor he lay face down with his hands over the back of his head. His friend shot him a puzzled glance before looking back at the girl with the black braided hair, who he now saw was grinning at him unsettlingly. Were those fangs? Tentatively he reached out with the machete, pointing it at her chest, hoping that the implied threat would make her back off. The grin grew wider, showing that yes, they were indeed fangs. Only little ones, but...
'Yori' flicked her energy blade in a series of blindingly fast movements accompanied by a deep humming noise, then snapped it back into a vertical rest position. Both of them watched as the machete dropped to the tiled floor in about fifty small pieces, none of them larger than a fingernail and all glowing red hot. The handle of the weapon still in the hand of the would-be robber was now shaking gently.

"Ah..." He looked at her, then at the remains of his weapon. Then he slowly put it on the counter, lay down on the floor avoiding the smoking shards of metal and copied his partners position. The clerk stood up and peered over the counter at the two thwarted thieves and the black-haired girl who was looking pleased.

"Well done. Now, please stay there. The police will be along soon to collect you." Making the energy sword vanish and smiling at the young man who was watching her with an expression of awe she asked, "Are you OK?"

"Um, yes, thank you." The man continued to stare, then haltingly asked, "Um, Miss Yori? Could I have your autograph?" Outside, Nabiki giggled, while 'Chou' sighed again.

"Every time someone asks her that her ego gets a bit larger." Nabiki had to lean against the building she was giggling so hard now.

"Don't people ask you for yours?" Her sister smiled.

"Oh my, yes. All the time."

"And that doesn't affect your ego?" The disguised Kasumi grinned.

"Of course not." Her sister shook her head in amused disbelief.

"Right. I believe you, of course."

'Yori' signed the notebook that the clerk handed her with a smile, giving it back to him. "You should call the police now. These two aren't going anywhere. Are you?" She asked the question in a hard voice, and was answered by a pair of muffled replies.

"No, Ma'am. We're staying right here," the man who had been filling his pockets said with vehemence. His friend reiterated the sentiment.

"Good. Please try to find a line of work that's less antisocial when you get out of jail."

"Yes, Ma'am." They both nodded into the floor. Waving to the clerk she walked out the door and rejoined her friend and wife.

"Right. Where were we? Oh yes, movie, club, or home?" They headed back to the alley where both the martial artists resumed their 'civilian' personae, then headed off down the alley to exit from the other end. Nabiki laughed.

"Just a routine robbery foiling, hmm?" 'Maiko' grinned.

"Yes, nothing at all interesting."

"You don't have to sound so disappointed, dear," 'Rika' commented with amusement. Her husband shrugged slightly.

"If someone is going to intrude on my night out I don't think it's unreasonable for them to at least be
"You didn't have to get involved, you know," Nabiki said with a raised eyebrow. Her sister-in-law laughed a little.

"I couldn't just let it pass, unfortunately. Martial artists oath, and all that."

The middle Tendo looked at her with a grin. "What about a magical girl's oath? Do they have one?" 'Maiko' cast a look of mild exasperation at her.

"I'm not a magical girl," she replied, sounding slightly vexed.

"Oh, yes, you are."

"Oh, no, I'm not."

'Rika' was walking along giggling to herself as they argued.

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

In the end they saw a movie.
Chapter 20

As the taxi pulled up at the apartment building 'Rika' nudged her sister who was more than half-asleep, leaning against her and occasionally mumbling to herself. "Nabiki. We're home." The younger woman jolted awake, licking her lips and looking around. 'Maiko' grinned at her and she smiled back tiredly.

"Good. I could do with some real sleep." They climbed out of the taxi, 'Rika' opening the door while 'Maiko' paid the driver, thanking him and waving as he drove off. This one had been a somewhat younger man who had stayed quiet the entire trip, only speaking to ask for their destination. As they ascended in the elevator Nabiki nearly fell asleep again leaning against the wall. Reverting to her normal appearance Kasumi supported her as they walked to the apartment door, Ranma also dropping her disguise and opening it.

"We should have come home after the movie," the middle sister said with a huge yawn, "the club as well was a bit too much." She felt distinctly tipsy, she'd had three beers as well as the wine from dinner. Waving vaguely to her sister and sister's female husband she stumbled into her bedroom and collapsed on the bed, almost too tired to get undressed. Within thirty seconds the other two could hear snores coming from the room. Kasumi smiled at her husband.

"I think she had a good time. I certainly did." Ranma nodded, also yawning widely.

"So did I, but she's right, it's been a long night." Giggling slightly as a particularly loud snore came from Nabiki, her sister gently pulled the door shut then led the red-head to bed by the hand.

Awakening to a sunny morning Nabiki rolled over and opened her eyes, squawking in pain at the horrible sensation of daylight. "Agh! It burns!" Trying again after a few seconds she blinked ferociously, her eyes streaming. "God. That was much too much. Much, much too much." Mumbling to herself she sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes and yawning. Eventually she felt human enough to get up, stumbling towards the nearest bathroom, muttering something incomprehensible to her sister who was coming out of the kitchen in her black practice silks. Almost without thinking she accepted the mug of coffee that was held out wordlessly, staggering off to her morning ablutions while drinking it. Kasumi watched with a smile then headed towards the practice room.

After a long shower, feeling much closer to human, Nabiki came out of the bathroom combing her hair. Hearing noises from the practice room she went in to watch Ranma and Kasumi spar with a smile. Ranma, male again, turned his head to grin at her. "Feeling better?" he asked, fending off a kick from his wife without looking. His sister-in-law nodded.

"Yes, still a bit tired, but it'll pass. Thanks for the night out, it was nice. I don't get out much at the moment."

"You're more than welcome, Kas, that's better, but you're still slightly off centre on that move. More like this." He spun and lashed out with his foot, halting the devastating kick less than a centimetre from his wife's face. She nodded while Nabiki winced, wide-eyed.

"I see. I think I know where I'm going wrong." Stepping back slightly she tried again. Her sister watched in amazement as she also stopped the kick, even closer to her husbands face than he had come to hers. Grinning, she asked, "How was that?" He smiled, moving her foot to one side with a fingertip so he could see her.
"Good. Quick and clean." Lowering her foot to the ground from where she had been effortlessly holding it she looked pleased.

"Wow." Nabiki shook her head. "Just... Wow. You two are pretty damn impressive." Kasumi shared a glance with Ranma then they both bowed a little.

"Thank you," they chorused.

"And you're both nuts." With a grin the younger Tendo sister walked over to the middle window, looking out at the park, then turning to glance at Kasumi as she joined her. "Do you guys ever use martial arts, the purely physical stuff, against anyone? All I've seen so far is basically advanced ki stuff, that looks more like magic than anything else." Kasumi smiled.

"Oh, we do have to hit things fairly often, but we try not to. The petty criminals usually give up after a demonstration of force, or simply run. The nastier demons you pretty much have to go in hard right from the start, they don't listen to reason. That usually means an energy attack. Everything else you try to talk down first. It's surprising how often that works." Ranma came over and stood next to his wife.

"That's where most of the magical girls go wrong. They never talk to anything, they just pile in with the heavy attacks, but usually escalate steadily. No real judgement of the opposition's strengths and weaknesses. They should either start very softly and talk it out, or if that's obviously not going to work go for the kill immediately, not fool around with lesser attacks. Most of the time the first approach works very well. I'd rather talk my way out of a confrontation if possible, but if not, finish it as fast as I can. There's less risk to bystanders like that. And us. We're not invincible, just very, very good."

Kasumi added, "Ranma has also had to avoid using most of his signature attacks since we left, or disguise them as something else. They're too memorable. Creating a tornado in the middle of Minato, aside from the damage it would cause, would get back to the Amazons. Most of the ki stuff can be made to look like a magical attack by changing the colour, or something along those lines."

"To be honest, a lot of it isn't strictly speaking ki any more, not completely at any rate. There's a lot of this magic or whatever it is mixed in even with the simpler stuff. The power signature is completely different, I doubt even Cologne would recognise it now." Ranma grinned. "I think she'd be very surprised indeed if she knew what I could do, and probably fall off her stick if she had any idea at all about Kas." Nabiki laughed, picturing it.

"You know, years ago I mentioned that attack you came up with, the one you saved Kasumi with. She refused to discuss it and got the weirdest look on her face. I think she was actually scared." She shook her head wonderingly. "I've never seen the old girl look like that before or since."

"Ha. I wish I could have seen that." Ranma grinned. "I tried for years to get any real rise out of her without a lot of luck. She's just too old and experienced."

Nabiki looked at him with interest. "You almost make it sound like you respect her." With a slight laugh he nodded.

"In a way I do. She knows an awful lot about martial arts, magic, ki use, all sorts of interesting things. If everything didn't come with strings attached I'd have really enjoyed learning from her. I did enjoy learning from her, even as frustrating as she was at the best of times. But there was always this whole 'Future son-in-law', marrying Shampoo thing hanging over every interaction we had. Even when she didn't say it, we both knew what she wanted." The martial artist shook his
head with a tired sigh. "It's a shame. Under different circumstances I'd have loved to learn everything she was willing to teach. I'd have like being friends with Shampoo, and even Mousse, I think, as well. They're both fine warriors, honourable people in many ways, but so inflexible in their goals..." He sighed again. "No, I'm afraid that there was no way that was ever going to end in a way that didn't make me very unhappy, or dead." Nabiki looked surprised.

"Dead?"

"Oh, yes. Mousse did on more than one occasion sincerely try to kill me. Much harder than Ryoga did. Shampoo, in the early days when she didn't know about my curse, was damn serious as well. If I hadn't been as good as I was then I'd probably have been killed." Both women looked at him sympathetically, Nabiki with considerable shock as well. She'd never really understood that all the cries of 'Die, Ranma!' were actually serious.

"Do you think they still feel that way?" she asked curiously. He turned away from the window and walked back into the middle of the room, slowly beginning a complex kata, while thinking about his answer. Kasumi joined him wordlessly, listening.

"I'm not sure," he said after a few seconds. "Shampoo was much more interested in marrying me, although I think it wouldn't have been beyond the bounds of possibility that she might have thought that if she couldn't have me, no one could. She'd be far more likely to go after Kasumi, I think, not that it would turn out well for her if she did, but..." He worked a shrug into the movements. "I think she did, possibly still does, think she loves me, but it's kind of a selfish sort of love. Since I haven't seen her in nearly four years, I don't know whether she's changed." He thought some more while Nabiki waited. "Mousse, from what you've said and our 'agents' have reported," he smiled at this, "is just as hung up on Shampoo now as he ever was. If he thought she was seriously going after someone else I have no real doubt he'd try to remove them as competition. The Amazon way is sort of... direct and simplistic." Nabiki nodded thoughtfully.

"That's true enough. I don't have a lot to do with Mousse, I haven't seen him for over a year. I know Shampoo still gets frustrated with him, while she likes him as a person he drives her nuts when he tries to persuade her to marry him. She really isn't interested. Ironic, really, considering how she behaved to you." The brunette chuckled ruefully. "She could never see the parallels in your situations. I tried bringing it up a couple of times but it was like trying to explain calculus to a saucepan. Total waste of time."

"It's a pity, she always stuck me as quite an intelligent girl," Kasumi said, getting into a position that made Nabiki wince, without the slightest sign of strain. "But completely obsessed. Such a waste of time and effort."

"Ah, well. Not much that can be done about it," her husband said, mirroring the position and giving his sister-in-law an upside-down smile. "Can't change the past. Or, you can try, but it doesn't work very well." Nabiki stared at this. He grinned. "Remind me to tell you about the time travelling mirror sometime."

After a long pause, she repeated, "Time travelling mirror?" in a sort of dazed voice. The martial artist flipped upright and nodded.

"Yep. Damn nuisance, and not very reliable. Time travel is a pain, stay away from it. Some of those magical girls fool around with it sometimes, it never ends well." She stared at him as he grinned quickly, then headed for the kitchen. "Time for breakfast."

"What... Time travelling mirror?" She looked plaintively at her sister who smiled back at her with a slight shrug.
"I know. He's had all sorts of weird adventures."

"But... *Time travelling mirror?*" Following her sister to the living room she went over it in her head, finally deciding that this time she really *didn't* want to know.

After a leisurely breakfast, they went out again for a wander around the neighbourhood, this time without either 'Yori' or 'Chou' doing anything particularly outrageous. 'Yori' talked to a few people as did her wife, mainly greeting acquaintances and chatting for a while. The only bit of martial artistry that broke out was very minor, a snatch and grab thief had the pure bad luck to ply his trade at a market stall that 'Chou' happened to be buying some oranges at, apparently not noticing her. She reached out and poked a couple of pressure points while paying the trader with her other hand, barely looking at the young man who had grabbed a handful of yen notes out of the cash box right in front of her. He dropped to the ground like he been shot, groaning as he went numb from the neck down. Dropping her bag of oranges into ki space she bent over and relieved him of his loot, handing it over to the vendor who thanked her with a smile.

Looking down at the thief she shook her head with a small sigh. "Please try to find something else to do, or practice your thievery somewhere else. You're not very good at it." Nodding to the vendor she rejoined her sister and husband, who were watching from a few metres away with amused expressions. The vendor was beckoning over one of the local cops, who waved to the martial artists before taking a statement from the merchant. The thief was still mumbling to himself as they walked off. "Orange?" 'Chou' asked brightly, pulling three out of nowhere and handing them around. Nabiki shook her head with a smile. Her sister was...different. In a very impressive way.

Back at the apartment a while later she packed her small overnight bag. Going into the living room and sitting down on the sofa, she turned to Ranma who was watching her. "This has been fun. Thank you." He smiled.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. We both had a really nice time, we don't go out socially much either at the moment. I hope you can come back so we can do it again. I know quite a few nice restaurants."

"You and food. I see that much hasn't changed." He nodded with a wide grin, which she matched. Kasumi came out of their bedroom and walked over, holding out a box. "Here." Nabiki took it while her sister sat next to her husband, watching her face as she opened the carton. "As promised." Reaching in and pulling out a thirty centimetre high brightly coloured box with a transparent front, Nabiki stared at the contents visible inside with a growing expression of hilarity.

"Oh, god, this is..." She started laughing. "It's fantastic!" Pulling out another box she inspected it as well, laughing even harder. The first one contained a very professionally manufactured posable doll, about twenty centimetres high, that was easily recognisable as Yori, complete with blue-streaked hair and her signature silk clothing. The work looked to be of a very high quality, just as Kasumi had said. The other box contained, of course, the matching Chou doll, equally as detailed. Reading the text on the side of the box the middle sister nearly had a fit she was giggling so hard. "Magical Girl Yori," she gasped out, "Lifelike replica. Fully moving joints, real silk clothes. Also available, Magical Girl Chou. Collect the set!" Dropping both boxes to the sofa she leaned back and roared with laughter while the other two watched with considerable amusement. Eventually she was able to speak again, picking up the 'Chou' doll in it's box and studying it with a huge grin on her face. "This is so damn funny. And really good work as well." She shook the box a little, hearing something inside rattle.

"That's the accessories," Kasumi said with a grin. Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "An energy sword,
and for Yori, several bows in different colours for her braid." Nabiki started giggling again.

"Thanks, sis. These are amazing. I'm almost wanting one myself now. Akane will love them."

"There's two sets there, one for her and one for Shampoo. Although you could always keep the second set yourself and get her something else." Her sister smiled at her impishly.

"No need. I have access to the real thing." She grinned back. "But the real Yori doesn't seem to have any other colour bows. I'm disappointed." Ranma laughed.

"Hey, I like blue." After a cup of coffee each, Nabiki put the boxed dolls back in the small carton and packed it in her bag. "Would you like me to call Aiko and ask her to teleport you back like last time?" The middle sister considered the offer but declined.

"No, thanks all the same. I'm going to stop off on the way back and do some shopping, I think, I need a new top and some shoes. There's a big mall I go past on the train." Ranma nodded.

"OK. I'll call a taxi." Shortly thereafter she said goodbye to both of them, currently in their 'Maiko' and 'Rika' disguises as they'd come out of the building to wave her goodbye.

"Let me know about a visit, OK?" Both women nodded.

"I will. Take care, Nabiki," 'Rika' said, hugging her sister. 'Maiko' did as well, then she got into the taxi. As it drove off she waved through the back window, then turned to the driver. It was the same older man who had taken them to the restaurant.

"Hello again, Miss. Did you have a good night out?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I did, yes. Very good." Leaning back into the seat she settled in for the trip to the train station, a faint smile on her face. Every time she thought of the dolls she snickered a little.

Arriving home several hours later she walked in the door and sniffed suspiciously. This time there was no odd odour wafting past that might indicate an Akane-based culinary disaster in the making and she relaxed. Taking off her shoes she hung up her coat and went into the living room, dropping her overnight bag and a couple of shopping bags on the table with a sigh of relief, massaging her hand for a moment where the handle of the plastic bags had cut into it. Her younger sister came down the stairs a moment later.

"Hi, Nabiki. Did you have fun with your friends?" She smiled at the younger woman.

"Yes, it was very nice. The restaurant was amazing, then we saw a movie and went to a club for a while. We got back very late, I felt like crap this morning, but it was worth it."

"I'd like to meet your friends one day," Akane said, sitting down. Nabiki sat across from her.

"That's quite likely to happen, actually. I invited them to come and visit Nerima at some point. Both of them are very busy, the university takes up a lot of their time, but they said they'd try to arrange some time to pop over for a day. I think you'll like them." Akane looked interested, then slightly hesitant.

"Um, they're in a, a, relationship, aren't they?" Nabiki nodded. "And they're both... women?" Her sister looked amused.

"Maiko and Rika love each other very much, Akane." The younger woman flushed a little.
"I wasn't being rude, I was just... interested." She seemed to be thinking of something, nibbling her lip, but didn't add to her statement. After a moment Nabiki let it drop.

"Oh, Akane, by the way, you still collect magical girl things, don't you?" The blue-haired young woman looked up, her thoughts momentarily derailed.

"Um, Oh, yes, I do. Why?" Nabiki smiled a little deviously.

"Just checking." The other woman studied her with some suspicion.

"What are you up to, Nabiki?" she asked slowly. Her sister smirked a bit.

"Honest, I was just checking. I'm thinking about Christmas presents, and something I saw caught my eye. I just wanted to make sure it was still appropriate."

"Christmas is still three months away." The younger woman was still looking at her sister with a mildly disbelieving air.

"I know, but I like to get my shopping done early."

"Hmm." Akane looked at her innocent expression through narrowed eyes for a moment longer, then shrugged. "OK."

"When is your next appointment at the hospital?" the older sister asked, changing the subject. The other woman frowned a little.

"Tuesday. It would have been Monday, but there was some... damage... to the room." She looked slightly embarrassed. Nabiki sighed.

"Again? Akane, you have to try to calm down. If nothing else getting shot with a dart gun all the time can't be good for you." Her sister glared, then shrugged.

"It's not like it even works very well," she muttered.

"That's not the point." Slightly frustrated, Nabiki slumped a little trying to come up with something she could say that might help. She was unable to think of anything much. "Just, well, try harder, please?" Akane sighed.

"I do try, 'Biki. I really do. I just can't seem to keep my temper. It's better than it was, but..." She waved one hand helplessly. "No matter what I do, I just kind of snap, sooner or later. I wish I didn't, but I can't help it." Nabiki looked at her younger sister with sympathy. It was obvious that she was being honest about how much she wanted to change, and also, unfortunately, about how hard she was finding it.

"You'll get it sorted out eventually, Akane. I'm sure of that. It's just going to take a while. Keep at it, OK?" The other woman nodded, somewhat depressed, but with a visible effort made herself smile.

"Thanks, 'Biki. I'll do my best."

"I know." They smiled at each other. "Where are the others?" Nabiki asked.

"Auntie Nodoka is out visiting a friend, and Genma and Father are in the Dojo teaching a lesson. I was just going to visit Sayuri, we're going out to see a movie. She just broke up with her boyfriend, again."
"Isn't that something like the third time in the last six months?" Nabiki asked. Akane nodded.

"Yes, I don't know why they have so much trouble. Hiroshi is a nice guy, although when we were at school I'd never have thought that he and Sayuri would get together. But they just seem to keep having arguments. She won't tell me what about." She shrugged. "So we're going out to cheer her up."

"OK. Give my best to her. I've got to go and have a bath, I'm all sweaty from travelling." Akane stood and left, the front door closing shortly afterwards. The older sister took her purchases up to her room, hiding the carton of dolls safely in her closet, where it would stay until she went back to the university.
"Ah, Sergeant, thank you for joining us. Could you close the door, please?" Sergeant Tetsuo Harada did as requested, looking at Captain Uehara, then glancing at the three other people in her office curiously. Two of them, a man and a woman, were obvious foreigners, the other was a Japanese man. "I believe you speak English fluently?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I spend several years in the US at university," he responded, wondering what was going on.

"Good." She switched to that language, turning to her visitors. "This is Sergeant Harada. He will be your liaison and guide while you're here. Sergeant, this is Agent Naito from the PSIA, Lieutenant Harrison from the LAPD in the US," she indicated the man, "and Inspector Deveraux from the RCMP, in Canada, obviously." The woman, a tall and pretty woman in her mid thirties with short dark hair nodded politely. Sergeant Harada greeted all of them, bowing slightly to the intelligence agent and shaking hands with the two police officers. "Lieutenant Harrison and Inspector Deveraux are here on a joint US-Canadian police intelligence operation, following a criminal gang they suspect has ties to an Aum Shinrikyo splinter group and also a small branch of the Yakuza. There have been some... unusual incidents... in both Los Angeles and Toronto, which bear some of the hallmarks of previous attacks by the Aum Shinrikyo group, but with aspects that are a little peculiar." She emphasised the last word, and Harada nodded understandingly.

"You mean magic." Lieutenant Harrison looked irritated and Inspector Deveraux sighed.

"Magic doesn't exist," the American stated flatly. The three Japanese people looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows.

"Hmm. Interesting." Agent Naito studied the man with a guarded expression, but said nothing more for the moment. The RCMP woman was less circumspect.

"Richard, I don't like it any more than you do, but all the evidence is..." He cut her off.

"I don't care. It's all some sort of technical trick, or something like that. I don't know how they did it, but it's not magic. Not real magic." She sighed again. "Laura, we've worked on this for a long time, but I still haven't seen anything that would make me believe in magic."

"How do explain the fact that five suspects vanished from a completely locked room surrounded by over a hundred SWAT men, with absolutely no exits, then?" she asked mildly. "We both looked over that place ourselves. We called in an expert on escapology, x-rayed the entire building, then took it apart. There was absolutely no way out of the place except through the front door, we know that for a fact. We also know they went inside. But when we got in, the only thing we found was a weird diagram on the floor. Where did they go?" He looked both very annoyed and very puzzled, shrugging after several seconds.

"Damned if I know. But we know they've been spotted in Tokyo, so obviously they got out somehow." She started to speak, and he raised a hand to cut her off. "But not by magic."
"Oh, for god's sake..." she mumbled, looking at the PSIA man, who quirked a smile at her for a moment.

"Anyway, Sergeant, we asked your Captain to assign you to us as you have a good relationship with the local, ah, special talent. We will probably need their help." Harada looked at the man with interest.

"I wasn't aware that the PSIA knew much about our girls." Agent Naito smiled.

"Oh, we keep tabs on the comings and goings of most of the specials in Minato. While some of them are a bit of a handful, on the whole we feel they're a valuable asset to the country as a whole. We know quite a lot about what they do, and how many times their help has been essential. A lot more than I suspect most of them realise." The police officer exchanged a glance with his superior, then looked back to the security agent.

"Yori might take exception to that, you know. I assume we are talking about Yori and Chou?" Agent Naito nodded.

"Yes, indeed we are. Of all of them they are by far the most professional, and the ones we have the least information on. They take their security extremely seriously and are exceptionally good at it. Better than our people, to be honest. We have had some dealings with them in the past, they've always come through for us, but we haven't been able to find out much about them. The one thing we do know is that they're very, very dangerous." Harada smiled a little.

"You have no idea, I suspect. Dangerous doesn't even begin to describe it. Most of that type are dangerous, it's basically the job description, they are absolutely lethal. Luckily, they also are some of the most responsible, reliable, and trustworthy people I've ever met." Harrison and Deveraux were looking at each other, wondering what on earth the other two were talking about. Captain Uehara noticed and explained.

"Here in Minato we have a peculiar phenomenon, that to the best of my knowledge is almost unique to us, with the possible exception of the ward of Nerima, and one or two other places in Japan. Have you heard of Magical Girls?" The two visiting police officers exchanged puzzled glances.

"Um, like in the comic books? A sort of Japanese superhero? Always female, dress in skimpy clothing, battle supernatural opponents?" Lieutenant Harrison looked at the three Japanese people with a sceptical and puzzled expression. "My daughter reads some comics like that. It always seemed like an excuse for the artists to draw pretty girls without much on, in my opinion." The Captain smiled.

"That's more or less it." She paused for a moment, then added, "We have rather a lot of them around here."

"Oh, come on! You're telling me that there are teenaged girls in miniskirts jumping around the rooftops battling demons in Tokyo, for real?" He laughed derisively. Inspector Deveraux smiled a little, then both of them noticed that all three of the others looked completely serious.

"Basically, yes." The PSIA agent looked evenly at the LAPD man. "I understand it's a bit odd, but essentially those comics are based on reality. I don't know why it happens here and nowhere else, but I assure you it's real."

"You have to be kidding me," Harrison said, sounding almost like he was pleading to be let in on the joke.
"Sorry, but I'm not. We have magical girls, real ones, and if anything they're even stranger than in
your daughter's comic books. The Sergeant here can introduce you to a couple of them. He can
certainly show you the results of some of their efforts on behalf of the community."

Inspector Deveraux smiled slightly at the weird expression on the face of her American colleague,
quickly stifling it when he glanced at her as if to a bastion of common sense in this strange foreign
land. "So, if you have magical girls, do you have demon attacks as well?" she asked with light
interest. "That's traditionally what they fight, if I have my urban mythology straight." The three
natives nodded. With a sudden shock she realised they were completely serious.

"You've got to be kidding," Harrison said again, almost under his breath. Ignoring him, the Captain
addressed Sergeant Harada.

"Two of the suspects in the LA attack were spotted very close to here a week or so ago. The PSIA
tracked them to an area of about half a square kilometre before the trail went cold. We suspect they
have some magical method of concealment, or are in league with one of our extremely out of town
visitors." He nodded, understanding what she meant. "There was talk about blanketing the area
with our people, but it was felt that this would both alarm the residents unnecessarily and also
probably tip off our little group of nasties. If they move on we could lose them for months, if not
permanently. Someone suggested setting Yori loose on them, and while it was felt that would
probably sort the problem out for good, we'd like to arrest them rather than just have another duck
pond." Harada grinned, while the visitors looked puzzled.

"What we'd like you to do is contact her and Chou, and ask them, politely of course, if they'd mind
helping us track this group down and provide support if it goes bad." Captain Uehara paused,
looking at the two foreigners for a moment. "We can't afford to have our guests get involved too
heavily, it would be a bit of a diplomatic nightmare. They're mainly here for intelligence support
and as observers." Harrison and Deveraux both looked somewhat unhappy about this but said
nothing. Harrison was still apparently trying to figure out where the joke was about the concept of
magical girls, without a lot of luck. Sergeant Harada smiled.

"OK, I can do that. It may take a few hours, her security is pretty tight and she doesn't always
respond immediately."

"That's fine. There's no massive hurry, we'll go when they're available. We have some people
watching from a discreet distance just in case one of the suspects shows up, but based on what's
happened so far I doubt it's going to be that easy, unfortunately."

"May I use your phone, Ma'am?" The captain pushed it across her desk to him. Picking it up the
Sergeant dialled a memorised number while removing a small card from his shirt pocket, then as
the others watched with interest read off a long sequence of numbers and letters from it. Inspector
Deveraux realised after a moment, with some surprise, that she couldn't remember what they were.
She turned to Agent Naito, who was watching her with a knowing expression.

"Weird, isn't it?"

"What's going on?" she asked, half-expecting the answer. He grinned.

"Magic, of course. That girl takes her privacy seriously and has some very cool toys." He waited as
Harada left a message then hung up. "Sergeant, can you show the Inspector the card, please?" He
looked puzzled, then suddenly understanding, handing it over. She took it and studied it curiously.
The card was completely blank, just a small rectangle of white card stock.

"Um, what am I supposed to see?" He grinned at her.
"Nothing. That's the point. Only the owner of the particular card can read it." Taking it back from her he put it away. Noticing her sceptical expression he explained. "The card is magical, and keyed to a particular person. Anyone other than that person can only see a blank card, and even the person it's keyed to can't tell anyone what's on it. Each card has a different password so she knows that who has it." Agent Naito smiled, looking impressed.

"I wish we had security that good. I have no idea how she does it, but I know it works. Not many people rate having her contact details, she doesn't hand them out very often. It's quite a sign of trust." Harrison and Deveraux exchanged glances.

"You realise how insane that sounds? And difficult to prove, if no one really can see what's on the card, who's to say it isn't just a blank card." Harada laughed.

"Honestly, inspector, we're not playing some elaborate practical joke. You'll see, later." Moments later the phone rang. "Hmm. That was quick. She must be bored." With a glance at his superior, who nodded approval, he picked it up and answered in Japanese. "Hello, Yori. Yes, fine, thanks. How's Chou? Good. Look, we have a problem we need some special help for. Could you two meet us somewhere? There are some people here who I'd like you to meet. Yes. Yes, that would be fine. Ten minutes? Great. Thanks." Hanging up he smiled, switching back to English for the benefit of the visitors. "She's happy to help, and will meet us outside in about ten minutes. I'd better get a couple of cups of coffee, she and Chou drink a lot of it and like ours." Leaving the room he headed for the cafeteria.

Inside, the two visiting police officers looked at each other with bemusement, then turned to the captain. "Agent Naito will come with you. You've both been given special dispensation to carry your service weapons while on this assignment, but I must emphasise, especially to you, Lieutenant Harrison, that you must only use them as a matter of last resort. Here in Japan we take a very dim view of people discharging firearms at all, never mind in the street. This isn't LA. If you use your gun you better have a damn good reason for it, or you may find yourself staying a lot longer than you planned. Do I make myself clear?" He nodded. "Good. Make sure you carry the letters of authorisation you have been issued at all times, and do not let your weapons out of your sight. And one more thing. Do not, under any circumstances, point a weapon at the magical girls. If you do the police and security forces of Japan won't be held responsible for what happens next. It wouldn't have any effect except to make them angry in any case, and trust me, you don't want to make them angry. You really, really don't." The Canadian and American police officers looked at each other for a moment, then nodded again.

"Yes, Captain." Inspector Deveraux looked at the older woman curiously. "If they're that dangerous, why do you allow them to run around the street?" Captain Uehara glanced at Agent Naito, then turned back to the woman.

"Partly because we have no effective way of stopping them even if we wanted to, but mainly because they perform a service that no one else could. If they weren't around, well, let's just say that it would get very messy if past events are anything to go by." She smiled a little scarily. "If you stay here for very long you may well find out what I mean. Anyway, good luck, and remember, do not annoy the magical girls! And if a demon attacks, get out of the way and let them handle it." They left the office looking worried, going in the direction of the main entrance.

"Masao, please keep them out of trouble, hmm?" the captain said. "I really don't want an international incident here, we have enough to do as it is. And don't let Harrison piss Yori off too much. I know his type, he's likely to be somewhat disrespectful to a young woman, which might be a bad mistake. She doesn't suffer fools gladly from what I've heard." He grinned.
"Yes, I believe you're right. Don't worry, the PSIA doesn't want any trouble from either the Americans or the Canadians either. At least the Canadians are polite, the Americans can be... abrasive. I will keep in touch." He bowed slightly, then followed the two foreigners. The captain watched him leave, then sighed.

"Magical girls. Demons. How did it come to this? Life used to be so much simpler." With a shake of her head she got back to her paperwork.

Inspector Deveraux and Lieutenant Harrison stood outside the front door of the central police station, looking around the small park it fronted onto. The Inspector was quite impressed with the area, it had a lot of greenery and seemed quite affluent and up-market, but not in an in-your-face sort of way. Everything was surprisingly clean and well looked after, the locals were respectful and pleasant, and although it was beginning to get cooler as autumn drew in, it was still warmer than Toronto. Harrison was shivering a little, though.

"Damn, it's cold. LA is much warmer than this even at this time of year." She grinned.

"If you think this is bad you should visit Toronto in the winter. It hit minus thirty last winter where I live, and that's nothing compared to further north." He stared, doing the conversion from Centigrade to Fahrenheit in his head, then looked appalled.

"Fuck. That's horrible. No thanks, I'll stay where it's warm."

"Come on, it's warm here, it must be at least fifteen degrees." He looked at her with an annoyed expression, zipping his coat up.

"Which is half what it should be to make me feel comfortable." After a pause while she smiled, amused, he slowly asked, "Do you believe everything they said in there? Magical girls? Demons? Hell, magic in the first place?" Glancing at him she shrugged.

"It's pretty hard to believe, I admit, but they seem sincere enough to me." A hand reached past her shoulder holding a disposable cup of coffee.

"We are sincere, and yes, it's all true," Sergeant Harada said with a smile as she jumped a little, then accepted the cup. He handed one to the American as well, then to the PSIA man who came up silently. Placing two of the three he had left on the wall next to the entrance to the station, he leaned against it and took a sip of the remaining one. Harrison tried his and nodded in slightly surprised satisfaction.

"Hey, that's pretty good. Especially for police issue coffee." Harada laughed.

"We take our coffee seriously around these parts." Studying the two police officers he asked, "So, you seem to have trouble with the concept of magic." The looked at each other, then back at him.

"I'm more puzzled that you guys don't," Harrison said. "I mean, magical girls? Teen-aged mini-skirted magical superheroes running around the place beating up demons. Demons, even. It's insane. Even if it was true, why does no one outside Japan know about it?" Agent Naito smiled slightly.

"Oh, some do, trust me. The UK, for instance, has a very long history of this sort of thing, but in a different way. Europe in general is aware of it, as is China. We seem to have a lot more of it, I'll grant you that, and the magical girls seem to be unique to us, but it's all around you if you know what to look for. It always puzzles me that North Americans have so much trouble believing it, while at the same time so many of them believe they've been abducted by aliens. Which is just
silly." He chuckled, while Deveraux burst out laughing. Even Harrison smiled at this.

Sergeant Harada looked off to one side, then said, "Well, if you want to ask about magical girls, you can ask them." He pointed, and the other three turned to look in the direction he was staring. The eyes of the two foreign police officers bugged out at the sight of two young women, dressed not in the mini-skirts of the comics but in fairly stylish silk clothing, leaping easily from building to building some five or six stories up, heading down the street in their direction. The one in the lead, dressed in black with her long blue-striped black hair in a braid that blew behind her with the speed she was moving, reached the edge of the last building and simply ran off it, somersaulting several times during the graceful arc she made to ground level. Landing on her feet as lightly as if she'd jumped off a chair she walked towards them, while behind her the somewhat taller short-haired blonde woman in grey clothes performed exactly the same manoeuvre.

"Holy fucking hell," Harrison whispered. "How..." He ran out of words. Deveraux didn't have any to start with. Both of them watched as the two women, who looked about nineteen or twenty, crossed the street towards them, stopping once or twice to greet various people, none of whom looked even slightly surprised at what they'd just done. Waving to a couple of police officers who were getting into a patrol car, they walked up to the little group and stopped, looking curiously at the two people gaping at them before turning to Harada.

"Hi, Sergeant," the shorter woman said, accepting the cup of coffee he handed her with a nod of thanks. He did the same to her blonde companion. "So, what's all this about?" She looked the three people she didn't know up and down intently. Her unusually tinted eyes almost glowed, making them feel a sense of considerable energy only barely contained. "An American, a Canadian I think, and someone from the PSIA." This last sentence was said in very good English for the benefit of the foreigners. Both the overseas cops were still staring, but Agent Naito smiled a little.

"How did you know I'm from the PSIA?" he asked.

"That's what your ID says," the blonde woman said, looking with interest at the contents of a wallet she was holding. He stared, patting his jacket with his hand, then sighed.

"Magical girls." Holding out his hand he asked politely, "Can I have it back, please?"

"Certainly." The blonde handed it over with a smile. He turned to the black haired girl to see her reading the contents of another wallet.

"Hmm. LAPD. A long way from home, Lieutenant." She flipped the ID shut and tossed it back to Harrison, who caught it reflexively looking stunned. Neither of them had come closer than a couple of metres to any of the people. Sergeant Harada was grinning.

"Sorry. We get curious." The other girl handed Deveraux her own ID with an apologetic smile. The Canadian took it numbly, putting it back into the interior pocket it had mysteriously somehow disappeared from. "So. What can we do for the police today? Or is it a PSIA event again?" The girl smiled at Agent Naito, who grinned back.

"It's a joint operation with international links. Our overseas friends here are coming along as observers, although their respective forces have considerable interest in this case." Yori raised an eyebrow.

"It must be a significant one if you're allowing foreign police officers to carry their weapons on the street." Lieutenant Harrison looked at her, startled.
"Why do you think we're armed?" She glanced at her blonde friend, who smiled.

"You have a Glock 17 9mm pistol in a shoulder holster, with two spare magazines. Your Canadian colleague is carrying a Smith and Wesson 5906 9mm, which I believe is standard RCMP issue. She's only got one spare magazine, although she also has a number of rounds in her purse." Both police officers stared at the blonde, then at each other.

"Holy crap. How did you do that?" Harrison was astounded and quite worried. They shrugged.

"It's a martial arts thing," Yori answered. "Difficult to explain. Anyway, I'm Yori, as you've probably already gathered, this is Chou. Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Harrison." She held out her hand and after a moment he shook it. Rather unwisely he decided to try to assert his own masculinity, which was feeling slightly overwhelmed, squeezing harder than necessary. She smiled slightly at him, apparently not noticing. With a small frown he squeezed harder. "Do you really want to do this, Lieutenant?" He saw something in her sharp violet-blue eyes that made him back off. Her friend put a warning hand on her shoulder and she released his hand, stepping back.

"Sorry," he muttered. She waved it off, grinning a little which showed off her small fangs, a sight that made both North Americans glance at each other for a second.

"No bother." Naito, who had been watching their interactions with a certain amount of humour, stepped forward.

"OK, now that we've established how clever we all are, let me introduce everyone properly." He spared each magical girl a minor glare, making them look mildly embarrassed and also amused. Yori graciously gestured for him to continue. "Thank you. Right, this is Lieutenant Richard Harrison, LAPD, and Inspector Laura Deveraux, RCMP. I'm Masao Naito from the PSIA as you somehow worked out. We have a problem we hope you can help with, we asked Sergeant Harada to call you as he knows you. Would you like to come inside where we can explain?" The two young women exchanged a glance then nodded.

"Of course," Yori said. "Always happy to help. Lead on." With a chuckle he waved them inside the police station then followed, Sergeant Harada and the two visitors bringing up the rear. Harrison watched the girls walking in front of them with an expression of incredulity on his face, while Deveraux watched him. Harada watched both of them.

"Believe in magic yet?" the inspector asked her American colleague in a low voice, glancing at the two young women who were chatting with the PSIA man. He shrugged helplessly.

"I'm not sure, but I certainly believe something weird is going on. How the hell did they do that?"

"Which part? Jumping off a five story building like it was ten centimetres tall, or somehow getting our IDs out of our coats from two metres away. Or knowing exactly what our weapons are and how much ammo we're carrying from the same distance?"

He almost giggled. "Any of it. All of it. It's completely nuts. They're only about three years older than my daughter, for god's sake." Harada, bringing up the rear, laughed.

"Oh, some of the magical girls are much younger than that. Age doesn't seem to be a factor. That said, I suspect they're actually rather older than they look, they have a much more mature outlook on life than their appearance would suggest, odd sense of humour aside. Don't let what they look like fool you. Both of those ladies could take out a division of any army in the world without much difficulty, should they want too. Some of the things I've seen them do is... pretty damn impressive, even by magical girl standards. Remind me to show you the crater in the park. It's a good
demonstration of what Yori can do if she feels it's necessary."

They looked at each other. "Crater?" asked Deveraux. He nodded.

"Yes. About twenty metres across, lined with glass. That's what happened when she got miffed with a particularly unpleasant demon."

"A twenty metre crater?" Harrison sounded both fascinated and horrified.

"Oh, it's a duck pond now, it was too much trouble to fill it in, but you can still see the glass slag lining. I've got no idea how much energy was needed to do that, but it was a hell of a lot. How she kept it from breaking every window in Minato is beyond me. The noise was pretty impressive even so, especially from only a hundred metres away. There wasn't anything at all left of the demon." He shook his head with a mildly amused smile while remembering, as the other two looked at each other, aghast. "I certainly wouldn't like to see her really go all out. You'd probably see the explosion from the moon."

"A crater?" Harrison mumbled again, trying to wrap his mind around the concept. Deveraux looked at him and sighed a little, he was going to have a lot of difficulty with this. She was having quite a lot herself and her mind was much more flexible.

Naito took over a small conference room, closing the door and pulling a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket. Spreading them across the table he explained the situation while both the silk-clad women listened intently, asking pertinent and insightful questions occasionally. Deveraux found her opinion of both of them going steadily up as it became more and more apparent that there were a couple of first-class minds there as well as the strange abilities. Both she and Harrison explained their respective forces' involvement in the case, while Harada sat and listened silently, watching all the participants with interest.

"So far, there have been at least forty-three deaths we know of associated with these people. We're not sure exactly what they are trying to do, or even if the deaths were deliberate or accidental. There were three separate cases in LA and the surrounding area, accounting for eighteen fatalities, and five cases in the greater Toronto area which produced the rest. The American and Canadian forces had been closing in on the suspects for nearly a year, and it all came to a head a few months ago when two of them were shot while apparently setting up to do... something. No one seems to have any real idea what. The other five who have so far been identified managed to barricade themselves into a locked basement room, but they were gone when the LAPD SWAT finally broke in over two hours later."

Agent Naito looked seriously at the two young women. "We do not like the idea of anything like that happening here in Japan, as you can imagine, so we want to stop them as soon as possible. Especially considering the provenance of the people apparently involved. But the PSIA, who ended up with responsibility for this case, knows when it's in over it's head on certain matters. Hence your involvement. You've been a great help in the past, I'm hoping you can be again."

Yori pulled out one photo from the pile that he had put on the table, looking at it again. She showed it to her colleague who nodded with a frown. "This is a one-shot teleport spell, a bit over-complicated but effective. As far as I can see the coordinates it was targeted to would be somewhere in Japan, but I can't make out a few of the symbols that would locate it more precisely than that. Someone has stepped on it and erased some critical parts." She glanced at the two visitors. "In future, if you come across something like this, try to get a clear photo of it without disturbing it." They nodded, still having trouble with the concept of teleportation.

"It's been drawn pretty amateurishly, to be honest. I doubt it was a trained mage, I think whoever
made it was shown how to do this one spell and given something to power it as an escape method. Did you find anything like a glass ball, perhaps ten centimetres across?" Harrison looked up.

"Yes, actually. We thought it was the remains of a light bulb but none of them were missing. It was broken on the floor in the middle of that pattern." She nodded.

"OK, that was a sort of magical battery. It would have contained enough energy to run this spell once and transport, oh, perhaps six people at most. It probably broke when the spell activated. It wouldn't have told you much anyway, they're pretty anonymous. You can buy them by the case in some of the demon worlds." They all stared at her.

"Demon worlds?" Naito asked slowly. The black-haired woman grinned.

"Demons have to come from somewhere, right?" Harada snickered a little. He was perhaps the only one in the room who had some idea of what she was talking about, having met a number of the more peaceful otherworldly visitors, mainly through Yori. Even the PSIA man seemed slightly startled. "We get a lot of traffic through Minato, for some reason I still haven't worked out. I think that it might be a sort of gateway for demon portals, they are easier to make here than most other places. Anyway, some of the other worlds have a certain amount of trade with and through here, quite a lot of magic workers get supplies from them. These magical storage devices are a pretty common and cheap trade good in certain areas. They're quite useful for people who don't have a lot of magic themselves but need to work a spell. Not all spells can be adapted to use them, but quite a few useful ones can." Making a quick gesture with her hand she was suddenly holding a small transparent sphere that looked like it was made of glass. She rolled it across the table to Naito who picked it up and looked at it, while Harrison and Deveraux looked at each other wondering where it had come from.

"That's the sort of thing. Possibly not that exact model, there are quite a few of them."

"This is a magical battery?" Agent Naito asked curiously. She smiled.

"Yes. It can hold a fair amount of power for months, perhaps years if it's made properly." She produced another one from wherever such things came from, then held it up. It slowly began glowing, as if it was being filled with purple-blue mist. After a few seconds it was as bright as the lights in the ceiling. "That's about enough to run the spell that you found." They looked on in awe, the two foreign police officers gaping at the most direct evidence of magic they'd ever seen. Deveraux nudged her colleague.

"Still don't believe in magic?"

"I'm beginning to," he replied quietly. Yori heard him and with a smile rolled the ball in his direction. Stopping it with his hand he pulled it quickly away when he felt it tingle, like the ball was charged with static electricity.

"It's safe to touch," she said. Hesitantly he reached out and picked the ball up, looking at it in wonder, before handing it to Deveraux. Rubbing his fingertips together he remembered the odd sensation. After a moment the Canadian woman handed it back to the black-haired woman. Holding it in one hand she somehow made the strange energy go back to where it had come from, leaving the ball transparent once more, before making it disappear again. None of the watchers could figure out where it went. Naito rolled the first one back and she vanished that one as well.

"So, are you a magic worker, then?" Deveraux asked, feeling slightly foolish even as she spoke. Yori shook her head.
"Not in the way you're thinking. Our magic works differently. I can't work a spell like that, although I could easily power it. Our energy is compatible, the method isn't. It's complicated if you don't understand multidimensional visualisation techniques." They looked blank and she sighed a little, exchanging glances with Chou, who smiled. "It's complicated. Anyway, what I'm getting at is that there are a few conclusions we can draw. Either your suspects have contacts with one of the otherworlds, or know someone who does. There is a mage involved, quite a good one, although they aren't mages. I would suspect some form of demon involvement as well, although I can't explain why I think that. It just feels like it. That cuts down the possible people to a few dozen, most of whom we know. I can ask around to see if we can figure out who is involved, which should let us work out where they are."

Agent Naito produced a map, which he spread out on the table, pushing the other documents to the side. "The PSIA tracked them to this general area, but it's quite large and difficult to search." He indicated a red line drawn around a roughly rectangular block of the locality approximately half a kilometre from corner to corner. Both Yori and Chou studied it.

"Close to the university over here, half the shopping district, some office buildings, and a couple of the student dorms as well. There are a lot of people in that area, it could get very nasty if something went bad." Chou looked at the map with concern.

Harada got up and leaned over Yori's shoulder, inspecting the map himself. "Can you locate them in all this?" he asked. The black-haired young woman looked thoughtful.

"They must be quite well shielded or I'd probably have spotted them already, we check out new magic users when they pop up on our patch. I'm pretty sure there's no portal there, those things stand out like a sore thumb for kilometres no matter how well you try to shield them and I haven't felt any for weeks around here, so they're probably still in this world. I'd guess they're hiding in a building somewhere in here, most likely underground, with the best wards they could manage around them. I'll have a poke around, but our best bet is to track them through their mage, I think. Mind you, we might get lucky."

Lieutenant Harrison shook his head in wonder. "I can't believe we're having a serious discussion about demons, portals to other worlds, and magic. With a pair of magical girls, to boot. No offence," he added hastily, looking at the two young women.

Yori grinned. "None taken, although I prefer to think of myself as a martial artist. But I can understand you might have some problems with all of this. I'm sorry, it's all real. You'll have to get used to that." He shrugged.

"I'm still not sure I believe it all, but I'm willing to go along with it for the moment."

"Fair enough." She studied him for a moment longer, then turned to Agent Naito. "I'll ask around. I'd prefer not to have people like this around here, we've gone to a lot of trouble to make this a safe place to live. I'll take a day or two to contact everyone we need to, but we'll make a swing through that area tonight and see if we can get any leads."

"Thanks. All of us will be here at the station most of the time, please call immediately if you do find anything." He handed her a business card with his name and a cell number on it. After looking at it for a second she made it literally disappear. He grinned. "That's a damn good trick." Laughing, she nodded.

"It has its uses. We'll be in touch." Standing, she looked at them for a moment, then added, "We don't want anything happening either, we happen to like this area a lot. You have our word we'll do everything we can to help you." Chou nodded with a smile, glancing at Sergeant Harada while
opening the door, then to the shock of the Canadian and American police officers, both magical girls simply faded from view. Harrison stared in disbelief, sharing a wide-eyed glance with Deveraux. Sergeant Harada chuckled while Agent Naito sighed slightly with a shake of his head.

"Yori likes her little moments of drama, especially with new people," Harada said with a small grin. "She can be a bit of a show-off."

"I heard that," came a faint voice from somewhere, followed by a couple of giggles that faded away down the hallway. He grinned more widely.

"Case in point." Harrison was still staring at the empty doorway with a look of shock on his face. Deveraux finally poked him on the shoulder.

"Come on, Richard, let's get some lunch. You're never going to work it out, just go with it." He shook his head hard a couple of times like he'd been slapped, then looked at her wide-eyed.

"They... went invisible? Or something?" His voice sounded both shocked and almost affronted, as if what he'd seen was annoying him. She shrugged.

"Something, I guess. Believe in magic now, then?" After a long moment he nodded slowly.

"It's as good a description as anything, at this point." He turned to the two Japanese people who were watching them with amused expressions. "And there are more like those two?" Agent Naito smiled momentarily.

"Not exactly like them. Yori and Chou are in a class of their own. But yes, we have at least some information on approximately fifty-four magical girls in Minato ward alone, either individuals or groups. The largest group consists of about a dozen, most are three to five. They range in age from around eleven or so up to mid twenties, but that's only an estimate, most of them have one form or other of disguise method available. We know the, for want of a better word, civilian identity, of about half of them, the rest are still anonymous. Those two are the most anonymous of all. We know, at least officially, almost nothing about them." He looked thoughtful. "I'm pretty sure that someone in our government knows more about them, but isn't saying. It's way above my pay grade as you Americans would say. I do know that they've helped out on a few occasions with some very sensitive operations, and that as far as the government is concerned they have a remarkably high if off the books security rating. Someone a lot higher up than me seems to feel they're very trustworthy. I'd love to know more but I doubt I ever will." He shrugged.

"Anyway, that's your introduction to magical girls. Stay around Minato for long and you'll probably run into others, but I think you've just met the best ones."

They stood up, Sergeant Harada gesturing to the door. "If you'll come with me I know a nice restaurant down the street, or we can go to the cafeteria if you'd prefer." Between them they decided to go to the restaurant. Or rather three of them did, Harrison still seemed to be having trouble with life at the moment, he looked like he was trying to understand how everything had gotten so weird so suddenly. This whole case had been an exercise in the odd anyway, but the last hour or so was almost beyond belief.

Inspector Deveraux was watching the expressions going across the face of her American counterpart with considerable sympathy, she was feeling quite a lot of what he obviously was as well. The whole situation was surreal to put it mildly. "So they battle demons, and other magical threats? Do you really have so many attacks here that so many of them are necessary? Do they do anything else?" She was full of questions, most of which seemed even to her to be weird. Sergeant Harada nodded a little as they walked down the street.
"Unfortunately, in Minato as a whole, yes, we do seem to attract incursions of an unusual sort. Not so much in this immediate area any more, for which you can directly thank Yori and Chou. I've got no doubt about that. When they turned up about three years ago, this district had as many demon attacks as the rest of Minato, which is a lot more than seems likely. Most of them are fairly low level, sort of the supernatural equivalent of a mugging, but there have been a few that could have been extremely nasty. One or two of them have been. We've lost quite a few people over the years to... things. The various groups of girls have a pretty high success rate in stopping this sort of problem. Quite a few of these attacks probably couldn't have been stopped in any other way. The main problem historically has been that the collateral damage from the battles between the demons and the demon hunters has been pretty impressive, sometimes worse than if the demons had been left to their own business."

He smiled somewhat ruefully. "In fact, having talked to Yori about a number of these cases, that's certainly true. Most, if not all of the other magical girls tend to come down like the fist of god on anything even slightly outside the ordinary, which can be very hard on the surroundings. She's shown me that a lot of the time none of that was necessary. It turns out that like she said, there is a lot of otherworldly trade to and through Minato, for some reason, which is essentially peaceful and harmless. Right up to the point that some overenthusiastic magic-powered schoolgirl drops the hammer of doom on it and blows up half a street. Yori gets extremely annoyed about things like that, she seems to take it quite personally. The result has been that she's ended up fighting other magical girls nearly as often as weird demons, to get them to stop smashing the place up."

Agent Naito chuckled and both visitors turned to look at him. "Reading the various reports, I've formed the opinion that Yori and Chou are essentially the magical girl police in many ways. The two of them have done a lot to keep the other groups under control, and aren't above shutting them down hard if they think it's getting excessive. Yori is surprisingly pleasant to talk to, I was expecting someone much more abrasive from what I've read, but you don't want to get on her bad side." Harada started laughing, all three of the others looking at him.

"No, you certainly don't. That girl has a mouth on her you wouldn't believe, it's awe-inspiring. Chou can be pretty damn intimidating as well but is much quieter about it, which is almost worse. She makes you feel like you've let your mother down. Yori just makes you wish you were back in basic training again for the peace and quiet. They're both damn effective though. Since they've been around the collateral damage has dropped to almost nothing in the district and gone down a lot throughout Minato. They took steps to arrange reimbursement to people affected by magical girl and demon fights, they'll stomp on a demon hunter just as hard as a demon if they think it's getting out of hand, and they go out of their way to deal with any real danger in a way that minimises damage. It's all very impressive. Ah, here it is." He indicated the restaurant in question, a few metres down the street.

"You call a twenty-metre crater minimal damage?" Harrison asked, looking askance at the sergeant. The other man nodded seriously as they entered the restaurant.

"To be honest, under the circumstances, yes. The thing that was attacking was practically unstoppable. I can guarantee you that conventional force, if it worked at all, would have pretty much wrecked the entire neighbourhood. She lured it to a park away from any people, then vaporised it cleanly and efficiently. Oh, she admitted afterwards that she might have overdone it a little and was very embarrassed about it, but no one who was there holds that against her. The damn thing had already killed five people a few kilometres away in another district and the local magical girl group, who are very good themselves, couldn't stop it."

"How many of them were there in this other group?" Deveraux asked curiously.
"Four, as far as I know. I don't know them very well, but they're friends of Yori and Chou I believe. One of the few other groups she seems to feel are competent. I know she trains others she feels are worth the effort, but not many of them come up to her standards." He grinned a little. "She has very high standards. I don't know where she got her own training, but that girl knows more about martial arts than any ten grandmasters. There doesn't seem to be a discipline she doesn't have a working knowledge of, and in most cases to an incredibly high level. I know quite a bit myself, a lot of the police around here do, but she's so far beyond anything I've ever seen it's almost impossible. Anything from Tai Chi to Muai Thai to Krav Maga, you name it she knows it. Plus a lot I've never heard of before. I suspect quite a few she's come up with herself." The visitors looked both impressed and a little appalled.

"How could someone that young possibly learn so many different martial arts?" Harrison wondered. Sergeant Harada shrugged.

"No idea. But seeing her in action is absolutely awe-inspiring. Far more impressive than any Hollywood action movie. She makes the best efforts of Bruce Lee look like the work of a rank amateur. Chou isn't quite as experienced, I think, but she knows nearly as much. Yori is obviously training her and has been for years. They both have a raw talent for martial arts that goes beyond genius, leaving aside the magical powers or whatever they are." The waitress that met them seated them at a window table, greeting Harada by name with a smile. He ordered a round of soft drinks and coffee, which she quickly brought along with four menus. The visitors looked through them, the two Japanese natives translating where necessary. Eventually they had all ordered food and the conversation restarted where it had left off.

Agent Naito asked, "What's the relationship between Yori and Chou, do you think? I've read all the information we have on them, which isn't much, and it's obvious they come as a set, but does it go further than that?" Harada smiled slightly.

"I'm not completely sure, and to be honest it's none of my business, but I suspect they've lovers if nothing else. It probably goes deeper. I do know that if you threatened either one of them the other one would end you so fast you'd never see it coming." The PSIA man nodded thoughtfully.

"Probably best not to do that, then." He grinned. "Not that I have any intention of ever trying anything like that. As far as we're concerned they're an invaluable asset and I suspect my own head would be on the chopping block if I was foolish enough to do anything silly, from someone at a considerable political height." Harada studied him with interest.

"I've always thought she had friends in weird places. Well, I know for a fact she has friends in weird places, but I mean high places as well. On both sides of the law." Harrison glanced at Deveraux, who leaned forward.

"What do you mean by that, Sergeant?" Harada shrugged again.

"Just that there are a number of very high-level Yakuza who treat both of them with extreme respect. More so than just the threat they could pose if they wanted to would seem to warrant. I've got no doubt that if they got seriously pissed off the Yakuza would cease to exist in short order, but by and large they leave them alone, unless they do something stupid. In this case, stupid means getting involved in prostitution or drugs anywhere in the district, or violence against people who in some way don't warrant it. Or violence against women anywhere. God help you if you try anything like a sexual assault anywhere in Minato, because no one else will. Yori has absolutely no sense of humour at all about that sort of thing and she seems to have passed that on to most if not all of the magical girls and a hell of a lot of the Yakuza higher-ups." He laughed for a moment.

"Zero-tolerance doesn't even begin to describe it. We haven't had a rape here in two years, and the
last perpetrator crawled into the station and begged to be arrested. He was in hospital for two months before he could be moved to jail." He didn't seem too upset about this.

The overseas officers looked somewhat taken aback. "And you let them get away with this, this, vigilantism?" Deveraux asked. Harada looked briefly at Agent Naito, who nodded a little, then answered honestly.

"We couldn't stop them if we wanted to, which we don't. One thing you should understand is that they're not really vigilantes. Unofficially, Yori and Chou, at least, have considerable backing from people who feel that they're doing a very good job. They don't charge for what they do, between them they've saved certainly hundreds of lives, if not thousands, both from demon attacks and more run of the mill crime or accidents. Plus when we ask for their help in unusual cases, they always give it without question. I suspect if we asked them to leave they probably would, they have a lot of respect for the authorities, more than some of them warrant in my opinion, but the result of that would undoubtedly be a disaster." Sergeant Harada paused for a moment, thinking about something, then continued.

"Leaving aside the fact that the community and most of the local police force would probably revolt on the spot anyway, those two are thought of extremely highly around here. People don't make much fuss about it, but they like and respect them. Between them they know practically every resident here, a lot of whom owe them thanks for something or other. Most of the magical girls are cut quite a bit of slack since they perform a very useful service that probably couldn't be done any other way, but that pair is genuinely respected to a remarkable level." He shook his head a little. "It's difficult to explain to someone from outside Japan. We run into a cultural problem. You see a vigilante, someone working outside the law, we see something else." Trying to think of the best way to get it across he paused again, while the visitors waited curiously.

"There's a long tradition in this country of the wandering martial artist, who protects the innocent. Add to that the even longer tradition of the Samurai, and a number of other things, you end up with a very high tolerance for someone like them. All the magical girls, really, even the more inept ones. They may at times act outside criminal law, but they act honourably, to protect the community from any threat, which is a very big deal to us. People respect that they help quietly and efficiently, often resolving trouble without involving official attention. When a matter does require police involvement they let us know and we take over, they never want any credit. It makes our job a lot safer if nothing else."

Lieutenant Harrison was listening with interest. "What does happen if someone pulls a weapon on them?" he asked curiously. "Your Captain was very insistent that it was something we should never ever try." Harada chuckled.

"I can imagine. Chou, particularly, isn't fond of firearms. She seems to know a lot about them, but doesn't like them being freely available. We tend to agree. Our laws on that sort of thing are very strict, especially to an American, or even a Canadian. But occasionally some low-level criminal gets his hand on a pistol or something along those lines, often as a result of an American serviceman deciding to supplement his pay." Harrison looked both annoyed and embarrassed.

"That shouldn't happen," he muttered. Agent Naito nodded.

"Agreed, but when we trace the serial numbers it's surprising how often they turn out to have been stolen from one of the military bases." After a moment, Sergeant Harada continued.

"Even the Yakuza tend to come down pretty hard on any of their people who do that nowadays, since the laws were made much more restrictive a few years ago, they've tended to think that guns draw too much attention. Anyway, using a gun on Yori or Chou would only make them very angry."
The last time that happened some idiot from out of the area tried mugging Chou while waving a 9mm pistol in her face. That was a serious mistake. A bigger mistake was firing it at her."

Deveraux raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, bullets bounce off them," she commented with mild sarcasm. He laughed.

"I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised. But in this case she just caught it." He looked at their expressions, even Agent Naito's, and laughed again. "Honest. She caught the damn thing three feet from the barrel, then took the gun away from him. Then she made him swallow the bullet. Then she broke his arms." They all stared at him. "I'm not making it up. We recovered the round from the toilet a few hours later, matched it to the gun which had his fingerprints on it, and that was that. The fact that he had a visit from someone who was allegedly his lawyer, after which he confessed to every crime he'd ever committed, was a nice bonus. I don't know who the lawyer was but he scared the man shitless."

"She caught the bullet..." Harrison repeated slowly. Harada nodded, looking highly amused.

"Yes. I couldn't believe it myself so she demonstrated. One of the most amazing things I've ever seen."

"Good god." Deveraux and Harrison looked at each other. "What else can they do, for god's sake?" Naito looked at them, then smiled.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I don't have a complete list, they seem to pull new tricks out of the woodwork quite often, but let's see. They can turn invisible, you've seen that. They can run at some ridiculous speed, at least a hundred and twenty kilometres per hour, jump six stories off a building without effort, more impressively jump back again, reportedly are strong enough to pick up a car..." Harada nodded.

"I've seen that myself. It was a large van, in fact."

"...pick up a van, have insane martial arts skills, some form of healing ability we don't have much information on, and can manipulate energy to form projectiles, beams, cutting implements, not to mention all the other magic stuff that's less identifiable."

There was silence for some time. Eventually Deveraux asked quietly, "Are all the magical girls like that?"

"No, like I said those two are in a class of their own. Most of the others don't have anything even approaching that level of martial arts or combat ability, while some of them are possibly considerably more powerful in raw magical output. I'd put Yori and Chou up against any of them, though, the mix of ability, talent, and experience they have is so far unbeatable. They have in fact gone up against a lot of the others at one point or another, either just for fun or to stop them causing a mess. They've won every time to date, often within seconds. We have reports that a lot of the more difficult groups are terrified of them now, they stay well away from here. Which is presumably the point."

"Wow."

There was silence for a while as their food arrived and they began eating. Harrison chewed absent-mindedly, still thinking about everything he'd been hit with in the last couple of hours, trying to fit it into his world-view, which was having to be severely bent to make this work. After several minutes he put his fork down and stared out the window, making Deveraux look at him with some concern. Harada and Naito exchanged glances. "This is all insane," he muttered, swallowing his
last bite. The others all looked at him, waiting for him to go on. After a long pause he did so. "How can you all be so blasé about it? Doesn't it bother you? School-girls with the power of a division of armour running around the place, with no controls on them? Why doesn't the whole world know about all this?" He looked like he was staring down the barrel of a gun. He felt that staring down the barrel of a gun would be an improvement, it was at least something familiar and understandable. The two Japanese men exchanged glances again, then Naito spoke.

"You get used to it." At the expression on the face of the American, he raised a hand. "No, I'm not being flippant. You do get used to it. We've been getting used to it for several decades now, one way or another. The last twenty years or so, things changed, got more intense, and I don't know why. I don't think anyone does. These girls, and I'd love to know why, at least here, it's always girls, despite everything are more of a solution than a problem. Yes, in a rational world, they probably wouldn't exist, neither would the demons, magic, all that sort of thing, but we don't live in a rational world. All of that provably exists. As long as the threat exists, it's good that we have an effective defence. From what I've been told over the years, this sort of thing has been going on all over the world for a very long time indeed, but for some reason, here and now, it's much more visible." Harrison didn't look much happier.

"Why the whole world doesn't know about it I have no idea. To be fair, it's not that the world doesn't know, we haven't gone to any great effort to keep it secret, it's more like the world doesn't notice, or perhaps care. My own theory is that it's all tied up with the magic in general. Unless you're personally involved in it somehow, even in as simple a way as living next to it, you basically don't notice. Whether that's true I don't know, but it makes a weird sort of sense. Like I said earlier, it seems to mainly be North Americans, and people from the US specifically, that have so much trouble accepting it. A lot of the world has similar things going on although in different ways. We do seem to be the leaders in this sort of odd occurrence here in Minato, though." He shrugged. "I don't have any real answers for you. All I can advise is that you accept it's real, learn to live with it, and move on. It doesn't fundamentally change the job we all have. Just think of Yori, Chou, and all the other magical girls as people who do much the same job you do, keep order in the face of an insane world, but have rather different methods and skills."

"But they don't have the training, the authority, anything!" Lieutenant Harrison had his head in his hands looking very depressed and almost angry. Harada smiled a little.

"I think you're wrong. Yori and Chou, at least, have more training under their belts than entire combat squads. Unconventional training to be sure, but effective and I have no doubt the result of an extraordinary amount of work and practice. Many years of it. The magic, where that comes from I have no idea, but even there I would think it's also the result of a vast amount of training. As far as the authority goes, they have that as well. Unofficially they're given a lot of leeway, but to their credit don't take unfair advantage of it. When police involvement is required or possible we get notified and take over. When they deal with something themselves, either they didn't need us, or we couldn't have done anything anyway. The community supports them, the government supports them although very quietly, and to date none of the magical girls have let us down. The only downside, the collateral damage, seems to be resolving itself as a direct result of our two young friends."

Naito grinned. "You have SWAT in LA? Special weapons and tactics. From what I can remember, the LAPD practically invented it. If it helps, think of our special talent as something like that." Deveraux laughed delightedly.

"SMAT? Special magic and talismans?" Sergeant Harada looked very amused.

"Perhaps MGAW? Magical girls and weapons?" The two of them spent the next few minutes
coming up with increasingly unlikely acronyms for magical girl support teams, while Harrison watched and listened with irritated disbelief. Eventually he picked up his fork and resumed eating.

"You're all crazy," he growled, prompting Agent Naito to smile again.

"Probably. But it comes with the job. At least it's not as bad as Nerima." Deveraux looked at him curiously.

"What's Nerima?" Harada took a drink of coffee then signalled to the waitress for a refill.

"It's another ward of Tokyo, perhaps thirty kilometres to the north-west. They don't get demon attacks, as far as I know, but they have a bad infestation of martial artists. It's kind of a tradition there. They're even worse than the magical girls, some of them are nearly as powerful from what I've heard, but even less predictable. They seem to spend most of their time beating each other up, which is very hard on the scenery. I've heard things about that place that make me glad to be living here in Minato where life is fairly normal." Both overseas police stared at him as if he was mad.

"Martial artists?" Harrison echoed. "Like Karate, Judo, that sort of thing?" Harada nodded.

"More or less. But in a lot of cases taken to ridiculous extremes. A lot less magic, although I believe they're not unfamiliar with it, but the abilities of some of that group rival some of our girls. I've heard things about a few of them that might even exceed them. There was one martial artist, who vanished some years ago, that had some incredible stories... surrounding..." He trailed off, looking puzzled, with a growing expression of deep thought. The others looked at him for a moment, but when he didn't resume talking, turned to Naito questioningly. The agent shrugged. He had no idea what Harada was thinking about.

"He's right, though. The file on Nerima is even larger than on Minato, and that file is huge. It's a very weird place. The damage isn't on the same scale, on a per-incident basis at least, but there were a hell of a lot of incidents. It's calmed down quite a bit in the last few years for some reason, but it's still very strange."

"Japan is nuts," Harrison said morosely. Naito smiled, unoffended.

"So I'm told."

When the meal was finished they ordered desserts, Harada rousing himself from his introspection long enough to make a quick selection from the menu before resuming silent thought. Eventually he shook his head a little, muttered something to himself that none of them could make out, and rejoined the world at large. "So, what are you plans for the rest of the day? Until Yori and Chou get back to us there isn't a lot we can do on your case." Deveraux finished her third cup of coffee and put the empty cup back down with a clunk.

"I haven't got anything particular planned. Richard?" Harrison shook his head, still trying to get to grips with the curve balls life seemed to be throwing him at the moment. His Canadian colleague shot him a sympathetic glance, then looked back to Sergeant Harada. "What would you suggest?"

"Well, you could do the usual tourist things, see the sights, all that sort of thing, or I could show you around the district. As long as I'm assigned to this case I'm off duty as far as normal work is concerned, and it's probably better to be out walking around that sitting back at the station. It's a nice day, after all." The two visitors glanced at each other then nodded.

"That's fine as far as I'm concerned. Lead on, Sergeant." She smiled at him. Waving the waitress over, Agent Naito settled the bill, then stood.
"I have to get back and report. I'll be around when our magical friends call. You have my cell number if you need me before them. Enjoy your stay, and please stay out of the way if a demon attacks." He grinned at their expressions then left, whistling to himself, apparently in quite a good mood.

"Demons. Magical girls. This place is insane." Harrison grumbled to himself as they left the restaurant. Deveraux sighed a little.

"So you keep saying, but it won't change the facts. Just go with the flow, Richard, you'll probably be a lot happier." He didn't look convinced but shrugged.

The sergeant spent the next couple of hours showing his guests around the district, including the university, the main shopping area, and the entertainment zones and parks. They ended up in one large park, next to a perfectly circular pond with a number of ducks happily swimming around in it. Sitting on a bench overlooking it Harada waved at the pond. "There you are." The other two looked puzzled for a moment, before Harrison's eyes widened.

"Holy crap. You don't mean..." Harada nodded with a smile crossing his face.

"Yes. The duck pond option, courtesy of Yori." Deveraux walked closer to the edge and looked at the inner surface of the depression in the ground. It was seamless glass like obsidian. Kneeling down and running a fingertip over it, she looked impressed.

"That's remarkable. The amount of heat it would take to fuse the soil like this is... unbelievable." Standing she rejoined her colleagues. "And one smallish woman did this all by herself?" Harada leaned back comfortably on the bench.

"Oh, yes. With no real effort from what I could see. I strongly suspect she could do a much bigger one if necessary. Hopefully, it never will be."

"Christ," Harrison muttered, staring at the pond filling the crater. Harada grinned at him.

"It is fairly impressive. She was very apologetic about the damage to the park, but the park authorities were pretty relaxed about it. Apparently they were thinking about making another pond anyway and this was easy to convert. It certainly doesn't leak, the slag lining is about ten centimetres thick." He laughed. "It would have cost a fortune to make something like this deliberately. They grumbled a bit about it being in the wrong place, but I think they were secretly quite pleased that they'd saved hundreds of thousands of yen. The thing was full of water with benches around it almost before it had time to cool down."

"That's a very pragmatic attitude," Deveraux commented with amusement. Harada nodded.

"We tend to be around here. Goes with the territory." After a while Harrison stopped staring at the hole, shook his head in worried wonder, then looked towards a small crowd near the middle of the park from which music could be heard coming.

"What's going on over there?" he asked curiously. Harada looked in that direction as well, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. We have a number of bands and individuals who perform in the park on an impromptu basis, I'd guess that's where the music is coming from. Let's go and have a look." The three law enforcement officers made their way over to the crowd to find a small group of musicians of the electronic persuasion playing a number of fast, high energy techno sets with a couple of synthesisers, some guitars, and an electronic drum machine. A fair number of younger people were
dancing to the music and there was an overall air of conviviality that was quite refreshing. Several enterprising food vendors had parked their carts around the crowd and were doing a brisk business in food and water. The late afternoon sun was brightly lighting the scene, which was one of people making the most out of one of the last nice days before it started to get cold.

Even though the music as decidedly modern and very fast, there were quite a lot of older people who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it. A few of them greeted Sergeant Harada as he and the two visitors joined the crowd. Exchanging greetings with them he smiled happily. "This is what I like about living and working here, in this district, you see," he explained. "People are generally friendly and open, much more so than in some places. It's an affluent area, but not snobbish like some places of this nature can be. Even the university students are surprisingly well behaved for the most part, although they can certainly enjoy themselves." He looked around the scene with a contented expression. "I put quite a lot of that down to a positive influence from two specific young women. Just by fixing a number of small things, the knock on effects are impressive. And of course, every now and then, they deal with something very big."

"Thank you, Sergeant, that's very nice of you, but I don't think we can take that much credit for it," said an amused voice from immediately behind him. He jumped a little, turning his head to see Chou smiling at him serenely. He grinned back while Harrison and Deveraux stared slightly, they'd had no warning at all the woman was approaching.

"Hello, Chou. Where's Yori?" The blonde women nodded towards the edge of the park.

"She's coming in a moment, she was checking up on something we detected earlier. We've contacted most of the people we needed to, there are still a few that we have to track down. So far no luck but we're expecting several responses over the next few hours to a day." Looking at the two foreigners, she asked, "Have you had a nice time so far?" Deveraux smiled back.

"Yes, thank you. This is a very interesting place, there seems to be quite a lot going on." Chou looked pleased.

"There often is. It starts to quieten down at this time of year, it's beginning to get a bit cold for playing in the park, for example, but it can get very exuberant during the summer. We had a particularly nice one this year." Turning to look at the musicians she listened for a moment. "This group is very good. I rather like the electronic music genre, although not everyone does. They're very talented, they can play classical music as well as this fast dance stuff extremely well." Harrison studied her for a moment.

"Do you live in this area, Miss Chou?" She smiled.

"Just Chou. And yes, Yori and I are both residents of the district. You'll understand if I don't say anything more about it." He nodded thoughtfully.

"Secret identities, I suppose?" She grinned.

"Something like that." He shook his head in a certain amount of wonder.

"I still can't believe I'm somewhere where there are honest-to-god superheroes." Chou laughed.

"Oh, it's not like that, not really. We just happen to have some specific skills and abilities that are a good match for the slightly odd problems that Minato suffers from. We do what we can to help." The Lieutenant inspected her some more, then nodded.

"OK. We may have slightly different definitions at work, but I can accept that." She grinned at
him.

"It's a lot to take in if you haven't come across it before, I do understand that. Even people from outside this ward tend to look askance at it and they come from the same culture. I'm not surprised you're having difficulty, but you'll get used to it." The woman glanced off to the side. "Ah, Yori is here." They all looked in time to see the smaller young woman with the long braided hair take a huge running jump off the roof of the nearest building, some four stories high, clearing an impossible twenty metres horizontally to land neatly in the middle of the open space that suddenly developed in the crowd as many of the bystanders also noticed her approach. Deveraux and Harrison gaped at the incredible leap as Chou giggled. "She likes to make an entrance when she's in a good mood. Even more so when she isn't."

The young woman approached them through the crowd, smiling and greeting at least as many of them as the sergeant had. The expressions of the bystanders showed considerable affection for the remarkable person walking through them, without the kind of awe that the two North Americans would somehow have expected. It was more a sort of easy and respectful familiarity than anything else. Deveraux found it very interesting. Yori stopped close to them and grinned. "Hi, guys. How's your afternoon been so far?"

Deveraux and Harrison listened with interest. Yori shook her head, looking momentarily slightly disappointed. "A portal opened up very near here so I checked it out just in case. It was only some friends of ours on a shopping trip again." She glanced at Chou with a wry smile. "Uthryyl is going to clean the wholesalers out at this rate." Chou laughed. The other three looked puzzled, which the black-haired woman noticed. "Uthryyl is a trader from one of the more interesting demon worlds, who has a nice little business going importing chocolate and coffee, amongst other things, to his home. He and his crew turn up a few times a year and buy up tons of the stuff, then ship it back. He must be raking it in, this is about the fourth time in the last eight months." Deveraux and Harrison exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"Are you telling me that there are some demons who are walking into shops and buying chocolate?" Harrison asked incredulously. Yori nodded, grinning. "Yep."

"What the hell do they pay with?" he demanded, looking stunned.

"Mostly gold and silver ingots. Almost pure. They have an arrangement with several local wholesalers who are more than happy to sell them anything they want." Yori seemed very amused by the expressions he and Deveraux were wearing.

"Do these traders know who they're dealing with?" Chou smiled.

"Oh, yes, definitely. They don't mind. A customer is a customer, even if they do have tails." Deveraux shook her head slowly while Harrison closed his eyes for a moment.

"This is a very strange place," he mumbled. Yori chuckled.
"Oh, it is that, but it's a lot of fun most of the time." Growing more serious, she added, "I told him about our little problem as well. He doesn't know anything but he's going to check around. That deals with pretty much every avenue I can think of to find our targets, now we just have to wait for everyone to get back to us."

"Can this... well, 'demon', I suppose, can he be trusted?" Harrison asked. Yori nodded with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Certainly. He may look different but he's a decent person. I trust him a lot, I've know him for quite some time." A voice calling her name attracted her attention and she turned. A small group of young men and women were approaching, apparently students from the university.

"Um, Yori? Hi?" one of the young women hesitantly said. At the black-haired woman's nod she looked slightly braver. "Um, we were wondering, um, if you and Chou could do a demonstration for us? Please?" Her voice wavered a little and she glanced at her companions, who urged her on. Yori shot Chou a look, the blonde woman nodding slightly with a small smile. Harrison looked at Deveraux for a moment, not knowing what the woman had said as she'd spoken in Japanese.

"Of course. We'd be happy to." Turning to the three police officers she smiled. "This happens every now and then. It's good practice." Both martial artist magical girls followed the group of students to a position a few metres closer to the band, who noticed and nudged each other. Sergeant Harada grinned at his overseas colleagues.

"This should be good. Watch carefully, you won't see anything like this anywhere else I suspect." Harrison and Deveraux exchanged looks, wondering what was going to happen. The crowd was whispering to itself, people pulling out cameras and camcorders, moving back and creating a circle some twenty-five metres across with Yori and Chou in the middle and the band at one side. Harada and the others were almost directly opposite. Stepping back a couple of metres from each other, Yori and Chou locked eyes, bowing formally to each other without shifting their gazes. The band kept playing but their sound engineer slowly lowered the volume to a nice background level. Returning to an upright position, a brief grin flickered across Yori's face to be met with an answering smile from Chou.

There was a pregnant pause during which only the music could be heard, the crowd having gone completely silent, before Yori made the first move. Too quickly to be seen as anything other than a blur her right foot suddenly moved from the ground to a position a centimetre from her partners shoulder, where it stopped dead. Maintaining this unlikely stance for a second, Yori then returned the foot to the ground as quickly. Chou hadn't so much as blinked. Harrison sucked in his breath, the speed of the move was unbelievable. "Holy shit..." he muttered quietly.

A slight pause, then Chou responded, stepping forward gracefully with her left hand shooting forward to just touch Yori's forehead, again so fast that it basically disappeared from her side and reappeared, completely still, in it's end position. Once more there was a slight pause before she reset to her start position. Both women smiled very slightly at each other. "And we begin..." Yori said, with a quick glance directly at Harrison and Deveraux, who took a few seconds to note that she'd spoken English presumably for their benefit.

Then they began.

"Oh, holy mother of..." Harrison stared in complete disbelief. Deveraux couldn't even manage that much. Both women were suddenly trading blows so fast they could barely be seen, blocking with loud cracks of flesh against flesh, jumping, rolling, flipping over each other in a way that was completely implausible. It looked like some particularly good movie special effect fighting sped up by several times, except it was really happening. The sheer speed was breathtaking, while the
appalling power behind the blows became apparent when Chou buried her fist to the elbow into the hard packed ground when one punch was deflected, with a sound like a hammer hitting a steak, then pulled it out again effortlessly in a shower of earth. Deveraux watched open-mouthed, glancing at her colleague to see he was doing the same.

Yori performed a standing backflip that took her over three metres straight up to land lightly on one foot on her partners head, who looked around quizzically as if wondering where she'd gone. The crowd, which had been watching engrossed, laughed delightedly. Rolling her eyes upwards Chou mock-sighed, then shot sideways a couple of paces fast enough that the other woman hung in the air for a fraction of a second before dropping to the ground. Landing lightly she smiled at the blonde, before bowing slightly. Harrison and Deveraux noticed with wonder that neither of them seemed to even be breathing hard. Again they began exchanging blows, this time with an obviously completely different style although at least as fast as before.

Once more they broke apart, grinning at each other, before taking up a pose like a pair of fencers, only without any foils. Deveraux gasped out loud when they were suddenly holding what looked for all the world like a pair of light sabres straight from the movies, about a metre long and glowing brightly, Yori's a pretty purple colour and Chou's a beautiful golden-white shade. The crowd clapped happily. The young woman whose request had prompted the bout stepped forward holding a piece of branch she had picked off the ground, looking at Yori questioningly. The martial artist nodded with a smile, and the student tossed the metre long five centimetre thick branch directly at her. Waiting until it was almost close enough to touch, the black-haired woman became a blur of movement and flashing purple arcs as her energy sword flashed into action with a throbbing hum, only to stop less than half a second later in a completely still pose with the glowing blade held upright in front of her. The branch continued it's flight past her apparently unaffected, until it hit the ground and burst into dozens of neatly cut slices, each apparently identical in thickness to the others, all of them smoking slightly. Once more the crowd applauded.

Harrison looked at Deveraux who stared back, unable to think of anything to say. They looked back as the two combatants resumed their fencing stance, then began sparring with the energy blades. Once more it was like a particularly good scene from a movie, only this time a science fiction one, as the blades roared past each other, clashing together with showers of light and a screeching sound. The crowd watched in awe as the pair fought, beginning to leap and roll as well. Within seconds they were jumping around as fast as before, slashing at each other from unlikely positions, including while one of them was flipping through the air above the other. When, halfway through the match, they each produced a second energy blade in their free hand and began using them as well, the crowd roared approval, really getting into the spirit of it. Harrison was mumbling to himself while Deveraux half-listened, her eyes fixed on the impossible sight in front of her.

After a few minutes, both the magical girls slowed then halted, once more back in their start positions. Both the energy blades disappeared. They bowed slightly to each other, then paused, before Chou grinned and bent down to pick up a number of the segments of sliced branch, each roughly three centimetres long. Yori nodded, then the blonde turned slightly to face into the park, away from the buildings. Leaning back a little Chou bounced one of the slices in her right hand for a moment, gauging it's weight, before throwing it straight up at a speed that made Deveraux blink. She almost expected to hear a sonic boom. The bit of wood travelled less than fifty metres before Yori had whipped her hand out, targeted it, and fired some sort of energy beam from her palm that intercepted the projectile with perfect accuracy. It disappeared with a flash of purple light and a sharp crack. Once more the crowd clapped, while the two visiting police officers stared. Chou threw another piece of wood and the same thing happened. Yori grinned and motioned with her other hand. The blonde laughed a little then blurred into action throwing the remainder of her ammunition so fast that no one else could see the individual motions. Yori waited for half a second...
or so until all the pieces were on their way before going into action herself, firing off a number of beams so quickly it looked like they were simultaneous, each one intercepting a piece of branch before any of them had travelled more than a hundred metres. Several reports sounded so close together that there was just a ripple of sound. Chou laughed again.

"You missed one," she said, loud enough for everyone to hear her. Yori shook her head with a smile.

"No, I let it get away. It should be on it's way back down around... now, and it will be... right... there!" She raised her hand over her shoulder and fired a final beam without looking, scoring a direct hit on the piece of wood which was dropping out of the sky a few metres above her head. Chou bowed mockingly.

"Well done." Yori returned the bow.

"Thank you." The crowd laughed, amused and impressed. Even Deveraux giggled, although it was more in shock than anything else.

The two women stepped forward and shook hands, smiling, then stepped back. This time they began slowly, not touching each other, running through a stylised set of moves which both visitors recognised as a training exercise or kata. Mirroring each other the two women flowed from position to position with incredible grace and precision, speeding up until they were moving faster than most people could manage for more than a few seconds, with no sign of effort. Both were smiling, obviously enjoying themselves. The crowd watched silently, almost everyone lost in the beauty and grace of the motion. After half a minutes or so the band, which had been playing quietly the whole time, stopped and huddled together, talking quickly until they reached a consensus. Moving back to their instruments they began another set, a fast electronic dance tune that matched the movements of the two martial artists remarkably well. The sound man turned the volume up, making Yori quickly glance at him for a moment, then nod with an approving smile. Looking back to her partner, they exchanged glances and understanding, before subtly altering the pace of their movements to sync with the music.

The kata flowed into a different style, speeding up slightly. The band increased their tempo a little to match. Yori and Chou both grinned to each other, changing styles and speeds again. Yet again, the musicians adapted to keep the beat in sync, all of them grinning as well. The crowd watched, fascinated, while the martial arts demo got set to music. After a few more changes of style and tempo Yori nodded slightly and everyone stared as the two martial artists' hands began to glow in their signature colours, trails of diffuse light following their movements, slowly fading. The crowd clapped wildly, several younger people beginning to dance around the area in the middle where the magical girls were practising their Art.

The dance music changed suddenly to a much quicker beat, becoming harder and much more electronic in nature. Yori laughed out loud, both of them flowing into a completely different style without missing a beat. The trails of light from their fingertips formed spirals around them as they moved in sync, truly dancing now as much as practising. Chou actually had her eyes closed, Deveraux noticed, a beautiful contented smile on her face. Yori looked at her in a way that left no doubt just how she felt about the other woman, unconcerned who saw it.

The impromptu martial arts dance sequence lasted for nearly fifteen minutes, speeding up and slowing down, going through so many different styles of martial arts that everyone lost count. When they wound down the band slowed, the volume dropping, until they came to a halt, completely still and facing each other. After a pause in complete silence they bowed to each other, then turned to each face in different directions, bowing to the crowd. There was a moment's more
silence, then tumultuous applause. Startled at the sheer noise Deveraux and Harrison both looked around to see that the circle of people had swollen in size by several times, there must have been over a thousand people standing there by now. Grinning happily Yori and Chou glanced at each other then slowly returned to the three police officers, being stopped and thanked by person after person.

When they finally reached the others Deveraux raised an eyebrow when she noticed that they still looked completely unaffected by the enormous exertion of the last half hour or more, neither sweating nor breathing hard. *'Their stamina must be absolutely inhuman,'* she thought. Out loud she said, "That was the most incredible thing I've ever seen." Harada, slightly behind her, laughed. "I told you."

"That you did, Sergeant." Yori grinned. "Glad you enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun. We didn't expect that last part with the music, but it worked really well. We'll have to try it again some time." Chou smiled. "We don't often show off like that, but every now and then people ask, and it only seems polite to agree. It's fun, as Yori says, and good practice as well. We'd be doing it anyway in private. This way people get some enjoyment as well, which is nice."

"Good public relations as well, I would imagine," commented Harrison absently, staring at the pair of them as if he was having trouble believing what he was seeing. Glancing sharply at him Yori nodded after a moment. "I suppose so, Lieutenant, although I wouldn't put it like that. We don't need, I hope, demonstrations like that to have good relations with the community. That was just because someone asked politely." Looking at her he nodded, understanding what she meant. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you or Chou." The martial artist grinned again. "Don't worry, you didn't, we take a lot of insulting. I know what you meant, trust me. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed it. We certainly did." She glanced at her companion for a moment. "We need to be going now, lots to do. We'll be in touch soon, hopefully. Have fun exploring until then." She glanced at her companion for a moment. "We need to be going now, lots to do. We'll be in touch soon, hopefully. Have fun exploring until then." She waved to them, nodded politely to Harada who smiled back, then ran off, leaping back onto the building she'd descended from in the first place. Chou smiled briefly at them all then followed her. The three officers watched them disappear over the rooftops before Deveraux broke the silence.

"Good grief." Harada nodded. "I know what you mean. It affected me that way the first time I saw them, and they've only become better since then. They were pretty incredible to start with." Harrison was still staring after the two women. Deveraux nudged him. "You in there, Richard?" Shaking his head slightly, he turned to look at her. "I'm really not sure any more. Did the last forty minutes actually happen?" She nodded with a slight smile. He shrugged. "Well, I guess I'm really here. I was beginning to wonder." Casting a glance at Harada who was watching him with interest he sighed. "And that's the sort of people you have around these parts?" Sergeant Harada nodded again, grinning. "Pretty much. Like I said, those two are impressive even by magical girl standards, but yes, basically that's the sort of thing that goes on a lot in Minato. Not always just for public entertainment, although they do that *extremely* well." He laughed. "Even the demon attacks get
rated around here. People take bets on them, how long they'll last, how the demon will get dealt with, which other magical girls will get involved, how they'll get dealt with, and so on. It's kind of a spectator sport." Shaking his head slowly Harrison glanced one last time in the direction the two women had disappeared in before looking back to the Japanese officer.

"Have I said that Japan is nuts?"

"Repeatedly."

"Good. Just checking."

They exchanged a look, then smiled a little. Deveraux watched with a feeling of mild disbelief herself, the demonstration by the two women had been so far beyond anything she could have expected, even with the knowledge of what they were, that she was still stunned. "How much of that do you think was for our benefit," she asked slowly as a thought struck her. Harada glanced at her and shrugged.

"I'm not sure, but I suspect some of it was aimed at you, certainly. I think she wanted you to understand what they were capable of, and short of a demon attack which no one wants, this was the best way." He paused for a moment, thinking, then added, "One thing you should realise, though, is that what you saw is only part of it. I know for a fact that they can both move a lot faster than that if they want for example, they never show off more than the necessary amount of power. It's a sound tactical move, not to let a potential enemy know everything about yourself." Deveraux and Harrison both nodded in understanding. As the crowd dispersed, the band going back to a dance track and more students turning up while the older people wandered off, the three resumed slowly strolling across the park. The sky was beginning to darken as early evening came closer.

"I'm still having trouble with the concept of demons, especially ones that wander around buying chocolate and coffee, for heaven's sake." Harrison shook his head in disbelief. Sergeant Harada smiled at this.

"I can understand that. It was a surprise to me as well when Yori mentioned it the first time. I haven't met this Uthryyl, but I have met a few other 'visitors' she's introduced me to over the years. Unusual people to be sure, but generally polite and easy to deal with." He laughed. "Once you get past the odd appearance of some of them they're just people." Harrison seemed slightly unsure, Deveraux noticed, but said nothing.

Eventually they went back to the police station. "You two may as well go back to your hotels, I suppose," Harada said. "I have your cell numbers and I'll call you and Agent Naito immediately if Yori contacts me." Deveraux nodded, but said nothing.

Harrison asked, "What are you going to do now, Sergeant?"

"I should check in with the Captain, then I need to get home to my wife. Unless anything turns up I'll see you in the morning, Lieutenant, Inspector." He shook hands with both of them. "Oh, if you want to go out tonight, Roppongi is a short ride on the Metro from here. There are all sorts of entertainment possibilities there and some decent restaurants as well." He took a sheet of paper off a nearby desk and quickly wrote down some names, in both Kanji and English. "Here. These places are pretty good, these two are nightclubs and the rest are restaurants, except for this one which is a bar."

"Thanks, Sergeant." Deveraux accepted the paper, glancing at it before folding it and placing in into her pocket. "See you tomorrow." They left, while he headed for the Captain's office.
"Ah, Sergeant. How did it go today?" Captain Uehara looked up as he knocked on her open door. Entering the office he stood in front of the desk while she leaned back in her chair and watched him.

"Well, I think. Their introduction to our special talent was quite amusing, but Inspector Deveraux at least seemed to take it more or less in stride. I'm not so sure about Lieutenant Harrison, he seems to have more difficulty accepting it. Americans can be quite rigid in their denial of magic, in my experience." She nodded, understanding.

"Yes, I can imagine. You have quite a lot of experience with them, I understand."

"Oh, yes," he replied, smiling slightly. "My time in the US was a lot of fun and very educational, but I learned very early on to keep quiet about some of the more unusual aspects of life here. By and large they're very nice people, but some of their attitudes to life are... interesting, I suppose you could say. For a country with such a multicultural background it's odd that they seem to know so little about much of the rest of the world." He shrugged. "Not my place to criticise, I guess. Anyway, I think the Lieutenant will come around. Yori and Chou put on a demo in the park at the request of some university students, which was as spectacular as ever. Good timing as well. It drove home some of what they're going to have to accept." The captain smiled.

"I wish I'd seen it. I've heard some impressive things about their public demonstrations."

"The stories probably don't do it justice. Those two have a real flair for entertainment, as well as all the fighting." Harada laughed. "They could make an absolute fortune on TV or in the movies."

"I can well imagine. Good work, Sergeant. Keep me updated, please." He nodded at the implied dismissal, saluted, and left. The captain went back to her paperwork, a slight smile still on her lips.

Late that night Harrison was sitting in a bar just off the main entertainment district in Roppongi, near a restaurant that was on the list Sergeant Harada had given them. Idly stirring his half-drunk rum and coke with a straw he'd pulled from a dispenser of them on the counter he looked around, while Deveraux got the next round in. When she came back carrying two glasses he nodded his appreciation. "Thanks."

Sitting down next to him she glanced at his face. "You still look worried, Richard." He shrugged slightly, slowly stirring his drink.

"I guess I am. This whole experience is surreal. The case has been weird from the beginning, but I was always able to pass off the stranger aspects, at least to myself, as simply some sort of technology or trick I wasn't aware of. But now..." Trailing off he sighed, sticking the wet end of the straw in his mouth and licking the coke and alcohol from it before dropping it back in his glass. "I don't know. It's all a bit much, you know?" He looked a little lost. Laura Deveraux put her hand on his for a moment, then sipped her own gin and tonic.

"I know. I also know how much you've been resisting the possibility of magic. I've been open to it from much earlier on, but even so, having it rubbed in your face like that, like it's just a normal everyday part of life, is pretty weird." Waving a hand at the mass of people noisily enjoying themselves in the bar, she added, "I don't know how many of them know about all this, I'd assume quite a lot if not all, but no-one seems too upset. It's like Agent Naito said, you get used to it."

Slowly nodding, still concentrating on his drink, Harrison eventually replied, "I suppose. Doesn't make it any easier when you're dropped right in it." One corner of his mouth went up a little. "I was expecting a certain amount of culture shock, but..." She laughed gently.
"I know, Richard, I know."

They were silent for a while, drinking slowly and watching the night life of Roppongi go past. The crowd was a mix of obvious tourists, from many countries, locals, and Japanese people from other parts of the country. Various languages could be heard all around if you listened closely, English, German, Dutch, and many others standing out. Pretty much every person present seemed to be having a good time, some of them very loudly. The two of them had walked through an area close by which was an obvious red light district, and even there people seemed polite and pleasant. Deveraux turned to her colleague. "I wonder if the reason there seems to be so little trouble is due to the Japanese culture, or the magical girls?" He looked interested.

"I don't know. It's certainly less dangerous-feeling than an equivalent area back home, but at least as chaotic. If I visit a place like this in LA I always feel I should have one hand on my weapon." She smirked, sipping her drink.

"I know what you mean. Most of the US makes me feel that way."

"Very funny. You Canadians and your lack of arms are weird as well." He smiled at her without animosity, as she snorted into her glass.

"Americans."

Settling into a companionable silence the pair of them nursed their drinks while busy with their own thoughts. A particularly beautiful young girl, perhaps mid twenties, sidled up to Harrison and made polite enquiries as to whether he would like to partake of her services, in which, she assured him, she was both extremely skilled and reasonably priced. Ignoring Deveraux, who was giggling quietly to herself at this point, he turned the girl down as gently as possible. Not at all disappointed, she bowed slightly to him, thanked him for his time, and left, targeting another obvious foreigner across the room. Watching her go he smiled a little. "Even the prostitutes are polite. This is a very strange place." His companion was still giggling. "Oh, grow up, Laura. How old are you?" She grinned at him.

"She was very pretty, and quite affordable." Laughing, he turned away from watching the girl, who seemed to have had more luck with her next potential customer.

"Yes to both, but I'm not interested." She teased him about it for some time, until she was approached in a similar manner by a very good looking young man, the male counterpart of the girl. Harrison snickered. Having some difficulty turning him down as he was somewhat more persistent Deveraux finally managed to push him off on to another woman at the next table, who seemed rather irritated about it. Looking at her friend she wryly smiled.

"OK, you can stop laughing now."

When they left the bar a while later, just after midnight, both were pleasantly tipsy although not really drunk. Looking at a map Deveraux had bought they decided to walk back to their hotel, it was only about five kilometres and they both felt the night air would clear their heads. About halfway they were passing through a less-travelled area that seemed to mainly be light commercial and industrial properties, when Harrison stopped. "Hey. What's that?" His companion also stopped, looking at him.

"What?"

"That sound. Can't you hear it? It sounds like a fight." She listened, and sure enough there were noises of several people making the sounds one, especially if one had a background in law
enforcement, would think indicated some sort of physical altercation. Not much talking, although there were intermittent sounds of at least three people grunting and swearing, but quite a lot of meaty smacking noises and the occasional crunch. They exchanged glances, police instincts finally winning out over common sense.

"You realise we're in a foreign country and about as far out of our respective jurisdictions as we could possibly get," Deveraux said quietly, abruptly feeling completely sober as she watched Harrison pull out his weapon and check it before putting his hand in his pocket, still holding the gun. He nodded.

"I do, but that sounds nasty. I can't let it go, can you?" She paused for a moment, then sighing, did the same.

"No." Looking around they headed towards the alley the sounds seemed to be coming from. "We're going to get into trouble for this."

"Probably." They cautiously peered around the corner of the alley, allowing their eyes to adjust to the darker environment, seeing nothing but more clearly hearing the sounds. They were definitely coming from down there somewhere. The alley ran back alongside a large low warehouse for some fifty metres, going around a corner, presumably to the rear of the building. With a glance at his compatriot, Harrison took the lead, sidling carefully along the wall with Deveraux following him, glancing behind herself every now and then to make sure no-one snuck up on them. Once or twice she also looked upwards to check the roof-line. As they approached the end of the alley and the turn, the noises became louder and clearer. There were at least three female voices, and another one that intermittently sounded, much deeper and somehow worrying. Stopping a couple of metres from the corner Harrison looked back at Deveraux.

"Ready?" he whispered. She nodded silently, removing her weapon from concealment and holding it pointing up in both hands, according to the best practices of the RCMP. A flick of one finger released the safety. Nodding back at her he did the same, then slowly approached the corner, sticking his head just far enough past the corner for one eye to see what was going on. Deveraux watched his back stiffen slightly as he froze for several seconds, then as slowly retreated until he was back behind the protection of the wall again. "Fuck me," he said very very quietly, not really to her. She looked at his face in the dim lighting cast by the street lamp at the other end of the alley.

"What is it?" After a moment he looked at her, wide-eyed.

"I can't really do it justice. Have a look." Staring at him for a moment, she then slid past him and repeated the same exercise he'd just finished, with almost identical results. When she was back against the wall they looked at each other.

"Is that...?" she began.

"A demon? I think so."

"And those must be..."

"More magical girls, yes." She nodded absently, then slowly had another look.

There were three young women, somewhere around their late teens or so, surrounding a... thing. A fourth girl, dressed like the other three, in a remarkably immodest outfit that a professional stripper might be embarrassed to be seen in public wearing, was slumped apparently unconscious against the wall just around the corner, mere metres from them. There was a large dent in the brick wall
which seemed to conform to the shape of her body unpleasantly well, implying that she'd hit it with enough force to pulp a normal human. The three other girls all bore evidence of having been in a serious fight, one of them limping a bit and all quite bloody. They were holding a series of weapons, ranging from some sort of sword to a pole-arm of a type neither officer was familiar with, all of which were glowing in various pastel hues.

Their opponent was very clearly not human in the slightest. The enormous fangs were proof enough of that, never mind the dark scabrous skin, a colour they couldn't make out under the bad lighting, covering it from head to foot. The three legs and the tentacles were just icing on the cake. The tentacles, which were a couple of metres long, were tipped in ten-centimetre talons which seemed to be wet, one with what was clearly blood, the others something much worse and probably toxic. It had started with at least six of them but two were now writhing on the ground near it, like damaged worms. As she watched, one of the girls made a feint at the thing with her sword, while the one with the pole-arm dived forward, rolling across the ground and coming up inside the creature's defences, lopping off another tentacle before being batted away like she weighed nothing as the thing let out a screeching roar then swore in a guttural language unlike anything the inspector had ever heard.

All three conscious girls looked exhausted, while the demon, although injured, seemed to have an unpleasant amount of life left in it. Pulling her head back around the corner before any of the combatants noticed her, Inspector Laura Deveraux, RCMP, said with feeling, "Fucking Christ on a crutch." Harrison nodded silently.

"What do we do?" she asked after a few seconds.

"I don't know." He looked speculatively at his firearm. She shook her head.

"Do you think that will do anything other than annoy it?" Harrison shrugged.

"I don't know. Perhaps we could distract it, get it's attention, and they could take it out?"

"While it reduces us to hamburger, pissed off about being shot at?" she asked furiously. Looking at her, he shrugged again.

"Possibly. But if we just leave them it might end badly, they look like they're not coming out on top."

Deveraux sighed. "Fuck."

"Yep."

"We can't just open fire on it, it might distract them as well, which could be even worse." They thought for a moment, then Deveraux risked another look. The sounds from the fight were getting louder, but the girls seemed to be having trouble. One of them pulled some sort of device from her belt and pointed it at the demon, letting off a bright ball of energy that smacked into it's torso with a sizzling noise. As it stiffened in pain the swords-woman shot forwards and hacked at it's middle leg, carving a chunk out of it before being forced to retreat as it recovered. "Damn. It's not going their way," she said, glancing behind her at her companion. A sudden thought struck her. Pulling her ID out of her pocket she opened it so the badge in it was visible, then cautiously stuck her head around the corner yet again. Waiting until one of the girls, the shortest one, happened to look in her direction, she waved quickly, then held up her ID as the young woman paused and stared. Holding up her handgun she flipped the ID shut, pointed to the gun then the demon. The girl shook her head, alternating keeping an eye on the thing and looking at her.
Deveraux mimed shooting a gun, pointed at the demon, then made a little twirling motion with her finger to indicate it turning around. Pointing at the three girls she then tapped herself on the back of the head, then once more pointed at the demon, desperately hoping that the woman understood. Apparently she did, because she looked interested, then thoughtful. Covertly waving back to the officer she made a clearly recognisable 'hold on' gesture, before jumping backwards out of range of one of the thing's remaining tentacles which took her momentary inattention as an open invitation. Rolling her eyes for a moment she slashed at it with one of her blades, she was holding something that looked like a pair of highly stylised hand scythes, a weapon that Deveraux vaguely recognised from martial arts films but couldn't put a name to. The tentacle pulled back quickly and the girl whispered something quickly to her colleague, the swords-woman.

The taller girl looked startled and shot a glance at Deveraux, her eyebrows going up. After a moment she nodded, moving to cover the short girl as she dashed over and talked to the one with the pole-arm. This girl also glanced in the direction of the officer, nodding after a moment. "What's going on?" Harrison asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I think I've got them understanding that we can cause a distraction. They seem to be setting up for it. Hang on." All three girls were slowly manoeuvring around in a semicircle to put the demon between them and the corner of the alley. "Yep, they're getting into position. Get ready, and for god's sake don't miss, they're right on the other side of it." Harrison nodded, checking his weapon again out of habit. "OK... now!" The short girl waved urgently to her, and she dropped to one knee, taking careful aim at the top of the thing's back which was clearly exposed ten metres away. Harrison dived around the corner and did the same next to her. Both officers fired several rapid shots, most of the rounds hitting the demon, which emitted a horrendous roar, staggered, then spun around far faster than they were expecting something with that many holes in it to move. "Shit." Deveraux emptied her weapon into the creature's chest. Harrison stood, took careful aim, suddenly icy calm, and shot it twice in the face.

Unfortunately this only seemed to make it absolutely furious, all it's remaining tentacles shooting towards them far too fast to avoid. Just as both officers thought they were for it, the thing suddenly froze. Opening the eye which had involuntarily squeezed itself shut as the tentacle on the left had approached her face, Deveraux scrambled backwards as it slowly toppled forwards, it's cleanly severed head bouncing off the tarmac a metre to the side. The tall brunette with the pole-arm looked tiredly satisfied as she lowered her weapon. "Oh, holy god that was close," Harrison mumbled, slumping against the wall of the alley. Deveraux stood carefully as she watched the three girls walk over to the corpse and have a discussion in Japanese, their tiredness coming through clearly despite the foreign language. Nodding, the short girl put her weapons away then pulled out some sort of artefact, which she pointed at the body. Concentrating on it the device began to give off a lambent blue glow, while the corpse slowly crumbled away into dust. Within thirty seconds nothing was left. Deveraux and Harrison stared in amazement.

Putting the short metallic rod away somewhere, the girl sighed. Glancing at the two officers she nodded thanks, before suddenly catching sight of her injured colleague, gasping as she saw how injured the girl was. Swearing in Japanese she ran over, quickly checking her, the other two following only slightly more slowly. The foreigners watched with concern as she checked the young woman's vitals, sighing in relief when she found the girl was alive. Squatting back on her heels she looked up at Deveraux and said something. "Sorry, I don't speak Japanese," the woman said.

"Oh, right, you're not local. American?" the girl asked, switching to good if accented English. Deveraux shook her head.

"No, Canadian. RCMP." She pulled out her ID again and showed it to the girl. "My friend here is
American. We're here on a case, luckily we have permission to carry our service weapons." She looked at the gun still in her right hand, then groaned. "But I don't know how we're going to explain this. Captain Uehara made it very clear indeed that we were only to use them as an absolutely last resort action." The girl stood, holding out her hand. She shook it.

"Don't worry, I'll explain it to her. I know some of her men, and she's in the district a couple of my friends work in. I don't think there will be any trouble. Thanks, by the way, that was getting nasty. I'm Aiko. This is Tamiko and Misaki, and on the ground is Fumiko." Deveraux nodded.

"Your friends? Would that be Yori and Chou, by chance?" Aiko stared, then nodded herself.

"That's them. You know them?"

"We're actually working with them. It's a complicated story, a case from North America that ended up here with some magical help. Sergeant Harada introduced us." Aiko looked interested.

"Ah, the good sergeant. I like him a lot. Hmm, I'd like to hear more about that case at some point, but we have to get Fumiko some help. That damn thing was vicious, and it's two friends were worse."

"There are more of them?" Harrison asked, looking around with a worried expression. Tamiko snickered nastily.

"Not any more." Aiko looked at her friend, smiling a little, then produced a cell-phone. Hitting a speed-dial number she waited for it to be answered then spoke rapidly into it. Listening for a moment she nodded to herself, then replied at length, looking at Harrison and Deveraux while she did. The latter was sure she heard her and her friend's name come up. Nodding again the young woman listened for a moment, then hung up after a couple more words.

"OK, we're going to meet Yori and Chou at a safe-house. Would you like to come as well? Apparently it's quite close to your hotel." Glancing at Deveraux, Harrison smiled uncertainly.

"Well, it's kind of you to offer, but is your friend all right to be carried all that way? Perhaps we should call for an ambulance." Aiko laughed.

"Sorry, I forgot, you're not familiar with all this. Yori explained. No, we're going to teleport. I can manage all of us." Harrison stared at her with wide eyes.

"Teleport?"

"Oh, yes. It's the best way to travel." She grinned at him. Looking at Inspector Deveraux, he shrugged. She returned the shrug.

"Um, OK, I guess. Why not?" Aiko smiled.

"Great. One thing, the first time will probably make you really dizzy for a few seconds, so be ready for it. It's safe otherwise, though." Misaki knelt and carefully picked up the other young woman, who both visitors noticed bore a strong resemblance to the brunette. She noticed them noticing.

"She's my sister," the brunette girl said shortly. Deveraux nodded understanding.

"OK, stand here, please," Aiko said, indicating a spot in front of her. With a glance at his colleague Harrison followed the instructions, as did the other officer. Satisfied, Aiko checked her colleagues, then did something. The world flickered, and both police officers staggered.
"Oh, hell!" Deveraux moaned, stumbling. Someone steadied her, guiding her to a chair, which she dropped into with gratitude, leaning back and feeling the world spin around her for a short time. She could vaguely hear Harrison making noises that indicated he was trying not to vomit. When her equilibrium settled to the point she could open her eyes without feeling like she was going to puke, she cautiously looked around. Surprisingly the nausea had subsided nearly as rapidly as it had come on, leaving her slightly dizzy but no worse than a couple of drinks. Which, she suddenly remembered, she had had. 'Ah,' she thought to herself ruefully.

She and Harrison were in a biggish room, which had a window through which she could see a street a couple of floors below. In the distance she saw the lights of several large buildings. She was sitting in a chair with Harrison beside her in another one, still looking slightly pale. Aiko stood next to them, watching them carefully. "It hits almost everyone like that the first time, sometimes worse. Chou was puking for five minutes. Yori, of course, didn't even notice." She grinned. "Feel OK now?"

"More or less. That was a very strange experience." The petite brunette looked amused.

"You get used to it." Looking past her, Deveraux saw a fold-out sofa bed which had Fumiko lying on it, with Yori, Chou, and the remainder of Aiko's team standing around it. Chou was carefully going over the unconscious young woman, speaking quietly to Yori while the black-haired girl nodded. Pushing herself to her feet the inspector walked over, followed by Aiko.

"How is she?" she asked. Chou glanced up.

"Six broken ribs, two crushed vertebrae, ruptured spleen, punctures to her liver and one kidney, broken collarbone, and a broken ankle. Not to mention a slow-acting poison of some sort. Nothing too serious." Deveraux gaped at her, horrified.

"Nothing too serious! Are you mad? She'll be lucky to live, never mind ever walk again with injuries like that." Chou smiled gently.

"Don't worry, Inspector. We're quite good at this." She looked at her partner. "You want to do the organs while I do the bones?" Yori nodded. Kneeling down, one on each side of the injured girl, the pair stretched out their hands, placing them on specific parts of her body. Deveraux gasped in shock as a glow appeared between their hands and the girl's body. She twitched a little, Chou quickly placing one glowing hand on her forehead for a second. The young woman suddenly relaxed completely and the blonde nodded, satisfied, returning her hand to the operation in progress. Looking to the side as she felt someone come up beside her, Deveraux nodded to Harrison, then followed his amazed gaze back to the scene on the bed.

After a few seconds Chou looked pleased. "Good, the ribs are done. Misaki, can you hold her leg still, please? Aiko, hold her foot. Yes, like that. Right, don't move." Once more she touched the girl and the glow returned. Thirty seconds passed until she smiled. "Done. It will ache for a day or two, I think, but it's fixed." She turned her attention to the young woman's upper torso. This time the glow lasted nearly a minute. When she had finished Yori was still slowly moving her hands across Fumiko's lower torso, concentrating. "How's it going?"

"Her spleen was a mess, I practically had to rebuild it from scratch. I'm doing the liver now," the black-haired woman said absently. Harrison glanced at Deveraux, shock and awe in his eyes. She nodded a little knowing exactly what he was feeling. In many ways this was by far the most impressive and startling thing she'd seen in a day of incredibly startling and impressive things. Chou passed the time until Yori was finished by erasing a number of cuts and scrapes on Fumiko's chest and arms. Deveraux gaped as her glowing hand passed slowly along the bleeding skin, leaving no marks behind at all.
"Holy crap," she mumbled. Chou looked at her for a moment with a smile.

"I prefer this to killing things, I have to admit. It's more worthwhile, but sometimes we have to do things we don't like." The officer nodded slowly, understanding.

"Do you have medical training other than this... whatever the hell it is that you're doing?" Chou looked back to her work.

"Yes. Quite a lot of it. This would be much more difficult otherwise. You have to know how things are meant to work to be able to put them back together. That said, Yori invented this technique years ago before she learned medicine and did pretty well." Her partner shot her a quick smile. A few seconds later she sat back.

"Right. All done. Just the spinal stuff now. We need to roll her over, very carefully. Excuse me." She stood and politely elbowed the observing people out of the way, Chou matching her position on the other side of the bed. "OK. Careful." They slowly and gently rolled the girl over onto her stomach. Harrison looked away, nauseated. "Ick. That's pretty unpleasant." This was a mild description, the young woman's back looked like someone had tried to scrape it raw with a concrete block, which was more or less accurate. Bone showed through in a couple of places and there was a lot of raw flesh and blood. The two magical girls looked at each other, sighed simultaneously, and got to work.

Ten minutes later Deveraux was genuinely stunned. She had just seen injuries that by rights should have been rapidly fatal anywhere outside a major trauma centre, and probably permanently life-altering under even the best prognosis, healed to the point that there was no evidence of them at all. Fumiko was now lying on her back on a bed that had had it's bloody coverings replaced by Chou once they had finished, apparently sleeping comfortably, with no sign of what she'd gone through except for her rather tattered uniform. She stared for a while until Yori handed her a cup. Startled, she looked at it, then took it from the smiling young woman. "It can be a bit of a shock. For some reason, healing impresses people in a way that nothing else does." Sipping the steaming liquid, which turned out to be some sort of tea, Deveraux nodded slowly.

"That's got to be the most amazing thing I've ever seen. And you worked out how to do that yourself?" The girl nodded, looking slightly annoyed about something.

"I kind of had to. A very long story, one I don't like to think about. Anyway, between us Chou and I improved the technique, we're pretty good at it now. Unfortunately like a lot of our more unusual abilities teaching it to others seems very difficult, we do things in a very weird way according to other magic workers. It's a pity, I'd really like to see that method in wide use. We simply can't use it as much as we'd like. At least we can help the people who are most likely to require it."

"So, you're the medical go-to squad as well?" Harrison smiled at the girl, who raised an eyebrow then grinned back.

"Pretty much. Some of the magical girl teams have healing powers at least as good, although I don't think many if any of them have much real medical knowledge. But most don't. We made it clear to even the ones we have... issues... with, that if they had a medical emergency they should contact us. Many of them have at one point or another. As have a number of the local police, a few others we know well, and a fair number of our special visitors." She laughed. "We've even been for what I suppose you'd call a couple of house calls for some of those visitors." Harrison looked at her oddly but shrugged after a moment, sipping his own tea.

Fumiko made a mumbling noise and put her hand to her head, wincing. Everyone looked at her, Misaki rapidly moving to sit beside her, holding her other hand. The girl on the bed opened her...
eyes and muttered something in Japanese, making her sister smile. After a moment her eyes fucussed and she looked around, staring briefly at the two people she didn't recognise with a furrowed brow, before looking at her sister. The two began talking quietly. Chou motioned them all to the other side of the room, where they sat.

"Let them have some time alone. Sisters need to talk after something like that." She looked momentarily sad, then smiled. "So, Lieutenant, Inspector, what did you think of your first run in with a demon?" Harrison stared at her.

"I think I'd like it to be my last run in with a demon, to be honest." Aiko and Yori burst out laughing while Tamiko giggled. Chou nodded understandingly.

"Yes, I can see why you'd think that."

"Thank you for helping, Lieutenant," Aiko said, grinning at him. "You too, Inspector. That was a brave thing to do under the circumstances. I wouldn't recommend shooting something like that normally, as you saw all it mostly does is make them really angry, but this time it was just what was called for." She laughed. "If you do want to shoot a demon you're going to need a much bigger gun. And, ideally, be a very long way away."

"Something like a six inch naval gun would probably be about right," Harrison said with considerable vigour. Yori produced an amused expression.

"For a little one like that, yes." Harrison stared at her, unsure whether she was joking. She was smiling but there was something in her eyes which made him shiver. Glancing at Deveraux he saw she was also worried. The martial artist turned to the leader of the other team. "Three of them? That's unusual, you normally only see one at a time of that lot. I wonder why three?" Aiko shrugged.

"No idea. It wasn't very communicative. I did ask, but you know that bunch, they tend to lie at the best of times." Everyone other than the two police officers nodded thoughtfully. "Then it tried to rip our heads off. We didn't spend much time chatting after that."

"Fair enough." Yori turned as Fumiko and Misaki stopped talking, the former slowly sitting up, then standing. "How do you feel?" she called across the room, still speaking English.

"Like I got thrown through a brick wall," Fumiko said, grimacing. Misaki looked darkly amused, while Tamiko snickered.

"You didn't go all the way through." Fumiko grunted.

"That fucking thing can't have been trying very hard then. Last time, I did."

"It was a very thick wall, to be fair," Aiko said with a smile. Fumiko shrugged, then winced, touching her collarbone gently.

"If I'd had time to get my shield up this wouldn't hurt so much." She seemed irritated, more with herself than anyone else. Yori smirked a little.

"I keep telling you guys you need more combat practice." Tamiko shot her a glance.

"Yes, and then you beat the crap out of us worse than that thing did. You've broken my arm three times this year so far." The black haired girl leaned back comfortably in her chair.

"Ah, I love my work, sometimes." She grinned. Chou sighed gently, casting a fond yet mildly
disapproving glance at her partner.

Harrison and Deveraux listened to the banter with a weird feeling. There was an underlying seriousness to it which belied the levity of the words. Everyone was clearly aware that it could have been much worse. It reminded them both very strongly of the sort of gallows humour that law enforcement officers the world over tended to, making them realise that these young women were very like them in many ways. If nothing else they could respect some fellow professionals, even if the profession was one they still had difficulty believing existed.

Deveraux was looking at the four girls, then away, frowning slightly to herself. Yori noticed, smiling slightly. "It's a protection spell," she said. The woman looked at her.

"Pardon?"

"You just noticed that when you aren't looking at them you can't remember details of what they look like, right?" Harrison raised his eyebrows as Deveraux nodded with an odd expression.

"Yes. It's very strange. I can remember their names, but draw a complete blank on their faces and general appearance. But when I look back at them everything comes back." Aiko looked amused, as did the other three.

"Like I said, it's a spell, for identity protection. It makes it basically impossible to identify them when they're in, well, street clothes. Not these," she gestured at the skimpy uniforms the girls were wearing, "pervert's dream clothes." Tamiko looked down at herself, then grinned. The other three looked somewhat embarrassed. Deveraux and Harrison looked at each other, eyebrows up. "That's pretty impressive. How on earth does something like that work?" Harrison started experimenting, not having noticed up until now. Yori sighed a little.

"It's kind of complicated to explain, even if you had a background in magic. I've heard it called a perceptual filter which is a reasonable description even if a bit simplistic. But that glosses over a very complex spell." Deveraux nodded.

"OK. I guess it's not something I'd understand anyway." She thought for a moment, then mused, "I wonder why I didn't notice until now?"

"It breaks down a little during very intense emotions. Still works, just slows down the forgetting bit by a few seconds," Aiko explained. "So, since you kept looking back at us, essentially it was being reset before it fully worked. Now that everyone is safe it's working to design. I don't know whether that part of it is deliberate or not."

"Magic is very strange," Harrison commented. Everyone else nodded.

"You're not the first one to have noticed that." Chou smiled at him warmly.

Yori looked around at them. "I guess we'd better get these two back to their hotel. Fumiko, you feel OK to go home, or do you want to come back with us?" The tall girl poked her collarbone again.

"I'm fine. Thanks, guys."

Aiko glanced at the two police officers. "I told Yori what happened with your firearms. She'll explain it to the captain. If needed, I'll come and give her a report as well. There shouldn't be any trouble." She smiled at them. "You did help in a genuine and nasty demon attack, after all." Harrison looked grateful, while Deveraux smiled back.

"Thank you."
"No problem. I'll go back and pick up all your brass as well, in case you need it for your report. The captain will almost certainly want this in writing. If there are any bullets in the walls I'll get them as well, but I think you hit with nearly every shot. Good work, by the way."

"Can you drop them off at the hotel, Aiko?" Yori asked. The short brunette nodded.

"Sure. Can you spare a bit of power, I'm getting a bit low after teleporting so many people." Yori grinned at her.

"Again? I'm just a battery to you, aren't I?" Aiko laughed and held out an odd looking necklace, the other woman touching it with glowing fingers for a few seconds. "There you go, that should be full."

"Thanks, Yori. See you in a moment." She turned to the two visitors who had watched this with interest. "Right. Stand over here, and I'll jump you right to the front door." Once more the world twitched and Deveraux staggered a little. It was nothing like as disorientating this time, she found, just a quick burst of dizziness that left almost instantly. She looked up to see their hotel lobby door mere metres away.

"Thank you, Aiko." The girl grinned.

"You're welcome. See you around, if you're here for a while. Take care, and try to stay away from the demons. Oh, when I teleport out it produces a very bright flash, so don't look right at me unless you want to be blinded for a while, OK?" Both officers exchanged a glance, then turned around. Behind them they heard Aiko giggle, then the street was briefly lit as if an enormous flashbulb had gone off. When they looked back the girl was gone.

"Well. That was... interesting." Harrison looked at his colleague with his eyebrows raised.

"That's one way of putting it. Frankly, terrifying would be a better description as far as I'm concerned." Both of them laughed a little, entering their hotel.

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When they entered the police station the next day, Sergeant Harada was sitting at his desk, looking at a sealed transparent plastic bag. Glancing up as they approached he showed it to them. "This was dropped off last night for me with a note to give it to you. Something you'd like to tell me?"

Deveraux and Harrison looked at each other, then back at the bag, which contained nearly two dozen expended 9mm casings and three rather squashed bullets.

"Um, we had an interesting time on the way back from a bar last night?" Harrison tried, looking guilty. Harada gazed evenly at him.

"I just bet you did." He suddenly grinned. "OK, tell me. The captain would like to see you, but I want to hear this first." They looked at each other again, then Deveraux shrugged a little, motioning to Harrison. Sitting down he explained the events of the previous night, which felt slightly unreal in the cold light of day. When he finished Harada stared at him for a while. "Hmm. You did have an interesting time. You seem to have been dropped into the deep end with magical girls, that's for sure." He shook his head in wonder. "I don't know anyone who's shot at a demon of that type and got away with it. Normally the best response is to run like a bastard."

"I can see why," Harrison said, thinking about the thing they'd seen. "About sixteen rounds in it, two in the head, and it just got angrier. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it." Deveraux laughed slightly.

"Hey, do you believe in magic now?" she asked.
"Oh, yes. I do indeed believe in magic now. After what I saw..." Harada grinned at him.

"It's a pretty effective way to find out the truth, but it is a little harsh. OK, let's go and see the captain. I don't think there will be too much trouble, but she may shout at you for a while. Let her get it out of her system, it's the best thing in the long run." Swallowing slightly, they both got up and went with him to their doom.

The captain did indeed shout. Quite a lot. In the end, though, she calmed down and listened carefully as they went over the story once more. At the end she sighed. "All right, I accept you didn't have any real choice once you got involved. I'm slightly sorry you did get involved in the first place, but from the way you described it that may have been for the best. I'd like a written report of this from both of you, please, by the end of the day. Sergeant, can you ask Yori to submit one as well, and Aiko if you can get hold of her?" He nodded. "Thank you. Put the casings and the bullets with the report, please. It's unlikely to go any higher, but if it does I want everything in order." She looked at the two foreign police officers. "If at all possible please try not to get involved in anything like that again."

Both nodded fervently. "I certainly have no intention of deliberately going up against a demon, Ma'am," Harrison said. She smiled very slightly.

"That's good." Turning to the sergeant she thought for a moment. "Issue them replacement ammunition and log that in the report as well."

"Yes, Captain," he replied, turning and waving his colleagues out of the office. When they were safe out of earshot, he smiled. "I think she must like you guys. That was pretty easy." Harrison stared at him.

"Easy? She made me feel like a rookie again." Harada snickered.

"She has a way with words. Believe me, if she was really angry you'd be on a plane home by now, probably in handcuffs. No, the captain was in quite a good mood all things considered. If it hadn't been Yori and Aiko's team matters might have been different, but she has a lot of respect for those girls." He showed them to a couple of computers. "Let me set these up for English and you can get your reports typed up. Best to get them out of the way sooner than later." Retrieving a pair of US keyboards from a cupboard he replaced the Japanese ones with them, then fiddled with both machines for a moment. "There we go. It should be reasonably recognisable. Let me know if you have any problems, I'll be at my desk." Both foreigners sat and began typing, a very common exercise with very uncommon contents.

A couple of hours later they had just about finished when a pair of familiar figures sat down next to them. "Hi, guys. How's it going?" Yori asked, looking curiously at the screen of Harrison's computer. He sighed slightly, leaning back in his chair.

"About as well as you could expect. I never thought I'd be writing a report to a Japanese police captain about how I and a Canadian colleague got involved in a firefight with a demon and some magical girls." She snickered.

"It could have been worse." He stared at her.

"How?"

"There was only one demon..." Harrison put his head in his hands.

"Oh, god. This is insane." Patting him comfortingly on the shoulder, she grinned.
"You'll get used to it."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me. When will this happy state start? Because, I can tell you now, I'm nowhere near used to it yet." Both she and Chou laughed, even Deveraux snickering a little.

Sergeant Harada came over, greeting the two girls with a smile. "Hello, Yori, Chou. The captain asked if you'd mind having a word with her when you have a moment." They glanced at each other then nodded.

"Yes, no problem, Sergeant. If I can use one of your computers I can write up a report of last night first, though." He waved her over to his desk. Sitting at it she altered a couple of settings on the machine, then started typing at an absolutely insane speed. The continuous buzzing noise of the keyboard made everyone in the open-plan office stare until they saw who it was. Deveraux and Harrison gaped. Chou grinned at them.

"We have extremely fast reactions," she said, "the biggest problem is having to go slowly enough to allow the computer to keep up, keyboards aren't meant to work that fast." In under five minutes Yori had typed some twelve pages of text, formatted it neatly, and sent it to the printer. Pushing her chair back she got up, retrieved the papers and stapled them together. Quickly shooting the two officers a smile she and Chou headed for the captain's office.

Deveraux shook her head in wonder. "Every time I think they can't possibly surprise me again, something like that happens."

"They are something special, that's for sure." Harrison turned back to his work, finishing it a few minutes later and printing it. "Done." Deveraux printed her report shortly afterwards. "Here you go, Sergeant." Harada took both reports, looked them over, and nodded in satisfaction.

"Thank you. I'll get these to the captain." He walked off, returning a few minutes later with the magical girls, all three of them laughing about something. "The captain sends her thanks. Here, this should be enough for you." He handed Harrison a box of 9mm cartridges. Both officers took out their weapons and began reloading them. Harada also produced a cleaning kit, which Deveraux accepted with thanks. Dismantling her weapon she carefully cleaned it, then lubricated and reassembled it, handing the swabs and fluid to Harrison who did the same. Yori and Chou watched with interest.

"You obviously know your way around a handgun," Yori observed. Harrison nodded, intent on his task.

"It's drilled into you in training. On more than one occasion this thing has saved my life, LA is a bit gun-happy even by US standards." Chou sighed a little.

"I've heard a lot about the US and your love affair with firearms. To us it seems, well, rather irresponsible, to let practically anyone have lethal weaponry." She paused for a moment. "I've heard all the arguments on both sides of it, and I do understand it's not the weapon itself that's dangerous but the person holding it, but even so, it seems to me that less guns inevitably leads to less people being shot with them. The number of simple accidents involving firearms in the US is remarkable, never mind the number of deliberate actions." He nodded thoughtfully, reassembling his weapon carefully.

"I know what you mean. Even though I come from that culture, one in which firearms are deeply embedded, in my line of work I see a lot of the downsides of it. I'm no gun nut, I carry one but I'm not entirely in favour of random citizens walking around armed to the hilt, if only because it makes
my own job much more dangerous. But it's a part of the culture, much like you and your friends are here." She indicated understanding. He shrugged, sliding the magazine back into the weapon and making sure the safety was engaged before putting it away. "Nothing I can do about it one way or the other, I just have to work with what we have." Handing the depleted box of ammunition back to Harada, who locked it away in his desk, he looked around at the various people.

"So, what next? Have you heard anything yet?" Yori nodded.

"We've been contacted by about half the people we got in touch with. So far, pretty much everything came back negative. We did get one report about a mage that apparently wanted some slightly unusual information a few months back, which might be something connected to this case. I've asked for more details, which will take a few hours. No one seems to have heard anything specific, though. That said, the information I gave out has several people rather worried. We'll certainly hear back if these people are found, I have no doubt about that."

A few minutes later, while they were discussing life in the US, which neither of the martial artists had been to, a faint buzzing sounded. Yori looked at Chou, who produced a cell-phone from somewhere and glanced at it. Her eyebrows went up. "It's Uthryyl." Yori also looked slightly surprised. Chou answered the phone, in a language that wasn't either Japanese or English. After a brief conversation she handed the phone to Yori, who spoke at length in the same language. Eventually she hung up, handing it back to Chou with a nod of thanks. Harrison and Deveraux were looking at both girls oddly. The language they had used was very strange sounding. She noticed the look and correctly determined the reason.

"It's a common trade language used through a number of demon worlds. We both learned it over the last few years, it's useful when you visit them. Uthryyl speaks Japanese very well, but we tend to use the other one when we talk, mainly to keep in practice." Deveraux nodded while Harrison listened, fascinated. "Right. What that was all about is a pretty solid lead." They all sat up, listening intently. "Uthryyl made some enquiries of his own, he went back to his home, then to a couple of trade worlds. It seems that there is a mage from this general area who has been buying up a lot of materials recently, ones that are used in the creation of a specific type of portal. Normal portals are produced through one or other spell, they're very complicated and difficult to do. Quite a lot of power is needed and often more than one mage to keep them stable. They're essentially impossible to automate, they need one or more actual mages. That's a normal, two way, stable portal." She stopped, trying to think of the best way to continue.

After a moment, she went on, "It's possible to make a much simpler one, which has some severe limitations. It only goes one way, it can't be kept open for more than a few seconds, perhaps half a minute, and it eats power like you wouldn't believe, they're horribly inefficient. But they can be automated. By that, I mean the spell can be prepared and applied to something a little like the storage sphere I showed you yesterday. In fact it uses one of them to hold the power to run it. The spell can be triggered by anyone who knows the process, it runs entirely on the stored power, and this sort of thing is often carried as an emergency escape method by interworld travellers who think ahead. You can keep it in your pocket or whatever, and if you really get stuck, activate it and jump through, you understand?" The three officers nodded.

"OK, good. Now, the thing about this is that the mage involved isn't someone anyone has ever heard of being involved in making these things, which is something of a specialist art. And he's been acquiring enough materials to make hundreds of them, which is very strange. It's an expensive process, normally even a specialist might only get ten or twenty orders a year. Hundreds?" She shook her head. "No, there's something funny going on there." Stopping as a thought struck her, she suddenly looked appalled. "Oh, crap." Swearing softly in Japanese in a way that made Harada both amused and impressed at the same time, she produced another phone and dialled a number.
Impatiently tapping the fingers of her free hand on the desk, she immediately began talking very fast when it was answered. The response she got didn't make her look any happier. Hanging up she thought for a moment, then dialled another number. This one took longer to be answered, but the conversation was shorter. Again, she looked annoyed, and a little worried. "Damn it." she muttered in English.

"Do you have that blue haired girl's number, what's her name, Ami?" she asked Chou. The blonde thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I think so. Hang on." Pulling out her phone again she looked through the contact list, before showing it to Yori. The black haired girl dialled the number and waited. Again there was a conversation, which went on for some time. In the end she went quiet for a moment, then apparently thanked whoever was on the other end and hung up.

"This isn't good," she said after a few seconds, looking up at the others. "I thought there was something weird about the portal that last demon came through," she said to Chou, who nodded slowly.

"It did feel a bit strange, I remember you said the same at the time, but we were rather busy after that." Yori scowled.

"I should have followed up on it. Stupid. I called a few other groups who have dealt with particularly nasty demons recently, and they all said the same thing. When they were close enough to get a good reading on the portal the things came through, it was a weird one that came and went much faster than normal. Aiko told me the same was true about the three that came through last night." The young woman stared at the floor in anger for a moment. "It is an attack, damn it. I couldn't figure out what the point was, but that is the point. There isn't one. It's just random destruction." Looking up at the officers who were listening and wondering where she was going with this, she sighed.

"The demons we've had to deal with recently, like the one that led to the new duck pond, are different. Most visitors from other worlds are either basically peaceful, or even if not have a very specific goal. These things are simply destructive, they seem to exist only to kill anything that moves. They're damn difficult to kill unless you both know the trick and have special abilities. We did find out which world they're coming from a couple of weeks ago, which is a horrible one no one with a brain goes anywhere near, but no one could figure out how they were getting here or why." She indicated Chou with her thumb. "Her sister actually asked me nearly a month ago whether I thought they could be the result of a deliberate attack, and I said I couldn't see any reason for it, not using those things. But I missed something. What if the entire point isn't a specific goal, just general death and destruction? Chaos, in a word."

Harada looked worried, asking, "But who, and more to the point, why?" She sighed again.

"Normal terrorists, even the more extreme ones, usually have a goal in mind. Political, religious, whatever, at least by their own standards there's some sort of sense to it and something at the end of it. Not usually something that a sane person would come up with, but it's internally self-consistent. Now, these guys you're tracking are some sort of offshoot of Aum Shinriko, who were nuts even by the standards of loopy cults. And these idiots are crazy enough that they were kicked out of a group like that? One that would try random nerve gas attacks on a major city basically just to see what happened?" Harrison, Harada, and Deveraux exchanged worried looks. The concept wasn't comfortable.

"I have a horrible feeling that your case and the problems we've been dealing with recently are connected, and that the end game isn't anything other than mass destruction simply for it's own
sake. Proper end of the world stuff. The original group, from what I can remember about it, were trying to bring about an Armageddon, so they could rule what was left, or something along those lines. What worries me is that these lunatics may be trying the same thing but with considerably more lethal methods. If even one of the demons we've dealt with appeared in, for example, the middle of a crowded mall, it would be a bloodbath. The fucking things have already killed nearly a dozen people in Minato, even though they get jumped and vaporised within minutes around here. If it happened in LA? Or Toronto? Or London? What would, or even could, the local authorities do then?"

"Oh, fuck." Deveraux looked sick. Yori nodded while Chou put her hand on her partner's arm.

"You see what I mean. Trust me, the thing you helped Aiko and her team take down last night is nothing compared to what these other ones are like. You could shoot one of those point-blank with an anti-tank gun and it would be back together and pulling your head off in seconds. Oh, sure, your military could deal with it in the end, but the damage would be horrific. And if there were dozens of them all over a large city..." Harrison had gone white, while Harada was calling Agent Naito.

"Are you sure?" Deveraux asked the girl in a low voice. She shook her head.

"Completely sure, no. But it fits, much better than I like. These local ones may have been a test run. You never did find out quite how the fatalities in your original cases happened, but I'm willing to bet that they were an early test of some sort of lethal magic. It may be that they settled on bringing in demons as a simpler method, death magic is difficult and touchy, while portals are pretty predictable. Minato is the global hotspot of portal and demon activity so perhaps they came here for information." She shrugged a little. "I don't know, this is at least half guesswork, but it kind of hangs together. I wish to hell it didn't."

"Agent Naito will be here in twenty minutes." Sergeant Harada hung up and turned back to them. "He didn't sound happy with your theory, mainly because I think he believes it." Yori nodded glumly.

"I wish I didn't." Pulling out her phone she dialled a number and began speaking the trade language to whoever was on the other end. After a moment she nodded, then spoke briefly to Chou, who pulled out her own phone and called someone else. By the time Naito turned up they had had a dozen conversations in both Japanese and the trade language, and one in English. Chou was still on the phone when Naito walked in, looking around then heading for them.

"OK, tell me in detail what you've found, please," he said, pulling a chair over and turning on a small camcorder, placing it on the desk facing them. Yori went back over everything while Chou murmured on the phone in the background. A few minutes in she tapped on Yori's shoulder and motioned for her phone, dialling another number on it and having two conversations at once. As Yori finished her explanation for the second time, Agent Naito looked as sick as Deveraux had done the first time around. "Oh, god damn it. That's far too plausible to be anything other than correct. What the hell are we going to do? How do we stop them, we don't even know where they are." Chou hung up both phones and handed Yori's back, putting her own away.

"Yes, we do. I think," she said quietly. Everyone looked at her. "With the information from Uthryyl I was able to find someone who had recently dealt with this mystery mage and some associates of his. The trader got curious about the man, he said there was just something that made his feathers itch." Most of those present looked at her with weird expressions and she shrugged, "That's what he said, yes, he does have feathers, anyway, he thought there was something weird going on so he arranged to have the mage followed. To cut a long story short, through a chain of people the mage was traced to an address in the middle of the area your men are watching, Agent Naito. Apparently
it's a second-level basement in an industrial building, which has, and I quote, "The strongest wards I've ever seen anywhere except for that building next to the university, which is simply insane."

She looked slightly embarrassed. "We know about the building, it's not involved. Just some very private and extremely strong magic users."

Agent Naito nodded thoughtfully. "So, we have a possible location. What can we do about it?" Yori glanced at Chou, who looked back with a small shrug.

"Well, there's always the duck pond option." Naito winced.

"Um, let's leave that as a last resort, OK?" She looked slightly amused.

"I'd think the first thing we need to do is find out whether they're actually there in the first place. That's where they were, but we don't know if it's where they are. We need to get all of them at once, if one gets away they could start all over again and we might not know until it's too late."

The PSIA agent seemed to agree.

"Fine. How do we do that? If they have magic on their side I don't think my men can sneak up on them." The two magical girls exchanged glances.

"That's what we're here for." Chou smiled at him. "We'll go and check the building out. Once we're sure they're in there, we'll let you know."

Harrison looked worried. "But then what? What if they teleport away like they did last time?"

"If the building is warded like that they won't be able to without lowering the wards at least a little, which will give us some warning. In fact..." Yori suddenly looked thoughtful, then maliciously amused. "I wonder... if their mage isn't a portal expert, perhaps he isn't a ward expert either."

Harada looked puzzled.

"Even if that's the case, what does that mean?" She grinned.

"Well, Chou and I are experts on wards, as it happens. We've had a lot of practice. We were taught by the best. And I just got an interesting idea. If he isn't an expert, if he bought in the spell for the wards, there's a possibility that we can turn that around on him." They looked puzzled. "It's just possible, if you know what you're doing and have enough power, to flip a ward. Turn the direction of shielding around. It takes a hell of a lot of energy, but it can be done. So, if his wards aren't quite done right..."

Naito suddenly got the idea.

"You could take them over and turn them around? Trapping them inside, rather than trapping everyone else outside?" She nodded with a grin.

"Basically. I'm not guaranteeing anything, I need to have a close up look at them, but if we can do that, they're sitting ducks. They can't get out, at least via magical methods, and we can get in. The only downside is that someone could then open an inbound portal and bring in reinforcements, which otherwise they couldn't do. Hopefully we can shut them down before they can call out, assuming there is anyone on the outside anyway."

"I can get all the phone service, including cell coverage, shut down for the entire area. We can also jam other radio communications." Naito made some notes. Yori looked pleased.

"Great. OK, I think we may have a basic plan then. Chou and I will go and check the building out and see if we can determine how many people are inside. You set up whatever it is that you need
to arrange. We need to hurry, no telling how soon this could happen, it might be months away or any minute now.” Both martial artists stood and ran out of the room.

Deveraux and Harrison looked at each other, then simultaneously checked their side-arms. Harada did the same. Naito watched them, picked up the phone, and began making calls.

It was nearly two hours later when the two young woman reappeared. Yori slumped down, looking slightly tired for the first time that Deveraux could recall. Chou sat beside her, pulling a bottle of water from thin air and draining it. "Well, their wards are pretty strong, that much is true. Luckily, I was right. It's a preset spell, or rather half a dozen of them, with a lot of power behind it and not much experience. We can flip it. I've already taken over the control function and locked it so they can't change it, hopefully they won't notice until it's too late." Agent Naito looked pleased.

"Well, that's one good thing. Are they in there, though?" She nodded.

"Yes. The mage is, definitely, and there are six other people. Five of them are the ones you and the Inspector have been looking for, Lieutenant,” she said, looking at Harrison. "The sixth one isn't on your list, but I know him, or at least know about him. He's Yakuza, or was. Not a pleasant person at all. He disappeared a while ago, just before Chou was going to have some serious words with him about the way he was behaving to certain women in the district. The Oyabun has had a large price on his head for over a year. I thought he'd left the country, to be honest." Chou looked quite annoyed, which Harrison thought wasn't an expression that she normally wore, the woman seemed very even-tempered, almost serene, most of the time, but now she looked genuinely dangerous.

"I would very much like to talk to him," she said in a quiet voice that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "A couple of people I know quite well were not treated properly by him." Yori smirked a little.

"With a little luck you may yet have that talk." Chou smiled in a way that made it look like she was thinking about going for someone's throat. Everyone else but Yori eased slightly away from her.

"Ah, right. Good. So they're in there." Agent Naito looked warily at the blonde woman, who smiled back, looking quite safe once more. "So what next? This is more in your field of expertise than mine at the moment."

"We need to wait, I think. The building above it is a light industrial one with several businesses in it. If we evacuate them it might tip these people off, so it's probably best to wait for them to close up and go home normally. You should arrange to have all the other buildings surrounding them to be evacuated, though, if that can be done discreetly." He nodded, picking up the phone. Issuing a few commands, he put it down again.

"In progress. They should all be out within an hour." Yori checked the clock on the wall.

"Good. The businesses involved should all close up in about an hour and a half. We can make a sweep through and make sure everyone is out. As soon as we're sure, you cut all the communications and we'll flip the wards. Get your men to cover all the exits in case they make a run for it the normal way, while we go in and deal with them.” Naito looked at Harada, then back to Yori.

"Deal with them how?” he asked slowly. She looked evenly at him.

"Appropriately." He was the first to look away.

"All right. As I said, this is more your field of expertise." She nodded, pulling out her phone.
"I'm going to ask Aiko and her team to come and help, from the outside, just in case some magical threat turns up. They're the only ones I can get on short notice I trust to do it right."

"Fine." Naito was still watching her with a mildly upset expression. She grinned suddenly.

"Don't look so worried, Agent. I promise we won't simply slaughter them, we'll give them every chance to surrender. We're not murderers. But we can't let them get away, thousands of lives could be at risk." He didn't look completely happy.

"And the duck pond option?" She shrugged.

"Is still an option. So keep your distance."

"Oh, fuck it all, this is going to be bad, I can just feel it," he moaned. She patted him on the knee.

"Don't be like that. Think happy thoughts." Dialling, she spoke for a while, before hanging up. "Aiko and crew will be here very soon." There was a flash outside the building, visible through the windows. "About now, in fact."

The other magical girls soon entered the police station, greeting various other officers on the way. No one seemed overly surprised to see them, although there were a number of discreet appreciative glances sent their way. Harrison was struck by the thought that at home it was very unlikely that large quantities of young women with little on would be able to casually wander in and out of a police station like that. He grinned slightly. Aiko spotted him and waved. "Hello, Lieutenant, Inspector. Feeling less confused after last night?" She smiled.

"Well, we're OK with that part now," Deveraux said, "but recent developments seem to be going quite fast." Aiko and the others sat or leaned on desks while Yori and Chou explained for the third time, adding some background to the case. They looked suitably appalled and very angry. Fumiko swore viciously.

"Those fuckers. So that's why I nearly got killed last night?" Yori nodded.

"And Tamiko when that first one showed up months ago." Both girls scowled.

"What do you need us to do?" Aiko asked, looking at her team-mates for a moment. They all seemed eager to help.

"Mainly provide backup and magical security for the police and PSAI teams outside. We'll go in after these guys, but if anyone or anything either gets past us or comes in from outside, we might need some help."

"OK. When are we going?" Yori checked the clock again.

"I'd think a bit over an hour. Does that fit with you, Agent?" Naito also looked at the clock then nodded.

"Yes. My men are almost in position, everything will be set up by then." He glanced at Harada. "I'd better go and tell Captain Uehara what's going on. She'll pop a gasket if this goes off without her knowledge." Harada grinned.

"That she would." The agent left, the remaining people sitting quietly for a moment busy with their own thoughts. Deveraux looked over at Harrison, watching him think. He was rolling a pen between his fingers, staring at the clock. Feeling her eyes on him he turned his head towards her.
"What?" he asked curiously after a moment. She shrugged a little.

"Not sure. What do you think about this?"

"It's kind of sudden," he admitted, frowning slightly. "I'm used to operations like this being planned for weeks in advance." Yori snorted, making them both look at her.

"And how often does everything go exactly to plan?" she asked.

With a smile he admitted, "Not all that often." The girl nodded.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy" she quoted. "That's as true now as it was when Field Marshal Von Moltke said it nearly a hundred years ago, and for the thousands of years before that when it was known by every person who ever went into battle. The more detailed your plans, the more likely something is to go wrong. I've always felt you need a decent set of guidelines, an objective, then enough flexibility to change things on the fly." She shrugged. "It's worked so far." Everyone was looking at her with varying expressions. "Hey, I took history in school. I learned things." Aiko grinned.

"You come out with the weirdest things sometimes, Yori." The black haired young woman looked amused.

"I do my best." Glancing at the two overseas visitors, she added, "You guys should stay back with Naito and his men." Harrison sighed slightly.

"I know. We will, but it feels wrong, somehow, letting a bunch of teenaged girls go in where a SWAT team wouldn't. No offence." She laughed delightedly.

"None taken, at all. Thank you for thinking of our safety. Don't worry, we'll be fine. If we run into something we can't handle, well, there's nothing you and the entire Tokyo police force could have done anyway." He groaned as Deveraux smiled and most of the magical girls nodded knowingly.

"Oh, that makes me feel much better, thanks."

Naito came back with Captain Uehara, who looked at the six magical girls with some irritation. "This is supposed to be a police station not a clubhouse for teenagers with too little on." She inspected Aiko, who smiled at her with glee. With a sigh, she shook her head then turned to her sergeant. "Agent Naito has filled me in on this. I'd like you to go along to make sure this madhouse doesn't wreck the district, please." He nodded. "I'd send more officers with you, but from what I hear it probably wouldn't help anyway, and it's not like we're a huge station here. This is only a district station." She shook her head again. "God, magic is a pain sometimes. Magical terrorists are even worse." Glancing around at them all, she sighed once more. "Try not to get killed, or blow up the entire town. Please? For me?" Yori grinned. Chou looked confident and relaxed, while Aiko and her girls seemed ready for anything. Shaking her head the captain wandered off muttering to herself.

"She seems perturbed," Chou said with a small smile. Naito looked at her, then grinned.

"She's having a little trouble with the entire day, I think." Glancing at the clock he looked back at Yori, who nodded.

"I think it's time. Are your people ready?"

"Yes. Everyone is in place at a safe distance, the entire area has been cordoned off out of sight of the building. There's no one we know of within three hundred metres." Pulling out his phone he
issued some quick orders, then hung up again. "Communications are ready to be cut as soon as you give the word."

"Right. Let's get over there. Aiko?" The petite brunette nodded, pulling out her amulet.

"Aim for the north side of Sakura park."

"OK. Everyone stand close." She looked around, then activated the teleport. The officers left in the room swore as they blinked.

"Gah." Agent Naito nearly fell over, only managing to stay upright when a slender but incredibly strong hand held onto his shoulder. "Thank you," he mumbled, his head spinning. In a few seconds he could see clearly enough that he realised that Chou was supporting him.

"Are you all right, Agent?" she asked politely.

"Yes, I think so. That was unexpected." The blonde smiled. "It only hits you like that the first time." She glanced over at Harada who was swaying back and forth with his eyes closed, Tamiko holding onto him. The auburn-haired girl nodded to her. Shortly both men had recovered enough to listen to Yori.

"OK. The building is about two hundred and fifty metres over in that direction. We'll get into position, then signal you. Cut the comms immediately, we'll flip the wards then go in. If anyone other than us comes out before we do, shoot to kill." She looked seriously at Naito. "I mean it. If they get away with any of those one-shot portals it will get extremely nasty." Reluctantly he nodded, pulling out a radio handset and issuing some orders. Looking at it, he handed it to the black haired girl.

"Here. This is about the only communication method that won't get jammed." She accepted it with a nod of thanks.

"Right. You guys make sure these guys don't get jumped from behind. You know what to do." She looked at each of Aiko's team in turn, they all nodded soberly, suddenly completely professional and battle-ready. Harrison was astounded by the abrupt air of no-nonsense imminent danger they were giving off. He found it difficult to believe that these were a lot of young women in their late teens, they suddenly seemed more dangerous than a squad of experienced soldiers. Glancing at Deveraux he saw she had noticed the change as well. She looked back at him seriously, pulling out her weapon and flicking off the safety. He did the same and saw that Harada and Naito had done likewise.

The four girls produced their own weapons from wherever they kept them, something Harrison still hadn't worked out, Yori and Chou touching each one in turn with glowing hands, pumping them full of whatever energy they had so much of. Yori did the recharging trick with Aiko's amulet again, and also a number of smaller artefacts the girls produced from about their persons. With one final check, the pair of them smiled at their friends then faded from view. "Let's get over to the command post," Naito said after a moment's silence. Everyone followed him. As soon as he got to the group of heavily armed and armoured men in the van parked up a side street out of view of the target building he plucked a radio from the hand of another agent, waving the man's protestations away peevishly. "We're in place, Yori," he said into it. A few seconds later the response came back.

"So are we. Cut the communications." He waved to a man in the open back of the van, who nodded then typed on a keyboard. Seconds later he gave a thumbs up.
"Comms down."

"Wards inverted. We're going in." The voice came from the handset he was holding and he sighed.

"Be careful," he said quietly, but didn't key up the transmitter. Aiko stepped up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"They know what they're doing. Yori better than anyone, I think." Looking down at the short girl he smiled slightly.

"I know. I've read her file." His smile widened a little. "And yours. I couldn't ask for better help." She looked pleased.

After the first ten minutes had passed with nothing but silence, everyone settled in for the long haul. Another twenty minutes crept past. Abruptly, Harada looked up, as did Tamiko and Misaki.

"What was that?" A faint vibration came and went, followed a few seconds later by a slightly more intense one. There was a distant rumble. Everyone froze, then looked around the corner at the building two hundred metres away. Nothing seemed different.

"We ran into some resistance," Yori's voice crackled from the radio, interference making it difficult to understand. "It's not resisting any more." Aiko snickered.

"I'll bet it isn't. Whatever it was is probably a glowing glass hole in the ground now." Harrison looked at Naito who was looking worried.

"Please don't make another duck pond," he muttered in Japanese, Tamiko helpfully translating for the benefit of the visitors. Naito glared at her, while she shrugged with a smile. "Thank you," he grunted.

"You're welcome," she chirped brightly. He sighed and leaned against the wall.

"Bloody magical girls." She giggled at his mumbling, while Harada grinned behind him. Several of his men chuckled until he turned his glare on them, at which point they became very interested in the details of their armour. "Any signs of movement?" he called to one of his agents, who talked quietly into a headset before shaking his head.

"No, the observers on the roof haven't seen anything." Naito sighed.

"I hate waiting like this."

Another ten minutes or so slowly passed. The radio finally came to life again. "We've got them," Chou's voice came. In the background there was the sound of a small explosion. "Oops. We had them." There was a larger explosion, which they felt through the ground, making Naito wince again. "Got them again. Most of them anyway. The mage isn't an issue any longer." Harada snickered while Aiko and her team laughed. Harrison looked at Deveraux, understanding the likely meaning of that. "You can bring your men in, Agent. Bring Aiko and the girls as well, we still have a problem we need their help for." The radio went silent again. Everyone looked speculatively at each other. Raising the radio to his mouth, Naito keyed it up and answered, then waved to his men. Eight of the armoured agents jogged past heading for the building, the others following behind.

Harrison, Deveraux, and Harada tagged along, Naito glancing at them but saying nothing. As they approached the building Chou came out with six men in front of her, holding both her energy swords ready. None of the men looked like they were likely to try anything, they had a number of wounds and one or two of them were being supported by their comrades. At least one had a very obviously broken leg. "Here you go, Agent. Be careful, they're a sneaky bunch." She glared at the
one with the broken leg. "Try that again and I'll break the other one. Or just cut it off." She made a suggestive gesture with one energy blade. He shied away from her, trying to put one of the other men between them, unsuccessfully as his colleague was no keener to be near her than he was.

Naito motioned to his men, who quickly and efficiently took charge of the prisoners, stripping them down to their underwear and relieving them of anything that could conceivably be a weapon, before handcuffing them and making them lie face down on the ground. "Misaki, check them for magic, will you, please?" Chou requested. "Yori and I both did, but better to be safe." The tall brunette nodded wordlessly, pulling out a small glowing device and running it over each man in turn. She gave Chou a thumbs up when she was done. "Good."

The blonde relaxed a little, dismissing her energy blades. Naito walked a little closer, he'd been staying well back while she had them out having read about what she could do with them. "Where's Yori?" he asked, looking past her into the doorway of the building behind her.

"That's the problem." She sighed. "They had six of those demons down there, in some sort of stasis spell. The mage released the spell when we got past the last door to delay us. When they realised their teleport spell didn't work they panicked. He nearly tried it anyway, which wouldn't have worked out well, they'd all have died. Luckily for them he changed his mind. Unluckily for him, he attempted to blow us up. It didn't work. Yori got annoyed." Harada nodded with a smile.

"That must have been the second explosion." She looked resigned.

"Correct. He wasn't nearly as good as he thought he was. At least it was quick."

"What was the first set of explosions, near the beginning?" Deveraux asked.

"That was one of the demons. We managed to move part of the wards and trap most of them in a couple of rooms in the sub-basement, but one got past before we could block it. It was headed out, so I had to deal with it while Yori was holding the others back. I tried to keep the damage to a minimum but there's quite a large hole down there now." Naito muttered something, making her look at him with a raised eyebrow. He apologised, slightly embarrassed.

"God, it's like my mother is disappointed in me. How does she do that?" he wondered to himself. Mollified the blonde smiled at him.

"We found quite a lot of paperwork down there, I took everything I could see, as well as some CDROMs and other media." The young woman pulled a large box out of thin air, making most of the people present stare at her. Naito motioned to one of his men when he got over his surprise, who came over and took it from her. "Here you go. This should help your case. I had a very quick look through it and as far as I could see this is probably all of them. We think we've accounted for all the portal devices as well. The plan seems to have been to use them more or less as bombs. Somehow the mage figured out a way to target demons from this end, then open a portal to one when it was moving fast. It would fall right through the open portal, find itself here, and probably in a very bad mood. They were going to scatter the things all over several major cities around the world on timers, then leave. Anything up to a few months later one or more would activate, more or less randomly dropping a demon into a crowd."

Harrison shuddered. "Jesus. That would have been..." He couldn't finish. Chou nodded soberly.

"Not good at all. Anyway, we found about three hundred of them, along with enough materials to make maybe another hundred and fifty. That matches their records. The only problem is that we don't know for a fact how many they made in the initial test batch. We've accounted for six so far, including the one that Aiko's team and our visitors here dealt with the aftermath of, but there could
be more. Probably not many, but the only one who could tell us for sure is dead. These men might know, I suppose." She turned to look at the prisoners with interest. They all went white. "I could ask. They'd tell me, I'm sure."

One of the prisoners shouted, "He made a dozen of them." Chou walked slowly towards him, suddenly radiating lethal intent to a degree that made the experienced SWAT team back off nervously.

Squatting down next to the man, she asked politely, "A dozen? Are you completely sure?" He nodded frantically.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Are they inside? Or did you put them somewhere?" Her voice had dropped a little in pitch and every person listening, with the exception of the other magical girls, felt a shiver go through them. Even Aiko and her team looked slightly worried.

"I don't know! Honest, god help me, I don't know!" The man was lying in a growing puddle. She reached out with a softly glowing hand, placing it lightly on his shoulder.

"You wouldn't lie to me would you?" she asked gently, leaning close so only he could see her face. He whimpered, then screamed in fright.

"No. no, no, no. I'm telling the truth. He took them all, I don't know what he did with them." She looked at him for a few seconds longer, everyone feeling like the afternoon had darkened a little, before suddenly bouncing to her feet.

"Thank you. Your cooperation is much appreciated." Turning she walked back to the others while behind her one of the SWAT team had to sit down. Naito and Harada stared at her in mild horror while Deveraux looked at Harrison, both of them shaking a little. Neither had understood her words, as she'd been speaking Japanese, but her tone carried over the language barrier perfectly.


"The thing to get really worried about is that Yori is the scary one." She looked subdued. They stared at her, then each other.

"Fucking hell," Harrison said again, looking at the blonde girl who had a satisfied expression on her face.

"He was telling the truth, I could feel it. He really doesn't know where the other devices are. So best case, we've got them all, worst case, there may be up to half a dozen still out there somewhere. That's not ideal, but it could be a hell of a lot worse. You should probably check where he's been in the last year, we might get some idea of where he might have put them if we can't account for them here. The paperwork has enough information to let you identify him." She looked at Aiko. "Yori is still down there making sure the wards hold. We still have five of those demons to deal with. She thinks the safest way is to force the wards as close as possible then, well, 'duck pond' them." Agent Naito looked worried.

"Um...," he started. She smiled serenely at him.

"Don't worry, Agent. We can reinforce the wards enough to contain the energy release. It will make a mess of that end of the basement but the damage shouldn't be too extensive. It won't affect the building structurally." He looked dubious. She shrugged. "It's the best way."
"Damn. OK, do what you need to." The blonde smiled at him, then turned to the other magical girl team.

"She wants all of us down there to focus the power and force the wards inwards. We'll feed you the energy, you just have to push it in the right direction. Then we zap them all at once." Aiko glanced at her team, who all nodded.

"OK." All four of them headed for the entrance.

"What about the other portal devices?" Agent Naito asked. She glanced back as she was about to enter the building behind the other girls.

"We'll destroy them. It's the safest thing to do. Most of them have already been targeted and armed, it would be a nightmare if they got out." He looked slightly worried but nodded. "Keep everyone back. You'll know when we're done." Following her friends the blonde disappeared inside the building. Naito slumped slightly as the tension left him.

"God almighty, that woman is terrifying." Harada looked at him and slowly nodded.

"You tend to forget just how dangerous those two are, they're very playful and friendly most of the time. But when they go into full blown combat mode..." He shivered a little. "I don't see that side of them very often, and I'm damn glad about it."

"I was asked to get a sample of that device, the PSIA would like to study it, but I'm not going to argue with that."

"I certainly wouldn't. Not about something she knew about and I didn't."

About five minutes later there was what felt like a minor earthquake, accompanied by a sort of mental fizzing effect. Everyone winced, the sensation was very odd although not painful. A rumble came from somewhere underground. All six magical girls emerged shortly afterwards, looking pleased. "Right, that's hopefully the end of that," Yori said, walking up to Agent Naito. "All the portal devices are slag, the demons are as well, and the sub-basement is clear. Your men can go in and look for any more evidence you may need. Three rooms are still a little warm and melty, but they'll cool down soon enough. I don't think there was anything particularly useful in them in the first place, they just seemed to be storage areas."

Agent Naito nodded to his men, waving to the building. Four of them entered, while the other four pulled the prisoners to their feet, starting them walking towards the command post. "Thank you, ladies," Naito said, looking around at his unconventional help. They all looked pleased. "You've been a great help once again. We owe you all yet another favour." Yori grinned.

"I'm keeping track." He grinned back.

"I bet you are." Shaking hands, they turned to follow the SWAT team which was fifty or sixty metres away. A sudden shout caught their attention and they all looked ahead to see one of the prisoners struggling with two of the SWAT men. He managed to knee one of them in the crotch, making him stagger slightly, bumping into his colleague, who lost control of the prisoner. Before the others could react he'd somehow managed to wrest control of the first man's pistol from him, jumping to the side and firing three quick shots at the group behind. It all happened so fast that none of the police or PSIA men could react in time.

There was a blur of motion from all the magical girls, which had started the instant the shout came. By the time the third shot rang out, Chou was just slowing from an impossibly fast sprint next to
the man, her hand reaching out and tapping him on the head, making him drop like he'd been shot, while her other hand had removed the pistol from his so quickly it had broken three fingers. Yori had her right hand in a fist steady in front of Naito's face, while Tamiko had pulled her sword from somewhere and placed the flat across Deveraux's chest. The tableau held for a moment, then Yori opened her hand to reveal a 9mm bullet. Naito stared in disbelief while Harada nodded wisely. Tamiko bent down and picked a flattened bullet off the ground, handing it to Deveraux, who accepted it numbly. "Holy crap," Harrison muttered softly, looking at the round in her fingers.

"Thanks," the Canadian managed in a soft voice. Tamiko smiled at her, making her sword go away.

"You're welcome."

Harada looked at Yori. "I heard three shots. Where did the third one go?" She looked annoyed, poking at a hole in her shirt.

"Right here, damn it. I like this shirt." He stared at her, then looked at the ground. There was another bullet lying there as flattened as the one in Deveraux's hand. Meeting his look with a raised eyebrow she shrugged slightly. He smiled.

"I thought so." Nodding back to him, she gave the bullet in her hand to Naito, then walked over to her partner, who was glaring at the man in her hands. The agent watched her, shaking slightly.

"Fuck me." Harada clapped him on the shoulder.

"I told you they could catch bullets." The other man slowly turned to look at him.

"I'd much prefer that demonstration not be with one headed right at my face." Sergeant Harada shrugged.

"She caught it. No problems." Naito glared at him. Grinning, the sergeant bent down and retrieved the third bullet from the ground, looking at it curiously. "It looks like it hit a steel plate," he said wonderingly. Glancing at Yori, who was talking to Chou, he laughed. "I'll bet there isn't even a bruise. Those girls are..." Harrison, Naito, and Deveraux all nodded. They knew what he meant.

Walking closer to the SWAT team member and their prisoners, they listened as Chou and Yori had a mild argument. The blonde was holding the man who had grabbed the gun by the scruff of the neck, the others noticing after a moment his feet were nearly clear of the ground. That explained the funny colour he was going. She was showing no sign of effort at all. "I need to talk with him. You said I could." Chou sounded irritated. Yori sighed a little.

"Oh, all right. Don't damage him too badly, it doesn't look good when he's already our prisoner." She smiled toothily.

"Oh, I'm only going to talk. I'll even heal his hand. That's nice of me, isn't it?" she asked the man, who rolled his eyes as he was unable to do anything else. Taking this as assent, she walked off towards a nearby alley holding the man at arms length, talking softly to him. Yori watched her go, then turned to the others. Everyone was looking at her.

"He'll live. Probably." She glanced over her shoulder. "I think." After a moment she swore mildly. "Damn. I'll be back in a minute." Hurrying after her partner she disappeared into the alley. Slight whimpering noises began to come out of it and everyone looked away, wincing one or twice as they got louder.

"Um, so, thanks again, all of you," Agent Naito said, looking nervously over his shoulder at one
particularly loud squeak of distress. There was a distinct feeling of something unpleasant radiating from the alley. The SWAT men looked at each other then turned to inspect their prisoners, all of whom had their eyes shut. Aiko smiled uncertainly, her eyes twitching towards the alley every now and then, as did those of the other magical girls. They seemed to be reacting to something none of the others felt. She winced slightly then looked a little awed.

"Good grief," she muttered. Glancing at her team-mates, she shrugged a little. "You're welcome. It was fun." Something made her wince again. Quickly looking towards the alley she seemed to listen, then deliberately stop herself. "If you have any similar problems in the future, Sergeant Harada has our contact details." Harrison and Deveraux glanced at each other as the whimpers abruptly stopped, dead silence coming from the alley. Suddenly there was a faint scream, all the more worrying due to it's low volume. Everyone jumped, even the magical girls. Silence came back, broken after a while by footsteps accompanied by voices.

"Look, all I did was explain it wasn't nice to do what he did."

"It wasn't what you said, dear, it was more how you said it." The voices got closer. The various people outside the alley listened intently.

"It's not my fault if he had a weak constitution. Big bad Yakuza man like that, having a heart attack in the middle of a nice talk. That's just rude. Anyway, I restarted it for him. He'll be fine. I even fixed his hand like I said I would." They all exchanged glances. There was a resigned sigh.

"The fangs and tentacles were possibly a little much." Everyone stared.

"Says the one who dangles muggers by one foot from thirty metres up when lecturing them."

"I only did that once."

"That was enough." The two women emerged from the alley, Yori carrying the man over her shoulder as easily as if he was a rolled up blanket. He was as limp as one, certainly. She looked at the wide-eyed expressions pointed at them and smiled a little guiltily.

"Um. He had a bit of an accident. He's all better now, just a little fainted." Lowering the man carefully to the ground she slapped his face once or twice. "Come on, wake up. You have jail to look forward to." He moaned, his eyelids flickering, then he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Chou looking at him impassively over Yori's shoulder. Opening his mouth he made a choked little squeak of terror, sounding like someone had just stepped on a kitten, before screaming loudly and fainting again. Yori sighed irritably. "Oh, for god's sake." Poking him in a couple of places on his chest she looked satisfied as he jolted awake again. "Look at me. No, at me, not her. Listen. You're going to get up and go quietly with these nice men, OK? And if you plead guilty and tell them everything they want to know, I'll make sure you'll never see her again. Understand?" He nodded convulsively, his eyes fixed on hers. She smiled in a way that made everyone watching go cold.

"Don't let me down." He shook his head rapidly, unable to speak, staring at her like a mouse looking at a hawk. Satisfied she stood, glancing around at the various people staring at her with one eyebrow up. "What?"

After a long moment, the SWAT men collected the now-whimpering former Yakuza man from the ground, placing him with the other prisoners and rapidly leaving the vicinity of the terrifying young women. All of them felt much happier the further away they got. Aiko looked at Deveraux and Harrison. "Told you," she mouthed, both of them nodding. Chou was bad enough. For a moment, though, Yori had been the most horrifying thing they'd ever seen. That smile was one that
Harrison would see in his nightmares for years.

Naito watched her for a moment more, then shook himself a little. "Um. Right. Anyway, I was just
telling Aiko and her team how much we appreciated their help. That goes for you two as well. If
it's not too much trouble, could you possibly submit some sort of report on this from your point of
view, along with any conclusions and insights you might have? Please?" He sounded slightly
worried. She nodded with a smile.

"Of course. We'll drop something in to the station tomorrow." The PSIA man relaxed a bit.

"Thank you. We still need to work out if those six devices are accounted for or still in play." Yori
glanced at Chou, both of them looking upset and annoyed.

"That's very true. I'd like to think that we got them all, but the way life works, I somehow doubt it. I
have a nasty feeling that they're going to turn up sooner or later, I just hope it's not with a lot of
dead people as well." Naito didn't look happy about this prospect, nor did the others. Yori looked at
Deveraux and Harrison, who jumped a little at the sudden attention. "So, how long are you guys
sticking around for?" They glanced at each other, then Harrison answered.

"I'm not sure. You seem to have closed this part of the case, although how the hell we're going to
explain it to the people back home I have no idea." Naito laughed.

"I can help you with that. We have a certain amount of experience framing this sort of thing in
terms that your people will accept." Harrison looked grateful.

"Thanks. So, I guess we need to write up our reports, get them to the captain and our superiors,
then we're off home." Yori looked at Aiko, who nodded slightly.

"See if you can get a few days holiday, as long as you're here you might as well enjoy it. No
demon attacks or anything. If you would like, Aiko can teleport you home afterwards, it beats a
fifteen hour flight." Harrison looked startled, staring at the other magical girl who grinned at him,
then his colleague. Deveraux shrugged.

"Why not? I don't like flying at the best of times anyway." Harrison looked back at the black
haired girl.

"OK. But that's going to be even harder to explain." She looked amused.

"No, just tell them that someone has offered private transportation. Free of charge. They'll probably
love that."

"True."

Aiko smiled at him. "I can take you to an airport or somewhere else you can go through with your
passport to make everything nice and legal. Or to your house if you don't care about that." He
looked interested, then nodded.

"Probably best to do it more or less legitimately. We are cops after all." She laughed.

"Fair enough." Glancing at her team-mates, she looked back at them. "Yori will call me when you
need to leave. We have to get going now. Nice working with you." The four of them waved to Yori
and Chou, smiled at the rest, then moved away a short distance. Deveraux and Harrison
remembered just in time to look away as the flash came. Harada and Naito weren't as lucky.

"Damn, that was bright." Naito scrubbed at his streaming eyes. Yori snickered.
"Sorry, she was off so fast I didn't have time to warn you." Turning to Harrison and Deveraux she and Chou both held out their hands. "Like Aiko said, it's been fun. We'll see you tomorrow, I think." The visitors shook hands with both young women, who then waved to Naito and Harada, ran towards the nearest building, and jumped five stories straight up onto the roof. Within seconds they were gone. The four people left on the street looked up with a mix of expressions, mostly on the theme of awe.

"That was... very strange." Deveraux looked back at the others, who nodded.

"Most definitely." Naito shook his head in bemusement. "I've met some interesting people in this job, but those two are something else. Come on, I need something to eat. And drink. Definitely drink." The group of law enforcement people wandered off down the road.

Four days later Deveraux sat down next to Sergeant Harada at his desk, putting her bag on the floor and pushing it under the chair with her foot. He looked at her with a grin. "You have the tired eyes of someone who had a good night." She laughed.

"As far as I can remember." Leaning back in his chair, he dropped his pen on his desk and put his hands behind his head.

"It's been interesting and fun having you two here, Laura. Keep in touch." She nodded, smiling.

"I will, Tetsuo. There's no way I'm going to forget about all this. No matter how much I try." They were still laughing when Harrison stumbled in, looking pale and wan. Slumping in the other chair he stared blearily at them.

"How much did I drink last night?" he asked. Deveraux shook her head.

"No idea. You were still going when I passed out. I know I had far too much, if that helps." He groaned.

"Not really." Looking at Harada he asked, "Do you have any aspirin?" The sergeant opened his desk and pulled out a small bottle, tossing it to the American. "Thanks." Swallowing three of them he handed the bottle back, then put his head on the desk. "Argh. I'll never drink again."

Deveraux snickered. "You always say that."

"I mean it," he mumbled into his arms.

"You always say that as well." Sighing heavily he didn't reply.

Yori and Chou entered a few minutes later, the former sitting on the edge of Harada's desk while the latter stood next to her. Both of them looked at Harrison with amusement. "Had a bit too much to drink, Lieutenant?" He nodded painfully. Chou glanced at Yori, who shrugged unsympathetically. "This is why I don't drink." The blonde woman sighed.

"Here." She reached out and placed her hand on Harrison's shoulder. A faint glow surrounded it for a few seconds. Removing it she asked, "How do you feel?" He blinked, surprised despite himself.

"Better, actually. A lot better. Thanks." She smiled.

"Try to drink less next time. Or at least drink a lot more water, your liver was having a hard time." He nodded. Deveraux had watched with renewed amazement, shaking her head.
"Where were you two when I was going through college?" she asked with bemusement. Chou grinned at her.

"So, have you enjoyed visiting Japan?" she asked. Deveraux exchanged a glance with her companion.

"Aside from the magical terrorists, getting in involved in a demon attack, and being scared shitless on a number of occasions, yes, it's been a real laugh," she replied, making Yori chuckle.

"Oh, come on, Inspector, it's not that bad." The older woman smiled.

"No, it's not, Yori. On the whole, yes, it's been very interesting. I've certainly made a number of friends." They grinned at each other. After a moment Yori produced two cards. Handing one to each of them, she said, "You might need these one day." Harrison looked at his with interest, realising what it was quickly. Deveraux did likewise. After a moment they exchanged cards, looking amazed as they saw that they were blank. Swapping them back the could read them again. "Wow. That's, well, that's kind of freaky." The Canadian looked at Yori, who seemed pleased.

"If you need the sort of help we can provide, call. Now that you know what to look for you might find it's more apparent. Or not. I don't know much about your homes. Just in case, though, hang on to those." She scowled for a moment. "I'm pretty sure there are still six of those damn portal bombs kicking around out there somewhere. I hope I'm wrong, but..." Harrison nodded slowly, exchanging a glance with his colleague.

"I understand. If something turns up, I'll call." Deveraux said much the same.

"Good. OK, if you're ready to go, I'll call Aiko." Harrison glanced at her.

"Can you give me five minutes? I'd like to say good-bye to the captain." Yori nodded.

"Sure. We're in no hurry." Both visiting officers headed to Captain Uehara's office, Harrison knocking politely on the door-frame. She looked up, waving them in with a small smile.

"Hello, Lieutenant, Inspector. I assume you'll be leaving us soon?" Both of them nodded. She put her pen down and leaned back, looking at them carefully, before smiling again. "It's been an interesting time, certainly. Thank you for helping."

"Thank you, Ma'am, for allowing us to," Deveraux replied. Captain Uehara waved a hand.

"It's no real trouble. Compared to magical girls you two are pretty easy to deal with." She grinned at them. "Even if you do have the questionable judgement to take pot-shots at demons." Harrison laughed while Deveraux looked amused.

"I can assure you, Captain, that I have no intention of doing that again in a hurry. Preferably ever." She nodded at Harrison.

"Probably a good idea. Take care, and if you come back this way, please stop in and say hello."

They nodded, reaching over the desk to shake her hand. Leaving the office they headed back to Harada's desk, where they found Agent Naito talking to the two martial artists and the sergeant.

"Ah, our visitors." He shook their hands. "I wanted to say good-bye, and also let you know the current condition of our mutual case. We've collated all the documents Chou passed on, along with other information we dug up, and we're almost certain we got everyone involved. There were never more than about ten of them in total, and you accounted for at least two of those back in LA. We have the rest, except for the mage, who our friends here dealt with. The bad news is that we are
also almost certain that those six possibly missing portal devices are actually missing." He frowned. "The records we have show that the damn mage visited at least a dozen cities all over the world in the last year or so, as far as we can tell. That's just via normal air travel. Once you bring possible teleportation into it he could have gone to dozens more. Those things could be almost anywhere." He looked seriously at them. "Including LA and Toronto, we know he went to both places." Deveraux sighed heavily while Harrison looked worried.

"I was afraid you were going to say that." Naito shrugged.

"Sorry. We don't have any way, as far as we know, to track them. Yori here thinks it might be possible, but even if it is you'd have to be quite close to one to detect it." The black-haired young woman nodded.

"They're shielded quite well, so even under ideal circumstances you'd have to be within about three or four hundred metres. If they're underground, it might be half that." Chou looked at them.

"The bigger problem is that if they are out there somewhere, active, they're going to go off within less than eight months at the outside. That's the maximum timer delay." She didn't look happy. "Hopefully they're all in Minato, where we can deal with them quickly. I'm not looking forward to that, but it's the best possible scenario. If they're somewhere else..." She trailed off, while the others all looked worried.

"We'll sweep the district, the entire ward if we have to, but to be honest I'm not expecting to find them here, at least not all of them. So keep your eyes open." Yori looked at each of them. "If you hear about anything that might be one, call us. We'll come and deal with it." Harrison nodded soberly, looking at the card she had given him again, before putting it carefully away in his wallet. Chou handed him one as well, giving one to the RCMP officer too.

"Just in case." She smiled at them. After a moment, Yori cracked her knuckles, making everybody jump.

"Right. Ready?" They both nodded. Pulling out her phone she placed a quick call. Seconds later Aiko appeared in the middle of the room, making a number of officers jump and one spill his coffee.

"Oops. Sorry," she said with a smile. He looked slightly annoyed but smiled back, wiping his desk. Walking over to Yori she greeted her, then turned to the two North Americans. "Hi. Which one first, and where to?" They looked at each other. Deveraux raised her hand.

"Can you do Toronto International?"

"Yep, been there a couple of times. Airside, I guess, so you go through passport control?" Deveraux nodded. Aiko glanced at Harrison.

"I expect you want LAX?" He nodded as well. "No problem." Waving them to a clear area, she waved to Yori and Chou. "See you guys in a bit."

Harrison and Deveraux waved to the people they had come to know as friends, then disappeared in a bright flash. Naito swore. Harada grinned, opening his eyes.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"Yes, damn it. Bloody magical girls." Yori snickered while Chou sighed gently.
"Holy shit!" Nabiki said, staring at her sister and brother-in-law as they finished recounting their story. Ranma looked amused. Kasumi giggled, while her sister gaped at them. "That's all true?" Kasumi nodded.

"Oh yes. It was quite interesting."

"Magical terrorist cultists? Demon portal time-bombs? Magical girls and SWAT teams, with international police observers?" The middle sister shook her head slowly, still staring at them. "When did I fall into some sort of manga or anime series?" Ranma laughed, getting up to refill the coffee-pot.

"Quite a while ago, I think. Years, at least." Nabiki watched him walk off chuckling to himself.

"Idiot." Kasumi giggled again, moving over to put her arm around her sister. "It's like the plot of a bad clone of a Tom Clancy novel with added magic and martial arts," the younger woman commented.

"I know. But it's all true, I'm afraid." Nabiki looked at Kasumi for a moment then snickered. "I wonder who will play you two in the movie version?" Kasumi burst out laughing.

"From what Agent Naito was saying they're doing everything they can to keep it quiet. I think a movie would cause a collective coronary in the political and intelligence establishments. We certainly have no particular need to spread it around. It would just make people worried." Nabiki nodded thoughtfully.

"I guess so. Thanks for telling me, though. I saw the news report that just said a criminal gang had been arrested in Minato but not before setting off a bomb to cover their activities. I assume that was the cover story for the damage to the building?" Kasumi nodded. Ranma came back and poured them all coffee, sitting down again.

"It's kind of true in a way. The best cover stories always rely on the truth." Accepting a mug from him with a smile, she thought about it for a moment.

"What will happen to the cultists?" He shrugged.

"Buried in a deep cell for a very long time, I would think. I don't have a lot of sympathy for those bastards, they're responsible for the deaths of over fifty people and were aiming for possibly hundreds of thousands. They're dangerous scum." He took a drink, frowning in recollection. With a shake of his head he added, "I really can't put myself in the mindset of someone like that no matter how much I try. To want to kill so many people, randomly..." The martial artist looked appalled. "It's hard enough for me to kill even if there is imminent danger to someone, although I have had to more than once. These people, though..." He fell silent again appearing both angry and confused. Kasumi looked at him sympathetically.

"Don't try. It only worries you. Accept the fact that some things we'll just never understand, which is quite possibly for the best. We simply have to try to keep these things from getting out of hand." Her sister watched them for a moment.

"By the sound of it you did a very good job two weeks ago. On behalf of one of the non-super-powered inhabitants of the city, thanks." She grinned at them. Ranma seemed to cheer up a bit,
smiling back at her.

"You're welcome. Hopefully it will go back to normal intermittent demons, something nice and sensible." She stared for a moment, then laughed.

"You have a very strange definition of both 'normal' and 'sensible'. Shrugging, he sipped his coffee, an amused look on his face.

After a moment, she asked, "So, you think there still might be as many as six of those things out there waiting to go off?" Kasumi nodded again.

"Unfortunately, that's looking very likely. I had another look at the paperwork we collected as well as the other information Agent Naito's team found and it all hangs together. There are at least four, probably all six, of the devices that the records show were made unaccounted for. It could have been much worse but that's bad enough." She sighed. "Ranma is probably right, it would be too much to hope they're all in Minato where the results could be dealt with more or less easily. We know the first six were used here, presumably as tests, but it seems very likely that he would then try a small-scale test somewhere else where no one had the experience or ability to quickly deal with the results."

"We've swept the entire ward twice, we called in all the help we could manage from magical girl teams and various demons we're on good terms with, but so far nothing has turned up," Ranma said, looking worried. "It's still possible that one or two are around here somewhere, hidden away behind really good shielding, but it looks much more likely that the mage managed to put them somewhere else."

"The one good bit of news we found out is that we're nearly certain that he didn't do much if any teleporting. It looks from his records that even the teleport spell the original suspects used in LA was bought in. He seems to have had a fair amount of skill at stitching different spells together, but not a lot of experience in using them. He was quite young and not very experienced although he had an unpleasantly imaginative bent for coming up with ways to weaponise magic." Kasumi looked grim. "It's a pity that the only use he could think of for that skill was to try to cause the end of the world." She stopped talking and drank some coffee, glancing at her husband who was looking out the window with a distant expression on his face for a moment.

"So it seems likely that the list of places he could have placed the devices is fairly short, something like fifteen cities we know he visited in the time period over which we think he finished the prototypes. LA, New York, Detroit, and Washington in the US, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver in Canada, Mexico City, Moscow, Warsaw in Poland, London and Birmingham in the UK, Sydney in Australia, Paris, and Beijing." Ranma looked at her for a moment.

"And the rest of Tokyo." She nodded after a moment.

"Yes. True."

"Damn," Nabiki said eventually, going over the list of places around the world. "Almost all cities with large populations, very crowded, all over the planet. Presumably the idea was to hit them all more or less at once?" Ranma looked back at them, coming back from wherever his mind had been.

"Not quite. They seem to have discounted a single massive attack in favour of a constant stream of random, smaller, but still quite serious ones going on possibly for years. Presumably he was scouting out all the possible places he could put the large batch, we don't know if he actually planted any of them in any of those places. But we don't know he didn't, either." The dark-haired
young man didn't look pleased about that. "I wish I hadn't killed the bastard, we could ask him directly, but at the time it was about the only thing I could do. Pity, though." Appearing depressed, he added, "That's the first completely human person I've ever killed. Not that it should really matter, killing is killing, whether the person is human or not, but..." Kasumi looked at him sympathetically, as did Nabiki.

"You had no choice. If you hadn't dealt with him like that I probably would have had to. He wasn't sane, he was extremely dangerous. We both gave him several chances to surrender but all he did was try to kill us four separate times. He was about to release more of those demons, we might well have been overrun, which would have let them out into the street." Ranma sighed with an unhappy scowl.

"You're right of course. I don't think he was going to surrender no matter what. He was a true believer. By which I mean completely crazy. But it doesn't make it any easier." Nabiki put her empty mug down, leaning against Kasumi with a slight shiver.

"God, it makes me ill to think of what could happen." The young man sighed.

"It's more than 'could' happen, it's almost certain that it 'will' happen, eventually. If those things really are still in play, they will time out and go off sooner or later. Within a bit less than eight months, Kas thinks from looking at his notes."

"Fuck."

"Yep."

There was silence for a while as they all thought about it. Eventually Nabiki spoke. "One thing I was wondering. All the demons were the same, this really aggressive and difficult to kill thing like that one I saw the night I found you guys, except for the last set, the ones that Aiko and her team were fighting when those foreign cops jumped in. What changed?" Kasumi looked at her.

"Our best guess is that the demons that came through that portal were actually hunting the one the device was targeted on. The intent was definitely to bring through only that one type, they're extremely tough and not very bright, but horribly bloodthirsty. The ones that arrived are ones we've encountered before once or twice. Their name is almost unpronounceable, we tend to call them tripods, for obvious reasons. They're quite smart and very quick, they travel around in packs hunting for sport more than anything else."

"So they went after the demon the portal was supposed to bring at exactly the right moment and fell through the portal instead?" Nabiki asked. Ranma nodded.

"Or went through deliberately. No idea, they're unpredictable. Whatever the reason, they ended up here. Aiko and the girls were, luckily, in almost exactly the right place at exactly the right time, completely by coincidence. Even so it got pretty unpleasant, if Lieutenant Harrison and Inspector Deveraux hadn't been there they might have lost Fumiko at the least." Nabiki shivered again. It brought home once more how dangerous the magical girl job could be.

"I'm glad they were there. I like Fumiko and the rest." Kasumi smiled.

"We all do, they're very nice people as well as good friends." Her sister glanced at her.

"Can you really heal injuries that severe?"

"Oh, my, yes, bones are easy, the organs are a little more difficult but Ranma is very good at them. The poison was the most problematic, but we've seen it before." She seemed quietly confident, her
sister looking at her in wonder. Ranma chuckled.

"That's the same expression the Inspector had." She looked at him and stuck out her tongue, making him laugh again. "The thing that could have been fatal was the bullet I caught that nearly hit Agent Naito. It was headed right between his eyes. That would have been very nasty." The middle sister smiled.

"I'll bet he was surprised."

"And very grateful. He had the weirdest expression, but he thanked me quite a lot the next day when he recovered from the shock." Ranma seemed pleased. "I like him, I'm glad I was there to stop him dying."

"Probably not as much as he was." Nabiki snickered. He grinned at her.

"I imagine not." The younger Tendo looked at both her companions.

"OK, changing the subject away from this very worrying and depressing one, have you given any more thought to a visit to Nerima?" Kasumi smiled with a nod.

"Actually, yes. We should have a bit of a break coming up in about three weeks, around the middle of November. Would that suit you?" Nabiki nodded happily.

"Definitely. That matches nicely with some time off I'll have, for outside study. I can lose a day or two from it no problems, I'm way ahead in my coursework."

"Good. We'll have to double check the exact date but lets say the second weekend in November, subject to change, demon attack, or the end of the world. In that case we can reschedule." She giggled while her sister looked at her with a small sigh.

"Very weird, sis, very weird indeed. Fine. I'll alert everyone at home that I'll be having visitors then." She looked across at Ranma who was uncharacteristically silent to find him looking out the window again. "You still with us Saotome?" she asked. With a slight twitch he turned his head.

"Yes. Sorry. Just thinking about everything that happened recently, trying to work out if I should have done anything differently." The brunette nodded understandingly.

"Don't get too caught up in it. Like you told me, it's pointless trying to change the past. You need to move on, not dwell on it." He studied her for a moment then smiled.

"Sound advice. Fortune cookie?" She laughed.

"Martial artist, family member, and friend. All three of them give good advice."

They grinned at each other for a moment. After a few seconds, he asked, "How's Akane doing?" She looked suddenly worried.

"Um, not as well as I'd like. She started making some real progress last month for a week or two, then for some reason sort of backslid, ending up worse than she's been for some time. Her temper has been horrible the last couple of weeks. It's slowly getting better again but at this rate it'll take another month to get back to the point she was at three months ago." Nabiki sighed, folding her arms and staring at the table. "I really had hopes that it was finally starting to work for a while."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he replied quietly. Kasumi hugged her sister.
"Poor Akane." Curiously, she asked, "Did anything change over that time? Different diet, different environment, some sort of shock or upset?" Nabiki shook her head.

"Nothing that I can think of. I wondered the same thing and checked everything I could come up with, nothing seems to be different. The only thing even slightly out of the ordinary is that her friend Sayuri got back together with her boyfriend, which if anything made her happy." She looked thoughtful. "That said, it was about the same time, maybe a day or two before." Kasumi glanced at her husband.

"That's a bit of a coincidence. But if they're connected, how?" Nabiki shrugged.

"No idea. I haven't talked to Sayuri for months myself. I know she breaks up with Hiroshi pretty regularly, although I don't know why, and always ends up with Akane cheering her up. A few days to weeks later she gets back together with him and it all starts over again. This last breakup lasted longer than any others, though." Looking at the other two, she asked, "How could it be connected to Akane's mood? Unless she really gets upset when her friends are as well." Ranma snorted. "Based on my own experience she never seemed to notice other peoples feelings very much at all. But I guess that might have changed." Kasumi glanced at him reprovingly.

"That is my sister we're talking about, dear." He looked abashed.

"Sorry, Kas. But you know what I mean." She nodded unhappily. "Unfortunately."

There was silence for a while as they considered the issue. Eventually, Nabiki looked up. "I just had a thought." She went quiet again while the other two watched her curiously, then slowly shook her head. "It makes a weird kind of sense. But, why now?" She muttered to herself for a moment, then shook her head again. Kasumi and Ranma exchanged glances wondering what she was thinking. "Damn. How could we find out?"

"What, Nabs?" She looked at Ranma for a moment.

"Don't call me Nabs." He grinned. "OK, I'm probably wrong. But..." She shrugged very slightly. "It almost makes sense, for at least part of all this." Kasumi and Ranma exchanged glances again.

"What?" they chorused. The middle sister sighed.

"We have all thought at one point or another that Akane might be a repressed lesbian or bisexual, right?" They nodded. "And she is very immature in sexual matters, to the point that she suppresses any thoughts along the lines of sex at all, actively getting hostile when the subject is brought up." They nodded again. "What if she has a crush on Sayuri? Or is actually in love with her on some level?" Both of the others stared for a few seconds, then looked at each other. Kasumi slowly nodded while Ranma closed his eyes and sighed.

"Oh, hell. Yes, that's entirely possible. She probably wouldn't even realise it consciously. She's known Sayuri for what, ten years or more?" Kasumi nodded.

"Since primary school, actually. Almost all her life. At one point they were almost inseparable, they went everywhere together. Half way through junior high Sayuri discovered boys, which is normal of course, but I remember Akane was depressed that she was going on dates and didn't have time to be with her." The older Tendo thought. "In fact, now that I think about it, it was around then that she started to talk about boys being perverts all the time." Nabiki nodded.
"Yes, I remember. She got all moody for a couple of months, wouldn't come out of her room most of the time, then one day cheered up a bit but has been really dismissive of males ever since. Which got a lot worse when that damn Kuno fool started the whole 'beat Akane to win her hand' crap. Then you came along and really confused the issue." She looked at Ranma, who half-smiled back.

"Sorry." She flipped her hand, brushing the issue away.

"Not your fault. But you see what I mean? It all kind of fits. Probable lesbian tendencies, long-standing crush on a close female friend, repressed sexual development, feelings of abandonment when said friend starts noticing the other sex, and so on. I don't know enough psychology to frame it correctly but I have a horrible feeling it hangs together. So, when Sayuri breaks up and comes running back to Akane for comfort, she's sad for her friend because at heart she is a decent person, but subconsciously pleased because it means she can be with her. When she makes up again she's consciously happy because her friend is but underneath that feels abandoned all over again."

Kasumi and her husband were nodding as she spoke.

"And this last time, it was a longer break-up than any of the others, which might have made her think it was permanent. So she improves in other ways as well. When Sayuri goes back to Hiroshi it hits her hard and she gets worse than she's been for some time," the elder sister said slowly.

"Yes, exactly." Nabiki looked both irritated and sad. "The sad thing is that I don't think, even if this is right, that she realises it at all. If she did it might be something she could work out in therapy, but I know the doctor is skating around the issue of sex because it provokes such a bad reaction. That should be a clue it's important, I should have seen it before. I would imagine the doctor has a good idea, she's pretty shrewd, but whether there's anything she can do..." Sighing heavily again she picked up her cup and finished the coffee, putting it down with a clunk and leaning back on the sofa. "Damn it."

Ranma watched her for a moment. "As sharp as ever, Nabiki. I hadn't thought of any of that at all but it holds together." For some reason the praise didn't cheer her up. His brow furrowed a little. "It would neatly explain a number of things, and certainly add fuel to the fire of her anger, but what started the fire in the first place? She's much too short tempered even at the best of times, explosive rage isn't normal even for a very sexually repressed person." Nabiki shook her head in response.

"No, it's not. And I don't know. There's certainly something wrong I'm sure, some psychological problem way down at the bottom of her mind, but what it is..." She shrugged helplessly. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"If you're right about this, and I have to say it sounds likely, I wonder how we can deal with it?" Kasumi said. Nabiki frowned.

"I'm not sure. I should have a word with her doctor, tell her what we discussed, in case it's not something she's aware of. She won't tell me much, doctor-patient confidentiality issues get in the way, but because I'm Akane's sister I might be able to talk to her about it a little." They were all quiet for a while. Ranma broke the silence.

"I did ask around a few people I know in the university. No one could come up with any radical insight for methods to treat someone with the symptoms I described other than what's already been attempted, but a couple of people suggested that it's possible that there might be a physical cause for her anger issues, or at least part of them. One doctor I talked to last week asked if this had come on quite suddenly. When I asked why, he said that there are some rare cases of hormonal imbalances caused intermittent explosive disorder which this sounded like. I looked it up and while that diagnosis fits some of the symptoms it's not right for all of them, and she's also missing some
"I haven't heard of that."

"It's a psychological disorder that's characterised by sudden wildly disproportionate outbursts of anger, often very violent and destructive, followed by feelings of relief and pleasure that often turn into guilt. Sounds familiar." She nodded. Kasumi glanced at her husband.

"Surely the doctor she's seeing would have considered that? After all, as you say, it's rare but not that rare." He shrugged.

"True. I don't know, it's not something I have any experience of. I'm just suggesting something like that as a possibility."

"Assuming it was something along those lines, what could be done?" Nabiki looked at the martial artist inquiringly.

"Well, in a normal case of IED, pretty much exactly what's being done at the moment, therapy and probably some sort of mood regulating drug regime. No one is entirely sure what the root cause of it is, there's probably more than one like in many of these conditions. If there's a physical cause, though, finding and fixing it could make the psychological treatment much more effective. Say there really was some weird sort of hormonal issue which started all of this. If it began years ago, which seems likely, it will be so deeply engrained in her mind that simply removing the original organic problem wouldn't necessarily fix the learned psychological responses, but it might mean that the therapy would stand a much higher chance of working." The middle sister suddenly looked hopeful.

"Do you think you two could find out if she has anything like that and heal it?" Kasumi shared a look with Ranma for a moment.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, thinking it over. "It would probably be very subtle. Most of the things I can think of that might have the effect we're talking about would have other symptoms which would be very noticeable by now. But it's possible, I suppose, that there might be something else along those lines that's involved. We'd need to scan her thoroughly, and even then I'm not sure we'd necessarily find anything, but it's worth a try."

Nabiki looked slightly hopeful. "You could do that when you visit."

"Ah, there is a slight problem with that," Ranma said. "Don't forget using the ki healing and scanning methods produces some rather obvious visual effects. If we're visiting as your medical student friends that might be kind of hard to explain. As would why we were scanning her with special techniques in the first place. It could lead to questions we don't want to answer." The middle Tendo's face fell.

"Oh, damn. You're right." She pondered the problem as did the other two. "We could have Yori and Chou visit?"

"How do you explain meeting them? And why would they have any more reason to check Akane than Rika and Maiko?" Nabiki looked at her sister with irritation.

"I have no idea." Kasumi smiled gently at her.

"Don't get worked up, sister, we'll figure it out." A few minutes later she looked pleased. "Ah. Of course. It's easy." Ranma and his sister in law looked at her. "We have access to a number of properties around Tokyo, mostly in Minato but a few elsewhere. Some are ones we rent or own,
most belong to friends.” Nabiki looked interested.

"You own more places than this building?" This was the first she’d heard of it. Kasumi nodded, amused.

"A few small flats, nothing as grand as this. Safe-houses like the one we used during that recent affair. It's not important at the moment. The thing is that I do know someone who could probably lend us the use of a small office, near Nerima so it has no likelihood of being traced back to us." Her sister looked puzzled.

"So?"

"So, what we could do is borrow that office, then set ourselves up as a medical consultant firm. It's no problem to produce some new personae for the purpose, obviously. They don't need to have any documentation, no one will check. You tell Akane that you've been doing some research and have found a consultant who might be able to help diagnose any possible problems, having been guided in that direction by your friends Rika and Maiko, who are after all nearly doctors. I would imagine you could persuade her to visit this person especially as she's as keen to get cured now as we are to have her cured. We could come up with some reason that she needed to be scanned with some sort of high-tech machinery, which involves sedation. Then we can get a look at her without her knowing the truth."

Nabiki stared at her sister for several seconds, then exchanged a glance with Ranma, who shrugged. He was also looking at his wife in wonder. "That's the most ridiculous, over-elaborate plan I've ever heard of, Kasumi," she finally said. Kasumi smiled a little.

"But do you think it would work?"

"Probably." They grinned at each other. "So, presuming we can get her to go along with this silly charade, then what? If you find something and fix it what do we tell her?" Kasumi laughed.

"That's the good part. We don't have to tell her anything. She'll never know. She comes along, we sedate her, or more accurately we make her unconscious with some pressure points which is safer, scan her, and if we find anything, fix it. Assuming it's fixable, of course. Then when she wakes up tell her the scans were inconclusive and that she should continue with her existing treatment. She gets helped without ever knowing or suspecting who we are." The older sister smiled at the younger one who looked impressed.

"It's ridiculous. But it should work." Nabiki shook her head. "This would be so much easier if we could just tell her everything."

"You know why we can't. Even hinting at it could lead to problems both in the short and long term." Ranma looked sympathetically at her. She grunted.

"I know. But it's so convoluted just to have one sister help another." The brunette looked frustrated. He smiled sadly.

"I agree." Kasumi looked at Nabiki.

"If there is anything to fix and we can fix it, there's a good chance the therapy will work given some time. That might mean we could visit as ourselves one day." Ranma appeared dubious but nodded when his wife gave him a look.

"I suppose. There's more to it than Akane, but it would certainly help."
With a much happier smile at the thought that perhaps her sister might come home again one day, Nabiki asked eagerly, "So when could you set all this up?" Kasumi thought for a moment. "I'll have to call my friend and arrange use of the office, which might take a few weeks to set up. We'd need a time when they were able to close up for a day. Possibly over a weekend. Then we would need to design some convincing personae for the job, get some practice with them... I can't see it happening before the end of the month at the earliest." Her face falling slightly, Nabiki looked mildly disappointed.

"OK." She cheered up after a moment. "Which one will be the doctor and which the nurse?" Ranma and Kasumi looked at each other, then started a game of rock paper scissors. Nabiki began giggling manically.
"Your friends should be here soon, I believe, Nabiki?" Nodoka glanced at the middle sister as she restocked the refrigerator. The brunette nodded, checking a list while looking through a number of bags on the kitchen table.

"Yes, their train gets in at the station in about forty-five minutes. I'm going to go and meet them there, I have to leave by half past ten." Nodoka looked at her watch.

"That's in five minutes."

"Oh." Nabiki checked her own watch, looking surprised. "I didn't realise it was already that late." Quickly scanning the list she dropped it on the table, appearing satisfied. "Looks like we have everything. I'd better go. I'm going to show them around on the way back, we'll probably get here around half past one, if that's all right." Nodoka smiled.

"Of course. I'll make lunch for two, then." Looking at the older woman gratefully Nabiki nodded once more.

"Thanks. Do you know where Akane is?" The auburn-haired woman shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. She was in the yard about half an hour ago but I haven't seen her since then."

Leaving the kitchen Nabiki checked in her sister's bedroom finding it unoccupied. Going out to the Dojo she located Akane going through a set of Anything Goes katas, stopping and watching for a moment while thinking that even though by most standards she was very good, compared to Kasumi it looked slow and clumsy. Compared to Ranma she was a dancing hippo. With a small inner grin, but at the same time feeling a little guilty for the meanness of the thought, she called to her sister. "Akane? I'm just going to pick up Rika and Maiko. I'll be back in about three hours. Is there anything you need me to pick up while I'm out?" The blue haired young woman glanced at her for a moment before going back to concentrating on what she was doing.

"No, thank you. Have a nice time with your friends, I'm looking forward to meeting them." About to leave, Nabiki stopped then turned back.

"When are Father and Genma getting back?" The two fathers had given their students a day off, going to a Shogi tournament in the next ward. Akane shrugged, nearly fumbling the next move in the kata then looking momentarily irritated with herself.

"Don't know for sure," she mumbled, trying to get back into the flow of the movement. "Some time this evening I think."

"Thanks." She smiled at her sister then walked out of the Dojo. Walking back around the house and heading out of the gate she waved at Nodoka through the kitchen window, who waved back. Half an hour later she was standing on the train platform waiting for the 11.10 train from Minato. It turned up on time as usual, pulling smoothly to a halt and opening it's doors. A relatively small number of people got off as at this time of day on a weekend most travellers were going in the other direction. Amongst the people exiting the carriage next to where she was standing she recognised the familiar forms of her disguised sister and sister-in-law, who grinned at her.

"Hi, Nabiki," 'Maiko' said, while 'Rika' hugged her.

"Hello you two. Was the trip OK?" They nodded.
"Pretty smooth", the smaller brunette women said. "I haven't done a lot of travel by train for a while, it seems slower than I remember." Nabiki laughed.

"That's because you spend so much time travelling by less common methods." Heading out of the station they walked down the road, the two visitors looking around with interest.

"Been a while. It looks more or less the same." 'Maiko' inspected a shop they were passing. "Didn't that used to be a bookshop?"

"Yes, it closed down about nine months ago, I think the owner retired. Now it's some sort of dressmakers." 'Rika' also noticed several other differences as they moved on. Talking and laughing, the three of them slowly headed in roughly the direction of the Dojo, in no particular hurry.

Stopping at a café near the central shopping area of Furinkan, they decided to have a small snack. 'Rika' sipped her tea while inspecting the immediate area. "I remember all this so well," she said quietly, "but it almost seems like another life. I used to buy groceries over there. That was where the tea came from. Around the corner is the butcher." Her sister listened to her with interest, sharing a glance with 'Maiko'. "It all seems so long ago."

"Do you miss it?" Nabiki asked, eventually. 'Rika' smiled slightly.

"Of course, in some ways I do. Most of my life was spent here. But in other ways, precisely because of that, I'm so very glad to have moved on." The middle sister nodded slowly while sipping her own tea.

"I think I understand." They sat in silence for a while just enjoying the day, which while rather chilly was still sunny. Hot air came out of the cafe door immediately behind them, warming the vicinity fairly well. They'd decided to sit just outside so they could have a good view although most of the café's patrons were inside where it was warmer. "I spoke to Akane's doctor, by the way. I meant to call you and tell you but I ran into a problem with my coursework and lost track of the time. She said the IED diagnosis was one she'd considered but there were some troubling differences. She wouldn't go into details although she agreed it sounded very similar." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' nodded thoughtfully.

"The idea about Sayuri, though, was one she found very interesting. Apparently she hasn't been able to get very much if anything out of Akane about her relationships with anyone but a certain martial artist. Him she wouldn't stop talking about for ages." 'Maiko' grimaced slightly while she smiled a little. "I went into some detail about our suspicions. She asked a lot of questions about the background of Akane and Sayuri, then went quiet about it. Again, she wouldn't be drawn much on any of it but she looked very thoughtful and thanked me for the information." The young woman shrugged. "Whether it will help I have no idea, but at least she has the information now. Akane certainly wasn't going to tell her, assuming she even realises it herself. And, of course, assuming we were right in any way at all."

"How has she been the last couple of weeks?" 'Rika' looked at her sister, concerned.

Nabiki sighed slightly. "Up and down. On the whole, getting better, I think, but slowly. She seems to have been spending a lot of time practising the Art, or what she knows of it. That's what she was doing when I left. Auntie Nodoka says she's spending most of her free time doing that recently. It seems to calm her down if nothing else." 'Maiko' glanced at her wife, then looked back to Nabiki.

"How is she coming along with it?" She was very curious.
"It's... difficult to say, really. I'm not a real expert. That said, she's visibly improved in the last few months, but even so she's so far behind, for example, 'Yori' and 'Chou'," she looked around slightly guiltily, not sure whether she should mention those names, but reassured when 'Maiko' nodded, unconcerned, "that's it's very obvious indeed. I think that to a more normal practitioner of martial arts she'd be considered very good, but by the standards of the NWC she's only improved a fairly small amount."

"Any improvement is good. It will hopefully produce a more disciplined approach to life if she keeps at it, which can only help," her sister-in-law said with some approval in her voice.

"I suppose." Nabiki's tone of voice was a little dubious. She glanced off to the left as a flash of blue caught her attention, then froze. "Um, Shampoo is heading this way..." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' exchanged quick looks but schooled their expressions into polite smiles as the Amazon girl noticed Nabiki and approached. As she walked closer Nabiki hissed out of the corner of her mouth, "Will she detect anything funny from you two?" 'Rika' shook her head nearly imperceptibly.

"No," she replied very quietly, "we're masking it. She shouldn't feel anything, although Cologne might." She stopped talking as the young woman they were watching came within earshot.

"Hello, Nabiki. I haven't seen you for a while." She looked curiously at the two people she didn't recognise. With a certain amount of inner trepidation Nabiki made the introductions.

"These are a couple of friends of mine from university, Rika and Maiko. They're medical students." Shampoo nodded.

"Yes, I remember Akane mentioning them. Hello, I'm Shampoo." She held out her hand. Nabiki held her breath for a moment wondering whether she'd somehow see through the disguises but apparently the Chinese woman saw nothing but what was apparent, two young Japanese females she'd never met before. The mannerisms, voices, and appearances were perfect and nothing like the real Ranma or Kasumi. She was so used to them by now she sometimes forgot quite how startled she'd been the first time. 'Maiko' stood and politely shook hands with the woman who had caused her so much trouble for years without Shampoo having the slightest idea how close she was to her errant 'fiancé'. The middle Tendo had a sudden urge to burst into hysterical laughter at the thought but suppressed it forcefully.

Sitting down again 'Maiko' waited until 'Rika' had also shaken hands, then asked, 'Shampoo? That's an odd name." She looked momentarily confused, then enlightenment crossed her face. "Ah, yes, I remember, Nabiki mentioned you, you're from a village of warrior women in China, am I right?" Shampoo nodded with a smile. "So, it should be something like Xian Pu, I think." She pronounced the Chinese version of Shampoo's name perfectly, making the Amazon look slightly surprised.

"Yes, that's correct. Most Japanese people don't seem to be able to pronounce it properly, I've got used to it over the years. Only my great-grandmother calls me that now." She grinned. "It's nice to hear it spoken correctly," 'Maiko' smiled, then said something in Mandarin. "Very good. Your accent is a little strange but that's much better than most people here can manage." Shampoo looked impressed. The petite brunette woman thanked her for the compliment, while Nabiki listened with interest.

"I'm afraid I don't know much Mandarin, only a few dozen useful phrases so far, but I'm learning. I can understand a bit more than I can speak. Some fellow students at university are teaching Rika and me, while we help them with Japanese." 'Maiko' smiled. Shampoo looked amused and said something, to which the other woman nodded with a laugh. "OK, I got about half of that. Something about it being nice to talk to someone in a sensible language?"
"Yes. You know quite a lot of Mandarin." The brunette shook her head with her long braid waving around.

"Oh, no, I've only been learning for a year or so. It's a very complicated language." 'Rika' looked at her companion with a smile and also said something in Mandarin, leaving Nabiki wondering what she was talking about. Shampoo burst into laughter.

"I think you mean mother not horse." 'Rika' looked embarrassed.

"Yes. Sorry, those rising and falling tones in Mandarin always confuse me." Giggling, Shampoo glanced at Nabiki, who waved her to a chair. Sitting down she talked for a little while, correcting a few words the pair tried on her.

"Not bad. Keep at it, you'll get it in the end. It took me years to learn Japanese properly, I'm not good with languages at all." She sighed. "I sounded like an idiot when I first got here." Nabiki snickered a little.

"You certainly did." The Amazon flushed, glaring at the other woman, who laughed. "You said it, not me." After a moment the other smiled a bit.

"Fair enough." She looked back to the two new people. "I'm trying to earn English now, it seems a useful one to have. But it's really difficult. There doesn't seem to be a lot of sense to it." 'Rika' smiled.

"No, it's a surprisingly complicated language in some ways. There are lots of rules, but about the only consistency with them is how inconsistently they're applied."

"Can you speak it?" Shampoo asked curiously. They both nodded.

"Yes, we're both actually very fluent in English, we learned quite a lot at school, then more at university and from dealing with people from overseas. We meet a lot of North Americans and Europeans, English is nearly the only common language we have. Hardly anyone from either place speaks Japanese very well." 'Maiko' grinned. "Sometimes they think they do, but often the result is very funny." Shampoo looked amused.

"How long are you visiting for?" 'Rika' smiled at her.

"We're going to be here for the weekend. Nabiki invited us ages ago but we couldn't get away until now. We're both looking forward to meeting the rest of her family." Shampoo nodded, looking momentarily pensive.

"Not all of them." The other woman raised her eyebrows then looked understanding.

"It's a shame. Kasumi, the oldest sister, was such a nice person. I hope she's all right wherever she is. And..." Trailing off she stopped talking with a distant look in her eyes. "And... him." They exchanged glances. She didn't notice, lost in her memories for a moment. After a few seconds she shook herself. "Never mind. It's all in the past." Looking at them she smiled, slightly sadly. "If you get time drop in to the Cat Café. Nabiki can show you where it is. My great grandmother runs it. We do some very good ramen." Standing, she nodded to them, then walked away still looking a bit depressed. When she was safely out of range, Nabiki looked at her disguised sister-in-law, who was watching the distant form with the long lilac hair, a certain amount of pity in her eyes.
"She's still holding a torch, you know. I think she will for years, possibly forever." 'Maiko' nodded slowly.

"I can see that. Poor Shampoo, despite all the problems I never wanted to hurt her like that. Kill her sometimes, yes, but not hurt her emotionally." She sighed. Nabiki studied her for a moment.

"Are you going to go to the Café?" she asked. The two women looked at each other for a moment.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Cologne is no fool, she might detect something. Not the right thing almost certainly, but something. I don't want to make her curious about us." 'Maiko' looked very slightly worried. "Not right now, certainly. We've got enough on our plates without Amazon Elders poking their noses in." Chuckling, Nabiki could only agree.

"What do you want to tell people if they ask where you're from, or where we met?" the middle sister asked as they left the café. 'Maiko' and 'Rika' thought about the question for a while.

"Well, we can sidestep both questions a bit if we just refer to the university. As long as they don't ask which university, we're fine. They'll just assume we go to the one you do." 'Maiko' grinned.

"We could just say you live in Minato," Nabiki said. 'Rika' frowned.

"I'd prefer not to. It's one more clue we don't want to give out. Saying we visit Minato is fine, lots of people do. Or saying you have as well shouldn't cause a problem. We simply don't want to associate ourselves with Minato too closely, just in case." Her sister nodded thoughtfully.

"I understand. I've steered clear of the subject whenever anyone asked by doing much the same. So far no one has dug any deeper. I don't want to outright lie if I can help it, but bending the truth isn't a problem." 'Maiko' laughed, looking at her with amusement.

"I seem to remember that was your entire operating method, you never lied but you were very good at letting people lead themselves down the wrong path." Smirking, the middle Tendo nodded with satisfaction.

"It's much better to have the mark, I mean, 'client', persuade themselves rather than to have you try to persuade them. More difficult to pull off but a lot more convincing." She glanced at them, her sister was frowning very slightly while the other woman looked amused. "Obviously, I don't do that sort of thing any more."

"Of course not." 'Maiko' looked at her with a serious expression, to be met with a similar one. It held for about five seconds, then they both burst out laughing.

"OK. We avoid the subject. I think we're all sufficiently practised to do that," Nabiki said after a moment. The others nodded.

They arrived at the Dojo on schedule, having looked around the old neighbourhood, re-familiarising themselves with it. Neither had been to Nerima at all for a considerable time. It brought back a lot of memories both good and bad. Stopping in the street outside the Tendo residence, 'Maiko' and 'Rika' both looked at it for a long moment, then exchanged glances and a small sigh each. Nabiki watched silently. "It's been a long time, dear." 'Maiko' studied her wife carefully. The other woman looked very sad for a moment, then obviously and deliberately put a smile on her face, looking at her currently female husband.

"Yes, it has. It's a pity it's still not possible to be open about it. Oh well."

"Are you going to be OK?" Nabiki asked with concern. Her sister nodded after a short pause.
"I am." They walked towards the gate, Nabiki opening it and waving them through. Both of them walked in, feeling very strange to be once again standing in the courtyard of the Tendo house where one of them had spent years and the other her whole life, after so long away. They looked at each other for a second, the same thought going through their minds, before deliberately immersing themselves in the personae they were wearing. Opening the front door Nabiki entered first, removing her shoes just inside. The two women with her did the same. Hearing the door close Nodoka came out of the kitchen.

"Hello Auntie," Nabiki said. "This is Maiko, and Rika, my friends. Guys, this is Nodoka Saotome." They nodded politely.

"Hello, Mrs Saotome," 'Rika' said, holding out her hand. Nodoka shook it with a smile.

"Nodoka, please. It's very nice to meet you, Nabiki has said quite a lot about both of you." She shook 'Maiko's' hand as well. The disguised Ranma had a very weird couple of seconds shaking the hand of her own mother while being introduced as a stranger. Nabiki covertly caught her eye and she smiled very slightly with the tiniest of shrugs. Leading them to the living room Nodoka said over her shoulder, "I understand you two are both medical students?" 'Maiko' nodded with a smile.

"Yes, that's correct. We've known Nabiki since before then, but for the last few years we've both been learning medicine. Rika is getting a medical degree, I'm working on sports medicine and biomechanics." The older woman bustled around the room for a moment, doing a little last-minute tidying up, before being satisfied.

"Please sit down. Would you like some tea? Or coffee?"

"Coffee would be very nice, please," 'Rika' replied with a pleased look, sitting next to her companion. Nabiki sat down across the table from them. Nodoka looked enquiringly at her and she nodded.

"Coffee, please, Auntie. Do you want me to help?"

"No, stay here with your friends. I have the kettle on, it won't take long." She vanished into the kitchen, returning in a couple of minutes with a tray full of cups and a coffee-pot. Pouring them each a cup she sat down. "So, tell me about yourselves." The two women exchanged glances for a moment, before 'Rika' indicated 'Maiko' should speak.

"Um, we live near the university. We share an apartment. Nabiki's stayed over a few times since we have a spare room." Nodoka nodded, pouring herself a cup as well. Nabiki helped herself to some sugar.

"I understand you are in a relationship?" she said, half asking, half stating. Nabiki nearly choked on her coffee.

"Auntie!" Nodoka looked slightly embarrassed while 'Rika' laughed.

"Yes, that's true. Don't worry, Nabiki, we're not offended." The middle sister wiped coffee from the end of her nose, staring at Nodoka with some irritation. The older woman looked more embarrassed, while 'Rika' simply smiled gently. 'Maiko' was openly grinning.

"We love each other very much, and don't care who knows or what they think." Reaching out she held her wife's hand. "We consider ourselves to be married." The auburn-haired woman sighed, watching them.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, but I've never met a pair of..." 'Maiko' laughed.
"Lesbians? I suppose I am, I certainly like women. Well, specifically one woman." Nabiki listened with inner hilarity. It was definitely true that Ranma liked women, but whether he still qualified as a lesbian when male was a very interesting point. She resolved to ask him the next time the opportunity came up. Nodoka blushed at the openness of the response.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "My upbringing was very conservative and traditional. This sort of thing wasn't something my own mother would ever have mentioned, or probably even been aware of. It's taken some time for me to get over that." 'Rika' looked understanding.

"We all have parental issues to one degree or another. We don't mind, you're just curious. That's understandable." The elder woman seemed relieved that they weren't offended, she was well aware that it had been a significant breach of etiquette to even mention it, but her mouth had run away before her mind could stop it. Bowing slightly from a seated position she apologised once more. 'Maiko' waved her hand airily.

"Please, forget it."

They talked about university life and gave some information on the background stories of their disguises for twenty minutes or so, before Nodoka looked at her watch. "I have to finish preparing lunch. It will be about a quarter of an hour. Nabiki, why don't you show your friends around the house and where their room is? Please excuse me." She smiled at the two women, stood, then disappeared into the kitchen. The three females left in the living room looked at each other then silently giggled furiously for a moment, before Nabiki motioned to the door.

Once outside the room 'Maiko' said quietly, "OK, we're lightly shielded. No one will notice what we say if we keep the noise down." The middle sister promptly started giggling again.

"God, I thought I was going to explode several times in there. How the hell did you keep a straight face? Your mother talking about the problems she has had to face because of her mother was so funny." 'Maiko' grinned.

"I know. I doubt she'll ever know the irony involved." 'Rika' looked at her and laughed.

"Asking us about our 'lesbian' relationship was very amusing as well. Especially the way she did it, she got so embarrassed when she'd realised what she'd said."

"To give her credit where it's due, she is trying to understand," Nabiki commented, turning and heading upstairs. They both followed. "She's changed a lot in the last year or so, for the better. Still a bit nuts but I don't think nearly as bad as before you left. She's come to realise some of what she was responsible for, in causing you so many problems with her impossible demands." She snickered. "I haven't heard her talk about 'a man among men' for a long time." She looked over her shoulder at Nodoka's currently female son and grinned. "Although I suspect that your current state would cause her some problems if she knew." 'Maiko' grinned back.

"Probably." They arrived outside Kasumi's old room, where Nabiki stopped and looked at the little yellow wooden duck that was still hanging there. 'Rika' also stared at it, reaching out with one finger to gently touch it with a tear in her eye. Her husband put her arm around her shoulders. "You OK?"

"Yes, I will be. It brings back a lot of memories." Standing straight she pushed on the door. It swung open to reveal a room both familiar and unfamiliar. None of her old possessions were in evidence, mostly because the bulk of them were in their apartment, and the room had been repainted. But the bed was still the same, as were the curtains. She walked inside and looked around while 'Maiko' and Nabiki watched from the door. After a moment she smiled. "This feels
very strange."

"Home at last?" Nabiki asked. She considered that for a few seconds then shook her head.

"Not quite. This isn't my home any more. But it's like an old familiar blanket, one you haven't seen for years, which you found while unpacking a cupboard. The same smell you remember from years ago, if that makes any sense." Nabiki nodded slowly.

"I think I understand."

"I spent so many years in this room." She walked over to the window and peered out, then sat on the bed. "In this bed. It feels... welcoming." Swivelling around she lay down for a moment, smiling to herself. 'Maiko' watched her fondly.

"Do you want to use this room?" Nabiki asked. "It's used as a guest room now, on the rare occasions we have guests, but if it's too much we could arrange something else. Happosai's old room, for example. Father usually sleeps there now but I can persuade him to move in here for a night." Sitting up 'Rika' swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She shook her head.

"No, thank you Nabiki. This will be fine. The bed is a good size and it will be nice to spend a night here after all this time." Her sister nodded.

"You'd better leave your bags here then, to make it look normal." They both pulled an overnight bag out of a ki pocket. "Hmm. I hope Auntie didn't notice you weren't carrying those when you came in." Leaving the bedroom they headed outside. Walking around the garden 'Maiko' stopped in front of the pond.


"Missing your morning swim?"

"No, not really." She grinned. "I like swimming a lot, but I prefer it to be on my own terms." They resumed walking, 'Rika' inspecting the garden carefully to see how it had been kept up in her absence, nodding approvingly. Nabiki noticed.

"Nodoka does quite a lot of gardening. She's kept everything pretty nice." Coming around the house they walked towards the Dojo, from which some familiar noises could be heard. Looking inside they found Akane going through another kata, fairly fast but still only at a fraction of the speed they performed the same one at even when they were just doing it for relaxation. 'Maiko' allowed the gentle cloak to slowly fade away. At a certain point Akane suddenly realised they were there, stopping and turning around.

"Hi, sis," she said, walking over while wiping the sweat from her forehead with a towel that was around her neck. She studied the two women with her sister curiously. They were looking at her with a slightly odd intensity, she noticed, but put it down to the martial arts she had been practising. Holding out her hand, she said, "Hi. I'm Akane Tendo." The shorter of the two women, who had her lustrous brown hair in a braid that reached to the small of her back and was wearing a red bow at the end of it, hesitated for a moment then shook it.

"Maiko Nakahara. Pleased to meet you." Her grip was firm and sure. The other woman, taller and blonde, also shook her hand.

"Rika Nygaard. Also pleased to meet you." She smiled in a gentle manner that reminded her faintly of her mother. Looking back at 'Maiko' she inspected the hairstyle for a moment. It looked slightly familiar but she couldn't place why.
"I like your hair," she commented politely. The other woman smiled.

"Thank you. It took ages to grow it this long. Braiding it is a pain but I like the look." She glanced around the inside of the Dojo. "This is very impressive." Akane smiled.

"It's the family Dojo. I practice here every day, and my father and his friend are the instructors. We have our own style, Anything Goes Martial Arts, which we teach here." She looked at the two women. "Do you do any martial arts?" They exchanged glances.

"Well, we both practice some tai chi, and I know some akido. Also we're learning about pressure points and things like that in our medical studies. They're used in martial arts, aren't they?" She sounded a bit unsure. Akane nodded encouragingly.

"Yes, that's right. Some forms of the Art make very extensive use of pressure points. I know a couple of real experts in the field." 'Maiko' seemed impressed.

"How long have you been learning martial arts?" she asked. Akane puffed up a little.

"Since I was a child. Not many people around here are better than me." Behind 'Maiko' she saw her sister roll her eyes a little and blushed slightly. "But I still have a lot to learn," she added hastily.

"It must take a lot of time and practice to become skilled at it," 'Rika' said, staring at the shrine to their mother high on the wall of the Dojo for a moment before looking back to Akane. The blue-haired young woman nodded.

"It does. Not many people stick to it and become real masters." Nabiki seemed to be having some trouble keeping a straight face. Akane glared at her sister when the other two women were looking away, making her shrug silently with a smile.

"Fascinating." 'Rika' smiled at her. Hearing a faint call from the direction of the house, Nabiki looked to see Nodoka waving to her. She waved back.

"Lunch is ready. Let's go inside. Akane, are you going to join us?" The youngest Tendo sister nodded, tossing the towel towards a bench just inside the door. It missed.

"Yes, I'll just go and have a very quick shower." She headed for the house. The three other women followed more slowly, 'Maiko' gently cloaking them again so they could take without anyone noticed.

"Still capable of being a little full of herself, isn't she?" the smaller woman asked. Nabiki grinned.

"Definitely. Although I seem to remember a certain martial artist who was similarly boastful." 'Maiko' laughed.

"The difference is that I actually was that good." The two sisters shared a smile.

"Yes, dear," 'Rika' said quietly. Nabiki giggled. 'Maiko' looked momentarily irritated then did the same.

"Yes," 'Rika' said quietly. Nabiki giggled. 'Maiko' looked momentarily irritated then did the same.

"It's true. But I'll admit that was a bit boastful." Entering the house they headed for the living room, finding Nodoka laying the table.

"Please, let me help you with that," 'Rika' said.

"No, you're guests. This will only take a moment," Nodoka replied good-naturedly. The blonde sat
down with a smile, followed by her husband and her sister. "Is Akane coming?" the older woman asked.

"Yes, she's just washing up."

"Good." As soon as the table was ready Ranma's mother vanished into the kitchen once more, returning quickly with the first plates of food. Nabiki got up to help despite her protestations. Minutes later everything was ready, just in time for Akane to come in. Very soon they were all eating and talking. Half-way through the meal Nodoka looked as if she'd remembered something. "Akane, a package came for you this morning while you were out." Standing, she rummaged around on the bookshelf next to the door until she retrieved a padded envelope, which she gave to the youngest Tendo before sitting down again. Akane read the label curiously.

"Ah. It's from a friend of mine who lives near Minato. Her sister works there, she's always telling me things about the demons and magical girls in the ward." She laughed. "The way she tells it you can hardly walk down the road without tripping over a magical girl fighting a demon, or the other way around." 'Rika' glanced at 'Maiko' and her sister as her other sister ripped the end off the envelope, emptying the contents onto the table next to her plate. A DVD in an unmarked case fell out along with a letter which she read curiously, smiling with interest after the first page. "Oh, wonderful. This should be amazing."

"What is it, dear?" Nodoka asked with curiosity in her voice.

"You remember those news reports we saw a few months ago? The ones with the magical girls in Minato who were shouting at the other ones after they caused all the damage when they killed a couple of demons?" Nodoka thought for a moment then nodded. "Oh, yes. The little shouty one and the tall quiet one." Akane smiled.

"That's them. The small one is called Yori and the other one is Chou. They have a real reputation as seriously dangerous even by magical girl standards." Nabiki hardly dared look at either of her guests for fear of losing it completely, she was having a hard enough time keeping a straight face as it was. She could hear intermittent faint snorting noises coming from 'Maiko' while out of the corner of her eye 'Rika' was obviously biting the inside of her cheek in an attempt to keep a serious demeanour. Neither Akane or Nodoka noticed.

"They're very private people, oddly. Most of the magical girls seem to like showing off." Nodoka nodded wisely.

"I remember seeing the reports. So many of those girls wear very inappropriate clothing, but those two were dressed very nicely. But I'm still not sure about, Yori, was it?" Akane nodded. "I'm not sure about that bright blue highlight in her hair. It's a bit bold." Three pairs of eyes looked at her, then at the blue hair of the girl still reading the letter, then at each other. Three very slight shrugs came and went unnoticed.

"No one seems to know very much about them, or at least, no one is talking. After those reports I tried to find out more, but apparently people inside the area they're active in don't talk to people outside it a lot. It's very strange. Anyway, they occasionally put on demos by request for people of their magical and martial skills, which are supposed to be incredible. Recently they did one to music which I've heard was one of the most amazing things anyone ever saw. It got videoed but copies are weirdly difficult to track down." She held up the DVD. "Kaede's sister managed to get hold of a copy. This is a duplicate of it. Kaede says it's absolutely beautiful." She finished reading the letter while 'Rika' and 'Maiko' looked at each other with amused expressions.
"You're interested in magical girls, then, Akane?" 'Rika' asked. Akane nodded.

"Oh, yes, very much." She blushed a little. "When I was a small child I wanted so much to be one. I think that might be why I stuck at martial arts all this time." The blue haired girl chuckled a little sadly. "I know it's silly, it's not like being good at martial arts makes you a magical girl." Nabiki suddenly choked as a bit of fish went down the wrong pipe, causing Nodoka to reach out and thump her on the back.

"Thanks," she croaked, reaching for her glass of water.

Looking annoyed at the interruption Akane stared at her sister completely missing the look of enormous enjoyment that briefly flashed between the two guests before their faces smoothed out into ones of polite interest. Nodoka also missed it as she was looking at Nabiki with some concern. The middle sister indicated she was all right. "We should watch it," Akane said.

"After lunch." Nodoka looked at her firmly, causing her to wilt a little.

"Yes, Auntie." They finished eating, 'Rika' and 'Maiko' both complimenting Nodoka on the food.

"Thank you," she replied, pleased and smiling.

"Would you like us to help with the washing up?" 'Rika' asked. "We would be glad to."

"No, that's fine. We got a dishwasher last week, finally. It only takes a couple of minutes to load it up." Nabiki helped the elder Saotome to fill the machine, then once it was running they came back into the living room. "All right, Akane, let's watch this DVD of yours." With a smile Akane put the disk into the player and turned on the television. A few moments later they sat back to watch, interested for several different reasons. Nabiki grinned at her elder sister and her sister-in-law when the other two weren't looking, receiving a mischievous look from 'Maiko' in return. Pressing play on the remote control Akane sat forward on her seat to watch, clasping her hands eagerly in her lap, as excited as a child watching a movie.

The video was a little shaky at first but steadied as the unknown camera operator found a vantage point to rest the device on. It was clearly a very expensive camera in use as the picture was near-professional quality. It started just after 'Yori' and 'Chou' had begun the first sparring match. 'Rika' nudged her husband as she spotted Sergeant Harada and the two North American police officers in the crowd. 'Maiko' nodded absently, watching their performance with a critical eye. "Good grief", Nodoka muttered as she watched the sheer speed of the sparring match, wincing at the noises which the recorder had picked up with startling clarity. The blows and movements were just a blur on the screen, far faster than the shutter speed of the camera could cope with. Akane watched wide-eyed with a large smile on her face.

When the energy swords came out she gasped in amazement while Nodoka simply gaped. They watched the light-sabre fencing match with awe, even Nabiki staring incredulously. It was noticeably faster than the one she'd witnessed at their apartment some time ago. Her sister had clearly been practising a lot. Looking at her for a moment she raised her eyebrows, getting a smug smile back. Shaking her head slightly with a small grin she went back to watching the video.

Eventually it got to the point where the katas and the band converged. They all fell silent as the spectacle went on, with small gasps coming from Akane and Nodoka when the glowing trails of light appeared. Once it was over the room was as quiet as the park had been that day. Eventually Akane pressed the power button on the remote, making the TV shut down with a faint click.

"My god," Nodoka said quietly. Akane had tears in her eyes. Nabiki looked at her, then glanced at
her older sister, who was watching the younger one with concern.

"Are you all right, Akane?" Nabiki asked. The other woman nodded.

"Yes," she said quietly, after a long pause. "That was... That was the most unbelievable thing I've ever seen." She fell silent again. "I wish I could see something like that in person. Those two women are..." She shook her head, unable to find the words.

"Even without the light show, that was the most incredible demonstration of martial arts I've ever even heard of," Nodoka said slowly. "I know how good some of the people around here are, but even I can see how much better those girls are. How could they possibly have learned so much, so young? They looked like they weren't even twenty yet." Akane looked over her shoulder.

"Magical girls are, well, magic. Perhaps that has something to do with it." Nabiki shook her head.

"I don't think so. It looks to me like that was the result of an inhuman amount of skill and practice. The magic just adds to it." She glanced at 'Maiko', who shrugged very slightly. Akane looked at her and nodded slowly.

"It makes me feel like I've wasted my life, in one way. There's no way I'll ever be anywhere even close to that good." After a moment, she added, "But at the same time, I also know that no one I know will ever be that good either. They're as far beyond everyone I know as the rest of the martial artists in Nerima are past me. More." She shook her head. "Even... him." 'Rika' and 'Maiko' looked at each other with a small amount of guilt mixed with some amusement.

"Your father will find that DVD interesting," Nodoka said after another silence. Akane nodded absently, still staring at the blank screen of the TV. "So will my husband." She laughed a little. "It will show them that there is a lot of room for improvement." With a small shiver across her entire body Akane came back from wherever she'd gone.

"Kaede was right. That was a genuine work of art. Those two could perform that anywhere in the world and get standing ovations." She smiled, going over to the player and ejecting the disk, putting it carefully back into it's case. "I'll have to show this to Shampoo. I think she'd like it as well." She looked at 'Rika' and 'Maiko'. "Shampoo is a friend of mine from China, she comes from a tribe of warrior women and is a very good martial artist," she explained. 'Maiko' nodded.

"Yes, we met Xian Pu earlier, Nabiki introduced us." Akane looked somewhat startled at the use of the Amazon's correct Chinese name, spoken with the correct accent, but accepted it.

"Do you speak Mandarin?"

"A little bit. Not very well yet, we're both still learning." The woman studied Akane. "What do you do, aside from the martial arts? Are you going to university, or do you have a job?" Akane sat down again having put the DVD on the bookcase.

"No, I don't go to university, not yet. I would like to one day, but there are some... problems..." Appearing slightly upset for a moment she quickly cheered up. "I'm working in a jewellery ship in Furinkan, I've been there for a while now. The owner is a nice man, he pays well and he knows a lot about his business. I don't know if I want to work there forever but for the time being it's OK, and sometimes fun. You meet some interesting people." She laughed. "It's the nearest I suppose I'll come to being a magical girl, I've stopped three robberies so far. I had to be quite harsh with the last two guys that tried to steal things, they had a knife they thought would impress us." Nodoka looked at her in shock.
"You didn't mention that, Akane. When did this happen?" The youngest sister smiled, shrugging a little.

"Three days ago. It wasn't anything special. Two young guys came in, some sort of gang members I guess, waved a knife in my face, then told me to give them all the cash and some diamond rings. I said no. They got pushy, I pushed back, they left in an ambulance. Mr Ito was very pleased and gave me a bonus. The police seemed quite happy as well, apparently those guys had robbed a couple of other shops recently and got away with it." Nabiki listened with some amusement, she'd heard some of the details but not all of it. 'Maiko' looked at 'Rika' with raised eyebrows and a secretive smile, then back at Akane.

"My, that sounds quite dangerous. Weren't you frightened?" She shook her head.

"Not really. I've had some very strange things happen to me over the years. Two punks with a knife doesn't even make the top ten most worrying things this month." Smiling, she added, "It actually cheered me up, I was feeling bored. For some reason hitting something always makes me feel better." Nabiki sighed.

"That's sort of the problem, isn't it." The blue-haired girl had the grace to look abashed. Nodoka watched her with concern.

"Sorry, Nabiki. But you know what I mean, it was something to do. I'm sort of bored a lot of the time, it used to be much more exciting around here." Her sister looked unimpressed.

"Exciting is an odd way to put it. Extremely dangerous and expensive, not to mention hard on property values, would be more accurate." Nodoka glanced at the two visitors who were listening with interest.

"Nerima has something of a reputation for strange martial artists and odd occurrences. About four years ago things started to calm down a little but it's still prone to weirdness." 'Rika' smiled.

"Yes, we've heard about some of the things that go around here. It sounds very interesting." The older woman sighed a little.

"It can be very annoying. You wouldn't believe some of the things that have happened. It's almost enough to make one thing of moving to Minato because it would be more sensible. And from what I've heard that place is also very weird." 'Rika' agreed.

"It is an odd place."

"You've been there?" Akane asked with interest.

'Rika' smiled at her. "We've both visited a number of places in Minato on many occasions." Nodoka raised her eyebrows.

"Is it as mad as it sounds on the news? I'm almost afraid to go anywhere near the place." The blonde grinned.

"I don't consider it mad, personally, but it's... unusual. You see some quite strange things there, that's true." 'Maiko' snorted slightly, amused.

"You can say that again."

"Aren't you worried about being mixed up in a demon attack?" Nodoka asked with concern. "They seem to happen quite a lot, especially recently." Smiling the blonde woman shook her head.
"No, not really. That sort of thing does happen but there are quite a few people who know how to deal with it." Akane was listening intently.

"You mean magical girls. Have you met any?" 'Maiko' and 'Rika' shared a glance.

"We've bumped into a few. They're not uncommon. Most of them seem like nice people, although there are a few that seem to be a bit, um, over-enthusiastic, would be a good way of putting it." 'Rika' smiled. "I've heard that those two you were talking about, the ones from the video, are pretty good at keeping the others in line." Akane was nodding, very interested.

"I wish I could meet them, or even find out more about them. Where do they live? What do they do? Most magical girls have a secret identity of some sort. I wonder what theirs is?" Nabiki smiled at the rapid-fire questions.

"Surely the whole point of a secret identity is that it's a secret? I don't think you'll find anyone who will just tell you who they are." Her sister nodded after thinking about it for a moment.

"OK, yes, you're right." She stopped and stared at 'Maiko' for a moment, suddenly realising why her hairstyle looked familiar. "Hey, your hair is just like Yori's." 'Maiko' grinned.

"It's quite a popular hairstyle at the university. Several girls there are fans of magical girls like you are and started wearing their hair like this. Mine was long enough to do it right." She pulled her braid over her shoulder and showed it to Akane. "I even use a bow. But mine is usually red." Flipping it back over her shoulder she laughed. "One time someone even said I might be this Yori person since I had the same hairstyle and was about the right height. It took a while to convince them I was just a medical student." Nabiki smiled, while Akane looked narrowly at the young woman before laughing.

"That must have been embarrassing. But I think a martial artist wouldn't have thought that. We can usually recognise each other just by the way someone walks and holds themselves. You can see in that video how skilled and practised Yori and Chou are. No offence, but you don't move like a fighter." 'Maiko' giggled while 'Rika' exchanged a privately amused look with her sister. Nabiki was doing everything she could not to collapse in laughter.

"No offence taken. Like I said, I'm a medical student."

Akane jumped to her feet. "I'm going to go and show Shampoo that DVD. I'll see you later, Auntie, Nabiki. It was very nice to meet you both." She smiled at the two visitors. "I guess I'll see you again later as well?" 'Rika' nodded.

"Yes, we're staying here overnight, and possibly tomorrow night as well." With a wave to the room in general the youngest Tendo grabbed the DVD and left, looking excited. 'Rika' laughed slightly. "She seems in a good mood." Nodoka glanced at her with a pleased smile.

"Yes, she does. I'm glad, she's been quite down a lot of the time recently. That video from her friend seems to have cheered her up a lot." The older woman turned to the two guests. "I'm afraid that Akane has some problems." She suddenly stopped, hesitant about saying anything else. Nabiki smiled.

"It's all right, Auntie, I've told them about Akane. They know everything that's happened." Nodoka raised an eyebrow. "They're very good friends, I trust them completely."

"All right." She nodded, satisfied. 'Rika' looked back at her.

"How has Akane been recently? We heard about her having something of a downturn some weeks
ago, but it's been a few weeks since we last saw Nabiki." The auburn-haired woman sighed a little.

"It's difficult to say. She has good days and bad days. Her temper has been worse, true, but it's also been better. I'd say she's made up some ground recently but she's still emotionally rather volatile." Shaking her head she looked sad. "The poor girl. I knew her mother well many years ago, she'd have been very upset about how things worked out for Akane." She glanced at 'Rika'. "Has Nabiki told you about what happened to her older sister and my son?" The blonde looked momentarily at her companion who stared impassively back, before nodding.

"Yes, she told us something about that night. It sounds both dramatic and very sad."

"It was terrible. I have never been so frightened in my entire life as when Akane snapped and nearly killed Kasumi, and then when what happened afterwards happened." She looked at the two young women. "Ah, has Nabiki explained about my son? His... curse?"

"Yes. It's a very odd sounding thing, it must have been difficult for him," 'Rika' said sympathetically. Nodoka sighed.

"It was made much more difficult by the reactions of everyone around him. Kasumi was, looking back on it with the wisdom granted by hindsight, the only person who didn't let it change how she treated him. That young lady was one in a million. Mature far beyond her years, the kindest soul I have ever known. But she was trapped here, I know that now. When Akane had her moment of temporary madness, in a strange manner she freed Kasumi, freed both of them. When Ranma stood up out of the wreckage he'd," she corrected herself with a shake of her head, "SHE'D been buried under, for three days, three days during which we didn't even think to check, it was like..." She stopped for a moment. "Like nothing I have never known. The look in her eyes was terrible. Disappointment, betrayal, pain, anger. If you'd told me that we were all going to die right there and then I would have believed you utterly. When she finally walked out the gate taking Kasumi with her, though, even after all that had happened, I thought that they'd both come back sooner or later. But I was wrong. Four years later and we have never heard another word about them." She had tears in her eyes. After a few seconds of silence she sniffed a bit and wiped them.

"Akane got much worse after that. She was never a very stable girl in some ways, she always tended to be very stubborn and to overreact to any slight from a young age from what her father and sisters told me, but after that night she was prone to the most appalling outbursts of anger and violence. It was only recently that Nabiki managed to persuade her to seek help but it has been a very rocky road since then. She has certainly improved, not to mention the fact that she finally admitted that she had a problem in the first place. To give her credit she does truly wish to become better. But it hasn't been easy for her. The whole thing is very much two steps forward one step back, except sometimes it's more a giant leap back. I wish I knew why." Looking at 'Rika' she smiled in a slightly surprised manner.

"I'm not sure why I'm telling you all this. You are very good listeners. I think you'll make good doctors, both of you."

"Thank you," 'Rika' said.

"I've told Rika and Maiko about most of what's happened with Akane's therapy," Nabiki said. "Maiko has been doing some research as a favour to me into possible causes and treatments for uncontrolled anger like Akane has and has a few leads. I need to look into it myself, there may be other doctors we can find who could help, based on what she had found, but it will take some time." Nodoka looked interested and pleased.

"That would be wonderful. Akane and Nabiki mean a lot to me. If you can find anything that can
help, I would be very grateful." 'Maiko' nodded.

"We can't promise anything but we're happy to help. Nabiki is a very close friend and we know what family means to her." After a moment's pause, Nabiki stood.

"OK, thank you for lunch, Auntie. I'm going to show them around some more. We'll be back later." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' also stood and all three left the house. Nodoka sat, occupied with her own thoughts, for some time.
Cologne followed the sound of electronic music up to her great granddaughter's room, curious as to what had the young woman and someone else, Akane Tendo by the sound of it, so excited. They were talking quickly about something, gasping with surprise every now and then, and then laughing with delighted amazement. She was a little surprised how close they'd become in the last couple of months having been rivals for so long, but since the Tendo girl had been in therapy, despite some setbacks, she'd become in many ways a much nicer person to be around. The removal of Ranma from the picture, apparently permanently, had made a considerable change to both young women. Cologne still hoped to one day track the martial artist down and retrieve him for her granddaughter but in the privacy of her own head admitted that it seemed extremely unlikely this would ever happen. Wherever he'd gone, however he'd hidden himself, it was with greater skill than she could bring to bear. "Bloody Happosai," she mumbled. "I'm sure it's all his doing somehow. If I ever get my hands on that little bastard..."

In her more honest moments she also admitted to herself she was just the tiniest bit afraid of what she'd find if she did track him down. The person that had left the Tendo Dojo that night so long ago was not the person she had thought he or she was. She still had nightmares about crystal sapphire eyes burning with a barely controlled fury, radiating so much ki energy she had suddenly had no trouble at all believing that this was the person who had defeated Saffron. When Ranma and Kasumi had left the Dojo it had been almost a relief. There was a moment she'd honestly thought that it would be the day she died. In her opinion Ryoga was extremely lucky to still be alive, the way the red-head had casually backhanded him all the way across the yard without showing the slightest sign of effort or interest had been horrifying. It had been clear she was right on the edge and vastly more dangerous than anyone had ever truly realised.

Reaching the door to Shampoo's room she peered in. The Amazon warrior and Akane were sitting on the floor watching the television Shampoo had in her room, apparently playing a DVD of some sort. Cologne shook her head. This modern technological world was stranger to her in some ways than magic was, not least because it changed so fast. That said she found it very useful. Walking further into the room unnoticed she got into a position to see what was being shown on the screen, then simply stared in amazement. "Holy crap," she muttered in Mandarin.

She recognised the two young women as the ones she had seen in a news report on the television a while ago from that strange ward of Minato. The shorter girl was the same one that Shampoo had told her about from a different report before that one. The young Amazon had been right, the girl had an amazing presence, she gave the impression of being an enormously experienced warrior and martial artist despite her young age. Watching her verbally flay an entire group of powerful magical girls who were clearly frightened of her had made her laugh like an idiot. She put some two hundred year old Amazon warriors to shame the way she took command. It had struck her that it would be amusing to get the girl to the Amazon village to see what would happen, but watching the DVD she suddenly thought better of it. Shampoo had been right, if this was what she and her colleague were capable of she wanted no part of it.

The two girls were currently sparring with what looked for all the world to be swords made from pure energy, either an amazingly powerful manifestation of ki, which seemed unlikely due to their age if nothing else, or simply magic. The skill behind the fight was incredible, matched only by the speed which was astounding. She watched some more, coming to the conclusion that they were not going anywhere near as fast as they could manage. Cologne nodded slowly, watching with interest and respect. They showed considerable intelligence in not showing their full capabilities. Akane was pointing out some of the more impressive parts of the fight having obviously seen it before.
The sword fight finished, then the shorter one, 'Yori' Akane called her, started showing off her abilities at target shooting using some sort of beam weapon she seemed to be generating from her hand.

When the two young women started a set of extremely advanced katas which rapidly became synced to the music playing in the background, the band apparently cooperating with them, she sat in Shampoo's bed and just watched in admiration and awe. Both the other women fell silent, watching quietly as the two girls performed a graceful dance that was as beautiful as it was deadly. The pure skill involved was off the scale. She felt it might even dwarf that of Ranma, wondering for a moment what the result would have been if he'd gone up against either one of these women. It didn't seem likely she'd ever find out.

When the pair starting applying some special technique that produced slowly fading glowing traceries of energy from their hands she shook her head in respect. "Amazing. Truly amazing," she said quietly, once the performance came to an end. The applause that came from the crowd in the background was thoroughly deserved in her opinion. Shampoo turned to look at her not having noticed her enter the room.

"Hello, Grandmother. How much of that did you see?"

"From somewhere during the sword fight. Is there more of it?" Cologne asked curiously. Akane nodded.

"Yes, there's some sparring at the beginning. Would you like to see it?"

"Please." Akane pressed play again and restarted the video at the beginning. The elder watched with great interest. Once it reached the point she'd come in, she thanked them. "Where did you get this, Akane?"

"A friend of mine sent it to me. Her sister works in Minato somewhere, she managed to get a copy of it. Apparently this was videoed a month or so ago in a park, the two girls, Yori and Chou, were asked to put on a demonstration of their skills. What do you think?"

"I think that I wouldn't like to go up against either one of them, never mind both. The level of skill and power there is... astounding is the only word I can come up with. I wonder how they do the special techniques, is it ki or magic?" Cologne looked at her great granddaughter and her friend. They shared a glance.

"Magic, I think. They are magical girls after all." Akane smiled at the elder who looked amused.

"Yes, Akane, I understand the concept." She shook her head. "Most remarkable. Thank you. That was not only probably the most impressive demonstration of martial arts skill I have ever seen it was undoubtedly the most beautiful." Thinking it over she left the room again, while Shampoo and Akane discussed what they'd seen, ending up playing the video again half a dozen times to see if they could work out any of the moves.

"She misses you," Nabiki said a few minutes after they left the house, not going anywhere in particular, just wandering along looking around. 'Maiko' glanced at her.

"You mean my mother?"

"Yes." The martial artist sighed slightly, looking momentarily guilty, while her wife watched her with sympathy.
"I could see that. I'm sorry about it." Nabiki studied her for a few more steps.

"Do you think you can ever forgive her?"

"I forgave her a long time ago. That doesn't mean I trust her, not yet."

The middle Tendo sister nodded. "She's changed, a lot. The woman back there isn't the same one you remember from four years ago any more than you are the same person she remembers."

'Maiko' looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"But has she changed enough? Could she accept me now, not as she wants me to be but as I am?"

Nabiki opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. Eventually, she quietly replied, "I don't know." Her sister-in-law shrugged.

"That's the problem. We've built up a life we like with a lot of effort and sacrifice. It's not something either one of us wants to jeopardise by revealing who we are to the wrong people, or too soon. Maybe one day, but not today." 'Rika' smiled softly at her sister.

"She's right. Much as I would like to tell Akane who I am, that I'm all right and have a good life, I can't. I wish I could. Seeing her again makes me miss her and Father all the more, but it's too soon. If nothing else we need to get her mind sorted out first."Nabiki nodded slowly, sighing with an unhappy smile.

"I understand, and I guess I agree. I just think it's a shame." She fell silent for a while. "There is a time limit, though, I think. After seven years with no word from either of you they could declare you legally dead." 'Maiko' looked at her, then smiled a bit.

"We know. There are ways around that as well, if we need to." She looked ahead, recognising the street they were on. "Hey, is that ice cream place still open?" Nabiki snickered.

"Yes, it's still there and as good as ever. I assume you're in the mood for some?" The other woman grinned.

"You know me, I'm always in the mood for some ice cream. Come on, I'm buying." Five minutes later they were eating their cold treats with enjoyment.

Nabiki pushed her empty bowl away with a satisfied smile. "I do like their mint ice cream, it's fantastic." The other two nodded, still eating. Watching them with fondness, she suddenly grinned. "I thought I was going to burst at home when Akane produced that DVD then started talking about 'Yori' and 'Chou'. Her sister laughed.

"She seems to be a real fan. I hope the dolls please her." 'Maiko' snickered, finishing her own ice cream.

"If her reaction to the DVD was any guide she'll be hugely pleased." Looking at Nabiki, she added, "Any chance you could get us a copy of that disk? I'd like to have it at home, it's good as something to study and also I'm kind of impressed with the results. Whoever shot the footage was pretty good. I think Aiko and the girls might like to see it as well."

"I'll see if I can borrow it and copy it."

"Thanks." 'Maiko' turned to inspect the display of ice cream again, making Nabiki smile. 'Rika' looked at her husband with a tolerant look.
"Don't you think you've had enough?" The martial artist shook her head with a grin.

"I've never had enough. You know that. But I'll be good."

When they left the shop they had only gone a couple of hundred metres before Nabiki spotted someone coming towards them and groaned. "Crap. I don't want to deal with this." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' followed her gaze, then looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Tatewaki Kuno was walking towards them looking at the two women he didn't recognise with curiosity. He stopped a couple of metres away.

"Nabiki Tendo. Fancy meeting you here." He inspected them closely. "Two beautiful young women I have never encountered before. Why is this?" Striking a slight pose he announced grandly, "I am Tatewaki Kuno, scion of the Kuno family and Kendo expert extraordinary. May I ask you delicate flowers to favour me with your names?" 'Maiko' looked at 'Rika' with an amused expression, then turned back to Kuno. Looking him up and down, she then walked around him inspecting him closely. He followed her with his eyes curiously.

Turning to 'Rika' she asked in a haughty voice, "What do you think? Overly brash, I feel. Some decent muscular development, reasonably good looking, but there's something missing." She inspected him again with a cocked eyebrow. 'Rika' nodded.

"Yes, overall quite pleasing to the eye but..." She also walked around the young man who looked back with a confused expression. "No. No, this will never do. Nabiki dear, is this the best Nerima can offer?" Giggling inwardly Nabiki shook her head.

"No, there are some specimens that are more pleasing to the eye. This one, though, has the advantage of being from a wealthy family." 'Rika' snorted in a delicate fashion, waving her hand in a dismissive manner.

"Money is hardly the issue. It's not as if it matters to us. No, I think not." Turning to the dark-haired young man who was looking increasingly confused, she said, "Thank you for your time, my dear fellow. I'm afraid that neither of us is interested. Good day." She bowed very shallowly as did 'Maiko' then swept grandly past him. Nabiki smiled coldly at Kuno, shrugged, then followed the two other women. Kuno looked blank for several seconds before turning to watch them walk away.

"What just happened?" he asked the air, very puzzled. There was no answer.

When they were safely some distance away 'Maiko' shielded them a bit so they would remain unnoticed in case Kuno followed them. She started laughing, Nabiki joining her.

"That was brilliant. Sis, your Kodachi impression is getting steadily better. Did you see his expression? He had no idea what to do." 'Rika' began giggling and couldn't stop.

"Silly Tatewaki. He's still a very strange person." 'Maiko' chuckled. Nabiki looked at her with an amused expression.

"Says one of the strangest people I know." As 'Maiko' laughed the middle sister looked around them. "We're quite close to Ucchan's. Fancy going for some okonomiyaki?" At their dubious expression she smiled. "Come on, it's not like they have any chance of recognising you, neither one is Cologne." 'Rika' looked at her husband, who nodded.

"Why not. I haven't had one of hers for four years and they're very good." A few minutes later they stopped outside the Okonomiyaki restaurant, looking at it with interest. "It's bigger."

"Yes. About six months ago the place next door shut down and she managed to negotiate a very
good price for the lease on the building, then expanded into it. She's taken on a couple more waitresses as well. Business seems to be pretty good." Entering they walked up to the counter where the young chef was working, her long hair swaying as she moved from grill to grill. Looking up she spotted Nabiki and smiled.

"Hi, Nabiki. You haven't been here in weeks." Without being asked she started grilling Nabiki's favourite, then looked curiously at the other two women. "Who are your friends?"

"My friends. This is Maiko, and Rika. You remember I mentioned them a while back?" Ukyo nodded with interest.

"Oh, yes, the medical students. You'd met them again after losing contact for a while, I remember now. Hi, pleased to meet you, I'm Ukyo Kuonji." She held out her hand over the counter. 'Maiko' shook it while sitting on a stool.

"Hi. Maiko Nakahara. This is my partner Rika Nygaard." Ukyo looked at the blonde then shook her hand as well.

"What can I get you? First one is on the house for friends of Nabiki's" 'Rika' smiled.

"That's very generous of you. Thank you." She looked at the menu. "Can I have one with ham and mushrooms, please?"

"Certainly." Turning to the smaller woman the chef smiled again. "And you?"

"Um, squid, peppers, and onions, please. Oh, and some mushrooms as well." Ukyo nodded, quickly preparing the batter and adding the toppings. Sliding Nabiki's okonomiyaki onto a plate she pushed it over to the Tendo woman.

"Here you go. So, how do you like Furinkan?" She glanced at the other two while Nabiki began eating.

'Rika' smiled. "It's very interesting. We've met most of Nabiki's family, and a friend of hers, that Chinese girl Xian Pu. She seems nice." Ukyo laughed.

"She's a lot easier to deal with nowadays. Back when we were in school there were some, well, some issues. Over a boy." 'Maiko' nodded, eating her okonomiyaki with appreciation.

"We've heard about that. I believe you, Akane, and Xian Pu were all chasing the same one?" Ukyo sighed a little, preparing an order that one of her waitresses handed her.

"Yes. It didn't end well. I miss him though." She stared into space for a moment, coming back to reality as the sound of frying on the grill changed. "Whoops." Quickly flipping the finished product onto plates she signalled the waitress, who returned and took them. "So how long are you here for?"

"Just tonight and tomorrow, probably. We've got a break in our studies but we have to get back by Monday afternoon at the latest. This was very nice, thank you," 'Rika' replied, finishing her snack. Ukyo grinned.

"Thank you. Would you like another one?" The taller woman shook her head.

"No, thanks. We had quite a large lunch not that long ago. I will come in the next time we're around her though." Ukyo seemed pleased.
Turning to Nabiki, she asked with some concern, "How is Akane doing at the moment? I haven't seen her for a while." Nabiki sighed a little pushing her empty plate away.

"Not ideal. She had something of a setback a few weeks ago. She's improved quite a bit since then but she's still prone to depression and anger." Looking momentarily amused she smiled. "She got a DVD in the post today that seems to have cheered her up quite a bit. Some video of some magical girls in a park in Minato doing the most unbelievable sequence of martial arts you've ever seen. Did you know she was so into magical girls?" Ukyo laughed and nodded.

"Sure, she's mentioned it a few times. Bit of a fan-girl I think. She was all about that bunch of colour-coded schoolgirls in miniskirts a couple of years ago, but since then she seems to have decided they're not interesting enough. Last I heard she was trying to find out more information on a new pair, um, Yuki and Chou?" Nabiki grinned.

"Yori and Chou."

"Oh. Yes, that's right. She seems to be a little obsessed with them for some reason. They were on the news a few times, something about them dealing with various nasty demons in Minato somewhere then giving some other magical girls a hard time. I saw one of the reports, it was hysterical. The little one was laying into the other girls like something out of a military training movie. They were practically standing to attention." She snickered at the memory. Nabiki giggled.

"Yes, I heard about that. That one is Yori, the other one, Chou, is a lot quieter. She seems rather intimidating though from what I've heard." Out of the corner of her eye she saw her disguised sister exchange glances with 'Maiko' who smiled a little and shrugged.

"OK, right. Anyway, she's pretty keen on them right now. Was it them on the DVD?"

"Yes. It's fairly incredible." Ukyo seemed interested.

"I'd like to see that. I'll have to stop by when I get a moment. I'd like to see Akane again in any case."

"How's Konatsu?" Nabiki asked, putting her elbows on the counter. Ukyo smiled.

"Doing very well, actually. He's out getting some supplies at the moment, you just missed him." She looked like she was remembering something nice. Nabiki watched her face with amusement, glancing at the other two who were doing the same.

"So, is there going to be a permanent arrangement in the future?" she asked with a grin. Ukyo looked at her for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"I think so. Not quite yet, but perhaps sometime after Christmas."

"Congratulations, in advance." The middle Tendo sister laughed. "Finally one of the old crew being taken out of the pool permanently." Ukyo shrugged.

"I guess so. I suppose it's time now, after four years." Looking at her curiously Nabiki thought for a moment.

"So, if he turned up again now, what would you do?" she asked slowly. Ukyo sighed.

"Nothing. I gave up on that dream years back, I saw it for what it was. It would never have worked out anyway, I came to that conclusion a long time ago. Wherever he is, I hope he's happy. Kasumi too. I miss both of them, I'd like to see them again, especially Ranma, but mainly to say goodbye."
I'm very happy with Konatsu, happier than I think either one of us would have been if I'd got my way back in school." She looked slightly melancholy. "It's a matter of shame to me that my actions helped drive him away. I wish I could apologise for that. I know how much he tried to balance all the various things pulling him this way and that, all for honour. The funny thing is that I now think the only one with true honour all that time was him." The chef fell silent as the others looked at each other. "Oh well. Too late now." She shrugged unhappily.

Nabiki smiled at her with affection. "Don't be sad, Ukyo. It'll all work out for you and Konatsu, I'm sure. Twenty years from now none of this will matter." Ukyo nodded briefly.

"You're probably right. It just kind of makes me a bit sad to think about it, you know?" Cheering up with a visible effort of will, she smiled brightly at the two visitors. "Please come back next time you're in Nerima." The other waitress handed her an order. "Excuse me, this is a big one." Nabiki nodded, as they all got up.

"Thanks, Ukyo. See you around. Give my best to Konatsu, will you?"

"Sure. Bye, Nabiki." They left the restaurant and headed back towards the Dojo, walking slowly.

"Poor Ukyo," 'Maiko' said after a while. "Another one I never wanted to hurt. That said, she was as much part of the problem as all the others were."

"Don't worry. In the end I think she came out of it better than almost any of them. She's smart as well as stubborn. When the situation changed she was forced to re-evaluate her life and worked out how mistaken she'd been. I don't know exactly how she sorted things out with her father but she did. They'll be fine."

Arriving back at the Dojo they entered, finding Nodoka in the garden looking at the pond. She glanced up as she heard them come out of the house. "The koi are looking a bit sluggish, even for this time of year," she said, smiling at them. "I think the last fight that ended up here may have disturbed the water balance. I'll have to get a water test kit and check it." She walked over to the group of three young women near the porch. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes, Auntie," Nabiki replied. "We wandered around for a while, saw the area, had some ice cream, then went to Ucchan's for some okonomiyaki." Nodoka laughed.

"Right after lunch? You must have been hungry. I'm sorry, I thought I'd made enough." 'Maiko' grinned at her.

"Don't worry, lunch was very nice. We were offered a free okonomiyaki by Miss Kuonji and it would have been rude to refuse. They're very good." The older woman nodded.

"They are indeed. So, what do you think of Furinkan?" 'Rika' laughed a little.

"It seems nice. There are some slightly strange people here though. We met one young man, Tatewaki, was it, Nabiki?" The middle sister nodded with a grin. "He seemed a little..." Nodoka started laughing.

"Oh, he is a little. One might even saw he was a lot. Very odd family the Kunos. The young man, underneath his peculiar demeanour and leaving his somewhat strange attitude to women apart, is actually quite a nice fellow. None too bright but I believe he mostly means well. That said he and my son didn't get along at all." Nabiki looked unconvinced.

"Auntie, he's an overbearing idiot. Don't forget what he did to Akane, or at least was responsible for starting." The auburn-haired woman sighed a little.
"I haven't forgotten. What he did was not at all good, but I maintain it was out of ignorance rather than maliciousness. I've had several very nice conversations with the boy, he can be quite charming." She shook her head. "The sister is another matter altogether, she's definitely not all there. I think she's actually quite smart but she's also very arrogant and pushy. Even so, she can also be rather pleasant to talk to on occasion." Nabiki looked appalled.

"Kodachi? Pleasant? She's completely nuts!"

"Well, I'll admit she can be difficult and very irritating, especially when she's teasing Akane. But she hasn't done that since you lectured her that time some months ago. In fact, I haven't seen much of her at all and the last time I did meet her she was surprisingly polite." Nodoka laughed slightly. "I think you unsettled her considerably. I have to say the expression on her face was extremely amusing. I don't think I've ever seen the young lady actually look confused before." Nabiki grinned at this.

"Oh, that was very funny and satisfying, I admit. You're right, she looked completely overwhelmed." She giggled. "Speaking of that, you should have seen how Rika and Maiko handled Tatewaki a while ago." Nodoka looked curious, so they took turns explaining. The Saotome woman laughed delightedly.

"Oh dear, he must have been very surprised. Well done, both of you, that sounds like it was very funny." 'Rika' laughed.

"It was. The poor young man had no idea what to do, we were able to make our escape while he was trying to figure it out." 'Maiko' was grinning.

"Nabiki has told us quite a lot about the Kuno family. They sound very unstable to me I have to say." Nodding, the older woman agreed.

"I'm afraid they are. The father is the worst, he's certifiable. If it wasn't for his financial and political influence he would probably be in some form of institution by now, possibly accompanied by his daughter. It's a pity, I think the children would have been quite nice with a different upbringing."

"We can't pick our parents, unfortunately," 'Maiko' said with a slight grin. Her wife kicked her in the ankle, just a little bit. Nabiki noticed although Nodoka didn't as she'd turned away to look over the garden. The middle sister hid a smile as the older woman looked back at them.

"So what are your plans for the rest of your time here?" 'Rika' looked thoughtful, glancing at her sister and husband.

"We have no definite plans. I think we may go out to see a movie, possibly, otherwise this is just a pleasant break from routine. It's nice to meet Nabiki's family and friends, we've been told quite a lot about most of them."

"All right, that sounds nice. I have to go out now but I'll be back by the early evening." Nodoka looked at Nabiki. "My husband and your father are due back around seven or eight, I believe. I should be back by then. They'll probably be, um, well-lubricated if you take my meaning." She sighed a little as Nabiki nodded. "If I'm not back, can you try to keep them from doing or saying anything particularly stupid? Either to Akane or your friends?"

"Yes, Auntie," Nabiki said with a small cold smile. "I can keep them under control, don't worry. If they try anything I'll set Maiko loose on them." At Nodoka's puzzled look she added, "Remember, I learned the technique that brought Kodachi to heel from her. It's almost a martial art and she is an
"I've been told I have a commanding presence when I'm annoyed," she explained lightly. "I think it's just that people don't expect a petite woman to shout quite so much, I'm nothing special otherwise. Blame my upbringing, it was a bit non-traditional." Nodoka smiled.

"That's quite common around here. OK, girls, I'm off now. I will see you later. Have fun." Re-entering the house she disappeared. The three left behind all looked at each other.

"Can't pick our parents." Nabiki snorted with humour. "Said to your mother of all people." The shorter woman snickered.

"Sorry, couldn't help it." 'Rika' sighed gently.

"Be nice, dear." Laughing, they went back into the house. The next few hours passed quietly. They looked around the place some more, recovering old memories of when they'd lived there, their conversations shielded just in case anyone came in. While they were the only ones there the disguised Kasumi went in to the Dojo to pay her respects at her mother's shrine, resuming her own appearance while the others stood guard. When she came back out a few minutes later, as 'Rika' once more, she was crying slightly. Her female husband held her until she recovered, while Nabiki leaned against her for comfort.

"Thank you," she said, wiping her eyes, as 'Maiko' released her. "I needed to do that, I've missed it for so long."

"I understand, sis." Walking around the garden the three of them talked for a while, before Akane came back, in a very good mood.

"Oh, hi, Nabiki." She grinned at her sister as she and her friends came inside. "Shampoo loves the video. Cologne saw it as well and I've never seen her so impressed." 'Maiko' and 'Rika' looked at each other for a moment. "We've been trying to work out how they do some of those techniques. Between us we counted at least twenty different styles they were using in the kata section as well, we only recognise about a third of them. Even Cologne had never seen more than half. It's like Anything Goes taken to the most incredible level." Nabiki waited for her sister to stop chattering, she hadn't seen her this excited for a long time.

"Can I borrow that disk, Akane? I'd like to watch it myself." Handing her sister the case, Akane nodded.

"Yes, sure. Don't lose it though, I want it back. Father and Genma will want to see it as well." She stopped for a moment, thinking. "I know. Shampoo and I should go to Minato and see if we can meet Yori and Chou." Slightly alarmed, Nabiki glanced at the two women listening quietly. They looked back, 'Maiko' shrugging a little.

"Ah, I don't think it would be quite that easy. It's not like they have an office or anything, they're magical girls. Presumably they turn up when a demon does and I doubt you want to be around for that." Akane waved her hands excitedly.

"No, no, Kaede says they often wander around just helping out, not like most of the others." She nodded to herself. "I should call Kaede and find out exactly where they are most." Smiling at the others she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and began dialling, going up the stairs. As she entered her room, just before the door closed, they heard her say, "Kaede? Hi, I got the DVD, tha..." The closing of the door to her bedroom cut her voice off. Downstairs there was silence for a
"Hmm." 'Rika' looked at her husband. "This could be a problem." Nabiki sighed a little, but smiled as well.

"Figures the one thing that's made her happy in months is the one thing we really didn't need."

"It shouldn't be a problem. 'Maiko' said, a small grin on her face. "Better we get some warning. If we hadn't come all this would have happened anyway and she and Shampoo might have turned up unexpectedly. The odds of bumping into them is pretty low, they'll probably give up if we don't meet them, and we can feel both of them coming for some distance so we can avoid them if necessary." She chuckled. "On the other hand, perhaps we should meet them just to get it over with." Nabiki got a thoughtful look.

"Or..." she thought some more, glancing up the stairs to make sure Akane was still in her room.

"Or what?" 'Rika' asked curiously, studying her sister.

"Well, if you did happen to meet Akane, maybe some reason might present itself for you to check her out. Then we wouldn't have to muck around with that ridiculously convoluted plan of yours." Both women exchanged glances, then slowly nodded. 'Rika' abruptly looked disappointed.

"I like my convoluted plan."

"Fine, you can keep it as a backup, then." Smiling at her sister, Nabiki added, "But if you happen to get the chance to bypass it I think you should do so." 'Maiko' was thinking about it.

"It's not a bad idea. No offence, love, but the other plan was a little overcomplicated and 'mission impossible'." At her wife's pout, she smiled. "We can use it some other time."

"The question remains how do we come up with an excuse to scan Akane even if she does meet us?" 'Rika' asked. They all thought about it for a while. Finally 'Maiko' shrugged.

"Not sure. Let's just see what happens. If she doesn't turn up, we go with plan A."

All three of them went to Nabiki's room, where she turned on the computer and within twenty minutes had made two copies of the DVD, one for herself and one for 'Maiko'. Handing it to her she grinned. "I really do want to see it again, that performance was unbelievable. I told you you just needed to set it to music."

"It was a lot of fun," her sister said, remembering it with a faint smile. "We've done demonstrations for people before, but that time was something special." Giggling, she went on, "Poor Lieutenant Harrison looked like he'd seen a ghost. Inspector Deveraux wasn't much better."

The two fathers did turn up before Nodoka returned, staggering in through the door with wide grins, Genma holding a bottle of sake, while Soun was carrying some take out ramen boxes. Entering the living room where Nabiki and her two visitors were talking about university life with Akane, they stared owlishly around, then each flopped down into a seat. "Hello Father," Nabiki said dryly, rolling her eyes a little. "Did you and Uncle Genma have a nice time?" Soun smiled a little tipsily, managing after the third attempt to put the boxes he was holding on the table.

"Yes, Nabiki, it was a lot of fun. We nearly won the championship." Genma swigged from the bottle and thumped it down.

"We would have won if everyone wasn't cheating." Nabiki exchanged a look of amusement with
"You mean, if everyone wasn't cheating better than you two, I imagine." They had the grace to look slightly shame-faced. The middle sister laughed while the other women smiled slightly. "These are my friends Rika and Maiko. Please be polite." Both fathers studied the two women for a moment then decided the food was more interesting. They were soon shovelling it in. Looking slightly disgusted, Nabiki asked, "Did you bring enough for everyone?" in a somewhat sarcastic tone. Soun nodded, his mouth full.

"I suppose I don't need to make dinner, then. Pity, it was going to be very nice." Akane grinned at her.

"Don't worry, Auntie, there wasn't much for us. We could eat." She looked at her father who was half asleep, and Genma who was twice that. "I think they're full though."

"Oh, joy. Right, Nabiki, would you help me in the kitchen?" 'Rika' smiled at her.

"Would you like me to help? I know my way around a kitchen quite well." Considering the offer for a moment, Nodoka nodded.

"That's very kind of you, dear. Yes, please, if you would. You girls, can you please clear all this up? And move them if you can wake them up." Staring at the two men with irritation she shook her head, then went into the kitchen, followed by 'Rika'. Akane and Nabiki, helped by 'Maiko', quickly cleared up the room, then got rid of the two fathers. Akane had to bodily carry Genma up to his room as he was deeply asleep, or in a drunken stupor as Nabiki rather unkindly put it. She poked her father in the ribs unmercifully until he woke.

"Go to bed, Father." Mumbling, he struggled to his feet and staggered out. She watched him go with a smile and a sigh, then turned to the others. "I don't like to see him like that. It doesn't happen very often nowadays but it brings back unhappy memories," she commented to 'Maiko' while Akane nodded.

"At least they seemed in a good mood," her friend said. "That's something." Akane helped Nabiki set the table while 'Maiko' joined her wife helping Nodoka in the kitchen.

"You certainly do know your way around a kitchen, dear," Nodoka commented, watching as 'Rika' deftly made a white sauce. The other woman smiled.

"Thank you. I'm not as good as my mother but I like cooking." 'Maiko' laughed.

"And I like eating, so it all works out." The elder woman watched as she prepared some vegetables, her eyebrows going up.

"You seem to know which end of a knife to hold as well," she said with a grin. The brunette with the long braid smiled.

"Rika has been teaching me for years. I'm not as good as she is and probably never will be but I think I've learned quite a bit." She looked up from her work. "Nabiki has told us some odd things about Akane's cooking skills," she commented in a low voice. Nodoka shuddered.
"I would debate whether her skills should be referred to as 'cooking'. They're impressive I'll grant you, but I'm not entirely sure what they are." 'Maiko' shot her a grin, while 'Rika' giggled.

"Surely it can't be that bad?"

The elder Saotome glanced at the blonde with a small sigh. "Trust me. Whatever you're thinking it's worse. Much, much worse." The meal was served half an hour later, all five women sitting around the table. "Very nice. Thank you, Rika." Nodoka looked impressed, tasting the food, while the other woman smiled happily.

"You're welcome."

Nodoka looked around at the four younger women. "Did you all have a nice day?" she asked. Akane nodded, slurping down her food with appreciation. When she finished her mouthful she started talking, nearly choking for a second. "Slowly, Akane." The blue haired woman blushed slightly, taking a drink to clear her throat.

"Shampoo and I watched that DVD about eight or nine times. We want to find out more about Yori and Chou, they're amazing. I called Kaede and found out where the video was made, it's an up-scale part of Minato near the bay. We're going to go there and see if we can meet them." Nodoka looked startled.

"Is that a good idea? How would you find them, even? I understand these magical girls tend to protect their real identities quite effectively."

"Kaede says they're often spotted walking around just keeping an eye on the area. They're not like most of the others, they don't just go after demons, apparently they have a very strong reputation as protectors of the community in general. They've saved lots of lives from things as mundane as falling off buildings or car accidents. People there really like them." She looked impressed, while Nodoka nodded approvingly.

"That's good. People so powerful helping the less powerful like that is a very honourable thing to do. The more I hear about these two the more impressed I am." Nabiki glanced at her two visitors. 'Rika' smiled privately at her over her cup while 'Maiko' winked.

"Still, there's no guarantee you'll just bump into them, presumably. You both have jobs as well, when are you going to have time to go?" Akane deflated slightly.

"Oh. Um. Perhaps during the evening? Or next weekend." She nodded to herself. "Yes. We can try during the evening this week, and if that doesn't work, on Sunday we both have the entire day available." Shaking her head slightly, Nabiki grinned at her enthusiastic sister.

"Well, good luck. I don't think you're going to simply find them walking down the street, but if you do see if you can get their autographs for me." 'Maiko' snickered and she looked severely at her. "Hey, they might be worth real money one day." This made the other woman start laughing. After a moment Nabiki joined in. 'Rika' simply watched them with a long-suffering expression.

After the meal Nabiki went up to her room, returning shortly with Akane's DVD. "Thanks, sis. Here you go." Akane took it with a smile and put it carefully beside the DVD player.

"I'll show it to Father in the morning." The table was soon cleared and the dishes washed, 'Maiko' helping Nodoka load the dishwasher. The older woman made a pot of tea and brought it back into the living room. 'Maiko' and 'Rika' were sitting next to each other holding hands with Akane surreptitiously studying them. Nodoka could see they were both obviously aware of the scrutiny, as
could Nabiki, but didn't mind. Tea was poured and distributed. A few minutes later 'Rika' looked directly at Akane, who jumped a little.

"Do you have a question, Akane? Only I can't help but noticing you seem to be very interested in us." She smiled making it clear she wasn't offended. Akane went red and chewed her lip.

"Um." She chewed it some more while everyone waited patiently. "You're... involved? With each other, I mean?" she asked in an embarrassed tone of voice. 'Rika' smiled gently at her.

"Yes." Akane nodded absently still looking at them. "Do you have a problem with that?" she asked. Shaking her head the youngest Tendo woman kept looking.

"No, I guess not. It's just... well, I find it kind of... weird." 'Rika' raised an eyebrow and she hastily added, "Sorry, I don't mean it like that."

"How do you mean it?" 'Maiko' asked her curiously. Once more she seemed slightly stuck.

"When I was younger I sort of got very angry about things like this. Things that were... perverted," she said by way of explanation. 'Rika' and 'Maiko' exchanged a glance.

"Perverted? I don't think we're perverted, do you, dear?" 'Rika' asked her partner with a smile. 'Maiko' shook her head, grinning a little.

'We're many things, but I'm fairly sure perverted isn't one of them. Nabiki? Are we perverted?" The middle sister laughed.

"Insane, yes. Annoying, yes. Perverted? I don't think so." Nodoka chuckled, making them all look at her. She seemed slightly embarrassed and went quiet again, motioning for them to continue. She was finding this quite interesting on several levels.

"But, two women together? That's not normal." Akane was aware she was digging herself in deeper but couldn't help it. If it wasn't for the fact that both of Nabiki's friends seemed so nice she'd never even have raised the subject, but now she had she couldn't let it lie for some reason. 'Maiko' giggled while 'Rika' looked amused.

"Normal is a matter of opinion. I know a significant number of same sex couples, so to me it's completely normal. It may not be traditional I'll admit, but even there if you look at history it's been a large part of many cultures for thousands of years. It's not something you choose, it's who you are. Do you understand?" The youngest sister looked slightly confused but nodded slowly.

"I guess so. I don't know, I haven't met any..."

"Lesbians?" 'Maiko' prompted when Akane seemed to run out of words. She nodded, blushing again.

"Yes. That. I haven't met any before." Nabiki looked at her and grinned.

"How do you know?"

Startled, Akane looked at her. "What do you mean? Of course I'd know."

"How? Why? For all you know some of the girls you went to school with were lesbians, it's not like anyone would have admitted it to you at the time. Your attitude to anything you called perverted was well known. You seemed to classify all males and some females like that, which caused lots of fights. Just think of poor Ranma!" Akane's face darkened at the name, but she
controlled her temper with more maturity than Nabiki had expected, possibly because they had visitors.

"He was a pervert. Always dressing in women's clothes, looking at me in the bathroom..." Nabiki sighed, exchanging glances with Nodoka.

"Oh, for heavens sake, Akane, we've been over this so many times. You were the one that walked in on him the few times that happened. He was very careful and respectful about it. And the women's clothing thing is just silly. Even when he was female you could only get him into female clothing with a lot of argument, even though there was nothing wrong with it. When he was a woman he was completely a woman, you know that as well as I do, so wearing women's clothing was fine by anybody's standards." Her sister crossed her arms and stared daggers at her.

"You didn't know him like I did."

"In many ways I think I knew him a lot better than you did. At least I talked to him, basically you just shout at him then hit him." Noticing her sisters complexion taking on a hue that suggest imminent danger, she raised her hands. "But that's in the past. Forget it. Get back to the subject at hand. Like I said, it's quite possible you do know some lesbians except they're just not telling you about it out of self-preservation. But surely you can see from Maiko and Rika that there's nothing wrong with it?" Akane calmed down and glanced at the two women under discussion who were watching with amused and tolerant expressions.

"I... guess so." She kept looking at them then away, still embarrassed. 'Rika' smiled and pulled her currently female husband in for a kiss, making Akane stare until she realised she was being rude. Nodoka watched with some interest and a slight smile while Nabiki grinned.

"You see? Nothing to be ashamed of. We love each other, that's all there is to it." After a moment Akane nodded very slowly, thinking about it. The others looked at each other. It seemed that the youngest sister had been given something to think about. She remained quiet for the next hour or so, studying them with covert interest, before excusing herself for an early night.

"That was interesting," Nodoka said once she was sure the youngest Tendo was out of earshot. Nabiki nodded.

"Yes. Very." Turning to her guests she said, "We may be on the right track. I guess we'll have to wait and see." She looked at Nodoka, opening her mouth to explain, when the older woman beat her to it.

"You think Akane might be a lesbian but can't admit it to herself." The others all looked rather surprised.

"Um, well, yes, that's sort of what we were considering." Nabiki inspected the older woman with surprise. "I didn't expect you to think of it though." Nodoka looked amused.

"I'm not completely stupid. I've wondered about Akane for years, there's something a little odd about how dead-set against sexual matters in general she is, not to mention her thinking that most perfectly normal expressions of attraction are perverted. I've been considering the idea that she was attracted to women on some level for quite a while. It would explain some of the stranger aspects of her relationship with my son to some degree, better than most of the other reasons I could come up with." Nabiki and the others were looking at her oddly. She grinned. "Didn't expect the old woman to think of all that, did you?" ‘Rika' smiled at her with gentle amusement.

"You're hardly old. And I believe you may well be right from what Nabiki has told us."
"Well, perhaps meeting you two will help her work some of this out for herself. God knows it's time she grew up in these matters, she's still very immature in many ways." She sighed a little. "I love the girl like my own daughter but she can be very difficult to live with." After a moment's silence she stood. "Right. I'm off to bed as well. Don't stay up too late you three. Good night." Smiling at them she left the room. They were silent until 'Maiko' nodded with a distant expression for a moment.

"OK, we're shielded. No one will hear anything." She looked at the other two with a surprised smile. "I have to admit I never expected Mom to come out with that! You may be right, she's changed quite a bit."

"We all have, dear. Some more visibly than others. I think your mother has learned a lot from the last few years." 'Maiko' nodded thoughtfully.

"Apparently. Still not in a hurry to tell her yet, though. There's all the rest to think about as well."

"You've met most of the people from your old life. There's still Genma and our father to go, Cologne, and Ryoga, I guess. And perhaps Kodachi." Nabiki looked amused as the disguised Ranma shuddered at the last name. "Not keen on her are you?" 'Maiko' shook her head.

"No, that woman always gave me the creeps. There's something... not right. I don't know what, like Mom said she can sometimes even seem normal for a while, but underneath it all there is a real problem. Much worse than Akane." 'Rika' looked sad.

"Poor girl."

"I have to admit I'm not happy about meeting Cologne just yet. Like I said earlier I'm pretty damn sure she'll never guess who we are but I don't want to take the risk. At least right now. We really don't need her popping up when we still have possibly six very nasty demons to deal with, not to mention all the normal chaos. Leaving aside the fact I like our life now, I don't want any of the old crap getting mixed up with it." 'Maiko' put her feet on the table and looked at them, until 'Rika' softly cleared her throat. Nabiki grinned as she put them back on the floor with an abashed look. "Sorry, love."

"What are you going to do about Akane and Shampoo, then?" Nabiki asked curiously after a moment. 'Rika' smiled, glancing at her husband.

"I suppose we'll have to give them the chance of meeting a pair of magical girls."

"Martial artists," the shorter woman said with a sigh. Her wife laughed.

"As far as they're concerned it's magical girls. Think about it, that's one more level of misdirection. It's a good thing." She and her sister both giggled at the expression on the face of the third woman. Leaning into her side she put her arm around the long haired brunette's shoulders and hugged her. "Don't look so sour, dear, it doesn't suit you."

"We can keep an eye out for them and meet them, I suppose. Hopefully nothing weird will happen at the same time, but the way our life goes I wouldn't put money on it," 'Maiko' said slightly irritably.

"But it's never boring," Nabiki quipped, making them both laugh again.

"Very true."

They talked for a while, before heading for bed. Inside Kasumi's old room, once the door was
closed, the two married people stared at each other for a moment. "This feels very strange," 'Rika' said to her husband, who nodded.

"I know. I have to admit I never thought either one of us would be back here, never mind as invited guests." They climbed into bed, snuggling close.

"Do you regret coming?" 'Rika' asked curiously. Her husband shook her head, already half asleep.

"No. I think you were right, as usual. This was something we needed to do." Shortly after that they were asleep, the disguised Kasumi smiling gently to herself with her arms around the love of her life.
Genma ate his breakfast, looking at the two unfamiliar young women sitting next to Nabiki with puzzlement. He glanced at Soun who shrugged. Nabiki spotted their bemused expressions and sighed irritably. "Oh, come on! You can't have been *that* drunk last night, surely?" The two men looked at each other again. "These are my friends Rika and Maiko. I introduced them to you less than twelve hours ago." At their blank looks she frowned while the two women under discussion smiled. Akane snickered and Nodoka rolled her eyes.

"Pleased to meet you both," Soun said, still seeming slightly confused. 'Maiko' grinned at him.

"And you. Again."

"Um, yes. Quite. So, you're friends of Nabiki's?"

"Yes, we're medical students. We met at University."

Enlightenment crossed his face. "Oh. I remember. Yes, Nabiki has said quite a lot about you." Genma seemed to suddenly remember also and nodded, still eating.

"She's also said quite a lot about both of you." They glanced at each other as she looked meaningfully at them. Not knowing quite how to respond Soun smiled weakly and concentrated on his breakfast. As they finished Akane looked up.

"Father, you have to watch this DVD a friend of mine sent me. It's incredible. Your students should see it as well." Nabiki felt that this was starting to get out of hand but couldn't think of any way to stop it. Sharing a look with 'Rika' and 'Maiko' she shrugged a little. They both returned it. Jerking her head towards the door she went out of the room, while they followed.

"Is this a good idea? Letting all these people see that video? It seems to be attracting a lot of attention." 'Maiko' looked mildly annoyed but smiled nonetheless.

"Not a lot we can do about it. Even if we 'disappeared' Akane's copy, she could get another one from her friend. To be honest I'm very surprised it's taken this long for it to pop up considering the number of people with cameras in the park that day. It seems people back home really don't want to upset the status quo."

'Rika' nodded. "Anyway, if we didn't mind people seeing it we wouldn't have done it. It's a little strange having Akane of all people get so excited, especially under the circumstances but perhaps it will be a good thing. It certainly seems to have cheered her up."

"True. She's more upbeat than I've seen her for some weeks." Nabiki sighed. "Oh well. I just hope it doesn't blow up in our faces, that's all."

"It won't," 'Maiko' assured her. "It's weird but nothing we haven't dealt with before one way or another. It might even be fun." She smiled evilly. "We can amuse ourselves quite a lot with Shampoo and Akane, I think." After a moment, she looked thoughtful. "Hey, do you want to see it? When Akane leaves for Minato you could call ahead, I could ask Aiko to discreetly pick you up so you'd be there when they turned up. With a suitable disguise and the bracelet they'll never know."

Nabiki looked surprised, then got much the same expression as the other woman was still wearing.

"Hmm. That's an interesting idea. Yes, I think that might be a lot of fun. You're on, I'll call you as soon as they leave." 'Rika' was listening with a small smile.
"Don't be mean to Akane, both of you." They exchanged glances.

"We'll be good," they chorused, then laughed. Inside the living room Akane shivered for a moment. Turning back to her father she waved the DVD case.

"Look, you all have to see this. I'll bring the DVD player and TV out into the Dojo and set it up, your students will be here in about half an hour, right?" He nodded, glancing at Genma, who looked both curious and puzzled.

"What's so interesting about that DVD, Akane," the Saotome man asked. She laughed.

"Just the most unbelievable martial arts you've ever seen in your life. Trust me, I think you'll all find it amazing. Go and get ready, your students will be here soon." Both the men looked at each other, rather bemused, then left the room. The youngest sister was unplugging the TV as Nabiki and her friends re-entered. Watching her for a moment the brunette exchanged glances with the other two then looked back to Akane.

"Um, where are you going with that?" Nabiki asked curiously as Akane picked the device up. She grinned.

"Out to the Dojo. You can help, grab the DVD player and remote will you?" Walking out the door she disappeared towards the Dojo, leaving the others to look after her with raised eyebrows.

"Well, she seems in a good mood at any rate," 'Maiko' said after a moment. Nabiki nodded absently, picking up the remote for the TV and DVD player. 'Rika' took the player itself with it's cables. 'Maiko' shrugged and followed them, picking up the DVD case which Akane had forgotten on her way out. Inside the training hall Akane was setting up the TV on a bench and looked up as 'Rika' handed her the player.

"Thanks." Grabbing it she put it next to the TV and started connecting the cables. Soun and Genma came out of the back room and watched her for a moment before turning to greet one of the students who came in just then. A few minutes later everything was set up and two more students had arrived. 'Maiko' and 'Rika' wandered around the room looking at things while they waited for the rest to come in, while Nabiki sat beside Akane and talked quietly to her. She noticed out of the corner of her eye that as time went on 'Maiko' was drifting further and further away from Genma, occasionally casting unreadable glances his way.

Eventually the whole class had turned up. The youngest Tendo got up and walked over to her father. Smiling at him she turned to students. "I wanted to show you all something a friend of mine sent me yesterday. It was videoed in a park in Minato around a month ago. I think you'll like it, it shows what martial arts can really become." Everyone turned to look at the TV as she pressed play.

'The sound of eleven jaws dropping simultaneously is a wonderful thing,' Nabiki thought with a grin. Looking at her sister and sister-in-law she saw they were obviously thinking much the same. No sound but that from the TV disturbed the room until the DVD finished, when Akane turned it off. She looked at her father. After a long moment he looked back, tears in his eyes.

"Thank you," he said quietly. Genma seemed unable to articulate anything, while all the students were looking at each other in disbelief.

"Who the hell are those two girls?" Genma finally said. Akane glanced at him.

"They're called Yori and Chou. The shorter one is Yori. I don't know much more about them. They work out of a fairly small area in Minato quite close to the bay. Their reputation is basically as the
most dangerous magical girls in Minato, but I think it's pretty obvious that they're also incredible martial artists as well." Her father nodded slowly.

"That's an understatement if anything is. I have never seen anything even approaching that before. It was... extraordinary. How many different styles did you see, Genma? I lost count at something over twenty-two, but half of those I didn't recognise." The other martial artist looked at him.

"I made it to twenty-four, I think. You're right, most of them were new to me, or at such a high level they were almost unrecognisable. I thought I saw some Anything Goes moves in there as well, or something that looked like it, both our schools in fact, but I can't be sure. Where the hell could they have learned all that? Even the boy didn't know all those disciplines and he soaked it up like a sponge." Soun shrugged.

"I have no idea. They only looked about eighteen or nineteen as well. I'd say the black-haired one was probably the better of the two but the other girl was incredible as well. Not to mention the special techniques. I've never heard of anything like those at all. If it was ki manipulation it was to an almost impossible level. I don't know much about magic but I would think it would be similarly difficult." He shook his head in wonder. "The katas at the end were beautiful as well as enormously impressive. A true art form." Turning to his youngest daughter he asked, "Play it again, please, Akane." With a smile she did so. The two martial artists and their students sat and watched once more. Nabiki looked over to 'Rika' and 'Maiko' who were by now at the other end of the Dojo, motioning slightly with her head towards the door. They nodded and moved in that direction. No one else noticed engrossed as they were with the images on the TV screen.

Outside the Dojo Nabiki turned to her companions. "Is there going to be a problem with either of them recognising Anything Goes forms in all of that?" With a look to 'Rika' her husband shook her head a little.

"I don't think so. Pop said he couldn't be sure, and after all a lot of Anything Goes is basically based on modifying and combining different styles anyway. We've changed and improved it so much over the last few years what we do doesn't bear a lot of resemblance to what they're teaching now. Happosai taught us both a lot of things he never taught either of them as well, things that are much more advanced than even your father knows. I don't use Pop's signature moves a lot, the more dangerous ones, and certainly not in demonstrations, so that shouldn't be an issue either." She smiled. "It's pretty unlikely that any of that will lead any of them down the right path. We've filtered out most of the things that might have caused suspicion from our own style and whatever's left could just be a coincidence." Nabiki looked slightly worried still but accepted this, it was after all their field of expertise.

"I'll take your word for it." Walking back into the house they sat in the living room, where Nodoka had cleared up after breakfast before going out. "So, what do you want to do next?"

"Not be too close to Pop, certainly." 'Maiko' looked slightly worried. "I'm sorry, I'm trying not to let it upset me, but I keep finding that if I think too much about being near him all the old memories tend to come back. It's a bit weird, that doesn't seem to happen nearly as much with the others, but he really triggers some things I don't want to remember." 'Rika' looked at her with sympathy, reaching out and holding her hand. "Sorry, love. I'm trying, but it's still difficult. I thought I could do better after all this time but..." She shrugged.

"It's not your fault. I should have realised. You've done so well, especially around Akane. Perhaps this was a mistake." 'Maiko' smiled at her.

"No, it wasn't a mistake. This was something you needed to do more than I needed not to do. I know how much you've wanted to come her for so long. And I needed to know as well. For me, in
some ways, it's too soon. The funny thing is that Akane and Mom don't affect me nearly as much. Mom still makes me a bit upset, but Akane mostly makes me sorry for her." 'Rika' squeezed her hand.

Nabiki watched and listened to them. "I'm sorry I pushed you two into this." Her sister-in-law smiled.

"Don't be. I'll be fine, I just need to stay away from him as much as possible."

"I guess you were around your father more than practically anyone in your life," Nabiki said, "it's not that surprising that he would provoke the strongest feelings."

'Maiko' nodded. "True, I suppose. Oh well, this is all something we each needed for our own reasons."

"Come on," Nabiki said, standing suddenly. "Let's go and see a movie. There's a new American action one that just started last week which I want to see, it looks suitably silly. Lots of explosions and special effects, you know the thing." 'Maiko' grinned.

"OK. Although we could probably do better just by filming a week in Minato." Nabiki laughed.

"You could try, but I think you'd find that everyone would say it was too unrealistic." 'Rika' and 'Maiko' both started giggling. The three of them left the house and spent most of the rest of the day out, seeing the movie first then just looking around Furinkan some more. They stopped for lunch at a small restaurant near the centre of the district, taking their time over the meal, before heading back to the Dojo in a wide looping path that covered quite a few old and familiar sights. 'Maiko' stopped when they walked past the gates to the high school. 'Rika' watched her face for a moment then turned to inspect the large building as well, while Nabiki waited.

"It brings back memories, doesn't it, dear?" 'Rika' asked quietly. 'Maiko' slowly nodded.

"Oh, it does that, all right. Some good, some bad. I can't work out which ones are stronger." She sighed, turning to walk beside her wife and sister-in-law. "That was the first school I ever really spent much time at. I learned quite a bit but not as much as I'd like, but also had so many fights it's just ridiculous. Hardly got through a day without something weird happening." Shaking her head she smiled. "No one who wasn't involved would believe me if I told them."

Eventually, sometime in the late afternoon, they arrived back at the Tendo house. Going inside they met Akane coming down the stairs. She smiled at them. "Hi. Did you have a good time?" Nabiki nodded.

"Yes, we saw that new American movie, you know, the cop one? It's pretty good." Akane grinned.

"Yes, Sayuri and I saw it last week. The martial arts were a bit weak but it wasn't bad at all."

"How did your own martial arts film go in the end?" Nabiki asked with amusement. "Father and Genma seemed pretty impressed." Akane nodded, smiling happily at the memory.

"Yes, they were. Their students didn't seem to know whether to simply give up now or try harder. In the end everyone decided that they wanted to be that good so they'd stick at it. Father tried to tell them that it was pretty unlikely that any of them would ever be able to do what Yori and Chou can but I don't think any of them are listening at the moment." She laughed. "It's certainly something to aspire to. But without the magic and the inhuman talent, I don't think it will work." The thought seemed to momentarily depress her and her face fell, while Nabiki and the other two marvelled at the volatility of her emotional state. Soon enough, though, she was smiling again.
"I'm going over to see Shampoo so we can work out when we could both get away to go to Minato. See you later." With a wave she left the house. They looked after her for a moment, then at each other.

"She seems, well, sort of quick to change her feelings these days," 'Maiko' said with a frown. Nabiki sighed.

"I know. That's something that's been getting worse for months. She can go from depressed to deliriously happy and back in seconds. I'd almost think it was some sort of bipolar thing except the doctor tells me it isn't. It's some weird side effect of her overall depression and anger. That's just one of the ways it manifests." Shaking her head, she added, "It's not good but I have to admit I prefer it to sudden attacks of near-homicidal fury. Unfortunately she still has those sometimes as well."

They were sitting in the living room having some tea when Nodoka came back from wherever she'd been. "Hello, girls. How has your day been?" she asked politely, sitting down next to Nabiki. The middle sister poured her a cup of tea. "Thank you, Nabiki." Accepting it she sipped some.

"It's been very nice, thanks," 'Rika' replied. "We saw a silly movie, had lunch, then walked around looking at the area. Nabiki showed us where she went to school, things like that." Nodoka nodded. "Yes, the infamous Furinkan High School, site of many odd martial arts encounters." She laughed. "You wouldn't believe how many times parts of that place have needed to be rebuilt. There was one boy, Ryoga, did Nabiki mention him?" They both nodded. "He was amazingly destructive. Constantly fighting with my son, who caused his own share of damage, it has to be said, but Ryoga was in a class of his own in that regard. Even Akane couldn't match him. That boy could smash his way through a wall like some sort of demolition machine." She smiled a little at the memory. "Quite incredible. It didn't end well though." 'Maiko' chuckled a little.

"Yes, Nabiki told us about him. Apparently when Akane found out about his curse she wasn't very pleased." Nodoka nearly choked on her tea she laughed so suddenly. "Oh, that's certainly one way to put it. Yes. Not very pleased. A slight understatement I feel. The poor girl went absolutely insane with rage, it took both Shampoo and Ukyo to take her down and they barely managed it. I know that dear Akane isn't considered the best martial artist around here by the others but when she's properly angry she's a force to be reckoned with, I assure you." Nabiki sighed.

"Unfortunately. That's basically what led to all the problems four years ago." The Saotome woman abruptly became serious, nodding with a distant look.

"Indeed. Such a pity. There were a lot of contributing factors but the main trigger was certainly Akane and her actions that night." She fell silent staring into her tea while the others watched her. Various emotions crossed her face, none of them happy ones.

"Do you think he'll ever come back?" Nabiki asked with a glance at the others, ignoring the slight warning look they both gave her which vanished as soon as Nodoka looked up. The elder woman was silent for a few more seconds then sighed.

"I hope so. I truly do. I would so like to see him again. But I wouldn't be surprised nor would I blame him if he never came back, considering everything that happened here. Kasumi as well. I was very fond of that young lady. I hope that both of them found happiness, wherever they are." She resumed staring into her teacup contemplatively. Eventually she looked up. "So. Enough of these thoughts, there's nothing we can do about it. Are you girls going to stay with us tonight?"
'Rika' looked at 'Maiko', who shook her head.

"I don't think we can. We have classes tomorrow so it's probably best if we get back tonight. There's no hurry to leave just yet though. There are trains until about half past eleven, about every forty minutes or so." Nodding, Nodoka stood.

"All right. I'll make dinner for everyone then. It will be at about six. I'm going to have a short nap, I've had quite a long day, so I'll see you all later." Leaving the room she headed upstairs.

"Pity you can't stay," Nabiki said once the elder woman was gone.

"We do have to get back, I think," 'Rika' said. "We do genuinely have classes tomorrow, although the first one isn't until after lunch. Various recent events have gotten in the way of our work so we have some studying to do." Nabiki chuckled.

"Magical girls and medical students. I have no idea how you have the time to do everything." 'Maiko' laughed.

"It can be a handful juggling it all. But somehow everything works out, or it has done so far at any rate."

At dinner a few hours later Akane was very bubbly. "Shampoo and I are going to go into Minato on Wednesday evening to see if we can find out more about Yori and Chou. That's the earliest we can both get away." Nabiki looked at her and sighed, making her sister glance at her curiously.

"Akane, you do realise that the likelihood of bumping into either one of them just wandering around is pretty low, I hope?" The blue haired woman nodded.

"Oh, of course. But they're certainly not going to turn up here, are they?" 'Maiko' stifled a giggle, looking at 'Rika' with amusement which was quickly hidden before any of the other noticed. "If we don't go we'll definitely never meet them."

"What are you going to do if you do succeed in finding them?" Nodoka asked with interest. Akane suddenly stopped dead, thinking.

"Um. We hadn't thought that far ahead." This caused almost everyone to look at her with some bemusement. She flushed under their gazes. "We'll think of something, I'm sure. There's no need to look at me like that." Shaking her head but smiling Nabiki went back to eating.

"Well, good luck, I suppose."

Genma was feeling something odd, it was like someone was staring hard at him, but whenever he looked around no one was. It was making him nervous. Trying stealth he waited until he felt it again then whipped his head around so fast his glasses dislodged themselves from one ear and dangled under his chin. Unfortunately, this now meant that everyone was staring hard at him, rendering the entire exercise pointless. Looking embarrassed he carefully re-hooked his glasses and resumed his meal, flinching every now and then. Nabiki glanced at 'Maiko' who gave her a small private smile. Grinning to herself she picked up her cup and drank from it. Soun watched his old friend for a moment then shrugged and ignored the whole thing.

"I understand you two teach martial arts here?" 'Rika' asked with interest. Soun looked at her then nodded.

"Yes. You saw our students earlier today. We've been teaching for a few months now, after a long period when I didn't teach at all and Genma only had one student. It's going very well, they are"
coming along nicely. Our family styles aren't widely known but are very effective, it's nice to see them being used more." She looked impressed.

"So, you have eight students at the moment?"

"Nine. Four beginners and five slightly more advanced ones, although one of the young women in the beginner group will probably move up soon, she's got a gift for it." 'Rika' nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you think you can teach more? Or is that the limit?" Rubbing his chin Soun thought about it for a moment, glancing at Genma.

"We could probably handle a dozen, I think. More than that would make the sort of hands-on approach we need too difficult with only the two of us." He smiled. "Why, are you thinking of taking up our form of martial arts?" Laughing she shook her head.

"No, I think I'm fine with my studies at the moment, thank you. I was just curious."

"Well, if you change your mind, either of you, please let us know. We'd be pleased to teach friends of my daughters." She smiled in a gentle manner at him.

"Thank you. I'll bear that in mind." Turning to Nabiki she asked, "What time is it, please, Nabiki?"
The middle sister looked at her watch.

"Ah, nearly seven." 'Rika' glanced at 'Maiko' for a moment.

"We should probably leave around ten, I think. That will get us home before midnight." Once the meal was finished, 'Rika' and 'Maiko' cleared the table, insisting that Nodoka take a break from it. "It's our pleasure. You've done so much work, let us do a little. We don't mind." The elder woman looked pleased.

"Thank you, that's very nice of you." Soon the dishwasher was running and they came back and sat down. The next three hours passed in pleasant conversation, although Genma kept getting that weird sensation of being watched. It was beginning to make him quite paranoid, twitching at any sound he didn't recognise. Eventually 'Maiko' looked at 'Rika' who nodded.

"I'm sorry, but we're going to have to leave. Thank you all so much for feeding us and letting us stay here." Soun smiled at them.

"It's been nice having you here. I'm very glad to see Nabiki has such good friends. Please visit again." Nodoka nodded as did Akane. 'Maiko' got up and retrieved their overnight bags from Kasumi's old room, coming back and handing 'Rika's' to her.

"Thank you, dear," she said, turning back to the room at large. "I hope we can come again some time. It's quite busy for us at the moment, though, so it wouldn't be for a while." She looked at her youngest sister. "Akane, it was very nice to meet you. Nabiki has told us a lot about you. Good luck with your trip to Minato." Akane smiled at her.

"Thanks. It's been nice meeting you guys as well. See you again, I hope. Have a good trip home." Nabiki stood.

"I'm going to walk with them to the station, I'll see you all later." All three young women soon left the house. Nodoka looked after them thoughtfully.

"It's nice to see Nabiki has some real friends. I thought for quite a while that she was rather lonely." Soun nodded, smiling a little.
"They seem very intelligent and pleasant young women. They'll probably make their future husbands very happy." He was very confused by the way both Akane and Nodoka started giggling at this, quickly progressing to roaring with laughter. Casting a puzzled glance at his friend he shrugged. Genma shook his head.

"Women. I'll never understand them." For some reason this made them both laugh even harder.

Standing on the platform as the train slowed, Nabiki watched it approach then turned to her sister. "Take care, both of you." She hugged 'Rika', then 'Maiko'. "It's been so nice having you back here. I wish it could be for longer. Perhaps one day." 'Rika' smiled gently at her.

"Perhaps. We'll see. Come and visit us soon, please."

"I will." 'Maiko' grinned at her.

"Don't forget, call as soon as Akane and Shampoo leave, OK? I'll get Aiko to pick you up. Um, from that alley a couple of streets down behind the dry cleaning place, I think, you know it?" Nabiki nodded. "Right. When she leaves, go there and call. That'll give us at least an hour's notice before they turn up, so we can set things up with you." The train stopped and the doors opened. "See you around, Nabs."

"Don't call me Nabs!" Snickering, 'Maiko' followed her wife onto the train, both of them waving through the window as the doors closed. Nabiki watched it until it was out of sight then with a small sigh of regret headed home alone.
"She and Shampoo left the house about five minutes ago." Nabiki looked guiltily around in case anyone was watching, even though this was very unlikely.

"OK. Hang on, Aiko should be with you in a second," Ranma's voice had a certain amount of amusement in it which she shared. The closer they got to seeing Akane in Minato the funnier it seemed likely to be. She could hear Kasumi sighing in the background and giggled. Abruptly she was sharing the alley with a familiar figure.

"Hi, Nabiki," Aiko said with a smile. "How's things?"

"Not bad, Aiko, thanks." She put the phone to her ear again having lowered it. "She's here."

"OK, tell her the wards are down for the next ten seconds." Nabiki repeated the warning. Aiko nodded.

"Right, come stand here and let's go." She followed instructions and the world flickered, resolving into the living room of her in-laws apartment. Pressing the disconnect button on the phone she dropped it into her pocket. This time there had only been the smallest twinge of nausea. Snickering at the thought that she was getting used to teleporting, which on the face of it was completely absurd, she smiled at her sister and brother-in-law, who greeted her happily. Ranma flipped the disguise bracelet at her. She caught it and slipped it over her wrist with a grin.

"Magic artefact, check." He laughed, activating it.

"Right. So who should you be, I wonder?" Aiko moved over to sit beside the rest of her team who were watching with interest, Misaki nibbling some sort of chocolate bar. Nabiki looked at the martial artist curiously.

"Why should I be anyone but myself. I thought this thing dealt with the problem of being recognised?" She held up the arm with the bracelet on. Ranma nodded.

"Oh, it does. She won't recognise you, only someone who's present when it's activated, or is using one themselves, can see through it. The spell is pretty thorough. Not only won't anyone recognise you they'll forget the details of anything they do see except for your name almost immediately, and even that will fade quickly the first few times. But where's the fun in that? While she's close to you she'll see something, so it should be something interesting!" He grinned, while Kasumi sighed again. Tamiko laughed and her team-mates all looked amused.

"Nabiki! You could be the fifth member of our group," Fumiko said with a giggle. Nabiki looked her up and down carefully.

"Um, no offence, but you'll get me into that outfit over my dead body." They all grinned, while she whirled and levelled a finger at Ranma who was smirking. "And don't you try anything. I mean it!"

"Oh, come on, I've worn it."

"So have I," Kasumi said quietly, making her sister look at her oddly. She produced a weird little smile. After a moment Nabiki shook her head.

*I'm not going to ask!' Out loud she said, "Even so. Pick something else." He shrugged, walking around her and inspecting her.
"Fine. Right, it'll have to be female, you don't know how to pull off male body language. So, human, mostly human, or not?" She stared at him.

"Human, I think, thanks all the same."

"Oh, come on, Nabiki, you'd look good with a tail. Or horns." He studied her again. "Perhaps feathers?"

"No. Keep it normal, please. Well, normal for me. Normal for you lot is insane." Even Kasumi laughed at this point.

"OK, OK. Wow, no sense of adventure at all." Shaking his head the young man smiled, thinking carefully "Right. Let's try this." Her field of vision abruptly rose a few centimetres. Everyone stared at her.

"Hey, that's not bad, Ranma," Aiko said with interest. The others were nodding. Nabiki held her hands out and noticed that she was now apparently wearing completely different clothes, which appeared to be some form of business suit. Looking down she saw that her breasts looked somewhat larger, and she was definitely taller, the floor was further away.

"What about the hair?" Ranma asked Kasumi, who studied her sister. She tapped her lips thoughtfully with one slender finger.


"No, thanks, I'm fine with it."

"Only you seem to keep missing..."

"I'm fine. Thank you." Fumiko looked at Misaki and they both started giggling. Nabiki crossed her arms and waited. "Right, where were we?" Ranma looked back to his sister-in-law. Kasumi nuded him in the ribs.

"Eyes."

"OK. How's that?"

"Not bad. Make them a little wider. Yes, that's good." She walked around the illusion-cloaked form of her younger sister looking at her carefully. "Very nice. I'm not sure about the clothes though. A bit severe." Ranma laughed.

"I was thinking that she can put on the full-blown ice-queen persona. Like this it should work pretty effectively." Nabiki listened as Kasumi thought.

"Yes, you're probably right. It's still missing something though." She looked at her sister for a moment then snapped her fingers. "Sunglasses. If you're going with this look you need sunglasses." Her husband looked at her with mild incredulity.

"At night? Really?" She nodded.

"Oh, that makes it even better. Here, let me have a go." Nabiki suddenly found herself wearing
"How am I going to see anything out there?" she asked curiously, looking around, noticing that her voice sounded different. The glasses were quite dark. Kasumi frowned for a moment.

"Let me..." The lighting gradually rose back to normal. "How's that?"

"Fine. What did you do?"

"I changed the sensitivity of the eyes a bit, and tweaked the reflectivity of the glasses." Her sister looked at her for a moment then shrugged.

"OK. I have no idea how you could do that, so I'll take your word for it." Reaching up she removed the glasses and looked at them. From the front they looked like amazingly dark wraparound sunglasses, very expensive, with a slight mirror finish. "Neat. I like these, pity they're not real." She put them back on.

"Real enough, for the moment. Go and have a look in the mirror." Walking into the nearest bathroom the middle sister looked at the reflection in the mirror with amazement.

"Holy shit," she said in a deeper than normal voice. The reflection showed a woman who looked a couple of years younger than her own age, with shoulder-length hair an unusual deep leaf-green colour pulled back into a tight pony-tail, leaving a lock either side of her ears, which she suddenly noticed with a slight sigh were noticeably pointed. 'The idiot had to get something adventurous' in there, didn't he? she thought with wry amusement. Her face was completely different but very good looking. Removing her sunglasses, marvelling at the fact that she was holding something that technically didn't really exist, she looked at deep blue crystal-clear eyes that reminded her of those of Ranma's female form, except for the catlike pupils. "Oh, for god's sake," she mumbled at the sight. After a moment, though, she smiled a little. Somehow the slightly non-standard features added to the exotic beauty of the face she was looking at.

Stepping back a metre or so she looked at the rest of her reflection. She was wearing a clearly very expensive black suit, looking like an extremely well-paid lawyer more than anything else. It was perfectly tailored, conforming to her female curves which were somewhat more pronounced that her own body was. On her feet were a pair of high-quality black leather shoes with a low heel. With a small smile she saw that her nails were done in a slightly darker green than her hair and wondered if it was Ranma or Kasumi that was responsible for that. Putting the sunglasses back on she looked at the overall effect, finding it to her liking. Practising her coldest smile she almost worried herself. In combination with the glasses it turned her from expensive lawyer into expensive female bodyguard. "Not bad. Not bad at all." Walking back into the living room she looked at the people gathered there.

"You've seen Men in Black, haven't you?" she asked Ranma with amusement. He grinned.

"Well, yes. What do you think?" Smiling at him in a way that seemed to make the temperature of the room drop, she nodded slightly.

"It will do." Aiko stared.

"Good grief. That's impressive. How do you do that?" Nabiki turned the cold grin on the magical girl who looked momentarily uncertain.

"Practice." Suddenly the expression warmed considerably. Kasumi laughed.

"Very intimidating. What should we call this one?" Ranma glanced at her, then looked back at the
disguised middle Tendo.

"Um. How about Reiko?" His wife looked at him then back at her sister, who shrugged.

"All right, that's not bad. Reiko... hmm. Reiko Aoyama." She glanced around in case anyone would object. No one did. "Good. Nabiki, is that OK with you?" The newly christened 'Reiko' nodded.

"Certainly, Miss Tendo." She smiled in a worrying way, getting into the act. Kasumi sighed a little.

"Don't get carried away. Remember you don't have our abilities." Her sister laughed.

"I know. But this might be fun. Anyway, I'm surrounded by magical girls. What could go wrong?"

Everyone winced. She suddenly looked worried, remembering where she was and who she was with. "Damn. I wish I hadn't said that."

"So do I," Ranma muttered to himself, looking around for a moment, as if he expected something to jump out of the woodwork. When nothing did he shrugged. "OK. Probably best if you mainly stand around and look scary. You're pretty good at that, like this even more so." 'Reiko' smiled coldly again. "Yes. Like that." Tamiko laughed slightly nervously, leaning into Aiko.

"Make the scary lady stop doing that," she whispered, making the other girl giggle. Overhearing the middle sister couldn't stop herself from doing the same which broke the effect. "You're really very good at looking worrying, um, Reiko."

"Thanks."

They spent the next hour coming up with some backstory for the Woman In Black, as 'Reiko' was thinking of this persona. She was having considerable fun. Hearing her own voice sound so different and feeling all the changes to her body she marvelled at the thoroughness of the illusion spell once more. It might not have been a true shape-change, according to Ranma, but as far as she was concerned it was pretty damn close. Finally, looking at her watch, which had also changed to something out of a science-fiction film but still seemed to be keeping the correct time, she said, "Their train should be getting in around now. The station is about five kilometres away, so I'd guess they'd be somewhere in the area in about fifteen minutes or so." Kasumi nodded thoughtfully.

"We probably don't want them coming around the university or here, so we should try to intercept them somewhere near the entertainment district."

"How do you want to play it?" Ranma asked. "We can't just walk up to them and say hi."

"Well, you could, but it would look pretty weird," 'Reiko' said with a grin. "I don't know if Akane was planning to just say hello if she saw either 'Yori' or 'Chou', but I suppose the first thing to do would be to get into position and see what happens." Ranma and his wife exchanged glances.

"As good a plan as anything, I guess," the martial artist said. He turned to Aiko and the others. "You guys coming along?" Aiko nodded happily.

"Damn right. I wouldn't miss this, it could be very funny." Ranma grinned at his friends.

"Hopefully. OK, can you take 'Reiko' with you, then? She's not keen on roof-hopping." The middle sister shuddered at the memory.

"No, I most certainly am not. I don't mind teleporting though." Aiko laughed.
"It's definitely the best way to travel. Yes, sure, she can come with us." She held out her amulet and Ranma grinned, reaching out to recharge it.

"OK, we'll meet you guys on the roof of the bank next to that seafood restaurant in about five minutes." Aiko nodded, standing up, followed by the other girls. "Reiko' walked over to stand beside them.

She glanced at Ranma. "Won't being so far apart cause problems with keeping this going?" she asked curiously, gesturing at herself. He shook his head with a smile.

"No. I can feed it power from a considerable distance once it's established. Certainly anywhere around here is easy. It doesn't take a lot." Looking impressed she nodded, vanishing with the others seconds later with the usual flash. Ranma smiled at his wife, melting into the form of 'Yori' in the process. She smiled back as she became 'Chou'. "Let's go and meet a couple of fans," 'Yori' said. They headed for the roof.

Shampoo watched Akane bouncing along just in front of her with a smile. The slightly younger woman was in a very ebullient mood at the moment, hoping to meet the people she seemed to have fixated on recently. Since that DVD had come a few days ago she hadn't stopped talking about it. The Amazon could understand that in a way, the video was truly incredible. Even so she thought her friend was possibly banking more on it than seemed reasonable. But it seemed to have cheered her up a lot, which was a good thing after how unstable her mood had been of late. Shampoo shrugged a little. Perhaps they would meet these magical girls, although she wasn't completely sure what would happen after that.

She certainly wasn't averse to learning some of their techniques, which put almost everything she'd ever see before to shame. Even... She found herself unable to complete the thought even in the privacy of her own head. Four years later and she found herself unwilling to think about Ranma, although at the same time she couldn't stop thinking about him. The lilac-haired young woman sighed. She missed him a lot, and she was sure a lot of Akane's problems stemmed from the same source, in one way or another. In her case the loss of her eldest sister at the same time must have made it much worse, especially as it was her own action that had started, or more accurately ended, the whole horrible mess. Pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind with a deliberate act of will she moved up to walk beside Akane.

"So what are we going to do now? Just walk around hoping to see them?" Akane looked at her with a smile.

"May as well, for the moment at least. I've never been here before, it looks interesting aside from magical girls. Even if we don't find them we can get something to eat, have a look around, then come back another time. Kaede says they're often around here somewhere." She looked around in a lively manner, as if she expected to see a magical girl around every corner. Shampoo snickered a little. Perhaps they would meet these magical girls, although she wasn't completely sure what would happen after that.

'reiko' watched smiling as 'Yori' spun in place. "What on earth are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Looking for Akane. I can feel her and Shampoo somewhere around here, their ki signatures are unmistakable. They must be just out of range." She stopped, pointing. "Over there somewhere, a couple of kilometres away." 'Chou' concentrated then nodded.

"I think you're right. That's definitely Akane." She smiled. "If she was angry this would be easier,
she'd show up like a lighthouse." 'Reiko' laughed.

"You wouldn't need to follow your weird senses, just the sound of things breaking in that case."
'Yori' looked amused. 'Chou' didn't, so much, but sighed.

Looking at Aiko, 'Yori' asked, "Can you hop us over to the top of the hospital?"

"Sure." Seconds later they looked at the night scene from a different viewpoint.

"Ah. Got her. About eight hundred metres over that way. That would be, hmm, near the school.
That'll do." Aiko smiled and saluted mockingly.

"Transport ready, Ma'am." They were still laughing when they materialised on top of the main school building. 'Yori' went to the edge of the roof and looked around.

"Hah. I knew it. There they are." 'Chou' joined her and followed her pointing finger. 'Reiko' looked as well. Her sister was nodding although all the middle sister could see was a few people walking around on a street some sixty metres away, fifteen metres down. They were only visible at all due to some street-lights and the lights in the various shops and restaurants. She looked wonderingly at the other two.

"Can you really make them out at that range under these conditions?" Her sister nodded with a small smile on her lips.

"Oh, yes, certainly. Akane's just in front there, Shampoo is looking around behind her. See? Right there." Straining her eyes 'Reiko' finally saw Shampoo's distinctive hair as the pair walked past a brightly lit shop front.

"OK. Got them." She glanced at the others. "Now what?" They looked at each other blankly. Shaking her head she sighed. "We've gone to all this trouble and you have no idea what to do next, do you?" 'Yori' shrugged slightly, grinning.

"Nope."

"Idiot." The middle Tendo looked at her in-law with amusement. The other woman snickered a little.

"Well, we could..." Stopping suddenly with an expression of shock, she whirled around to look off to the right, 'Chou' doing the same thing at exactly the same time. "Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me..." 'Yori's' snarl of anger and disbelief raised the hairs on the back of 'Reiko's' neck. "Here? Now? I don't believe it." Husband and wife looked at each other with resigned horror. Aiko and her team all looked at each other, then glanced at 'Reiko' who shrugged, as lost as they were. She found out what the problem was when 'Yori' growled one more word.

"Ryoga."

Closing her eyes in the sure knowledge that all hell was about to break loose, 'Reiko' said "Fuck," with great feeling and under her breath.

Akane wandered happily along looking around her. So far there had been nothing particularly unusual to see. They were heading for the main entertainment district, having been walking for a couple of kilometres. She was just wondering whether she should simply ask if anyone knew the whereabouts of either of the magical girls when she thought she spotting something familiar in the distance under a street lamp some two hundred metres further along the road. Staring intently, a
smile still on her lips, she slowed as the distant figure passed into a better illuminated area. Shock brought her to a complete halt with a gasp, before a brilliant red battle aura abruptly flared around her taking Shampoo completely by surprise. The Amazon stared as Akane suddenly roared with rage, screamed something unintelligible, then raced down the road holding a pair of huge mallets she’d pulled from thin air.

Wondering what the hell had happened Shampoo watched for a second before taking off after her friend. After a few steps, through the raging ki emissions of a homicidal Akane, she recognised another signature with a sinking heart. "Oh, shit," she mumbled, picking up the pace. Seconds later Akane struck out with her first mallet, cratering the street and cracking several windows from the shock wave from the blow. The target of her wrath barely avoided the hit, having jumped sideways as he heard the whistle of wind coming from the ki manifestation.

"RYOGA!" screamed Akane at the top of her voice, swinging again, her battle aura heating the air around her with a crackling noise. The part time pig ducked, allowing her second strike to smash a light van parked by the side of the road, before staring at her wide-eyed unsure whether he should run, hide, or fight. Very rapidly his options dwindled to the last one as the youngest Tendo, incandescent with fury, dropped both mallets, which popped out of existence as they left her grip, only to pick up what was left of the van and heave it at him. This time he didn't have time to duck, more than a ton of crushed metal collecting him at a substantial speed and sweeping him across the street to smash into the wall of a building on the other side, which promptly partially collapsed and buried him in a huge pile of bricks.

The seven people watching on the roof of the school two hundred and fifty metres away had varying reactions to all this. 'Chou' sighed, 'Yori' scowled, 'Reiko' winced, and the other magical girls who were unfamiliar with Akane except from stories gaped a little. "Holy crap. I see what you mean. That's one bad tempered woman." Aiko looked at 'Chou' who nodded sadly.

"She was doing so well." 'Reiko' put her hand on her forehead and sighed as they watched Akane start smashing the pile of bricks with another mallet in an attempt to dig Ryoga out so she could kill him properly.

"Oh, fucking hell, this is bad. You have to stop her before she kills him or he fights back. You know he's stronger that her if he ever has a chance to react." 'Yori' nodded, still glaring at the distant fight.

"Damn it. Stupid pig boy, why the hell did he pick here and now for god's sake. I told you he'd turn up at the worst possible moment." She glanced at 'Chou', who nodded slowly.

"He does have a gift."

"That's one way of putting it."

They watched, impressed despite themselves, as Akane smashed bricks out of the way like a maniacal demolition machine, uncovering a slightly stunned young man who looked up at her with his mouth open, covered in dust. Even at that range they could clearly hear her yell, "Ryoga Hibiki, prepare to DIE!" 'Yori' suddenly had a short attack of the giggles making the rest of them look at her in disbelief.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "You'd have had to be there."

Akane swung her mallet, catching the dark-haired young man just as he was trying to both stand and scramble out of the way, punting him nearly eighty metres down the street, making a crater in
the concrete wall he bounced off before landing on another parked car which died in a shower of glass. Even 'Yori' winced. "Damn. That'll leave a mark. She hasn't got any weaker that's for sure. We'd better put a stop to this before it gets any worse." She jumped off the roof followed by her wife. Both of them ran towards the fight. Akane was charging back towards Ryoga screaming insults, with Shampoo following desperately trying to figure out a plan.

Ryoga pushed himself out of the wreckage of the vehicle he'd landed on, brushing glass off his face with one hand, wondering what to do. His eyes widen as he saw a large motorcycle flying towards him and he barely got out of the way in time. His reflexes took over and he stabbed a finger into the pavement, using the breaking point, causing a huge explosion of cement and tarmac shrapnel to hurtle towards Akane. A lot of it hit her, causing numerous small cuts since she wasn't hardened to it's effects, but she ignored the pain and carried on, picking up another motorcycle and flinging it at him as she moved.

She reached him just as it did and caught him a solid blow in the crotch as he ducked to avoid the flying metal. Even as tough as Ryoga was that hurt a lot, Akane was almost as strong as he was when she was this enraged. Grunting in agony he fell over, firing a small ki ball at her defensively but missing. It almost hit Shampoo who was following behind, but whistled past her to penetrate the window of a shoe shop behind her with a fizz then a large blast as it detonated inside, wrecking the shop and blowing shoes all over the road. Luckily by now all the pedestrians in the area had retreated to a safe distance, their demon and magical girl fight honed reflexes making them seek a safe place to watch from. No one could recognise the new girl but she was clearly quite powerful judging by the glowing red aura and the flying vehicles.

Only about fifteen seconds had passed since Akane had struck the first blow, but she was getting steadily more furious, her battle aura reaching a level Shampoo hadn't seen even the first time she'd tried to kill the young man. That didn't bode well. She and Ukyo had only just managed to drop her the first time, this time she was on her own. Without resorting to potentially lethal force she wasn't sure what she could do to stop her friend.

Akane kicked Ryoga viciously again, hearing the crack of bone as his kneecap shattered. He howled in agony and struck out, catching her in the side with a hugely powerful blow. She flew across the street and into the wrecked shop, landing inside with a crash. Her incoherent screams of rage and pain were briefly stopped as she slid to a halt. Struggling to his feet Ryoga yelled, the sensations from both his leg and his groin bringing tears to his eyes. A sound from the shop caught his attention as well as Shampoo's and they both stared as a large desk came flying out of it directly towards him. His attempt to duck resulting in him falling over since his leg wouldn't hold him up. Akane limped out of the store, now glowing so brightly that she was difficult to look at, radiating enough heat to make her clothes smoke. She growled like a pit-bull, so far past the point of reason she more resembled a demon than a magical girl. The onlookers some distance up the street began rearranging their bets as to who would survive the fight.

"Oh, damn it," Shampoo muttered to herself in Mandarin, pulling a pair of clubs out of weapon space and sprinting towards her friend from the back, hoping to knock her out quickly. Unfortunately Akane's reflexes were being boosted by the amount of uncontrolled ki she was producing in her anger and she moved as she felt the beginning of the first blow, twisting and lashing out with one hand without even thinking. Shampoo felt a massive impact on the side of her head and was unconscious before she hit the road twenty metres away.

Less than thirty seconds after the start of the fight 'Yori' and 'Chou' arrived. 'Chou' stopped next to Ryoga. "Stay down. Let her handle this," the blonde said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He tried to sit up but might as well have attempted to push a mountain to the side. Eyes wide he stared at the girl above him who was watching her partner with a worried expression. 'Yori' came to a halt a few
metres in front of Akane.

"Stop, please. You can't win and you're hurt." The blue-haired young woman stepped to the side so she still had an uninterrupted view of Ryoga, bending down to pick up a huge chunk of concrete that had fallen out of the wall he'd hit. "Put it down. You have to stop." Ignoring the black-haired girl as if she was irrelevant, Akane heaved the two hundred kilo block of steel-reinforced concrete at her target. 'Yori' sighed and vaporised it in flight with an energy beam before it had gone more than five metres, the boom this produced echoing around the entire neighbourhood for several seconds. The shock-wave knocked Akane flat, stunning her momentarily. Walking over and looking down at her 'Yori' shook her head unhappily, then bent down and prodded a couple of pressure points. With a faint whimper the other woman lost consciousness, the blazing red aura of her rage guttering out.

Ryoga watched this with shock, before the pain from his leg became too much and he passed out. Less than a minute had passed since Akane had first spotted him. Half a dozen vehicles had been totalled, either directly or indirectly from shrapnel, four shops were damaged or destroyed, there were numerous craters in the road, and dozens of broken windows. 'Yori' looked around and winced.

"Damn. This one is going to be expensive." Her wife nodded unhappily. She walked over to check on Shampoo as 'Reiko' and Aiko's team appeared in the middle of the road. 'Reiko' went over to her unconscious sister and looked down at her with dismay, while the others looked around in amazement.

"Oh, god. What a mess. How is she?" 'Yori' glanced at her, then squatted down, quickly scanning the youngest Tendo girl.

"Not too bad. Her leg is fractured, I'm amazed she was walking on it, I guess she was so furious she didn't notice the pain. Three, no, four broken ribs, one of them shattered, mild concussion. Oh, and her small intestine is perforated, one of the ribs got it I think." 'Reiko' gasped, one hand going to her mouth.

"That's horrible! Is she going to be OK?" 'Yori' nodded, standing up.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine. Physically at any rate. We've fixed much worse problems." Her sister-in-law slumped slightly with relief, then looked across to Shampoo and 'Chou'.

"How's Shampoo?" 'Yori' asked as they walked over to the blonde woman. 'Chou' looked up unhappily.

"Not ideal. Akane hit her very hard, she has a slightly fractured skull and a nasty concussion. Other than that it's mostly scrapes from where she hit the road." She glanced over at the unconscious form of Ryoga with a dark look. "That annoying young man really set Akane off. He's paid for it though, his knee is ruined and he's got a ruptured testicle." 'Yori' grimaced, also looking at the part time pig.

"Ow. That's got to smart." She followed her wife's eyes. "Oh well. We'll have to heal him anyway." 'Chou' seemed slightly reluctant but eventually nodded. "Come on. Let's get them somewhere safe. Then I'll have to come back and get a list of all the damage." She sighed heavily. "Sergeant Harada is never going to believe this one." Looking around she spotted someone she knew, one of the shopkeepers who was still open, standing outside his shop and gaping at the damage. She went over to him and had a brief conversation while the others watched, then came back.

"OK. Hikaru will tell everyone that we'll be back to catalogue the damage, he'll arrange to have the
affected people make a start on it. Do you want to grab Akane, please, love? I'll get Ryoga. Hey, Misaki, can you carry Shampoo?" The taciturn brunette nodded and came over, dropping to one knee and carefully picking the unconscious Amazon up. 'Chou' gathered her sister in her arms, looking at her sadly and brushing her hair away from her face, while 'Yori' walked to where Ryoga was lying and looked at him with considerable irritation.

"You damned idiot. Trust you to turn an amusing evening out into a war zone." She bent down and effortlessly picked him up, holding him gently despite her words. 'Reiko', who had accompanied her, sighed.

"To be fair to the guy I doubt this was something he wanted." 'Yori' grunted as they joined the others.

"Probably not. Doesn't change it though." Reaching out she charged the amulet that Aiko held up wordlessly, before the entire group vanished in a bright flash of light. The various onlookers stared around at the devastated street and gave it nine out of ten for effort and a high six for style.

'Reiko' looked around the unfamiliar apartment they'd appeared in the middle of with interest. It was nowhere near as nice as the one her sister lived in, but was still surprisingly large for an apartment in Tokyo. There was a bed on one side of the room, with a sofa near the window next to some chairs. One door at the side of the room led into a kitchen from what she could see, while one next to it was presumably the bathroom. The other side of the room had the door to the outside hallway. 'Chou' carried Akane over to the double bed and put her down on it gently while Misaki did the same with Shampoo on the other side. 'Yori' placed Ryoga on the sofa. She reached out and touched his head with a softly glowing hand, then looked satisfied. "That will keep him out for a while until we can sort him out." 'Chou' did the same to both the girls. "Right. What are we going to do about all this?" 'Yori' was joined by her wife who put her arm around her waist as they looked at the three people. Aiko and Tamiko sat in two of the chairs, while Misaki disappeared into the kitchen. Shortly noises could be heard that made it apparent she was rummaging around for something to eat. Fumiko shook her head and went after her.

"You never stop, do you?" she said as she left the room. 'Reiko' twitched a smile and looked at her younger sister, then her older sister.

"Crap. Not exactly what we had in mind." 'Chou' shook her head sadly.

"No. This was no fun at all I'm afraid. Although it does give us a good excuse to scan her, I do wish it hadn't been forced on us like this." Nodding, 'Yori' moved to get a slightly better view of the man.

"Damn it, Ryoga," she mumbled, kneeling beside him. 'Chou' joined her, putting her hands on his leg which was massively swollen around the knee. "That's a pretty bad break. She's gotten stronger, he's really hard to damage." "You should have seen him last time," 'Reiko' observed. "This is pretty mild, actually. She caught him completely by surprise the first time and beat the crap out of him, she broke quite a few bones and nearly tore his left ear off. The doctor said he was lucky to survive." 'Yori' glanced over at the sleeping form of the youngest Tendo, almost impressed.

"He heals considerably faster than normal due to his high ki level, but even so this would take a while to get better and might leave him with a limp for a couple of years."

"That's the leg done. He's going to ache for a while. Quite a while, actually, I couldn't bring myself
to remove all the damage." Yori' and 'Reiko' both looked at her with odd expressions which she returned with a small, hard smile. "Call it a reminder."

"That's harsh, sis," 'Reiko' said grinning coldly. They watched as 'Yori' placed her hand on his lower belly, glancing at them with a wry grin.

"That's as close to the damage as I want to go," she said. 'Reiko' grinned while 'Chou' giggled. The glow came and went. "OK, the Hibiki family future is fixed. Nasty. I don't even have them at the moment and it makes me want to cross my legs." This made everyone laugh.

Satisfied that Ryoga was physically whole again, both 'Yori' and 'Chou' moved over to Akane and Shampoo. They checked the two young women again. "Shampoo first, this head injury isn't too bad but it's potentially worse than anything Akane has." 'Yori' agreed with her wife, both of them concentrating on the Amazon. The disguised Nabiki and the four magical girls watched with interest and amazement as they muttered to each other while performing delicate internal operations on the young woman, finally stepping back and looking satisfied.

"That should do it," 'Chou' remarked, a smile on her face. "All the internal haemorrhaging is fixed, the swelling has been eliminated, and the skull fracture healed." 'Yori' nodded, slowly moving glowing hands over the lilac-haired woman's body, erasing all the small scrapes and grazes with no scarring. A few minutes later she grinned.

"Done. I can't find anything else wrong, she's in very good shape otherwise." 'Chou' put a glowing hand on the woman's forehead, nodding after a moment.

"Good, she's not in pain any more. I'll just put her a bit deeper under so she doesn't wake up until we're ready." Turning to look at her youngest sister she sighed unhappily. "Now for poor Akane." Both women walked around to the other side of the bed, looking down at their final patient. Shaking her head, 'Yori' placed her hands on the youngest Tendo's torso.

"I'll do the ribs and the intestines, you want to do the head again?" Nodding, 'Chou' began working. Finishing shortly 'Yori' moved down to Akane's left leg. "Aiko? Can you grab her ankle and pull her leg out straight, please?" The short girl followed her instructions immediately. "Thanks. Fumiko, hold here, yes, that's good. Right, don't move." A minute passed in silence as she rebuild the shattered bones, finally sitting back with a smile. "Great. That's done, thanks guys." The two other women smiled at her, stepping back. 'Reiko' shook her head in admiration.

"You two really are impressive. Those medical skills are astounding." 'Yori' shrugged, grinning.

"Certainly comes in handy pretty often. Of all the things I've worked out over the years I'm most proud of coming up with the ki healing, I'll admit. Between us, it's become something very powerful. I just wish it wasn't so hard to teach to other people." Glancing at her wife, she asked, "How's it coming at that end, love?" 'Chou' still had her hands on Akane's head and was frowning. She looked up.

"The concussion is fixed, that was easy, it was quite mild. But there's something... Have a look and tell me if I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing." Raising an eyebrow 'Yori' shifted up to kneel beside her partner, joining her in placing her hands on the blue-haired woman's head. "Right there." The others watched as 'Yori' closed her eyes, probing delicately with the weird senses both martial artists had. Several seconds passed then she also frowned.

"That's... not right. Not right at all."

"But what is it?" 'Yori' concentrated, gently moving her hands around on Akane's head. After some
time she opened her eyes and studied the Tendo woman's face.

"I think..." She trailed off, looking like she was trying to remember something. Jumping abruptly to her feet she looked at Aiko. "Can you take me to the university medical library, please?" Slightly startled, the brunette nodded.

"Sure."

'Yori' glanced around at the other people present, all of whom looked at her wondering what was going on. Then she turned to 'Chou'. "I won't be long, I need to look something up. Keep her under until I get back." Her wife nodded, then everyone looked away as the teleport flash came and went. 'Reiko' turned to her sister.

"What did you find?" she asked curiously, quite worried. 'Chou' looked at her gravely.

"I'm not sure, but she seemed to recognise something. It almost looks like lots of tiny cysts all through areas of Akane's brain, which isn't good." 'Reiko' gasped while the remaining magical girls looked worried. 'Chou' hastened to reassure them. "It's not immediately dangerous. We just need to figure out what it is." Ten minutes passed very slowly before Aiko and 'Yori' abruptly reappeared in the room, the former holding a book with one finger marking a place. She walked over to the blonde and handed the book to her, pointing to a colour image on the page.

"I think that's it." 'Chou' studied the photo, nodding slowly, then read the accompanying text. Her eyebrows went up steadily, then she glanced at her husband.

"This could explain a lot."

"It could explain nearly everything, if the current research is right." Everyone else looked at each other, before 'Reiko' stepped forward.

"What on earth are you two talking about? What's wrong with Akane?" she demanded, getting more worried by the moment. Her elder sister looked at her while 'Yori' knelt down once more, putting her hands on the youngest Tendo again.

"We think Akane may be infected by toxoplasma gondii. It's a parasite that causes something called toxoplasmosis." Very worried, the middle sister stared at the younger one. That didn't sound at all good.

"Is it serious? Can you fix it?" Her sister nodded.

"Yes, it can be serious although in most cases it isn't, and yes, we should be able to deal with it. She doesn't show any of the symptoms of serious toxoplasmosis infection, but the parasite can lie dormant in the brain for long periods of time. The more worrying and also in this case, very interesting thing about toxoplasmosis is that there is quite a lot of evidence to show that in some cases it can affect brain chemistry, specifically altering certain neurotransmitters. It's been implicated in serious mood disorders, bipolar disorders, and even schizophrenia. That isn't common but seems to be backed up by the literature." She glanced at her youngest sister, frowning slightly. 'Reiko' quickly realised the implications.

"You mean...? Akane's emotional problems could be caused by this parasite?" 'Chou' nodded.

"Possibly not completely caused by it, but certainly there is a strong possibility that it's drastically increased the severity of whatever did cause it. It's believed to alter dopamine levels, sometimes considerably, in much the same way certain drugs do. Dopamine is very important, too much or too little can have all sorts of fascinating but very unpleasant effects. It would explain a lot if that's
what's happening." 'Yori' looked up, motioning for the book. Handing it to her 'Chou' watched with the others as she looked at the photo again, then nodded.

"That's it. Definitely toxoplasma gondii. Her brain chemistry is all over the place, nothing like what it should be. According to the book this is a pretty rare outcome of toxoplasmosis but not unique. You're going to have to help me, love, this is a two person job I think." Kneeling beside her husband the two of them exchanged glances, then leant forward. Each placing their hands on Akane's head, they surrounded it with a soft glow mixing purple and gold, a peculiarly beautiful sight to the others. All five women stood and watched for nearly twenty minutes, before 'Chou' looked at 'Yori' and nodded.

"I think that's it." 'Yori' checked one last time then dropped her hands.

"Yes. It looks like it worked." Standing she turned to the rest. "We cleaned out the parasitic cysts, that was the easy part. The harder bit was repairing the damage to the brain chemistry. As far as I can see we sorted out the main changes to the neurotransmitters, but we'll have to wait for everything to settle down before we can be sure. It might require some more work in a month or two." Looking at 'Reiko' she smiled. "I can't guarantee this will fix her emotional issues, or at least not all at once, but I'm pretty sure it will make the existing treatment much more effective. It should also reduce the wild mood swings quite quickly, there will probably be a noticeable difference within a week or two." 'Reiko' looked extraordinarily pleased. Stepping forward she hugged her sister-in-law.

"Thank you. Both of you." 'Chou' smiled at her and came closer, the middle sister gathering her into the hug. Aiko and the others grinned. After a moment 'Reiko' released the other two, looking at the two women sleeping on the bed, then glancing at Ryoga on the other side of the room. "So, what's next?"

Aiko looked at the dark haired young man on the sofa. "I'd think you probably need to get him out of here before you do anything else. If Akane wakes up and sees him it's going to get messy." 'Yori' nodded, walking over to look down at Ryoga.

"We also need to persuade him to stay away from here. I know it wasn't really his fault, but there's a lot of damage out there he managed to trigger. Let's wake him up." She reached out a hand, then paused. "Hmm." Looking up at 'Reiko', she grinned slightly menacingly, fangs showing. "I have an idea..."

Ryoga fought his way to consciousness through a mist of confusion. He'd been walking, hadn't he? Somewhere he didn't recognise, which was hardly unusual, but at least it was in Japan this time. Then there had been an ungodly howl of rage from behind him... Akane! "Oh, crap," he thought, jolting awake and opening his eyes, expecting the excruciating pain he'd felt before he passed out some unknown time earlier. He could remember a hit to the groin, exploding in agony, then something about his leg.

Oddly, while he wasn't exactly pain-free, his knee only hurt a little and his poor groin seemed more or less OK. Reaching down unconsciously with one hand he gently probed, relaxing when nothing hurt very much. Flexing his right leg he winced, it hurt more than he liked but nothing like he remembered. That implied he'd been treated, somehow, and/or spent a considerable time unconscious. The part time pig raised his head and looked around wondering where he was. His eyes flicked around the large dark room he was lying in the middle of, which looked like some sort of warehouse, concrete floor disappearing into the dark, ceiling obscured by gloom, then across the woman wearing dark glasses, around the room some more...
Woman? His gaze shot back as his mind caught up with what he was seeing. Sure enough, standing a few metres away and watching him with a coldly neutral expression that sent an involuntary shiver down his spine was a youngish woman in a black suit, impeccably tailored, her green hair in a ponytail and pulled back from her face, except for a bit in front of each ear, inexplicably wearing dark glasses despite the dim lighting. She raised an eyebrow behind the glasses. "Ah. Back with us, Mr. Hibiki. I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever wake up." She took a step forward and studied him in a way that made him feel worried. "You were responsible for a considerable amount of damage today, Mr. Hibiki. Several million yen worth."

"Who are you?" Ryoga demanded with a dry throat. "More to the point, how do you know who I am?" She smiled, the expression even colder than the previous one.

"We know a significant amount about you, Mr. Hibiki. We have been keeping an eye on you for some time." This made him stare with a wide-eyed expression.

"Who is we?" he finally asked. She stepped forward, sitting down in a plain wooden chair he could swear hadn't been there seconds ago. Sitting up slowly he looked around the room, there was still nothing in it except for the woman and himself, and that chair. Glancing back at her he froze.

Two chairs.

There was now another one a meter in front of her, facing her. She gestured to it. "Please, sit down. I dislike speaking to someone sitting on the floor." Staring for a long moment, he eventually levered himself to his feet and walked slowly to the chair, wincing a little as he put weight on his knee. The pain wasn't major, just enough to let him know it was there. He sat.

They stared at each other for a moment. "I'm not at liberty to disclose who 'we' are, Mr. Hibiki. I'm sorry." She smiled in a way that made it clear she wasn't. "Suffice it to say that I represent a group that keeps a close eye on the comings and goings of people of, shall we say, unusual talents. You meet that criteria for a number of reasons. I hope you'll understand if I don't explain any further." He didn't understand, but couldn't bring himself to say that, the woman gave him the willies for some reason he couldn't explain.

"You may refer to me as Ms. Aoyama. Now, I have to decide what to do about you." Once more he stared, he didn't like the sound of that. A small noise in the depths of the darkness made him jump and look around, he was getting quite nervous, this whole experience was extremely creepy. When he looked back to the woman she was reading from a thick folder that she definitely hadn't been holding before. Wondering for a moment whether she was some sort of hidden weapons master, he stared. If she was, he might be in real trouble. "Hmm. I see you have been involved in a considerable number of previous events of a destructive nature. An impressive number, to be honest. Also a large number of interactions of a physical sort with other people we watch." He saw her eyebrows go up once more as she turned a page. "Ah. That is an interesting name. Akane Tendo. The same Akane Tendo as this most recent event, I believe?" She glanced at him, the blank glare of her dark glasses making him wonder what was behind them. When she turned her head to look back at the folder he noticed that her ear was distinctly pointed.

"Very interesting," she continued, reading from another page. "Xian Pu of the Joketsuzoku. Khu Lhon of the same tribe. Ms. Ukyo Kuonji. Quite an impressive resume. We're aware of all of these people, they have caused us some problems in Nerima for a considerable time." She flipped a page and stopped, reading it with interest. "Ranma Saotome. The same Akane Tendo as this most recent event, I believe?" She glanced at him, the blank glare of her dark glasses making him wonder what was behind them. When she turned her head to look back at the folder he noticed that her ear was distinctly pointed.

"Pity. We would
like to track him down. Never mind, this is about you and what we should do.” With that rather disturbing statement she lowered her glasses back into position and held the folder off to one side, where it disappeared in a very strange manner, as if someone invisible had taken it from her. Yet again he stared. This was becoming extremely weird.

"So, Mr. Hibiki. What to do next..." She stood and walked slowly around him, studying him disconcertingly carefully, before sitting down again. Ryoga followed her with his eyes, not sure whether it was a good idea to reply or even move. He was beginning to feel as if there were several other people present, but try as he might he couldn't work out why. There were no apparent ki emanations from anyone but him and the woman, although there was something very odd about hers. "We can't have people of your abilities going around destroying buildings and vehicles willy-nilly, can we? There is enough of that sort of thing in Minato and Nerima already. We would be most upset to see that type of event spread outside those areas." Ms. Aoyama inspected him again. "Perhaps we should eliminate the problem once and for all." He really didn't like the sound of that one little bit.

"Look, it's not like any of this was my fault, Akane just jumped me out of nowhere! I didn't even know she was there. I didn't even know where I was, for god's sake!" She nodded slowly.

"Yes, I believe that is a common state of affairs, in fact. Yet, there is no doubt that without you present this sorry affair would not have arisen, is there?" After a moment he shook his head.

"Um, I guess not."

"You see my point. While you may not have directly caused the damage you were the catalyst."

"What about Akane, then?" he demanded, both angry and somewhat scared. "She's the one who smashed up most of the area." Ms. Aoyama raised an eyebrow and he flushed. "OK, the shop was my fault. But the rest of it was hers."

"Rest assured, Mr. Hibiki, I will be having a similar discussion with Ms. Tendo immediately after we deal with you." Her voice was cold and emotionless, making him shiver a bit.

"What do you mean, deal with me?" She bared her teeth a little in what some people might charitably have called a smile. It didn't feel like one.

"Oh, it is within our power to arrange matters so you would be most unlikely to precipitate such a happening again." Trembling a little he glanced around, trying to work out whether he should make a break for it, or jump the woman and fight his way out. She didn't look like a fighter, but bearing in mind the sort of people he’d come across in the past, that was no guarantee. Apparently reading his intentions somehow, she mildly continued, "It would do you no good to run, Mr. Hibiki. We can find you again easily enough. Very few people manage to escape our view." As he looked at her she added, "Please do not consider attacking me, either. It wouldn't end well for you I can assure you."

"Look, ah, Ms. Aoyama, just let me go, and I promise I'll stay as far away from both Nerima and Minato as possible. That's where I was, Minato, right? Hell, I'll stay away from Tokyo." The pig-cursed martial artist was seriously worried by now. The shadows in the room seemed to be drawing in, whenever he looked away from them, while he kept hearing disturbing little sounds in the dark just below the threshold of audibility. The whole thing had gone far beyond creepy into genuinely frightening. Not usually one to quail in the face of danger, Ryoga found himself twitching at every little noise like a ten year old in a storm. Ms. Aoyama considered his request, rubbing one finger along her cheek.
"Hmm. How do I know you will follow through with this promise? For that matter, how do you know you will? From your records you do seem to have a distressing propensity to turn up where you're not required despite your best efforts." She shook her head slightly. "No, I think it might be neatest just to... remove you from the equation. Permanently." He stared wide-eyed at her, that sounded extremely ominous. She chuckled in a voice that sent a chill down his spine. "Don't worry, Mr Hibiki. I'm not suggesting that we slaughter you in cold blood. That is not our preferred methodology. We have more... elegant... methods." Waving a hand to her right without looking she didn't even blink when a glowing blue tear in the space-time continuum silently opened a few metres away. Ryoga recognised a portal to another world with a massive shock, he'd encountered them one or twice before, usually just before something horrible came through.

"That leads to a place from which you would be most unlikely to return. It is a simple solution to the problem you represent." Ryoga stared at the portal, then at the woman. The eerie silence of the manifestation was bad enough, the way the woman almost looked bored about it was worse. It implied a number of very unsettling things both about her and the 'group' she claimed to be associated with.

"I don't like the sound of that," he remarked, desperately attempting not to show how scared he was. The green-haired woman smiled nastily.

"Your interest or otherwise in the procedure is unimportant," she assured him. Standing he moved around the chair putting it between himself and the deeply unsettling woman, as well as the portal which simply hung in the air, silently threatening a trip he was not at all keen on taking.

"You can't do this! I'm not a criminal, You can't simply throw me through a portal to some demon world like that. Even if I was, I'd need a trial and everything." She laughed, her clear voice ringing through the large room.

"Oh, Mr. Hibiki, that's very amusing. Thank you. A trial. Very good." She snickered to herself as he backed away. "No, a trial is unnecessary. We are not associated with the judiciary system."

"I promise I'll stay away. You have my word, on my honour as a martial artist. We keep our promises." She looked at him evenly for a long few seconds while he sweated, glancing between her and the portal which was radiating a sensation that made all his hair tingle. Eventually she nodded, waving her hand again. The portal vanished as silently as it had appeared. Ryoga sighed in relief, suddenly realising how fast his heart was racing.

"All right, Mr. Hibiki. Never let it be said that we are unmerciful. We will try it your way. Once. If anything like this happens again..." She looked meaningfully at him and he nodded frantically.

"It won't. I promise." Standing she walked a few paces to the side, indicating he should follow.

"We will be monitoring you." Releasing the chair he stepped away from it, walking towards her, then glancing over his shoulder. Both chairs were gone. "Transport has been arranged, do you have any particular destination in mind?" Licking dry lips, he thought for a moment.

"Um, Osaka?" She nodded again.

"Fine. Remember, Mr. Hibiki, if we meet again there will be no second chances." He was in mid-nod when the world wrenched while a horrible nausea overtook him. Staggering a few paces he vomited, barely registering a brilliant flash from somewhere behind him. When, a couple of minutes later, he recovered enough to look around he found himself standing in a park overlooking the night skyline of Osaka, which he recognised from the times he'd visited. Shaking slightly, the part time pig limped off into the dark, silently grateful that he'd managed to talk himself out of
whatever horrible fate awaited on the other side of the portal.

"Damn you, Akane Tendo. This is all your fault. Because of you I nearly went to hell," he mumbled.
When Aiko returned from teleporting Ryoga to Osaka, she found 'Reiko' leaning against the wall giggling helplessly while 'Yori', 'Chou', and the rest of her team were close to rolling on the floor. 'Yori', in fact, was doing exactly that, howling with laughter. "That was absolutely brilliant, Nabiki, sorry, I mean, 'Reiko'. You say we're good at acting!" Shaking her head she sat cross-legged on the floor and wiped her eyes, grinning like an idiot. "I wonder if he'll ever stop looking over his shoulder, worried that 'Ms Aoyama' might turn up and push him through a portal?" Aiko chuckled. "That projection was pretty damn convincing. If it wasn't for the low power output I'd have been sure there really was a portal there." 'Yori' nodded with a smile.

"I still haven't completely figured out portals, but I can fake it pretty well. I know Ryoga has seen them a few times, I was banking on him not knowing much about them, and of course, not being able to sense the magic or lack of it. He seemed to believe it." She looked at 'Reiko' who was still giggling. "The way you were completely blank about it was probably the most impressive bit. You could see in his face that he truly believed you'd toss him through it without a care in the world. I think it was the right decision, turning off the bracelet. I want him to remember her for the rest of his life."

"I doubt poor Ryoga will want to be anywhere near Tokyo from now on," 'Chou' commented, smiling widely. "It was a bit mean but I have to admit very funny to watch." 'Yori' grinned, glancing at Aiko.

"Thanks, guys, your help is much appreciated, as usual." Aiko and her team looked amused. "No problem, Yori. Always glad to help, you've both helped us so many times we can never pay you back." 'Chou' glanced at them.

"That's what friends are for. You know we'll always be there for you, you're all like family to us." The four young women seemed pleased. 'Yori' pulled a phone out of her ki pocket and dialled a number.

"Hi, Yoshi. Yes, it all went extremely well, thanks. Thank you for the loan of the warehouse, I owe you one. We'll lock up on the way out. Yes. OK, see you next time. Bye." Disconnecting she made the phone vanish again. "Right, we'd better get back to Akane and Shampoo. I'll just go and make sure everything is secure, then meet you guys back at the safe house, OK?" 'Chou' nodded, walking over and gently levering her giggling sister from the wall. 'Reiko' wiped tears of laughter from her face and grinned at her elder sister.

"That was so much fun," she said quietly, still intermittently giggling. 'Chou' smiled.

"Come on, we need to get back." Seconds later they vanished with a flash. The disguised Ranma checked the doors and windows, set the alarm, then locked the door behind her, before leaping to the roof and bounding off into the night. A few minutes later she walked through the door of the apartment to find everyone else standing around the bed on which Akane and Shampoo were sleeping peacefully. 'Chou' glanced up and smiled at her husband before looking back at the two women.

"How are they doing?" 'Yori' asked, coming up beside her.

"They're just sleeping now. There don't seem to be any after-effects from the cyst removal in
Akane's brain, it looks like we managed to clean up all the breakdown products enough to prevent any reactions. We can wake them up at any point." The black-haired woman nodded thoughtfully.

Glancing at 'Reiko' she asked, "Fancy being Ms Aoyama again? There's no need to scare them as much as Ryoga, but I do think we need to get across to Akane at least how serious what happened was and how much worse it could have been." The middle sister looked at him, then at her elder sister, who sighed a little but nodded.

"I think she's right. If we hadn't been there the results could have been very unpleasant, it's bad enough as it is. Akane needs to understand that." 'Reiko' sagged a little.

"Damn. You're both right, of course. OK, but it won't be nearly as much fun this time." Her sister smiled gently at her.

"We understand. Thank you." They all looked back at the bed.

"Do we wake them up together, or one at a time?" 'Reiko' wondered out loud. 'Yori' and 'Chou' glanced at each other.

"It might be best to wake Shampoo first and explain the situation to her. She's less likely to freak out than Akane is, I think." 'Yori' looked again at her wife who slowly nodded.

"I agree." Moving to the Amazon's side of the bed, she reached out a hand, gently touching Shampoo's forehead. A couple of seconds later the young woman's eyes flickered, then opened. She stared at the ceiling with a slightly furrowed brow as if trying to remember something, then her eyes widened, flicking from side to side. Spotting 'Chou' first she looked at her blankly for a moment. After a second or two she looked around the room, her sharp eyes spotting 'Yori' and the four under-dressed magical girls, then 'Ms Aoyama' who was standing off to one side appearing forbiddingly calm. She looked at each of them in turn then dropped her head to the pillow and mumbled something in Mandarin. 'Yori' recognised the word for 'dreaming' and laughed.

"No, it's not a dream, Miss... sorry, what's your name?" Shampoo looked at her again.

"Xian Pu, but you Japanese usually pronounce it Shampoo. Is this real?" 'Yori' nodded.

"Yes. You and your friend were involved in a major fight a couple of hours ago, with a young man. All three of you were injured. We stopped the fight and brought you back here to heal you. The young man has already left. You and your friend were more seriously injured." Shampoo stared at her, then looked to her right where she had felt the ki signature of Akane, who seemed to be sleeping.

"Is Akane all right?" she asked, worried. 'Chou' nodded with a calming smile.

"Yes, she's fine. There was quite a lot of damage including a number of broken bones but we repaired it all." The Chinese girl looked at her gratefully.

"Thank you," she said. "On behalf of both of us." Inspecting the blonde carefully, then looking at the smaller black-haired woman, she asked delicately, "Excuse me, but are you Chou? And Yori?" They both nodded. Shaking her head, she sat up. "And I said we'd never meet you," she muttered, glancing sideways at the sleeping form of her friend. 'Yori' raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?" Looking embarrassed, Shampoo looked at her.

"Sorry. Akane wanted to meet both of you, she's been a little obsessive about it since she got a copy of a video that showed a demonstration you both did in a park around her a month or so ago. We
came to Minato because she was sure we could find you, although I wasn't convinced. It seems I owe her an apology." 'Yori' appeared amused.

"We don't mind meeting fans. Although we're not too happy about people smashing up the area we call home. What was all that about?" Shampoo swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat on it, sighing.

"Ryoga and Akane have something of a history. It's a complicated story, but it boils down to the way he did something dishonourable to her, which she has never forgiven him for. She also has a quick temper. Not a good combination." 'Yori' nodded.

"I could see that. The damage was impressive. I assume you both have some serious martial arts training?"

"Well, I'm from a village in China that's been raising and training women to fight for thousands of years. We're pretty good," Shampoo said rather proudly. "Akane's father is a martial arts master, a good one, and while she doesn't know as much as he does she's very fast and strong. Especially when she's angry, and I've never seen her that angry before. I've never seen anyone that angry before." She shuddered a little at the memory. 'Chou' glanced at her, then back at her still sleeping friend.

"She certainly seemed very worked up. Her ki output was quite large for someone so young." Turning her head to look at Akane, Shampoo wondered why she was still asleep. She asked them.

"We wanted to explain things to you before we woke her up, since from what we saw you were less likely to react badly. Akane was in a very distressed state when we were forced to render her unconscious," 'Chou' explained. "Just in case she was still feeling emotional we thought it would be a good idea to have you aware of the situation." Shampoo nodded with understanding, pushing herself to her feet then wobbling as a certain amount of dizziness came and went. 'Yori' steadied her.

"You had a fractured skull and quite a nasty concussion. It's all healed up now but you might feel a bit dizzy on and off for half an hour or so." The young Amazon was amazed, the injuries described so casually should have put her in hospital for days if not weeks. Turning to look at the woman lying on the bed the magical girl added, "We'll wake her up now. We found some things during her healing that we need to explain to her." Shampoo looked worried, that sounded ominous. Correctly deciphering her expression the black-haired young woman smiled. "Don't worry, we fixed the problem, but we need to explain what it was."

'Chou' moved around the bed to a position next to Akane, placing a gently golden-glowing hand on the sleeping woman's forehead, which made Shampoo stare. After a couple of seconds she removed her hand, as Akane's eyelids twitched. A few more seconds passed, then her eyes opened and she stared at the face of the blonde looking down at her. A blank look gave way to dawning recognition. "Chou?" she asked faintly, very surprised. The blonde nodded with a gentle smile. The blue-haired woman tried to sit up, wincing as her head throbbed. Quickly reaching out 'Chou' helped her.

"Careful. You were injured moderately severely, don't make any sudden motions for a few minutes." Reaching up with both hands Akane held her head for a moment, groaning a little.

"God, my head feels terrible," she moaned faintly. 'Chou' smiled slightly, putting her hand on top of the young woman head. Once more the glow came and went.

"How's that?" she asked quietly. Looking surprised, Akane prodded her head, then nodded
"Much better, thanks. What did you do?"

"We're rather good at healing." Sitting on the bed beside the younger woman, she looked seriously at her. "Akane, I hope you don't mind me calling you that?" Akane shook her head, "We need to explain something to you. You were fairly seriously hurt, you had several broken ribs, a badly shattered leg, a concussion, and internal injuries. There's nothing to worry about, we fixed all of that and you'll be fine, although I would advise taking life gently for a couple of days. However, while we were working on your head we discovered something somewhat strange." Looking worried, Akane stared at the blonde, then looked at her Amazon friend, who also seemed disturbed.

"Is it serious?" the youngest Tendo asked quietly, horrible thoughts of some incurable ailment going through her mind. The warm smile she got back made her worries drop considerably even before the woman spoke.

"Not any more, as far as we can tell. But I believe it may have caused you some considerable problems in the past. From what your friend Shampoo tells us you have been somewhat, well, fast to lose your temper in the past. Would that be a good description?" Shamefacedly Akane nodded.

"Yes," she almost whispered. "My temper has been horrible for years. No matter what I do, I can't help it, it just suddenly boils over and I go... I guess I go a little crazy. Sometimes I can't even remember why I got angry. I've done some terrible things when I'm like that." A tear worked it's way down her left cheek, her hand coming up to wipe it away without thought. "It's cost me... it's cost me a lot. Me and my family. So much..." 'Chou' put her arm around the younger woman.

"I understand, more than you might realise. People in my life have had emotional problems as well. I'm sorry you've had these things to deal with, it's a terrible burden." Everyone watched silently as Akane collected herself. When she was calm again, the blonde woman continued. "Have you tried therapy for these problems?" Akane nodded.

"Yes. For nearly a year so far. It's helped a bit, but not as much as the doctor hoped or I want, I still get really angry sometimes. I don't even know why a lot of the time, when I look back on it whatever it was that triggered the anger is such a trivial thing." She shook her head. 'Chou' watched her face for a moment.

"When we scanned your brain to see if there was any damage from the concussion," she said slowly, "We found something else. Something a little unusual." The younger woman looked at her. "Have you heard of toxoplasmosis?" Akane shook her head. "It's a disease caused by a parasite called toxoplasma gondii. The parasite is very common around the world, it's mainly spread to humans by contact with cat faeces. It doesn't take much, just the slightest amount you might pick up while working in the garden or stepping in something in the street. Some estimates are that as many as twenty percent or so of people in some countries could be infected by it. In the majority of cases it has few if any effects, the infection is dealt with by the immune system and the person never realises. In a small proportion of people it can trigger effects similar to flu, for example, but they usually get better. In a small proportion of those cases it can go on to cause more serious problems, such as neurological issues of various types." Akane nodded as she listened.

"You understand? So, a common parasite, normally not very dangerous, but in a very small percentage of cases it can be quite unpleasant. There are a different class of problems, though, which are much rarer and also much more difficult to isolate. There is still a lot of research going on in the subject, in fact. The parasite ends up in the brain where it generates tiny cysts, which can be spread throughout most of the neural structure. Once it's established it stays put for a long time,
possibly essentially for life. Some of the effects of this can be very nasty but usually a healthy person wouldn't even know. One odd effect, though, is that rarely it can have a fairly dramatic effect on certain neurotransmitters in the brain, mostly something called dopamine. Dopamine is extremely important to normal brain function. Too much of it, or worse, too little of it, can cause a vast number of quite unpleasant problems." She sighed a little. The youngest Tendo was looking very worried.

"Your brain chemistry was seriously out of balance. The neurotransmitter activity was all wrong in subtle ways, which we believe was either caused by or made much worse by the toxoplasmosis infection. There were a large number of cysts in several areas of your brain that are involved with normal emotional responses, amongst other things. There is a very good chance that this is at least partly responsible for your anger issues. It's a rare but not unknown effect of toxoplasmosis infection, which it's entirely possible your doctor might not have come across." 'Chou' watched the face of her youngest sister, wishing desperately that she could drop the disguise and comfort her. Akane looked scared and upset. "The current state of medicine doesn't know of any way of removing the cysts when they become established, that phase of the disease is considered chronic and untreatable." 'Yori' sat beside Akane on the other side of the bed and grinned at her.

"Luckily, we can do a lot of things that current medicine wouldn't believe possible." The blue-haired girl stared at her. "It took a while but we were able to remove the cysts and correct most if not all of the changes to your neurotransmitter system. We won't know for some weeks whether we got everything completely back to normal, it'll need to settle down for a while before we can really check it out properly, but I'm pretty sure that we've sorted it all out." Akane stared some more, then looked at the blonde on her other side who nodded with a smile.

"What does that mean?" the youngest sister asked, her mind whirling with all the things that she'd been told. 'Chou' smiled again.

"Hopefully, the main result you'll see is that whatever therapy you're having will become much more effective. It isn't a complete instant fix, though." 'Yori' snickered.

"Yep, it's not a miracle, it's just magical healing." 'Chou' gave her a look, while Aiko and her team smiled.

"Not entirely helpful, Yori." The black-haired woman grinned unrepentantly.

"But true." She turned to Akane. "I don't know for sure that the toxoplasmosis was the only cause of whatever emotional issues you have, I rather doubt it in fact. But I am sure it was making them much worse and also interfering with your treatment. Only time will tell but we both think it's very likely that you'll find you progress a lot better with your therapy now, although it will probably take a while to really have a large effect. Removing the physiological cause doesn't instantly fix the psychological effect, you see. But it will certainly help." Akane looked from one magical girl to the other, before she started crying. 'Chou' hugged her while 'Yori' watched sympathetically.

"Thank you. So very much. I've been trying so hard to be a better person, to get better, but I just can't. If this helps... I'll owe you more than I can ever repay."

Smiling, 'Chou' said, "Don't worry about that. It's what we do, we fix things where we can. I hope we've helped you."

"We're going to have to check you over again in perhaps a month," 'Yori' commented. "Just to make sure that we got everything. But after that you'll be clear and you can go on with your life. Hopefully in a calmer mood." Akane smiled at her joyfully.
"I knew wanting to meet you was the right thing to do, but I had no idea this was why. Thank you."
Glancing at Shampoo who had been listening with interest and pleasure, she grinned. "And you said we'd never find them." The Amazon smiled, shrugging.

"I was wrong."

The sound of someone clearing their throat made everyone look at the green-haired woman in the dark suit who was watching with a calm, neutral expression. She stepped forward. 'Yori' looked at her carefully. "Do you have something to add, Ms Aoyama?" Unseen by Akane and Shampoo she winked. The disguised Nabiki pushed her inner happiness at seeing Akane's joy down ruthlessly, subsuming it beneath the persona of 'Reiko'.

"Yes. Now that you have completed explaining the medical intervention you have performed on Ms Tendo, I require a discussion with her and Xian Pu. There is still the matter of her earlier interaction with Mr Hibiki to discuss. A very considerable amount of damage was caused by that interaction." Akane swallowed, glancing at Shampoo, who looked back wide-eyed. The cold emotionless voice of the young woman with the dark glasses produced a certain amount of worry in both of them. 'Yori' and 'Chou' exchanged looks then both stood up.

"Please be considerate of the fact that both of them have recently undergone medical treatment," 'Chou' requested quietly. 'Ms Aoyama' nodded once, seeming mildly annoyed at the comment. Stepping to one side, she waved a hand to the sofa and chairs on the other side of the room.

"Would you two please accompany me over there, so we can talk?" Shampoo and Akane looked at each other, then slowly got off the bed and walked over to the sofa, sitting down beside each other. 'Ms Aoyama' sat neatly in a chair facing them, her hands in her lap. They watched her watch them through the intimidating dark glasses for a moment, feeling nervous. "Akane Tendo, of the Tendo Training Hall in Furinkan, Nerima, and Xian Pu, of the Joketsuzoku tribe, also currently a resident of Furinkan." They exchanged worried glances again.

"Um, how do you know about us?" Akane asked nervously. The woman smiled slightly.

"We have our sources. As I explained to Mr. Hibiki a short time ago, we keep an eye on persons of a certain unusual type. You are both persons of interest to us for a number of reasons. As are a considerable number of the residents of Nerima and Minato." She fell silent for a moment, studying them dispassionately, while Akane shivered. There was something extremely worrying about what the woman said, but even more so about the way she said it. Glancing at 'Chou' and 'Yori' who were watching from the other side of the room she saw they both looked interested but didn't seem likely to intervene. This was something she and Shampoo would have to deal with on their own.

"Who are we?" Shampoo asked slowly, inspecting the woman carefully. She wasn't quite as worried as Akane but there was no denying that she felt this wasn't someone to mess with. The magical girls were one thing, she could feel how dangerous they were from some distance, but this woman was a different sort of threat, one she was finding it very difficult to get any sort of reading on. There was something very weird about her ki signature, even by comparison with 'Yori' and the others, which were odd in their own right. 'Ms Aoyama' smiled again, making both young women feel that the temperature in the room had dropped.

"As I explained to Mr Hibiki I am not at liberty to explain any more. Suffice it to say that I represent a group that takes a close interest in certain people and events. We usually prefer a more hands-off approach but recent events required direct intervention. Mr Hibiki has been dealt with already." That made them look at each other with a certain degree of concern, it sounded somewhat permanent. She noticed their glances and smiled again. "He was sufficiently persuasive about his
intention to stay well away from Tokyo in future that I decided to allow him to leave rather than utilise my preferred method of dealing with the problem. It would have removed the young man as a threat for the foreseeable future, although he did not seem very keen on it himself. Although his cooperation was not essential I decided to be merciful this one time. As I explained to Mr Hibiki I will not be so understanding if it happens again. I believe he understood me."

Akane was feeling somewhat torn as well as definitely scared. Despite her own feelings towards Ryoga there was something about the dispassionate way this woman was suggesting a permanent solution that made her skin crawl. The woman turned her head to look at ‘Yori’ who had walked a little closer, allowing both young women to notice what they’d earlier missed, her ears had distinctly non-human traits. Once more they exchanged wide-eyed glances. Looking back to them she studied them both for a moment. Nodding to herself, she turned to Shampoo.

"Xian Pu. From what I understand you were attempting to restrain Ms Tendo and did not cause any damage. Indeed, it might even be said you were a victim. Ms Yori informed me that you sustained a severe concussion as a result of Ms Tendo's actions and that without her and Ms Chou's medical intervention could have suffered greatly." Akane gasped, snapping her head around to stare at her friend.

"Oh, god, Shampoo, I'm sorry. I don't even remember that." Her friend looked at her and smiled. "Don't worry, Akane, I'm fine now." The green haired woman waited patiently for them to turn back to her.

"As a result, at this time I don't believe you require any further action. I would suggest that in future you attempt to either more effectively restrain your friends, or duck faster." Her smile this time was particularly cold. She turned to Akane. "However, Ms Tendo, in your case we have a problem. You were directly responsible for the destruction of a building, six motor vehicles, two lamp posts, a large amount of street surface, and a wall, and indirectly responsible for the destruction of another building. Not to mention a considerable amount of damage to local infrastructure from concussion and shrapnel. Surprisingly, aside from Mr Hibiki and Xian Pu, no people were harmed. I find that quite impressive under the circumstances. The potential for a significant catastrophe was considerable."

Akane had gone pale as the full extend of her rampage was so clinically laid out. "If it had not been for the fortuitous presence of Ms Yori and her colleagues I suspect that at the very least there would have been a minimum of one fatality, although whether that would have been Mr Hibiki or yourself is open to doubt. Our records indicate he is a formidable opponent. Luckily, at least for you, he also seems not to be particularly fast on the uptake." She paused, inspecting Akane curiously. "We are aware of his prior history with you. I find it interesting that you have been able to damage him so severely on two occasions as there is little doubt you are not remotely in the same class of ability. If it was not for the fact that he appears from the evidence available to have difficulty fighting female opponents on equal terms things might have gone very badly for you, despite the advantage your uncontrolled anger gave you. You might do well to remember that in future, should you ever meet again. I would much prefer it that you do not." She waited until Akane gave her a very small nod, looking frightened.

"So. The question remains, what to do about you? Mr Hibiki was considerably more troublesome I will admit, but you are still something of a problem. When your destructive nature was confined to Nerima it was annoying but something we could deal with. I am not particularly interested in allowing that same nature to expand to Minato, we have enough problems here already, and we cannot always assume that Ms Yori will be there to prevent more damage." Akane opened her mouth, thought for a moment, then closed it again without saying anything. Ms Aoyama's
eyebrows raised. "You have something to add, Ms Tendo?" Akane shook her head. "As you wish."

'Chou' walked over and tapped Ms Aoyama on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, could we have a word with you?" Glancing at the taller blonde the green-haired woman thought for a moment then nodded. Standing, she followed 'Chou' and 'Yori' to the corner of the room furthest from the sofa, where the three of them had a quiet discussion for some minutes. Akane glanced at Shampoo who looked back, neither one of them able to think of anything sensible to say and sufficiently intimidated not to idly talk. Eventually, Ms Aoyama returned, studying them for a moment before sitting again.

"Ms Tendo, I believe you should consider this your lucky day. Ms Chou and Ms Yori have persuaded me that a reparations fund they are involved with will cover the costs of the damage you caused. I have agreed to take no further action this time. But, I must warn you, it is unlikely that in the event of a repeat performance we will be so lenient. Certainly Mr Hibiki has used up all his chances, which will make his next interaction with us his last. I would advise that unless you wish the same, you confine your exuberance to Nerima. Additionally, I would also suggest that it would be in your best interests to continue with your medical treatment in an effort to reduce the likelihood of this type of event recurring. Even in Nerima we have limits to our patience. Do you understand me?" Akane nodded again feeling like a small child that had been scolded. Cold sweat was rolling down her spine under her clothes. "Excellent. In that case, I will take my leave." She stood.

Looking at Akane once more, she smiled again, this time the tiniest amount of warmth entering her expression. It was still chilly but more like liquid nitrogen now rather than liquid helium. "I wish you the best over your medical problems. Ms Chou and Ms Yori are superb healers in addition to their other impressive talents. Hopefully they have helped you." She took off her dark glasses revealing blue eyes with catlike pupils, making both young women gasp slightly. "I bear you no personal ill will, but I would prefer not to meet under such circumstances in the future. Good bye, ladies." Putting her glasses back on she walked over to the group of magical girls, talking briefly to a short brunette, who nodded. Seconds later both women disappeared with a brilliant flash of light making Shampoo and Akane stare in shock through blinking eyes. 'Chou' came over to them.

"I'm sorry about that but we didn't have a lot of choice. Damage from demons or overenthusiastic magical girls is one thing, but what happened tonight was rather different. Ms Aoyama and her group are... somewhat difficult." She grimaced slightly. "Anyway, that's all done with. With luck you will never meet her again." The youngest Tendo nodded slowly, shivering a little.

"That's probably the scariest person I've ever met. She's not even human." 'Yori' grinned at her from across the room.

"A number of people have said that about her for years. She's all right, actually, but not the most smiley person you'll ever meet." The black-haired girl came over and dropped into the chair Ms Aoyama had occupied. 'Chou' sat in the next one, while the three other magical girls wandered over as well. 'Yori' made introductions. "These are very good friends of ours. Misaki, Fumiko, and Tamiko. Aiko is the leader of their group and also the teleporter. She'll be back soon, she took Ms Aoyama to her next appointment." Shampoo and Akane both shook off the lingering effects of the interviewer from hell, smiling at the five magical girls. "I assume you don't want to talk about this Ryoga character." Akane frowned slightly.

"No, not really, thanks." She sighed, looking at them all. "I'm sorry you got dragged into my problems. I had no idea he was going to turn up here." 'Chou' smiled.

"Don't worry about it. We can deal with the results, as long as it doesn't happen again, and it
resulted in us finding what might be your main problem and fixing it. With luck soon enough this sort of situation will be a thing of the past. Concentrate on getting better, don't dwell on things you can't do anything about." Nodding slowly Akane listened.

"I'm still really embarrassed about all of that. I'm going to have to go and apologise to everyone in the area." 'Yori' raised an eyebrow approvingly.

"That would certainly be appreciated."

"Is there anyone you would like to call, to let them know what happened?" 'Chou' asked. Akane exchanged a glance with Shampoo, who nodded. She sighed.

"I guess I'm going to have to tell Nabiki. That's my older sister. She's been very supportive of me, even when I did some horrible things, she deserves to know." Reaching into her pocket she pulled out her phone, staring at it as half the casing fell off in her hand. "Damn."

"Looks like you landed on it," Tamiko said with a smile. "That's happened to me as well. I wish I could find a properly battle-hardened one, I've broken about five of them in the last three years." 'Yori' pulled a phone out of thin air and handed it to her.

"Here. Use mine."

Smiling gratefully Akane dialled Nabiki's number then waited. When it was answered she said quietly, "'Biki? I've kind of messed things up again." She talked for a while, tears once more coming to her eyes, while the others waited. Aiko reappeared half-way through the conversation, 'Yori' softly catching her up in the background. Eventually she looked up, glancing around at the others. "She thinks I should go home now. Also, she was hoping you could come and explain things to them, if that's possible." 'Chou' and 'Yori' exchanged quick looks that passed a lot of information between themselves, then glanced at Aiko, who both nodded and shrugged a little. They turned back to Akane.

"Certainly. We can't stay long, there's quite a lot of work to do here, but we'd be glad to come and meet your family to explain. We can come back later for longer if you'd like that." 'Chou' smiled at her. 'Yori' was talking quietly to Aiko and her team, then turned to Akane and Shampoo.

"We'll have to come and see you again in a month or so anyway to check on you, so it's a good idea to find out where you live. Aiko knows parts of Nerima, and Furinkan, fairly well, so she can teleport us all there, then pick us up when we need to leave." Akane nodded, smiling gratefully, then repeated most of this to her sister on the phone before hanging up and handing it back to 'Yori'.

"Thanks."

"How do you feel?" 'Chou' asked with concern. The other woman looked pale and tired.

"Physically fine, thanks, but my mind is sort of tired." She laughed in a slightly depressed manner. "This isn't quite the way I thought things would go. I wanted to meet you, but not like this." Shampoo put a hand on her shoulder and gave her an encouraging squeeze, Akane looking at her friend, nodding with gratitude.

"Come on, no time like the present," Aiko said in a cheerful tone of voice. "Tamiko, keep yourself and the other two lunatics out of trouble until I get back. Call me if anything weird happens." The auburn-haired girl nodded and saluted mockingly.

"Yes, Ma'am. Define weird, please, Ma'am." Aiko burst out laughing, as did 'Yori'.
"Weirder than usual, you nut." Grinning, Tamiko stepped back as did Misaki and Fumiko, while Shampoo and Akane both stood. "Right, you two, stand just there, please," Aiko requested, while 'Yori' gave her a quick recharge. Both Nerimans watched with interest as the glow sank into her amulet. "You've both already been through a teleport once while you were unconscious, which should have overcome the worst initial symptoms, but you may get a little dizzy for a few seconds, OK?" They nodded apprehensively, eyes wide, wondering what was going to happen. Abruptly the world shifted and they found themselves looking at the main shopping precinct of Furinkan, all the shops now dark and shut since it was after midnight. The two women new to teleporting staggered slightly but quickly recovered.


"Everyone says that. It's certainly useful." Akane looked around, orienting herself, then pointed.

"The Dojo is about a five minute walk that way." They set off, arriving at the Dojo gate a few minutes later. Akane stopped, looking at it, then took a deep breath and pushed the gate open. Nabiki was waiting by the open front door, looking worried. 'Yori' and 'Chou', standing behind Shampoo and Akane, exchanged amused glances. The middle sister was indeed good at acting, she looked very convincing. When Nabiki spotted the three magical girls accompanying her sister and the Amazon her eyebrows went up.

"Are you OK, Akane?" she asked, walking to meet them. Her sister nodded, reaching out suddenly and hugging her hard. "Ow! Careful, you gorilla, you're crushing me." Giggling and crying simultaneously, Akane relaxed a little. Nabiki put her arms around her younger sister and hugged her as well. "It'll be all right, Akane. Come on inside." She cast a look at the others. "You guys as well. Everyone is waiting, they want to hear what happened, they're worried." The entire troupe went inside, entering the living room where the three parents were sitting talking with a pot of tea on the table. Nodoka jumped to her feet, rushing over and hugging Akane, before holding her at arms length and carefully inspecting her.

"How are you, Akane dear? You look very tired. Here, sit down and have some tea, then tell us what happened. Nabiki's told us some of it but I'd like to hear the whole story." She guided the youngest sister to a seat then poured her a cup, handing it to her. Akane took it gratefully. Nodoka turned to the others who were watching with amusement. Her eyes widened a little as she saw 'Yori' and 'Chou', recognising them from the news reports, then widened a little more as she saw Aiko and looked her up and down. The magical girl smiled back, used to the effect her uniform had on people. After a few seconds Nodoka shrugged slightly and said, "Please, take a seat, all of you. Would you like some tea?"

Soon everyone was comfortably seated and provided with cups, Akane having introduced the three women to everyone. 'Yori' glanced across the table at Genma and Soun who hadn't said a word since they'd come in, but were watching with wide eyes. She grinned at them exposing her small fangs. The exchanged glances but didn't say anything, remembering with some awe the DVD they'd seen a few days before. "I understand you're both master martial artists?" They nodded simultaneously. "Ah, excellent. Perhaps we should have a spar at some point." They paled a little while 'Chou' discreetly dug her elbow into her partners side. Snickering, 'Yori' turned back to Nodoka, who had a small private smile of her own at the interaction between the magical girl and the two martial artists.

Nodoka looked at Akane, then Shampoo. "So, girls, what happened? I know you went to Minato to meet Yori and Chou, but this seems a little... excessive." Akane blushed while Shampoo stared at the floor for a moment.
"Um, things got a bit, um, out of hand." Akane scratched her nose, embarrassed. She looked desperately at Shampoo who gazed back, then sighed deeply and began talking. It took half an hour or so to explain the events that had led to the two of them being unconscious on a bed somewhere in Minato. All three parents looked angry and worried when Ryoga was mentioned. Akane pointed out with considerable shame that it was her own fault that the fight had started, making Soun sigh and look at her with disappointment. She looked back, then dropped her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I know it was wrong, but I couldn't help myself, I just saw red when I spotted him. I can't even remember a lot of it."

"Oh, Akane. I thought you were doing so well." He studied her for a moment. After a few seconds she sighed and resumed her story. Shampoo, 'Yori', and 'Chou' all told their parts as well, the two magical girls carrying the explanation after Akane and Shampoo reached the point they were both unconscious. Nodoka gasped when 'Chou' listed the injuries all three participants had sustained, looking at Akane and Shampoo with concern.

"Do we need to get you checked over at the hospital?" she asked, worried. 'Chou' smiled serenely at her.

"That's unnecessary. We're very good at healing. Neither of them has anything wrong now, we repaired all the damage. And some other things we found." She glanced at Akane for permission to explain, the younger woman nodding. "We've learned about Akane's prior anger problems and the treatment she's been undergoing. While we were scanning her brain for any damage from the fight we came across something a bit strange that could have a bearing on it..." She explained carefully and slowly the toxoplasmosis diagnosis and the treatment they'd performed, 'Yori' adding some details. All three parents listened with shock, Genma going green when the words 'brain parasites' were spoken.

"There's nothing to worry about now, though. We cleaned out the cysts and all the damage we could find from their presence. Luckily, other than the influence on brain chemistry, there appears to have been no long-term damage, but we will have to check again in a month or so when everything has had a chance to settle down into equilibrium. Neither one of us expects to have to do anything more than minor adjustments at worst." Nodoka nodded, glancing at Soun with concern, who was almost in tears at what he'd heard.

"How long would this have been affecting Akane, do you think?" 'Yori' shrugged a little.

"It's almost impossible to say for sure. The parasite, when it reaches that stage of the disease, can stay resident for years at least. It's entirely possible that Akane could have been infected for most of her adult life if not longer. In most cases, there are no symptoms, or only mild ones. The immune system fights it off in the normal way, the infection clears up, and you're immune after that. The chronic stage is rare, this sort of effect is much rarer. There's quite a lot of research going on into it but there are still gaps in the knowledge." She grinned. "It's lucky we found it. Normal medical methods probably wouldn't have, and certainly couldn't currently do anything much about it if they did. We use different methods."

Nodoka nodded slowly, understanding what she meant. Soun asked, "Does this mean that her anger problems are gone?" 'Chou' shook her head sadly.

"I'm afraid we can't be sure of that. The root cause may not be the toxoplasmosis, in fact it almost certainly isn't. But we are sure that the parasite was making it dramatically worse by interfering with the normal progression of emotional development. The neurotransmitters affected are extremely important in the operation of the brain. Now that her brain chemistry is back to normal, or mostly at any rate, things should settle down rapidly. We both think that her current treatment
should become much more effective now. Hopefully this will lead to a long-term improvement." She smiled at him. "If nothing else, the wild emotional swings we were told about should soon be a thing of the past, they were the most obvious direct effect of the dopamine imbalance." Akane looked grateful, while Soun stared at the magical girls, then his youngest daughter. After a few seconds he stood. Looking seriously at both of them he bowed deeply.

"Thank you for saving my daughter. It was an act of great honour. You have my eternal gratitude." Holding the bow for a long moment, he straightened up. "I can never repay you." 'Yori' glanced at 'Chou', then they both stood and bowed back.

"It was our pleasure. We like to help, and your daughter and her friend required us. There is no debt to repay," 'Yori' replied formally as she straightened. She grinned at Soun. "Don't worry about it," she added more casually, sitting down again and waving him to do the same. "It's what we do. We could have done without the fight and the damage, true enough, but fixing Akane's medical problems, that's something we would have happily done anyway."

"Even so. You are very honourable people, if there is ever anything I can do for you, just ask." Soun sat down again, smiling at them. Nabiki watched with interest, glancing at Aiko, who looked amused. Turning to 'Yori' she addressed the young woman.

"Speaking of the damage from the fight, what's going to happen about that? From what you've said it was considerable." She saw the spark of amusement in 'Yori's' eyes as the black-haired woman looked at her although no one else did.

"We manage a fund that was set up to cover damages caused by demon attacks and magical girl fights in our area of Minato. It's stretching the definition a little but under the circumstances we decided to class this as a magical girl fight and use the fund to sort out the damage." She looked seriously at Akane. "But this is a one-time thing, Akane. If anything like this happens again I don't know if we can help you." The youngest Tendo nodded with understanding.

"I know," she replied quietly. "Thank you. It won't happen again. You have my word." Shivering with the memory, she added, "I really don't want to meet Ms Aoyama again." Soun and the other parents looked at her, wondering what that meant, but all decided that now wasn't the best time to ask. Nabiki suddenly laughed. Everyone looked at her with varying expressions.

"I just thought of something," she explained. "You always wanted to be a magical girl, Akane. Now you've been classed as one for financial purposes." She giggled as Akane looked stunned. "Or possibly as a demon." This made her sister glare at her while 'Yori', 'Chou' and Aiko began giggling. Nodoka politely covered her mouth while she tried not to laugh, while even Genma was smirking. Soun grinned. Standing, 'Yori' looked at them all.

"It's been nice meeting you all. We're going to have to go now, we still have quite a lot to do, but if it's all right we'll pop back some other time and talk some more. We need to check up on Akane again at least once, so perhaps we should come back every week or two just to be sure." She glanced at 'Chou' who nodded as she also stood, followed by Aiko. Nodoka smiled at them.

"That would be wonderful. Thank you again. If you come during the day let me know in advance and you could have lunch with us if you'd like."

"Thank you, Nodoka," 'Chou' said with a smile, "That would be lovely. Yori has Nabiki's number from lending Akane her phone, so we will call her if that's acceptable." Nabiki put a surprised look on her face then nodded. The three magical girls stepped closer together. "We must leave now. I would suggest looking away or closing your eyes, the teleport produces a very bright flash when we go." Surprised, the three parents looked at each other, then at Shampoo and Akane who had
their eyes closed tightly. Just in time they all closed their own, before the three women disappeared from the living room in a soundless bright light. A few seconds passed before Soun cautiously opened his eyes and looked around. He stared speechlessly at the middle of the room, where the three young women had been. Everyone else opened their eyes then also stared, before exchanging glances. Hanging in mid air in a very improbable manner were the Kanji characters for 'Good Luck, Akane' written in beautiful golden glowing calligraphy. Akane slowly got up, inspecting the insubstantial writing with amazement. She waved her hand tentatively through it feeling nothing at all. Moments later the writing faded away.

"That was... interesting," Soun said slowly. His middle daughter grinned at him, picking up her cup again.

"I have a feeling you haven't seen anything yet."
"Were they as impressive in real life as on the video?" Cologne asked her great-granddaughter curiously, stirring the pork stew she was making. Shampoo looked thoughtful.

"We didn't see any martial arts used, or at least I didn't, by the time they got there I was out of it. Akane can't really remember much either. Probably the only one who saw anything is that idiot Ryoga. But all that said, I'd have to say yes. They certainly have healing abilities greater than anything I've come across before. A lot of medical knowledge combined with some amazing magic or something." Cologne nodded, tasting a little of the stew, then frowning slightly. She reached for the spice rack and selected a bottle, adding a small amount to the pot. "They also have incredibly strange ki signatures, Yori more so than Chou, but neither one of them is like anything I've ever seen," Shampoo added, handing her grandmother the larger spoon she gestured to. "I'm not even sure I was even reading it right it was so weird. The level of power there was... just unbelievable, really. I can't be sure I'm not underestimating it. For all I know they were shielding it from us. What I did see makes someone like Herb look like a beginner."

Cologne checked the rice, then spooned some out onto a couple of plates, adding the stew on top. Shampoo picked up both plates and took them out to one of the tables in the closed restaurant, while the Amazon elder bounced behind her with the cutlery. When they were sitting down, she continued her story. "I don't know enough about magic to even guess at their power level there, but there was certainly something that wasn't ki present in enormous quantities as well. Yori is definitely more powerful then Chou, but even Chou is much more powerful than anyone I've met before." She glanced at her grandmother who was chewing contemplatively. "Even you, Great Grandmother."

The old woman smiled, unoffended. "I wonder what would have happened if Saffron had bumped into those two?" she mused. Shampoo laughed.

"They'd have eaten him alive. No question. He'd have lasted seconds." She shook her head in amazement. "You have no idea, not without meeting them. They look fairly harmless on the surface, but the way they move, not to mention the power signatures... No, they're extremely dangerous. Incredibly, unbelievably lethal, I suspect, if they have need to be. Luckily they also both seem to be very calm and peaceful people. Chou gives off an air of serene competence, that's the only way I can think to explain it. Like my mother, but taken to silly levels. Yori is more chaotic, but also gives off a feeling that she knows what she's doing. I like them. Even with all the power, you don't feel scared, it's more like you know beyond doubt that they'd protect you from anything, even if they didn't like you." She gazed off into space for a moment.

"It's difficult to explain. You really have to meet them, I think, to get the full effect. But I begin to see why people from their district seem not to talk about them outside it. They feel a loyalty to them, they don't want to upset them because they love them rather than because they're frightened of them. Although, I can see why the magical girls Yori shouts at look so worried, I think that when she's angry she's very scary indeed." Blinking, she looked slightly embarrassed about her speech, quickly beginning to eat. Cologne watched her face with interest for a moment.

"Interesting analysis, dear. Very interesting. Thank you." She grinned, making her wrinkly face fold up even more. "You seem quite taken by them." Shampoo glanced at her, then laughed.

"It's difficult not to be. Aside from anything else, the way they helped Akane is remarkable. They certainly didn't have to, not to that extent. Healing her is one thing, arranging to pay for all the damage is amazingly generous." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then worried. "Especially
with Ms Aoyama there. Now, she scared me. A lot.” Looking seriously at her grandmother, she went on, "You have no idea. There was something really off about her ki, like she wasn't human. Her eyes weren't human either. I'd guess that there might be a certain amount of demon heritage there. She was terrifying. The way she spoke about simply eliminating Ryoga as a threat, like she thought of him as no more than a fly to be squashed..." The lilac-haired Amazon shuddered. "Cold. She'd scare Nabiki, she was so cold. And she knew things, things about us and Ryoga. I have no idea who she is or who her 'group' is but I don't want to meet them again.” Cologne studied the younger woman for a few seconds. It was clear that she was genuinely terrified by her memories.

"Was she physically dangerous?" she asked. Shampoo shrugged.

"I truly have no idea. She didn't look like a fighter, but... I just couldn't say. Her ki, her attitude... Whether she was personally capable of hurting me I don't know but I have no doubt at all she could arrange it, and more to the point, would without a second thought if she felt she had to. I don't want to find out what would happen then." She laughed slightly uncertainly. "It was like talking to someone from some sort of supernatural Yakuza or something. Or perhaps some incredibly secret government organization like in the movies, only a lot scarier." Shuddering again she resumed eating, her hand trembling a little.

Watching her for a while Cologne ate slowly. Eventually she asked, "How did Yori and Chou act towards her?"

"With a lot of respect. Which makes it even worse." The old woman nodded, thinking over everything she'd been told.

"Very interesting. I think I'd like to meet these people one day, or Chou and Yori at least. The other woman, probably best to leave that alone." Shampoo nodded vigorously.

"We found one of the devices," Ranma said, handing Nabiki a cup of coffee. She took it with a nod of thanks.

"Before or after it activated?" she asked, dreading the answer. He smiled.

"Before, luckily." They walked out of the kitchen to the living room where Kasumi was just finishing putting away the tablecloth after lunch. All three of them sat on the sofa, Ranma handing his wife the other cup he was carrying. "Sergeant Harada found out that there was a bomb scare in Kyoto, with a description of a bomb unlike anything they'd seen before. He recognised it immediately and called Agent Naito, then us. Agent Naito was able to get the Kyoto bomb squad to back off and leave it alone. Good thing too, it was booby-trapped and would have activated immediately if they'd prodded it any more than they did. Aiko got us all down there a few minutes later and we disarmed it then destroyed it." He shook his head with a scowl. "The damn thing was in a school, of all places. The carnage would have been unbelievable." Nabiki felt sick.

"A school?" she whispered. Her sister nodded looking grim.

"As far as we could make out the timer was set to go off sometime in the next couple of weeks during the middle of the day. They're a bit imprecise, possibly deliberately to add a random factor.” She turned to her husband. "To be honest I'm quite glad you killed the bastard. If you hadn't, something like this would make me want to." He nodded soberly, reaching out and taking her hand.

"So that's one down, five to go." Nabiki sipped her coffee while staring out the window, thinking. "What do you think are the odds that any more of them are in Japan?" Ranma shrugged.
"I suspect not high. We're pretty sure there are none in Tokyo now, we've scanned as much of it as we could with no hits at all. I have a feeling that the mage wouldn't have left them all here, he'd want to spread them around. To be honest I'm kind of surprised that any were in Japan at all. We got lucky, or he got sloppy. Same thing I guess."

"So five left, with fifteen cities around the world we know he visited. Assuming he didn't give them to someone else to plant in which case they could be almost anywhere." Ranma nodded at her summation.

"I really hope he did it himself, that narrows it down a lot, but even so we're going to have to get very lucky to find them all before they go off. I have a horrible feeling that at least one of them is going to be after the fact."

"Damn. I wish I could help somehow." The middle Tendo looked at her sister and brother-in-law. Kasumi smiled at her.

"You help just by being here to talk to, sister." Grinning, Nabiki lifted her cup in salute.

"Even so." After a moment, Ranma looked up from where he'd been studying the table, deep in thought.

"How's Akane doing? We've been kind of busy for the last week or so and haven't had time to drop by." The brunette woman looked pleased.

"Remarkably well, actually. It's not quite a miraculous cure, but it's the next best thing. The first couple of days after you cured the infection she was tired and a bit depressed, but since then she's cheered up more than I've seen her for years. Her temper is still on a hair trigger but the random mood swings seem to be dying down steadily. Her doctor is astounded. She tried explaining what you did but I'm not sure the doctor believed her. Especially as even if she had the equipment to check for that sort of problem the evidence is gone now." Ranma looked amused, while Kasumi giggled.

"It probably doesn't matter if she believes Akane or not, as long as she keeps treating her." Nabiki nodded.

"True. Anyway, so far it seems to be having a very noticeable effect. Hopefully in the longer term her treatment will begin to work the way it should, although whether she'll ever get over all her problems I have no idea." She snickered. "If nothing else, having the number of times she needs to be darted brought down would please everyone." Ranma and Kasumi exchanged glances then fell about laughing.

"I still have trouble believing that was the only thing they could think of," the martial artist said, chuckling. His sister-in-law shrugged.

"So do I, but whatever else you say about it, it works. Bit brutal though." Kasumi was still giggling, but finally composed herself.

"We were thinking that we'd pop by on Thursday, if that's all right," she said. "Around midday." Her sister looked pleased.

"That would be fine. I'll come back from university for the afternoon." She inspected the other two. "It's Christmas in a little over three weeks. Do you have any plans for it?" They exchanged glances.

"Well, usually we stay here, perhaps with a few friends. Aiko and the girls came by last year, and Uthryyl dropped in to say hello. He finds the whole idea a bit strange but is completely fine with
holiday celebrations in general. He likes a good party.” Nabiki stared at her brother-in-law for a moment, then shook her head.

"Um, OK. So you celebrated Christmas with some magical girls and a demon..." Kasumi and Ranma both nodded, grinning. "You two are very strange."

"So you keep saying." Ranma looked amused, stretching and becoming female at the same time. "I heard that Akane went and apologised yesterday to everyone affected by her little self-control problem," she said, looking pleased. "I'm genuinely impressed. It made people feel much better about things." The red-head leaned against her wife, looking comfortable. Nabiki watched with a grin. Kasumi smiled at the smaller woman, putting her arm around her.

"How cute," the middle sister said with a certain amount of sarcasm. Ranma winked at her, closing her eyes and relaxing.

"It was a big lunch and I want a nap." Both Tendo sisters chuckled as she pretended to snore.

"Twit." Nabiki got up and took the various depleted cups into the kitchen, putting them in the sink, before returning to the living room. She stood looking at the two on the sofa for a while with a small smile, before walking over to the window and looking out. "It's snowing again," she observed, peering up and down the street. "Must be about two centimetres by now." She turned back to the others. Kasumi watched her with affection.

"Would you like to come here for Christmas, or at least some of it?" the elder woman asked. Nabiki laughed.

"Funny, I was going to ask the same thing. Coming to the Dojo, I mean."

"As Maiko and Rika, or Yori and Chou?" Ranma asked, her eyes still closed but a smile on her face. Nabiki shrugged a little.

"Ah. That's the problem, you're both too many people." The red-head snickered. Opening her eyes she grinned at Nabiki.

"You could visit as Ms Aoyama. Your first alternate persona! She's a very good one as well." Moving back to the sofa the middle sister burst out laughing.

"Poor Akane would crap herself. I'm afraid I really scared her. Every time she mentions Ms Aoyama she actually shivers. God knows what Ryoga feels about her, I was genuinely trying to terrify him. Not with Akane and Shampoo though, I thought I'd dialled it down enough to just worry them a little." Ranma chuckled again.

"You needed to see it from outside. I don't think you realise just how frightening you can be when you try, especially when you look like that." She glanced up at her wife who nodded agreement.

"Sister, you can be very impressive if you try. Ryoga was absolutely horrified by you, we could both feel it. He believed it utterly, especially when you threatened to toss him through a portal. I doubt he'll ever come anywhere near Tokyo again if he can possibly help it."

"Shampoo mentioned once that the thing that scared her the most is that Ms Aoyama had a ki signature that was clearly not human. What did she mean by that?" Nabiki asked curiously. Ranma smiled a little.

"We're good at energy control as you know. Even without the invisibility cloak both of us can mask our ki and magic emanations pretty much completely, it would take a real master to notice
anything at all when we really try. Happosai could, Cologne might, a few others probably could with effort. But even they couldn't read the real results, only that what they saw wasn't quite right. We can also mask other people as well, or alter their signatures. It's part of the illusion spell in fact. So, when we set up Reiko Aoyama, we gave her a... very strange... ki signature. Fairly powerful but definitely not human. It helps that your own ki levels are considerably higher than average." Nabiki stared at her, then at Kasumi, who nodded.

"All of our family have higher than normal ki outputs, Nabiki. It's in our blood, so to speak. That's one reason I found learning the art relatively easy. Ranma told you some time ago that you would probably be good at it as well, she wasn't trying to flatter you. We can both see it. It's a bit sad that out of all of us Akane is the lowest skill and power level, even after all these years. She could improve considerably, with a lot of work, but will never reach what I can do, or what you would be capable of." The middle sister looked somewhat shocked.

"But... when she was fighting Ryoga, she was absolutely blazing with energy! Even I could feel it and you could certainly see it." Ranma sat up and nodded at her statement.

"Very true. But the thing you don't realise was that was about the maximum output she could possibly produce. It's one of the reasons I shut her down like that, she was in danger of permanently harming herself with so much ki being thrown about. Another few minutes and she would have burned through all her reserves and possibly died." Nabiki thought about this for a while.

"You told me some time ago that ki use was like exercising a muscle, in that the more you used it the more you could use it. And also that you hadn't yet found an upper limit to how much you could produce, either of you." The red-head nodded again.

"Correct. But to use the same analogy, if you push yourself too hard when exercising a muscle you could tear it, or break a tendon or even a bone. That could cause permanent damage which would affect it for life, possibly even cripple you." It was Nabiki's turn to nod thoughtfully. "Ki is a bit like that. It's not a perfect analogy but you don't have the background to quite understand it if I gave you a more accurate description. What it all adds up to is that some people have lower limits than others. Akane is vastly more powerful in ki output than probably ninety-five percent of martial artists could ever be, but she's completely untrained and worse, undisciplined in it. That limits her severely. She just doesn't have the mindset for it, in essence. Even so with proper training she could do some pretty impressive things." Kasumi took up the explanation at this point, Nabiki switching her attention to her sister.

"Almost all the martial artists back in Nerima were far more able to use what ki they had available because they do have the right mindset. Shampoo, for example, probably doesn't have quite the same power available that Akane does, yet, but she is much more dangerous because she knows how to use it. She could progress to a very high level with practice, I think. Ryoga has much, much more ki than Akane, and also knows how to use it very effectively, but because of his own issues Akane has badly beaten him twice. If he'd tried as hard as he did against Ranma he could have defeated her easily either time. Mousse, again, has much more ki than you would expect, nearly as much as Ryoga, but he uses it differently."

"Pop and your father are also quite powerful when they need to be, although neither one of them is trained in the use of raw ki. Several of Pop's special techniques use it in interesting ways." Ranma grinned. "I don't think he knows that, though. He doesn't have the right mindset either. I'm not sure if he could learn to use even a simple ki blast, personally I doubt it. Your father might."

"What about Happosai? Or Cologne?"
"Happosai is a master, as you would expect. Simply being as old as he is would push his power level extremely high, but he knows an enormous amount about how to use it as well. Cologne, oddly, isn't anywhere near as powerful in ki terms as you might think, although she's certainly nothing to sneeze at, I'd put it at about Ryoga's level. Her knowledge of it, though, rivals Happosai, so she's extremely dangerous. She can use what she has very efficiently. She also knows quite a bit about magic, and can combine them effectively." Nabiki considered this for a minute or two, then asked the obvious question.

"And the magical girls?" Ranma snickered.

"Now there, it gets interesting. Almost none of them have much ki power at all, not much more than a normal untrained person. I was really surprised about that at first. The bulk of them use magic exclusively, which allows some admittedly extremely impressive results, but it's not quite the same, nothing like as flexible for instance. There are some exceptions of course, but that's broadly true. Aiko and the others are one of those exceptions, which is our fault. We've been training them for years in the art, they're coming along well. I started it when I first met them, but since we've been here we both took it up again. None of them are anywhere near our level yet, they probably never will be to be honest, but they're becoming very dangerous even without the magic. Again, probably in the top half a percent or so of martial artists, like all the people in Nerima were. There are a few others we've trained to some degree, but most of them simply don't have what's necessary to be really good at it." She sighed a little. "It's a pity, really, some of them desperately need to learn some proper fighting skills. Luck and overwhelming power will only take you so far if you don't know how to apply it right."

Kasumi smiled at her husband, who turned male again and kissed her before getting up and heading for the bathroom. "He's worried about all of them. Even the ones we don't get along with he feels responsible for in some ways," she confided to her sister once the dark-haired young man had left. "I keep telling him that a lot of them have been doing this since long before we came on the scene, but he still worries. He's a good person and doesn't want to see anyone hurt if he can somehow prevent it. You also have to bear in mind that his idea of 'really good' is so far past what anyone else would even consider possible that he tends to underestimate how effective his training is."

She smiled a little. "Everyone either one of us has trained at all has improved enormously but he has extremely high standards. Aiko and the others are certainly the best, they'd be able to give anyone in Nerima a very hard fight indeed even without using their magic. He won't be satisfied until they've all reached whatever limits they have though." She stopped talking as Ranma returned and sat beside her again. Nabiki considered her sister's words. She could certainly believe that Ranma felt a degree of responsibility to the others who occupied the same basic role, that of protecting the public, which would also explain why he seemed to take their excesses so personally. It amused her, the fact that deep down he clearly identified strongly with the magical girl lifestyle even if on the surface he disliked being described as such.

He noticed her looking at him with a slight grin, retuning the look with a puzzled one. "What?" he asked curiously. She shook her head a little, the grin widening.

"Oh, just thinking. Don't worry about it." Ranma laughed.

"That look always makes me worry, coming from you." Both sisters giggled, exchanging amused glances. "So, ready to learn the art yet?" Nabiki shook her head.

"Not yet. Like I said the last time you asked, there are things that get in the way." He shrugged.

"OK. But I'm going to keep asking." Grinning, she nodded, then changed the subject. The trio
talked for a couple of hours, before Nabiki looked at her watch.

"Well, it looks like I have to go. I've got one lecture at about four I need to go to, then a lot of studying for a test tomorrow. Thanks for lunch, it's been nice seeing you two again." Kasumi hugged her sister, smiling.

"It's been wonderful seeing you as well, sister. I'll call you a taxi." She went off to the house phone, as Ranma also gave his sister-in-law a quick hug.

"We'll see you in three days, assuming nothing insane happens between now and then." She chuckled.

"Knowing your life, that's no guarantee!" Laughing, he walked her to the elevator, where they waited for Kasumi.

"Very true. But we can hope." By the time the three of them exited the elevator on the ground floor three women were in it. The taxi arrived a few minutes later, 'Maiko' and 'Rika' waving to Nabiki as she dashed through the snow which was now coming down quite heavily to dive into the door the driver opened for her. She waved back as they pulled away, brushing snow from her coat. The driver glanced at her, he was the older man she'd met when she'd gone out with Kasumi and Ranma months ago. Since then she'd ridden with him several times, enough that he knew her name.

"Have you had a nice time, Miss Tendo?" he asked politely. She nodded.

"Yes, as always, Mr Tanaka. I like this area, it's very interesting. Although I could do without the weather." She looked at the snow she'd brushed onto his seat. "Sorry about that." Laughing, he waved it off.

"Don't worry, it'll dry." They chatted until they reached the train station, where she paid him then jumped out. "See you next time, Miss Tendo. Bye." he called as he pulled the door shut. She watched him drive off before heading inside, smiling to herself.

Sergeant Harada watched the young brunette woman head for the north-bound platform, thinking hard. 'Tendo. That name rings a bell. I wonder why...' He mused on the subject as he left the station, pulling his coat collar up against the snow drifting out of a leaden sky. 'I've seen her around here a few times, near the university, but she doesn't live here. Must be visiting friends.' Shaking his head he dropped the thought, pulling out his notebook to check on his next task. 'Oh, right, check on how things are going over by the school after that magical girl fight last week. Or whatever it was, people seemed a bit confused. Good thing Yori and Chou shut it down before anything worse happened. Aiko and her girls were there as well, that lot seems to be around here quite a bit recently.' He laughed slightly to himself. 'I guess Yori is training them again. They're probably wishing they had some nice easy demons to deal with in that case.'

Half an hour later he looked at the reconstruction work across the street, which was ongoing despite the heavy snow. Turning to the mid-fifties man standing next to him he grinned. "Yori seems to have found some pretty dedicated contractors, to be working in this weather." The man laughed.

"Or she's paying them pretty damn well. Sorry, I mean, the magical girl reimbursement trust is paying them well." He looked amused. "Although we all know who is behind that. And we're very pleased about it."

"Remarkable young woman, isn't she, Hikaru?" Harada said as they retreated to the warmth of the
coffee-shop the man ran. He went behind the counter, pouring them both a mug of fresh coffee, then pushing one across the counter to the sergeant. Hikaru nodded.

"Oh, yes. Very much so, even taking the magical girl part into account. Her and Chou both."

Trying his coffee, he made a face and stirred in some more sugar. "Those two are very popular, more so than I think they realise. If either one of them was to run for Mayor they'd get an awful lot of votes." Harada started laughing, completely surprised by the comment. Hikaru shrugged, looking amused. "It's true. I'd vote for them."

"Somehow I doubt either one is interested in politics. Neither is really the type from my experience. Although, that said, you're right. I'd vote for them as well." Harada grinned, drinking some more coffee. "The current guy is fine, though. He stays out of the magical girl thing completely, which is probably a good idea. I can't see a minor politician getting any mileage out of interfering at all, except to alienate the public. Especially around here." The coffee-shop owner nodded with a smile, turning to serve a customer. When he came back he picked up his mug and held it, looking out at the street.

"You remember what it was like before they came? Half the buildings in this street were damaged. Most of them because of the magical girls, not the demons." The sergeant nodded, thinking back a few years.

"It was pretty bad for a while. I remember those colour-coded girls kept popping up and breaking things, it was getting really annoying. I know Yori seems to find them particularly irritating. Understandable, the way they spend half the fight posing and shouting silly slogans and the other half using ridiculously overpowered attacks with stupid names is practically designed to piss her off." Both men laughed.

"Pretty girls, though. But their uniforms aren't exactly right for this weather," Hikaru said, grinning.

"True. I'll bet they spend a lot of time shivering unless they have some sort of heating magic." Harada snickered. "You know Aiko and the other girls with her? Yori's friends?" Hikaru nodded. "They must be having a hell of a time with this snow. Their costumes are even less practical." They looked at each other and chuckled, turning to watch the construction across the street again. "What exactly happened last week, anyway?" the policeman asked curiously. "No one seems to have a sensible answer. It's down as a magical girl fight, but something doesn't quite fit."

The store owner looked thoughtful. "Well, there was certainly a magical girl, or a girl, at any rate. She was a bit taller then Yori and seemed in a very bad mood. I mean, an insanely bad mood. She was glowing bright red and absolutely frothing at the mouth, screaming insults at this dark-haired young man. Um, Hibiki something I think she called him, or something Hibiki. It was hard to tell, by that point most people were running in the other direction." He sipped his coffee while Harada waited. "I didn't see the beginning of the fight, but apparently she jumped him out of the blue, that's when the building up the other end of the street got wrecked. She threw Yoshi's van at him. Yoshi isn't very happy about that, he'd only just got it. Anyway, the girl chucked it at this kid, smashed him right into the wall which then collapsed. She dug him out then smacked him all the way down the street, which made several craters. He's a tough young man whoever he is, a normal human would have been killed just by the van never mind everything else."

"Some sort of martial artist, I'd guess," Harada commented. The other man nodded thoughtfully.

"Probably. Anyway, by the time I got outside she was throwing motorcycles at him. He managed to get off some sort of energy attack, which missed and destroyed Mrs Watanabe's shoe shop. Then another girl, with really long sort of lilac hair, tried to knock the first one out with some clubs she got from somewhere. That didn't work out very well, the first girl knocked the second one out with
one punch and threw her all the way across the street. The boy managed to punch her into the shoe shop, but she came out and threw a desk at him. By the end of it he had a broken leg from what I could see, his knee looked dreadful, but she was pretty smashed up as well. Then Yori and Chou turned up and shut it down in seconds." Putting his empty mug in the sink he looked enquiringly at the sergeant while holding up the coffee pot. Harada shook his head and he put the pot down again.

"Aiko and her team arrived at about the same time, I don't know if they were together or if it was just a coincidence. They took both girls and the man who was completely out of it by then and the whole bunch teleported away. Yori came over and told me just before to let everyone know that she'd be back to arrange the repairs later. She came back first thing in the morning and did exactly that. Very reliable girl." He accepted Harada's empty mug and quickly washed and dried both of them, putting them back on the rack.

"I wonder what that was all about?" Sergeant Harada mused, thinking about the story. Hikaru shrugged.

"No idea, Yori didn't say. The girl, the first one, obviously had some real problem with the young man. I've never seen anyone that angry before. Poor kid didn't seem to know what to do, he just looked confused and scared. Lucky for him Yori turned up when she did, the girl looked intent on killing him." He served another customer. "Not many people around this afternoon because of the weather, I might shut early," he commented on his return. After a moment's thought, he added, "The funny thing is that the girl came back yesterday." The sergeant looked sharply at him, raising his eyebrows. "To apologise, apparently. She tracked down everyone who'd had some problems because of the fight and apologised to them, from what I was told sincerely and looking very embarrassed. She didn't go into any details though, just apologised, promised it would never happen again, and left."

"How odd," Harada said slowly. Hikaru nodded.

"It's a bit weird. She didn't seem to be a magical girl, someone told me she said she was a martial artist from Nerima." Laughing, he didn't notice the way the sergeant's attention level jumped. "You know the stories about that place. They make Minato look sane. Anyway, she said she was really sorry that all the damage had been caused because of her issues with this Hibiki guy. Everyone felt she really meant it too."

"What was her name, do you know?" Harada asked after a few seconds. Hikaru looked at him with interest.

"Going to talk to her?" he asked. The policeman shook his head.

"I don't think I have to, if Yori's been involved. I'm just curious." His friend nodded understandably.

"Um, Tendo, I think. Yes, that's right. Akane Tendo. Mrs Watanabe said she obviously had some sort of martial arts training, just looking at the way she moved, but nowhere even close to our girls. Better than average except for the temper, probably, anywhere but here or Nerima." Harada absently thanked his friend, then left the coffee shop, heading back to the station.

'Tendo. There's that name again. I'm sure I've heard it somewhere before, years ago, and now twice inside an hour...' Shaking his head, puzzled, he decided to do a little research when he had a free moment.
Chapter 29

Nodoka looked up at the knock on the door. "Ah, that must be them. Would you get the door, please, Akane?" The blue-haired young woman put the dish she'd just dried on the table and headed for the door, smiling. Nabiki watched her go, then turned to the older woman.

"She's in a good mood at the moment." Since she'd arrived half an hour ago Akane had been smiling most of the time. Nodoka nodded, opening the oven and checking the progress of the cake she was baking.

"Her treatment is certainly working much better the last week or so. Those two girls worked the nearest thing to a miracle I've ever seen." She carefully closed the over door again, then stirred the rice on the stove. "Your sister still has a quick temper, but it's not such a nasty one now. She doesn't seem to be as vindictive when she's angry as she was even two weeks ago. Plus the sudden mood swings have evened out to a remarkable level. She's basically quite happy most of the time. She knows it herself, which I think helps a lot as well." Both women turned as Akane returned, followed by 'Yori' and 'Chou', talking quietly to them. "Ah, hello, you two. I'm glad you could come. Lunch will be in about twenty minutes, is that all right?" 'Chou' nodded with a gentle smile on her lips.

"That would be wonderful, Mrs Saotome." The auburn-haired woman smiled back at her in a similar manner.

"Please call me Nodoka."

"Of course. Akane, if you'd like, we can check you now, or wait until after lunch." The blonde looked at the youngest Tendo, who shrugged.

"It doesn't matter to me. Now is as good a time as any, I suppose."

"Very well. Shall we go and sit in your living room, then?" Both Tendo sisters led the way, the two magical girls following. Nodoka put a kettle on and set a tray of tea things ready. When she came into the living room a few minutes later with the prepared tea Akane was sitting on the sofa with 'Yori' sitting next to her, her hands on the other woman's head. Nodoka's eyes widened a little when she saw that the black-haired girl's hands were actually glowing visibly, in a rather pretty purple colour. Putting the tray quietly on the table she sat down next to Soun who was watching with interest and awe. Nabiki was talking to 'Chou' in the corner of the room, both of them watching the process intently.

A couple more minutes passed before 'Yori' lowered her hands and opened her eyes, smiling at Akane, who looked slightly worried. "It's fine. There's no sign of the parasite any more, your brain chemistry is almost back to normal, all I had to do was slightly adjust the serotonin levels which must have been influenced by the dopamine imbalance. Nothing to worry about although you may feel a bit tired for a few hours. I'd suggest going to bed early tonight to let everything settle down." Akane nodded.

"Thank you," she replied, looking grateful. 'Yori' grinned.

"No problem." 'Chou' came over, kneeling next to the youngest Tendo.

"Do you mind if I have a look?" Her friend glanced at her with a raised eyebrow, making her giggle. "I'm not suggesting you've missed anything, I'm just curious. This is an unusual case, I'm
"Go ahead. I can't feel anything other than a faint tickle anyway." 'Chou' placed her hands on the young woman's head in the same way 'Yori' had done earlier, except the glow this time was a beautiful golden-white colour. Soun made a slight noise causing Nodoka to look at him, seeing he was watching with respectful awe. After a minute or two 'Chou' sat back on her heels, nodding.

"Yes, everything looks pretty much correct. We'll have to check at least once more, but I'm fairly sure there won't be any adverse effects from the infection." Standing, she looked down at the woman who didn't realise she was her sister. "How do you feel?" Akane grinned happily.

"Good. Better than I have done for years. Oh, I know I still lose my temper too easily but the doctor thinks she'll be able to help me with that now. I don't get the red mist any more though, or the up and down emotions. I can't thank you two enough." 'Yori' looked gratified, as did her blonde partner.

'I heard that you went back to apologise to everyone affected by your, um, incident, a few days ago," the smaller visitor said, looking approving. "Thank you for doing that. It impressed everyone with how you accepted the responsibility for the damage. It was an honourable action." Akane appeared very pleased by the compliment but also slightly sad.

"I just wish it hadn't happened." She paused, then added, "But it if hadn't, I wouldn't have met you and been cured of those horrible little parasites. God knows what might have eventually happened then." 'Yori' and 'Chou' exchanged glances, then the blonde put her hand on Akane's shoulder.

"I'm glad we were able to help. Don't worry about things that didn't happen." Moving over to the other end of the sofa she sat next to 'Yori'. Nabiki sat next to her father, who smiled at her, then went back to studying the two magical girls. Pouring the tea Nodoka handed everyone a cup then took her own.

'Yori' sipped hers, then looked at the older woman. "Thank you, Nodoka, this is nice." The Saotome elder smiled.

"You're welcome. So, tell me, what do you and Chou do when you're not saving Akane from herself?" She laughed a little. "Or terrifying other magical girls. I've seen some of the news reports from Minato, you seem to have a penchant for dressing them down." 'Yori' snickered, amused, while 'Chou' grinned.

"It's a hobby." Nodoka snorted with laughter. "To be honest I don't truly enjoy shouting at the other girls but some of them are very irresponsible. They seem to think it's OK to wipe out anything they consider 'demonic' without any thought of the consequences, which reflects badly on the rest of us. Neither of us like that, it's disrespectful of the people whose livelihoods they upset, and also rather dishonourable to just distance yourself from the consequences of your actions in that way." Everyone could clearly see that she meant every word. Soun was nodding approvingly, Nodoka noticed. "Not to mention that a lot of the visitors they go after are harmless in any case." This surprised the older woman.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked curiously. 'Yori' looked annoyed.

"Exactly what I said. There are a surprisingly large number of extremely out of town visitors to Minato for some reason and only a small proportion of them mean any harm. Most of the so-called protectors of the community don't take the time to check this, though, they just immediately go after anyone from another world with lethal force." She shook her head in disgust. "That's not the way to make friends. I know a lot of so-called 'demons', most of whom are decent people just
visiting for one reason or another, often trade or tourism. It gets very irritating having to apologise to them after stopping some magical girl team from killing them in cold blood. That doesn't give a good impression. So I tend to be kind of hard on the ones who try that. They're mostly beginning to learn although it's an annoyingly slow process."

A beeping from the kitchen indicated a timer had finished it's job, prompting Nodoka to jump to her feet and rush to rescue her cake. A moment later she stuck her head into the living room. "Lunch will be ready in five minutes, could you go and get Genma, please, Akane? Nabiki, can you lay the table?" Both young women nodded and proceeded to perform their requested tasks. 'Yori' helped Nabiki set the table, while 'Chou' went into the kitchen.

"Would you like some help, Nodoka?" she asked politely. The older woman looked at her, somewhat surprised.

"Ah, yes, thank you very much. Could you get some plates out of that cupboard over there?" 'Chou' did as requested, privately amused at the way she was yet again being shown where things were in her own kitchen. Smiling gently she put the plates on the kitchen table. The elder Saotome woman investigated the meat simmering on the stove, finding it was just about right, then brought it to the table as well, transferring it into a large bowl. 'Chou' took it into the living room along with the plates while Nodoka brought the rice and vegetables. Once everything was arranged correctly, everyone sat, Genma and Akane coming in seconds later. Genma was currently a damp panda, making Nodoka sigh. "What happened this time?" she asked dryly. Genma held up a sign.

#Mariko happened. She's getting faster#

Rolling her eyes Nodoka glanced at Nabiki. "Can you get some hot water, Nabiki? I'm not having wildlife at the table with guests." Grinning, the middle sister disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a glass of hot water which with considerable glee she threw accurately into the face of the pandafied Genma, who quickly resumed human form. Akane looked at the two guests to explain the odd situation, but found them remarkably unsurprised. 'Yori' was looking intently at the martial artist.

"Ah. A Jusenkyo curse. Interesting," she said. 'Chou' nodded.

"Indeed. I haven't seen one for a while." Everyone stared at them, Genma most of all.

"You know about Jusenkyo curses?" he asked slowly. 'Chou' nodded again.

"We're familiar with them. Somewhat unusual, most people aren't silly enough to go anywhere near Jusenkyo, but there are a few around. It's extremely old and complex magic." The martial artist looked hopefully at her.

"Do you know about any cure for it?" he asked. Both magical girls exchanged glances, before 'Yori' replied, apparently regretful.

"There isn't one, I'm afraid. The magic is amazingly complicated, with dozens of traps in it, it was clearly designed a very long time ago to be as unremoveable as possible. No one knows who did it or how long ago, or for that matter why. Once you have it, you're stuck with it." She paused, watching as his face fell, internally somewhat satisfied. "Oh, and the effects of the springs mix, by the way. So if you happened to come into contact with another one you would end up with a cursed form that was a hybrid of your current one and whatever the new one was. At best. The magic is odd about exactly what happens, but I doubt you'd like it." Genma's face fell further, while Akane and Soun looked at each other, thinking back to earlier days and various attempts to track down the spring of drowned man water. Akane shuddered.
"Are you sure?" she asked faintly. 'Chou' looked at her sorrowfully.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Most magic workers have heard of the cursed springs and want nothing to do with them, the magic is far too powerful. The one thing everyone is completely certain about is that there is no way to remove it." Sighing, Akane reached for a plate.

"So, he was right," she mumbled under her breath. 'Yori' and 'Chou' both heard her, although no one else could make out what she'd said.

"Mariko is one of your students?" 'Yori' asked, taking the plate of rice and meat that Nabiki handed her. Genma nodded with an almost proud look.

"Yes. She's one of our first students, in fact, and probably the best. She's definitely got a gift for the art. Give her five or six years and she'll be very good. Even now she's better than any of the others." He laughed. "I made the mistake of forgetting just how fast she was and left an opening. She found it." Looking at Nodoka he seemed amused. "Again, right into the pond. I swear that thing attracts people to it." She looked amused, handing him a plate of food.

"It certainly seems so. I have no idea otherwise why every fight around here inevitably ends up in it. Perhaps it's haunted, or possessed." She laughed, while Genma suddenly looked worried. 'Yori' looked at Nabiki who gave her a private grin.

"I don't think we have a possessed pond, Auntie," the middle sister said, beginning to eat. Nodoka shrugged.

"Perhaps, perhaps not." She was inwardly amused by the looks both of the men exchanged, resolving to mention the idea every now and then. It seemed like it might be a source of amusement with a little work. Nabiki studied her face, getting a good idea of what she was thinking, winking at her when the two men weren't looking. 'Yori' and 'Chou' noticed, as did Akane, and all three women stifled a sudden urge to laugh.

Lunch passed in idle conversation, Nodoka and Akane asking various questions about the magical girl lifestyle and the weirdness of Minato, gasping at various points as the two visitors told various stories about their adventures. Akane had to restrain herself from asking too many questions about their origins, Nabiki occasionally giving her a hard look when she felt the line of questioning was becoming too personal, making her younger sister blush a little and swiftly change the subject. After a while Soun also began asking about their martial arts abilities while Genma listened, although the Saotome man was mainly concentrating on eating.

"A friend of Akane's sent her a DVD of a demonstration you girls performed a couple of months ago. She showed it to us and our students. I have to say, it was the most incredible thing I've ever seen. Purely on the basis of the martial arts alone I'd rank you both as higher in ability than anyone I've even encountered, never mind the magic. If you don't mind my asking, how did you become so good at it? Where did you learn?" 'Yori' and 'Chou' exchanged a glance while Nabiki watched with some worry. They had all known that such a question was inevitable eventually. After a while Soun also began asking about their martial arts abilities while Genma listened, although the Saotome man was mainly concentrating on eating.

"We've both been learning for some considerable time. Yori is better than I am, having travelled extensively to some very unusual places to train. She's taught me a lot. We've also had a considerable amount of training from various people we're not at liberty to talk about as it was under the condition we not discuss it." Soun nodded slowly, having some idea what she was referring to. Unusual but not unprecedented in his experience. "The magic is inherent, in our case, the result of much training and experimentation. We worked out most of it ourselves." Everyone who wasn't aware of this looked at them with impressed interest.
"That's not very common, is it?" Genma asked curiously. 'Yori' shook her head.

"No. In fact most of the other magic workers we know find it all very weird." She laughed. "To the point of refusing to believe it. But it's true. Our magic isn't like anyone else's at all. Which can cause problems, it makes learning other people's spells more difficult in some cases, we have to work out what they do and design our own method of performing the same thing. But at the same time we end up knowing a lot more about how they work. It's surprising how little most magic workers understand of how their own magic functions." Genma nodded thoughtfully.

"I see. Thank you." He smiled a little oddly. "Hopefully you've never encountered our own grand master, he was certainly not much liked by females." 'Yori' shot 'Chou' a look.

"You're both masters of the Anything Goes school, I believe?" the blonde asked. Soun and Genma both nodded. "So it would be Happosai who was your grand master." They looked at her in shock, as did Akane.

"You've heard of him?" Soun asked with a stunned impression. She laughed gently.

"Oh, yes. His reputation is... considerable. I believe he disappeared some years ago, though. No one seems to know where he is now." The two martial artists looked at each other, then Genma sighed.

"There was an incident. My son and Soun's eldest daughter vanished as a result, we've heard nothing about either for years. Master Happosai disappeared shortly after that, no one seems to have heard from him either." With a small smile he added, "To be honest, except for the unpleasant circumstances, people are quite happy about that. He isn't a nice person." 'Chou' regarded him expressionlessly over her tea for a moment then nodded.

"So I understand."

Akane looked at the two magical girls, who seemed slightly annoyed for some reason. Thinking of something she'd been meaning to enquire about, she asked curiously, "How did you do that writing in mid air thing when you were here the first time?" Her disguised sister transferred her attention to her, then smiled.

"It's another trick we worked out some time ago. There doesn't seem to be much real use for it but it's fun." Holding up a hand she made the index fingertip glow gold, causing several pairs of eyes to widen. Quickly writing "Hello, Akane" in mid air she lowered her hand. Akane stared in amazement.

"Oh, wow. That's incredible!" Nodoka, who was sitting beside the blonde, looked at the writing wide-eyed, then slowly raised her hand. At an encouraging nod from the magical girl she tentatively waved her hand through the insubstantial writing, feeling nothing at all, before lowering it again.


"It's a trivial little thing but a nice demonstration. Yori can do some more extensive manipulations of this sort of effect, we're still experimenting and she's better at it than I am right now." The black-haired girl grinned.

"I still can't figure out a use for it other than party tricks but it's good practice in power manipulation." She wrote "Yori" in mid air in a glowing purple script, then gave the writing a flick with her finger, causing it to begin rotating. Once more everyone stared, even Nabiki this time.
This was a trick she hadn't seen before. 'Yori' caught her glance and winked. "I only worked this one out a few days ago." Reaching out her hand again she stopped the rotation, then flipped the writing again, making it rotate horizontally this time. Standing, Nabiki waved her hand through the symbols, finding as usual that she felt nothing. Impressed she sat down again.

"It may not have a practical use but it's impressive even so," she commented.

Both magical girls made their projected writing vanish, resuming the meal. Nodoka stared at them for a moment, the way they did the impossible with such a matter-of-fact attitude was one of the weirdest things about them. Eventually she started eating as well. When the meal was finished she disappeared into the kitchen for a little while, returning with her cake and some plates. "I hope you like lemon cake and ice cream," she said. 'Chou' smiled, while 'Yori' looked pleased.

"Certainly we do," the blonde replied. Glancing at her partner, she laughed slightly. "Yori is practically powered by ice cream. And coffee." The other woman raised an eyebrow at her partner but snickered.

"I'd be offended if it wasn't true." Turning to the older woman who was cutting the cake with a smile at the banter she said, "Thank you, Nodoka. That looks very nice. The meal was excellent as well." Pleased at the compliment, Nodoka handed her a plate with a slice of cake and a scoop of ice cream on it, then served everyone else. Half-way through eating it the black-haired girl looked up sharply then glanced at her blonde friend who nodded, also apparently sensing something. "There's someone quite powerful coming this way. Are you expecting anyone?" 'Yori' asked, feeling Cologne a few hundred metres away heading in their direction. Soun and the others exchanged glances.

While no one was looking at them Nabiki glanced at her friends, mouthing 'Cologne?'. 'Chou' nodded fractionally, then quickly smiled as Soun looked back to her.

"No, we're not. Is it anything to worry about?" 'Yori' shrugged.

"I doubt it, but I don't know. It feels like someone quite old, female, fairly powerful." Nodoka looked impressed.

"Ah, that's probably Elder Cologne. I haven't seen her for some time. I wonder why she's here?" A moment later there was a knock on the door. "Akane, would you let her in, please?" The blue-haired young woman put her fork down with some reluctance, she was enjoying the cake, then got up. A few moments later she returned with the Amazon Elder behind her. The old woman balanced on her staff in the doorway, looking around with interest, while Akane quickly resumed her seat and dove back into the cake. "Elder. How nice to see you. Would you like some lemon cake?" Nodoka asked. Cologne smiled.

"Yes, thank you, Nodoka. That would be very nice." Dropping lightly from her staff she accepted the plate the auburn-haired woman handed her, glancing curiously at the two women she recognised from the DVD her great-granddaughter and Akane had shown her. "I was in the area and I felt some rather high-powered magic users I didn't recognise. It seemed quite likely that it was Yori and Chou, I decided to drop by and thank them for helping Shampoo." She didn't mention that she was desperately curious about both the magical girls. The power signatures she'd detected were extremely strange, unlike anything she'd ever encountered before, and as her granddaughter had said, monstrously powerful. In fact she was having severe difficulty despite her centuries of experience from showing her shock. Never in her life had she come across anything like the two women sitting less than two metres away from her, which worried her a lot. The fact they both looked so normal was also somewhat strange.
They were both clearly ki masters of a level she found hard to believe, although the ki signature was very weird. The magical power reading was even weirder, it almost didn't register as magic at all. If it wasn't for the fact that it obviously wasn't ki, which meant it basically had to be magic, she wouldn't even have known what to call it. Without even taking the known martial arts prowess of the two into consideration, she decided that based on the power emanations alone she very much did not ever want either of the two to become annoyed with her. She was certain that even with her experience and deviousness she wouldn't last long. None of this showed on her face as she appreciatively tasted the cake, although she was fairly sure that they both had a pretty good idea of what she was thinking from the weird little smirks that flashed across their expressions and vanished as soon as she'd noticed them.

"This is very good, Nodoka, thank you." The Saotome woman dipped her head in acknowledgement of the praise, appearing pleased, as the Amazon elder glanced at the two magical girls who returned her gaze with almost identical calm expressions. "Thank you for healing my great granddaughter, both of you. She's the only living relative I have and I value her highly." They smiled.

"You're welcome, Elder," the black-haired one said politely. "We enjoy helping people, especially when it involves healing rather than fighting. Although we do like a good fight." Her grin was momentarily the most feral and dangerous thing Cologne had ever come across. She shivered internally, masking her feelings with another fork-full of cake. "How is Shampoo?" Once more the expression was of polite interest.

"Oh, she's fine, thank you. If she knew you were here she'd probably want to thank you herself but she's working at the moment." The taller blonde woman smiled.

"Please pass on our best wishes to her, Elder," she said. Cologne nodded.

"I will do." Pausing for a few seconds she studied them with interest. "Are you here for long?" she asked curious. 'Chou' shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. We have quite a few things on at the moment. This was a visit to check on Akane's progress and for lunch, but we will have to leave soon. I expect we'll be back in one to two weeks for a final check-up. After that Akane should be fine, there doesn't seem to be anything amiss so far. I'm very pleased with the results of the healing. It was a strange case."

"Shampoo told me about what you found and how you dealt with it. I'm very impressed, that level of healing ability is extremely unusual, especially in ones so young. May I ask, how did you learn to heal like that?" Cologne inspected them both as they exchanged a glance. 'Yori' nodded to 'Chou', who turned back to the elder.

"We're self-taught." Cologne's eyes widened. "Our magic is somewhat different from that of most practitioners, which causes some minor difficulties at times, but also allows us to do a number of things much more efficiently than most people can manage. We happen to be very good at healing." The Amazon was listening with shocked respect. Even Nodoka could see she was surprised.

"You appear somewhat taken aback, Elder," she mentioned curiously. Cologne looked at her, then back at the magical girls, who seemed quite amused by the look on her face.

"I am. I've been learning magic and ki use for over two hundred years yet I would have had extreme difficulty duplicating what these two girls seem to have done with ease. And that's assuming that I could have even diagnosed the problem in the first place. The Amazon magical knowledge is the result of three thousand or more years of learning, but we have very few healers
capable of such things at all." Shaking her head in respect, she added, "Self-taught mages are almost unheard of. Someone, I suppose, must have worked out the principles to start with but for a very long time magic has been taught based on established practice. The methods vary but the basic principles are the same. From what I can sense, though, these two young ladies don't use many if any of those techniques, which means they have something new." 'Yori' grinned.

"You're taking it a lot better than most magic workers do. I've had some very nasty arguments with mages who insist that there is only one way to do magic, the right way, and therefore whatever we're doing isn't magic at all." She shrugged. "I don't know what else you'd call it though. And, of course, it works."

"Indeed. That would seem to be an excellent argument," Cologne said with a grin. Despite her shock she found these two rather likeable. They didn't seem to be full of themselves to the level she would have expected from her experience of extremely powerful people in the past. It was a refreshing change.

A faint buzz made everyone look at 'Chou' who produced a cell-phone from nowhere and answered it. Cologne watched this with interest, it was obviously a variant on hidden weapons techniques. The blonde talked for a moment in a language that none of the people present had encountered before, then sighed. Saying a few more words she hung up.

"What's the problem?" 'Yori' asked, having listened to one side of the conversation with concern.

"Uthryyl has found something we need to have a look at, immediately. He seems quite upset." Nodding, the other woman pulled out a phone.

"I'll call Aiko and see if we can get a lift." As she dialled, 'Chou' turned to the others.

"I'm very sorry about this but it looks like we will have to cut our visit short. A friend of ours has made an unpleasant discovery which we need to deal with. Thank you for lunch, Nodoka, it was lovely. Akane, we'll come back in one to two weeks, certainly before Christmas, to check out your progress, but I don't expect there will be any problems. Nice to meet you, Elder." She jumped to her feet as her partner put her phone away, also standing.

"She'll be in the yard in thirty seconds or so," 'Yori' said. The black-haired girl looked around the room. "Sorry about this. Duty calls, I'm afraid." Nabiki stood and waved to the door.

"I'll show you out." Both magical girls went with her. Cologne watched, then followed, trailed by the rest. They watched as 'Yori' shook Nabiki's hand and said something to her, then jumped as the under-dressed girl they'd met when Akane and Shampoo had been brought home suddenly appeared in the middle of the yard. Cologne stared, teleportation was a difficult spell but this girl seemed to do it easily, she didn't look tired at all. Glancing around the brunette spotted 'Yori' and 'Chou', walking over to them. Greeting Nabiki she waved to the others, then all three of them vanished in a brilliant flash of light. Cologne swore and rubbed her eyes.

"My apologies, Elder, I didn't think," Nodoka said, sounding embarrassed. She'd closed her eyes just in time having remembered the previous occasion she'd encountered the teleporting magical girl.

"Don't worry, my dear, it's only a momentary discomfort." Cologne's vision cleared and she looked around the yard, then turned to the auburn-haired Saotome woman. "I wonder what the emergency was? They seem like extremely competent young women. I suspect they can handle it."

"Would you like some tea?" Nodoka asked. Cologne nodded, with a final look around the yard.
"Yes, please." Everyone trooped back inside the house, talking with interest about the magical girls, followed by Nabiki who was hoping that the problem wasn't another portal bomb.

"What do you think, Elder," she asked curiously, wondering if the Amazon had even the faintest idea of who the pair really were. Looking at the expressions that flickered across the face of the old woman she highly doubted it, making her relax slightly. She'd been on edge ever since the old woman had arrived, especially following the questions that her father had asked earlier. Once more her familiarity with Ranma and Kasumi's abilities and disguises had made her underestimate how inhumanly effective they really were to others.

"I think I would be very reluctant to get involved in any altercation with those two," the elder said after some consideration. "I haven't met a real magical girl before, but the power those girls have available is... quite worrying." She glanced at the middle Tendo sister. "It would be very unwise to upset them, I suspect," she said seriously. Nabiki nodded with neutral expression.

"I got that impression myself. I looked into them, they seem to have a reputation of being very dangerous indeed. Although they seem very nice when you meet them in person."

"Something for which we can all be grateful," Cologne muttered, almost to herself. "If that pair decided to be evil, I don't know how you'd stop them." Shivering slightly, she changed the subject.

Sergeant Harada watched Corporal Otani vomit again, wincing. Turning away from his officer he looked at Yori, who was emitting an air of danger he seldom encountered from the normally cheerful girl. He glanced from her to her blonde partner who was looking even more dangerous, then at the third member of their little group, who rather weirdly, given his appearance, was currently the least worrying person present.

The demon Uthryyl looked both upset and annoyed, glancing at the end of the alley with a clear expression of distaste on his inhuman features. "I found the... remains... and that man when I was parking the truck," he said quietly, his tail twitching from side to side uneasily. "We'd only rented the warehouse this morning, the others were inside setting up some temporary beds while I got the vehicle. It doesn't look like anyone has been down this alley for quite a while, but when I got out of the truck I could smell something unpleasant. Then I saw him. He ran, but I grabbed him on reflex. When I realised what I'd found I called Chou and Yori, it was the only thing I could think of."

Harada finished writing in his notebook, then nodded.

"Thank you, Uthryyl. I understand. It was good of you to get involved, being a visitor." The demon glanced at the unwell corporal with sympathy, then back to the sergeant.

"We come here a lot, and we like your people. This isn't right. Someone has to pay." They all turned to look at the mid-thirties man being held firmly by two more of Uthryyl's crew, both of whom looked like they'd enjoy pulling very hard in opposite directions. The man looked back at them defiantly although he was sweating. The single crime-scene technician that the district station had available finished photographing the man's hands which were being forcible held out in front of him by the demons, then turned to the sergeant.

"I've got everything from here that I can use. I'll get started on my report." She looked back at the man and the demons holding him, then shook her head. "He's covered in blood and was found dumping one of the bodies. I don't see how he can't have done it." Glancing at the three demons she addressed her superior with a smile, "Although I'm not sure quite what to put in the report about our friends here." She nodded to Uthryyl respectfully. Like many of the local police she saw right through the illusion spell Uthryyl and his people used, not having been even slightly surprised by them when she arrived half an hour previously. Harada sighed a little.
"Just report it as some civilian bystanders for now. It's basically true. I'll talk to the captain about it." The technician nodded, putting her camera away, then left, smiling at Yori and Chou on the way. The sergeant turned to them. Yori was staring at the suspect with a look that made him think she'd quite like cutting little bits off him to show him what it felt like. Just as he was about to speak a car pulled up at the end of the alley and another officer from the district station got out, accompanying a plain-clothes policeman new to them all. The two approached the little group.

"Sergeant Harada, this is Inspector Chino from Tokyo Metro central command," the officer said. Everyone looked at the newcomer, who was studying the scene with experienced eyes. He was a tallish middle-aged man who looked quietly competent, and for some reason very tired.

"Inspector," Harada said politely, bowing a little then holding out his hand. Inspector Chino shook it. "Sergeant. Good to meet you." He turned to the officer. "Thank you, Officer Iwai. You can go back to the station, I won't need you again." She nodded and turned, waving to Yori and Chou as she left. Chou smiled back, while Yori nodded to her, her attention still fixed on the suspect.

"Before you get annoyed, Sergeant, Central isn't trying to step on any toes in the local police. I'm only here because I think this may be the same case I've been working on for some time." Harada smiled.

"I'm not annoyed. We're only a small district station, we're happy to have any help you can offer. We don't get a lot of murder cases around here. Especially ones like this." The inspector walked over to look at the five bodies hidden behind the pile of crates at the end of the alley, giving the two magical girls and the three demons a curious look as he passed them. After a minute or two he returned, stopping to carefully study the suspect who was still held firmly by the two demons, before rejoining the sergeant.

"Extremely messy. It looks almost identical to two other crime scenes we've found around Tokyo in the last eighteen months, each one had six bodies dumped in it. We're certain it's the work of one person, but we had no leads on who, he was very careful."

"A serial killer then," Harada commented. The inspector nodded.

"Yes. Only the dismemberment and disposal of the remains was the same, the method of killing and the choice of victims were different each time. He seemed to be picking them randomly which didn't give us much to go on. None of our profilers could give us any real leads. It seemed likely that the only way we would catch him was through chance." He glanced at Utthryyl again, then the two young women, before turning back to Harada. "Tell me what happened, please. The report we got only mentioned some brief details of the crime scene and that the suspect was apprehended at the scene by some civilians. Speaking of which, why are they still here? Normally we prefer to have the suspect in the custody of police officers." He smiled to indicate he wasn't angry, but there was a certain amount of mild suspicion in his eyes. Harada glanced at Yori who shrugged. Clearly the man wasn't familiar with Minato in general and this particular district in particular. It also seemed likely that he didn't see the demons for what they were.

"Yori and Chou here are... special consultants." Inspector Chino looked them up and down for a moment, He smiled a little.

"They look like some sort of magical girl wannabes, only they got the uniforms wrong. Not enough skin." he said sarcastically. Harada winced while Constable Otani, who had just finished vomiting and cleaned himself up, closed his eyes and sent up a brief prayer. Utthryyl waited with some amusement to see what would happen. Yori glanced at Chou, then both girls faded from view. The inspector gaped.
When a silky voice in his ear said, "We happen to like our clothes, thanks," from far too close, he yelped and jumped, whirling around. No one was there. When he turned back the two young women were standing where they'd been, looking at him neutrally. He swallowed, then nodded.

"Um, OK, I think I see. My apologies." Sergeant Harada stepped closer and motioned to him.

"Inspector, I would suggest being very polite to both of them. They're extremely highly regarded around here, and have friends in some remarkably high places. They are also personal friends of mine, and of most of the local police. Insulting them is not a good idea, trust me. I can give you names at the PSIA if you need more verification," he whispered. Chino's eyebrows rose as he listened. The sergeant stepped back and the inspector turned to the two young women.

"I'm sorry if I was rude, ladies. I plead tiredness and unfamiliarity with the situation. I've heard about the Minato penchant for magical girls but I've never personally experienced it, this is my first visit to the ward." Both women stared hard at him for a moment, then smiled.

"Apology accepted, Inspector," the blonde said gracefully. "This situation is upsetting everyone. As far as our friends here are concerned, they are the ones who captured your suspect in the act. Sergeant Harada is short on manpower today and Uthryyl's people can be trusted to help." Harada nodded.

"We've got half the force out from some sort of food poisoning today, they went to a restaurant in Roppongi to celebrate a wedding last night and it seems to have gone rather wrong. Luckily this district has a very low crime rate most of the time, mainly thanks to these two young women and their friends," Inspector Chino looked around at all the non-police people present then sighed.

"OK, fine. I can work with that. Minato is weird anyway. I've heard some very strange stories about here." Yori snickered.

"They're probably all true. Sorry."

The inspector sighed again, then pulled out a notebook. "So, what happened." Uthryyl explained once more, his two compatriots adding their parts in the story as well. Yori and Chou also gave their side. When the inspector had finished writing everything down, he looked at Uthryyl. "The only thing I don't understand, sir, is why you called Chou, rather than the police?" Uthryyl glanced at Yori who rolled her eyes then nodded slightly.

"We're visitors from very different place, Inspector. We know Chou and Yori well, they're good friends, but we haven't had much contact with your authorities. I thought it was easiest if they dealt with you at first." Chino looked slightly puzzled, making Yori sigh.

"Show him," she suggested. Uthryyl thought for a moment, then made a small gesture with one hand. Inspector Chino's eyes nearly popped out of his head and he instinctively scrambled backwards fumbling for his side-arm while making a choked noise in the back of his throat. Someone grabbed him, preventing him from falling over, while his hand suddenly stopped moving as if in the grip of a vice. Tearing his eyes away from the totally unexpected sight in front of him he glanced down to see a hand holding his wrist in a grip of steel, then followed the arm it was attached to up to the face of Yori, who smiled at him.

"Calmly, Inspector. You're perfectly safe, these are our friends. They mean you no harm. They're just traders." Trembling slightly he slowly reholstered his pistol, Yori watching him carefully, before looking one more at the three people who had abruptly changed from perfectly normal looking individuals to things from a science fiction film. They were still there. Looking wildly around he noticed that neither of the local policemen looked either surprised or worried, having
clearly known the truth all along, which made him slowly relax. Eventually he calmed down enough to talk without embarrassing himself by stuttering.

"Minato is very weird," he managed at last. Everyone chuckled a little. "I'm sorry. That was a bit unprofessional of me, but in my defence I wasn't expecting to meet anyone who wasn't human today." Uthryyl laughed, a remarkably normal sound.

"Don't worry, Inspector. We understand. Not everyone deals with people from other worlds very well. Minato is indeed strange because so many people here are so accepting. Trust me, I've seen more violent reactions, that's why we use the disguise spell." Still shaking a little from the adrenaline rush, Inspector Chino looked at the three demons, then shook his head.

"Remarkable. OK, I understand now." He turned to Harada. "If you don't mind I would like to take the suspect and the remains back to the central office. I'm sure this is the same case I've been working on." Sergeant Harada looked at the suspect then nodded.

"It's fine by me. You'll need to talk to the Captain to arrange a transfer of evidence, she's a bit picky about the paperwork being right, but I doubt there will be a problem. To be honest I have enough to do around this madhouse without a serial killer multiple homicide case on top of it. He's obviously not a local, Yori says there's no magic involved, so there's no reason to keep the case here that I can see." Inspector Chino studied him for a moment.

"I have to admit I rather expected more of a fight. Some officers I've dealt with become very resentful of someone outside their area coming in and taking over." Harada grinned.

"We're not like that around here. We all work for the same team, it only matters that the work is done not who gets the credit for doing it." Raising his eyebrows, the inspector nodded, then pulled out his phone to arrange transport for the prisoner and the remains. Sergeant Harada moved closer to Yori and Chou to give him some privacy. "Thanks for calling me, Yori. This one is pretty nasty. I'm just as happy to see it in someone else's hands." The girl glanced at the inspector.

"So am I. We've got too many other things to deal with anyway. We're only involved because of a friend in the first place." She scowled. "I wish I'd picked up on this bastard before. It looks like he's been dumping his bodies here for nearly a month. It's right on the edge of our normal area, plus we've been distracted, but..." Harada smiled at her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't beat yourselves up about it. You both do so much good around here, and you don't even get paid for it. Everyone knows how many times you've put your lives at risk protecting people. Even you two can't be everywhere and do everything. There will always be ones that slip through, we all have to live with that fact. You know as well as I do a crime-free world is basically impossible while people still have free will." The black-haired girl sighed, but nodded sadly.

"I know. You're right, of course. I still feel guilty about five people being dead when we might have been able to save them."

"That's because you're a good person. Go home, have some ice cream. I know how that cheers you up." She grinned at him again.

"Very true, Sergeant." After a moment she asked, "Would you like us to visit your people who are sick? We might be able to help them." He thought for a second then nodded gratefully.

"That would probably be much appreciated. If you stop by the station in about half an hour I can get you a list of names and addresses."
"All right." She walked over to Uthryyl and talked to him for a moment, then shook his hand. Everyone watched as the two young women jumped three stories straight up to disappear over the roof of the warehouse. Inspector Chino stared in amazement then shook his head, putting his phone away as he rejoined the sergeant.

"That's pretty damn incredible," he said quietly. Harada smirked at him.

"You have absolutely no idea."

"Probably not." The inspector glanced up again, then shook his head once more. "Probably not."
"It was pretty horrible, Nabiki," 'Maiko' said, as they walked through the campus of Nihon University college of commerce. She and 'Rika' were visiting Nabiki in Setagaya for once, not having been there before. "This sick bastard had killed seventeen people that the police know of, in groups of six, chopping them up into little bits and doing something with some parts. Only about eighty percent of the bodies were found." Nabiki looked green. "If it hadn't been for Uthryyl stumbling across the guy and his quick reactions he might have got away. His pattern was six in one place then move away, the other dump sites were widely separated. He picked the victims at random as far as anyone could tell. There was no sexual aspect to the crime that we know of and he didn't torture them, just killed them, but even so..." She sighed. "I've seen some pretty terrible things in my life but this sort of reminder of how horrific an otherwise perfectly normal person can be is kind of sobering. No demons, no magic, no martial arts, just a man who enjoys killing for fun."

'Rika' put her arm around her husband, holding her tight. The three women stopped under a skeletal tree and looked at the floodlit snow scene of late afternoon, thinking about the events of a week ago. "It'll hit the news any day now, I would think," the blonde said quietly. "The police have tried to keep it quiet while they were investigating things to get enough evidence to charge him, but according to Sergeant Harada they've identified the man and located where he was living. It was some distance outside Minato, he was driving the bodies in using stolen cars. Apparently when they broke into his apartment they found some very upsetting things. They now have enough to be certain they have a rock-solid case. He's not getting away."

"It's a little weird," 'Maiko' added. "The only reason we got involved at all was because of Uthryyl. Although if we'd come across this guy ourselves... God, I wish we had, we could have stopped him. I still can't believe we missed a damn serial killer dumping bodies on our patch." Nabiki sighed, looking at her sister-in-law.

"Everyone else missed it as well, the guy was careful. You can't dwell on what you can't change. Sergeant Harada is right. Even you have limitations, you can't stop every possible crime, even horrible ones like this. Don't feel guilty about it, you've had a lot of things on your plate recently. At least he's been stopped." The other brunette nodded glumly.

"True enough. You're right. It still bothers me though."

"I'm not surprised. It bothers me as well. But that's because all of us are relatively sane people. This man clearly isn't." Smiling slightly wryly, 'Maiko' nodded. The middle Tendo pointed. "Come on, let's go in there, it's cold out here. That coffee shop is very good and they do some wonderful carrot cake." They crossed the road and entered the shop, Nabiki greeting the woman behind the counter. 'Maiko' and 'Rika' sat at a table near the window while the brunette ordered, coming over a minute later with a tray. "Here. Try this, see what you think," she said as she handed each of them a large mug and a plate with a slice of carrot cake on it. Taking the tray back having unloaded it she returned and sat, picking up a fork.

"Hey, this is good," 'Maiko' said through a mouthful of cake, spraying crumbs. Her wife looked at her with an eyebrow up. "Sorry, dear," she mumbled, abashed. Nabiki giggled while 'Rika' half-smiled.
"Honestly. I can't take you anywhere." The blonde carefully tried some cake of her own, nodding in satisfaction then making a point of swallowing before speaking. "Very good indeed."

"So, horrible crimes aside, any more word on the portal bombs?" Nabiki inquired, picking up her coffee. 'Maiko' shook her head, already half-way through her cake.

"Nope. Nothing so far. The longer it goes without news the more worried I get. We know they're going to activate sooner or later, but not when." She paused for a moment to drink some coffee. "One rather unsettling suggestion that Tamiko came up with is that as the mage clearly wanted to maximise casualties, he might well have set the timers to activate when he could be fairly sure the most people would be around. That could well mean around Christmas, depending on where they are. You know, last minute shopping crowds, or in Christmas sales." Freezing with her fork half-way to her mouth, Nabiki stared in horror.

"Oh, shit. That sounds unpleasantly likely." The other brunette nodded with a grim expression.

"I know. I mentioned it to Agent Naito who wasn't happy about the idea. He's passed it along to security forces in the possible target areas but is kind of frustrated as most of them don't seem to believe him. The RCMP is taking it seriously, the UK is as well, The Australians aren't completely convinced but are willing to work with us, while most of the rest are saying that the photos he sent don't look like much of a bomb. Last time I talked to him he was almost pulling his hair out trying to explain how dangerous the things were and how if they found one no one should do anything but call him. I suggested he try telling them it was a biological weapon, which is actually true in a weird sort of way, which he was going to do." She shrugged slightly, sipping some more coffee appreciatively.

"Not much we can do but wait. My guess is that if one activates in the US they'll try to handle it themselves, they're very sure of their own military ability. For all I know they'll succeed, they're not stupid, but I think the collateral damage will be remarkable in any case. If it's in LA I have hopes that Lieutenant Harrison will call us before it gets too out of hand. Anywhere else..."

"Not good," Nabiki sighed.

"No."

They sat in silence for a little while, until 'Rika' looked up. "We were successful in helping the various people who got food poisoning. It's a little complicated because the bad food takes a while to... pass through..." She half-smiled, half grimaced, as Nabiki laughed, "But we could kill off the bacteria that caused most of the problems. Luckily it wasn't one of the nasty ones, just something that was painful and unpleasant. I think we made some new friends as a result."

Nabiki grinned. "I can understand that. I had food poisoning once, you remember?" Her sister nodded. "It was horrible. Anyone who could have made the pain go away would have been my friend for life."

"We're going to visit Akane again the day after tomorrow. Will you be free?", 'Rika' asked. Nabiki thought for a moment.

"Ah, yes, I should be. That's Friday, isn't it? Afternoon again?"

"Yes. Probably around four."

"OK. I'll go back home early. That's the last day of this semester anyway, I can lose the afternoon with no problems." She studied the two people sitting opposite her. "We never settled the question
of whether you'd come to Nerima over Christmas." Her sister smiled.

"Or the other way around." She glanced at her husband who shrugged unhelpfully. "Fine, I'll decide," she said, making Nabiki laugh. "Right. We're planning on having Aiko and the others over during the evening on Christmas day. They're all eating lunch with their families. It would be wonderful if you could come then, you could stay overnight. We could come back with you the next morning and stay over on Boxing Day. How would that suit you?" Having thought it over Nabiki nodded slowly.

"That would work. If I came over around three would that be OK?"

"Certainly." Pulling out a printed timetable Nabiki checked it.

"There aren't many trains running on either day. Looks like I'll have to take the two-thirty one, so I'd actually get to you around half-past three. And the next day we can go back at about noon."

"Trains. Feh. Teleporting is much better," 'Maiko' commented with a grin. Nabiki laughed.

"I'm surprised you rely on Aiko for all your teleporting needs. Shouldn't you have worked it out yourself by now? Call yourself a magical girl..." The other brunette chuckled.

"But I don't call myself a magical girl, as you well know." She looked amused rather than insulted, while Nabiki grinned. "I'm still working on portals. Getting pretty close, I think. Teleporting is a whole different problem. In theory it's less complex but there are some nasty little traps if you're not careful. It's not the sort of thing you want to just experiment blindly with, it can go pretty spectacularly wrong. Aiko is very unusual, the artefact that allowed her to learn to do it is extremely old and remarkably efficient. She doesn't have many of the limitations that normal teleportation spells have. The only real limitation she does have is one of energy, she builds it up much more slowly than she'd like although that's gradually improving. A lot of that is our training, as her ki levels increase it's having a knock-on effect on her magic. We didn't expect that but it's a pleasant surprise."

"You seem to be able to recharge her amulet thing very easily." 'Maiko' nodded.

"It's basically just a very efficient magical battery. It only provides the bulk of the power, the teleportation is her own magic. Without the amulet she can only teleport herself, or perhaps one more person now, but with it the number is increased considerably. Probably around a dozen or so. Our magic control isn't compatible with her spell, as usual, but our energy is, so pumping power into it is easy. It's a tiny drain by our standards, really. I've been trying to figure out a way to provide the power without having to touch the thing but so far haven't worked it out." Nabiki listened with interest.

"Do you think you'll be able to duplicate her ability eventually?" 'Maiko' looked at 'Rika', then nodded.

"We both think so. Working out the portal spell is teaching us a lot about converting complex operations to our method. By the time we've managed it we should have a good handle on some of the things we've been struggling with. Every spell we redesign lets us learn more about how we do what we do, it's getting steadily easier."

"It's fascinating," 'Rika' commented. "Designing these techniques from the beginning teaches you so much about how it all works. It always surprises me when we talk to a more traditional mage how little most of them know about how their magic functions. They know what the spell does but not how it does it. That goes a long way towards explaining how so many of them are quite
inflexible in what they can do." She shook her head sadly. "I suspect that may be one of the main reason we've had so little luck teaching them our healing method. It requires a very low level access to the magic, and a lot of ki control as well."

"We're hoping that eventually we can teach it to Aiko's crew once we get their abilities high enough. They're not really mages in the normal sense of the word, they just use magic, so it should be possible to change the magic they use to ours without too much trouble. It would make them much more formidable aside from anything else." 'Maiko' grinned. "And it would mean that they wouldn't need those damn uniforms any more." The middle sister snickered.

"I suspect that's incentive enough for most of them. Although Tamiko seems happy enough."

"She's something of an extrovert," 'Rika' said with a smile. "And she's right, she does have very nice legs." Laughing, Nabiki looked out the window where it had resumed snowing.

"Blue ones in this weather, I suspect." Her sister nodded, finishing her coffee.

"The uniform is a little impractical for winter." Leaving the coffee shop the little group headed for the main building. Nabiki spent the next hour showing them around, before they went back to her small apartment in the women's dormitory. Sitting on her bed she waved her arms grandly at the two rooms she had.

"Here we are. My huge apartment, where I spend many a happy night entertaining all my friends." She smirked as 'Maiko' looked around, then grinned at her.

"I'm jealous. It makes our little hovel look very small."

"Oh, ha ha. I should transfer to your university and move in with you." 'Rika' giggled, sitting beside her sister.

"You can if you would like to. We certainly have the space." Somewhat surprised, having only meant it as a joke, Nabiki considered the idea for a moment then reluctantly shook her head.

"That would be fantastic, but the courses I need are here. The college of commerce is world-renowned for it's business classes. Thanks for the offer though." She smiled at her sister who looked slightly sad. "Oh, I was meaning to tell you, I looked into your idea of becoming a forensic accountant. It looks very interesting. My accountancy tutor thinks it's a good idea, apparently there is growing demand for that sort of thing with the growth of the internet making international money-laundering more easy. He thinks it would be a sensible career choice." 'Rika' looked pleased.

"I'm glad I was able to suggest something useful." 'Maiko' turned to look at her from where she had been peering out the window.

"You always suggest useful things, love." She chuckled as her wife smiled at her. "Well, as fun as this has been, Nabs, we need to get back. We'll see you in a couple of days." Her sister-in-law nodded.

"OK. And don't call me Nabs." All three women laughed as they left the room.

Sergeant Harada entered the Furinkan district police station, showing his police ID to the officer on the front desk. "Hello. I'm here to see Lieutenant Sasaki. He's expecting me." The officer nodded, checking the ID, then pointed to the left.
"Down the corridor, third door on the right."

"Thanks." Harada went in the indicated direction, knocking on the door he arrived at then opening it. The short man behind the desk grinned at him.

"Tetsuo! It's been years, I haven't seen you since the ten year reunion. How are you?" He got up and came around the desk as Harada closed the door behind him. Shaking the out-thrust hand of his old friend he smiled.

"I'm fine, Norio. Actually very good. And you?"

"Not bad at all, despite working in this madhouse. Mind you, you work in Minato, that place is as crazy as here from what I hear. I haven't been there for years but I remember there seemed to be a lot of skimpily dressed young women bouncing around the place." Returning to his seat he gestured to the coffee machine on a side table. "Coffee? Help yourself." The sergeant poured himself a cup and added some sugar, then sat in one of the two chairs in front of the desk. "So, still a sergeant, after nearly sixteen years?" Sasaki looked at his friend inquiringly. Harada laughed.

"I like being a sergeant. I have enough authority to get things done without being responsible for too many people. Besides, I seem to have ended up as the magical girl liaison officer somehow, which gives me all the work I can handle."

"You have good relations with them over there, then? I've heard some even weirder than normal stories in the last few years." The other man grinned. "I saw a news report a few months ago from somewhere around your area, there was this little black-haired young woman ripping into a group of girls that had just smashed up the place defeating some sort of monster in a way that would have put old Iwao at the academy into shock. She was absolutely ferocious." Harada laughed.

"That's Yori. She's one of our girls, all right. She and her partner Chou are truly remarkable. Very pleasant and helpful people, but you most definitely don't want to get on their bad side. They're terrifying when they get angry and they have a very low threshold for stupidity on the part of the other girls. Yori more than Chou, but even she can get annoyed." His friend looked interested.

"You know them well?" Harada shrugged.

"As well as anyone, I suspect. They take their privacy extremely seriously, and I'm certainly not going to begrudge them that, not after all the help they give us." Lieutenant Sasaki raised his eyebrows.

"Sounds like they're more than just the normal run of the mill magical girl."

"Oh, definitely. Extremely professional, very modest, and incredibly effective. They have quite close relations with us, almost every officer in the station has cause to thank them for something or other. The community as a whole is in love with them. Both of them help out in all sorts of ways other than the usual demon-killing." He snickered. "In fact, they don't really kill demons much at all. Most of the demons that do turn up are friends of theirs." His friend looked puzzled. "It's true. I've met some very odd people through them. Yori particularly gets extremely miffed if any girls from outside the area turn up and start attacking random demons, as far as she's concerned most of them are simply visitors that should be treated with respect. Oddly enough this is usually correct. The hostile ones either run away when they see her coming, the smart ones all seem to know about her, or they just get evaporated if they're too stupid to run." Sasaki appeared both amused and impressed.

"A very formidable young woman, by the sounds of it." Harada chuckled a little.
"Honestly, you have no idea. The most dangerous person I've ever met by a long way, but at the same time one of the people around whom I feel safest. She and her friends seem to take protecting the community more seriously than a lot of cops I've met. If you're ever in the area I'll introduce you." He sat up a little straighter.

"Besides taking the opportunity to catch up, I had another reason for coming." Sasaki smiled.

"I suspected as much. How can I help?"

"I wanted to know about one Akane Tendo, a martial artist who lives around here. Do you know her?" His friend sighed heavily at the name.

"Oh, yes. That I do." He paused, trying to think of how to put it. "OK, you know that Nerima is as infested with martial artists as Minato is with magical girls?" Harada nodded, smiling a little. "It's completely nuts. Martial arts everywhere. Martial arts dining. Martial arts calligraphy. Martial arts chess. You name it, someone probably has made a martial art out of it, and they all end up here. Anyway, Ms Tendo comes from a family right in the middle of all the weirdness. Her father, Soun, runs the Tendo Dojo about a kilometre away, over closer to the school. She's the youngest of three daughters. Akane, then Nabiki, the middle one, then Kasumi, the oldest. Their mother died, oh, about ten or fifteen years ago, I think, their father brought them up."

"Poor girls."

"Indeed. To be honest, from what I heard it was mostly the eldest, Kasumi, who did the bulk of the raising of her sisters. Soun had a kind of mental breakdown when his wife died and for a long time was only a pale shadow of what he'd been. He stopped teaching, he's a very good martial artist, and pretty much just sat round getting drunk. Even so he'd be a dangerous person to go up against if you weren't also very highly trained." He sighed a little. "A real pity, from what I know he was really something when he was younger. The daughters were more or less left to run their own lives and it's testament to how dedicated Kasumi Tendo was that the family stayed as sane as it did. Which isn't saying much, unfortunately."

"What do you mean?" Harada asked curiously. His friend got up and rooted through a file cabinet next to the desk, removing a set of folders that together were about twenty centimetres thick. Dropping them on the desk he waved at them as he sat down again.

"That's about half the file on various incidents connected in some with with the Tendo Dojo." Sergeant Harada looked impressed. "Akane Tendo is in probably a third of them. The girl is in many ways quite a nice person, but she has the most vicious temper I've ever encountered. She's also insanely strong, even by martial artist standards, even around here. There are quite a few that are stronger, but when she snaps she just goes mad and a sane person runs for the hills until she calms down. You wouldn't believe the damage she can cause, has caused, when she's angry." He shook his head in awed respect. "An enraged gorilla with a rocket launcher would be less destructive." Harada snickered at the description, picking up one of the folders and leafing through it, his eyebrows going higher and higher.

"Holy shit," he murmured, looking at one set of photos. Sasaki glanced over at them, then nodded.

"You see what I mean. That one was when she got particularly pissed off with her fiancé of the time about five years ago. She went on a bit of a rampage, smashed him right through that building, then started throwing concrete blocks at him. If it wasn't for the fact that he was something exceptional even by Neriman standards she'd have killed him for sure." He started looking through another folder. "That kid was amazing. Probably the best martial artist ever to come through here, possibly anywhere. Soaked up the art like a sponge, could turn his hands to practically anything..."
even if he only saw it done. A true genius in his own way. Nice kid as well. I felt very sorry for him, his life was insane even by local standards." He put the folder down.

"Nabiki Tendo had something of a reputation as well. She was a dab hand at blackmail and information brokering when she was in school, probably would have ended up running the Yakuza if she'd stuck at it. Scary, scary girl. Not at all violent, but the sort of person that made you want to count your fingers twice after she shook your hand. Very cold and calculating, although I think devoted to her family in her own way. She'd sell practically anything to practically anybody, her main saving grace from what I heard is that she never lied and always kept her bargains. Not someone you'd want to upset though." He sighed a little. "Again, a pity. Probably the smartest person I've ever met, I suspect she could have done almost anything she set her mind to, but from a very early age that mainly seemed to be aimed at being an efficient mercenary. Which she certainly was. That said, in the last few years she seems to have changed course, since she went off to university." Harada came across a photo in the folder labelled as being of Nabiki Tendo, who he recognised with interest as the same girl he'd seen at the train station.

"Kasumi Tendo was remarkable. The gentlest, kindest young woman I've ever met. She had a kind word for everyone, was unfailingly polite, and basically ran the Tendo Dojo since she was about nine or ten. Everyone loved her, I never heard a bad word about the girl. But at the same time I think she was very unhappy although you'd never know it looking at her. I never saw her without a smile. The problem is I think she was trapped in a role she didn't really want but couldn't refuse. I always got the impression she was very intelligent, possibly as smart as Nabiki, but she basically hid it under the perfect housewife façade. It was a shame, she deserved better."

The sergeant looked at his friend curiously. "You say 'was remarkable', past tense. Did something happen to her?" Sasaki sighed again.

"Yes, although I couldn't tell you exactly what. There are a lot of stories about that night that don't make any sense." Gathering his thoughts, he tried to explain. "The Tendo family has close relations with another martial arts family, the Saotomes." Harada started at the name, listening intently.
"About, oh, perhaps six years ago, Genma Saotome wandered into Nerima with his son, Ranma." Harada nodded, recognising the name with a shock.
"I've heard of Ranma Saotome. He was, according to what I've heard over the years, supposed to be the best martial artist in Japan even when he was still in school. There are some very odd stories around him as well."

"That's him. I have a feeling that whatever you've heard is an understatement. I didn't know him hugely well, but I liked him. Kind of full of himself at first, a bit overconfident, you know the bravado of young men. That improved a lot over time. His skill level was off the scale. Truly incredible, like something out of a manga. The problem was he was definitely a weirdness magnet in a big way. He attracted the crazy like you wouldn't believe. The number of bizarre things that happened to him in a little over two years was simply ridiculous." Harada thought for a moment.

"I heard he disappeared some years ago. Was he this Akane Tendo's fiancé?"

"Yes to both. Apparently his father had arranged with Soun that his son would marry one of the Tendo girls and Akane ended up with him. I don't know exactly how. To be honest, either one of the others would have been a better choice, I think, for a whole range of reasons." Pausing for a moment he got himself a cup of coffee, then resumed the story. "The real problem was that his father is a bit of a bastard. And a thief. And a child-abuser. He'd managed to engage the boy to at least two dozen women before he was sixteen, although only about four or five of those engagements were really followed up on. That still left the poor bastard with something like four
girls chasing him all the time and beating each other and him up in the process. Each of the girls had at least one other suitor as well, all of whom tended to attack him regularly."

He laughed slightly bitterly. "Not to mention the Tendo girl constantly being kidnapped by the weirdest collection of lunatics you could possibly imagine, which meant he had to go and rescue her. Then throw in Chinese Amazon warriors, various magical opponents, a number of very nasty demons, random magic, and so on. It was completely insane even by local standards." Harada stared in amazement. "Honest, it's all true. I'm certain that there was a lot more to it than I've heard about. Almost everyone in Nerima who was around at the time has a strange story involving that boy somehow. To be fair to him, most of it wasn't his fault, but he certainly attracted trouble."

"Then, one night, everything changed." The man sighed again. "I still don't know exactly what happened, I've long since decided I never will. What I do know is that he finally got pushed to his limit. The two fathers had tried to trick him into marrying Akane, somehow, but it all went pear-shaped in a huge way. By the time the fighting died down the Dojo was almost destroyed and the boy had vanished. Three days or so later he reappeared, did something no one seems to want to talk about, but which scared the absolute shit out of quite a few people, then disappeared again, taking Kasumi with him. From what I know she went willingly. Anyway, nobody has heard a thing out of either of them since, they vanished as cleanly as if they'd dropped off the planet."

"Wow." Harada couldn't think of anything else to say. Sasaki nodded.

"Wow indeed. Everything went to crap at that point. It turned out he'd been keeping a lid on an amazing number of things around here. Not only did the various martial artists who'd been constantly attacking him start beating each other up, causing a hell of a lot of damage in the process, but we had a crime wave for months after that. He'd been quietly dealing with muggers and the like when he was bored, which kept the crime rate down amazingly effectively. You wouldn't believe how many minor crooks were found unconscious next to their crime scene over the years." The sergeant grinned, but before he could speak, there was a soft knock on the door, causing both men to glance over. It opened to reveal an elderly woman pushing a cleaners cart.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but I need to empty your waste bin." She smiled vaguely at Sasaki. Nodding politely to her he moved to one side as she tottered over, emptying the bin into a larger bag then putting another liner into it before replacing it under the desk. "Thank you." Leaving the room she pulled the door closed again. It took the two men a moment to work out where they'd got to. Eventually Sergeant Harada spoke.

"I heard he had a sister who was nearly as good as he was. Really good looking red-head." The other man looked at him for a long moment, then opened a folder and found a photo, handing it over. The girl pictured there was indeed extremely attractive, brilliant red hair contrasting with extraordinary sapphire-blue eyes. "So what happened to her? Is she still around?"

"Not as such." His friend looked at him again. "You believe in magic, I suspect?" Harada laughed quite hard for a while.

"Believe in magic? No, in the same way I don't believe in the sun. I simply know it exists. After what I've seen back home, there's no way I could deny it." Sasaki nodded slowly.

"Good." He retrieved the photo, looking at it for a moment, before slipping it back into the folder. "There are a lot of stories about Ranma and his sister Ranko. All of them are true, except for the fact that the sister didn't exist." Sergeant Harada looked at him curiously.

"But you have a photo of her right there."
The man behind the desk smiled. "I have a photo of a beautiful red-head here, true enough. But it's not Ranma's sister." He paused. "It's Ranma." Harada stared.

"Um, what?"

"I'm not kidding. The poor fellow had a weird curse he picked up in China, a few months before he came to Nerima. One of the most convincing proofs of magic I've ever seen, although most people seemed to have trouble believing it. Basically, when he got wet with cold water, he turned into that girl. Warm water changed him back. It drove him nuts and was the cause of quite a lot of the problems he had."

"Bloody hell," Harada said, trying to grasp the concept.

"I know. It's pretty weird. The curse is from some sort of magic pond or something. There seem to be several variants, his father has one that turns him into a panda." Harada stared again, then snickered.

"You've got to be kidding." Sasaki grinned.

"Nope. Get him wet and bam! Instant panda. Very odd. There's a few more around here, there's a Chinese girl who changes into a cat, a boy from her tribe who becomes a duck, one kid who turned into a little piglet, and a couple more who wander in occasionally I've heard, although I don't know what they turn into."

"That's... very strange indeed. Sounds like this Ranma got the best of them, though." The lieutenant nodded.

"Very true, although he didn't see it that way. What young man would? Not to mention both his father and his mother had very strange ideas about how a man should act, which probably confused the poor sod even more. He was always looking for a cure, but from what I was told there most likely isn't one. That made his relationship with Ms Tendo even more complicated, she's kind of intolerant of anything she considers deviant behaviour. Regularly changing sex certainly counted."

Harada thought about what he'd been told. "So, he and the oldest Tendo sister vanished nearly four years ago, and that's the last anyone has ever heard of them."

"Yep. Poof, just like magic. For all I know, it was magic. We poked around a little in the early days, unofficially you understand, mainly just out of curiosity, but no one could find anything at all. However they did it, there's no trace anyone has ever been able to find. Quite a lot of people have looked very hard, some still are."

"Perhaps they left the country?" Sasaki looked at his friend for a while, then nodded to himself, having come to a decision.

"I don't think so. I have no way of proving it, but there's circumstantial evidence that suggests they stuck around for at least a while." Harada looked curious, and he sighed. "It's my fault, actually. A few months after they both vanished, we had a particularly nasty sexual assault case here. It took us by surprise, there are a lot of martial artists around here who take a very dim view of that sort of thing and tend to sort it out very harshly." Harada nodded understandingly.

"That's very similar to Minato as a whole and our district specifically. We don't get sexual assaults any more, not since Yori and Chou turned up. The assailants tend to regret it very quickly indeed. All the magical girls now come down on that sort of thing like a ton of extremely angry bricks."

"Right. So, we were kind of shocked. This was a very bad one as well, it was all too close to being
a rape-murder case. The problem was we had no leads at all. No one had seen anything, the victim couldn't identify a suspect, she was too young and traumatised, we had nothing. The community was up in arms about it. In the end I had an idea, the sort of thing you think of at four in the morning after a long day. I called in a favour at one of the big newspapers and got the story in the national press. Everyone in Japan read about it." Harada nodded, now that it was mentioned he vaguely remembered it.

"A few days later, we found the rapist in one of the parks. He'd been beaten to within an inch of his life by a real expert, then... well, mutilated. Lets just say he won't be raping anyone ever again." The sergeant winced. Even the experienced police officer looked slightly ill. "I'll spare you the photos, they're not much fun. The thing is, the way the wounds were made, plus other evidence, made me fairly sure it was something that could only have been done by someone with some pretty unusual abilities. I have a very good idea who, although I could never prove it and to be honest, have no wish to at all." He shrugged, frowning. "The fucker got what was coming to him, screw the law. There was a camera next to him which showed beyond doubt that he'd perpetrated the assault, plus three others no one could solve, including a murder. I certainly didn't lose any sleep over it."

"And you think that this was the work of Ranma Saotome?" Sasaki shrugged again.

"I have my suspicions. I know he had some very impressive abilities that went far beyond the normal martial arts, even around here, almost to the point of being magic. He also had an almost pathological need to help people who he felt were being taken advantage of. His curse gave him a unique view on crimes of violence against women as well. If it wasn't for the amazingly strong value he put on life he could have ended up being unbelievably dangerous. No, scratch that, he was unbelievably dangerous, but it was tempered with amazing compassion. I suspect, though, that whatever happened at the Tendo Dojo that night removed some self-imposed limits."

"Interesting. And a little worrying." Harada's old friend nodded again.

"Quite." After a moment, somewhat ashamed, he added, "But it was very useful. I'm slightly embarrassed to say I mentioned the basic idea to a few friends around the country, when they got stuck under similar circumstances." Harada looked at him, fearing he knew what was coming. "They tried a similar approach. It usually works. There have been a number of other very dangerous sexual predators who have ended up in a bad way, solving a remarkable number of assaults and murders. It started to make quite a few people rather uncomfortable. A couple of years ago we had a meeting here, with senior law enforcement people from all over the country. We showed them some files, even some video." A small grin passed over his face. "You should have seen the expressions. The guy from Minato seemed to take it in stride, and there were a couple of people from some department of the government I could never get any details on who didn't seem at all surprised, almost like they were expecting it, but most of the others looked like they'd seen a ghost."

"Not used to magic, I guess."

"Or whatever was being used. I mean, video of a pretty normal looking teenager who can create an honest-to-god tornado on demand makes you re-evaluate your world view pretty quickly."

Harada gaped. "A tornado?"

"Honest. We got some security camera footage of him doing it although no one has a clue how. There was also video of him when he was a female picking up an entire steel lamp-post and using it like a baseball bat, with about as much effort. Those things weigh about half a ton! We managed to make the point that even if you did want to arrest him, no one had the faintest idea how to do it, or make it stick. The same problem we have with most of the martial artists around here.
Handcuffs would be about as useful as damp spaghetti. Luckily, aside from fighting in the street, the majority of them are surprisingly law-abiding." Even as used to extraordinary things as he was from dealing with magical girls for years, Sergeant Harada was shocked by what he'd heard.

"You really think this young man is behind all these... incidents?" His colleague shrugged, sighing a little.

"I don't know. There's nothing I or anyone else can prove one way or the other, nor do I personally want to. Whoever did do it, they were extremely careful not to leave any evidence. There are no weapon or tool marks, no trace evidence, nothing. All the events were different, the only common factor is that the 'victim'," he made little air quotes, making Harada smile, "was a very dangerous sexual predator. To be honest, even though what happened was clearly illegal, no one really seems too concerned about it now. The government agents who turned up kind of strongly implied that it would be best to forget about it. They didn't seem worried."

"Hmm. That's intriguing. And slightly scary." Sasaki nodded, then drank some coffee.

"Obviously, none of this is to be talked about. I probably shouldn't have told you, but..." Harada nodded, understanding. "So, why the interest in Akane Tendo, anyway?"

"There was a fight in my district about a month ago. It turns out it was mostly Akane Tendo. Apparently there was some problem she had with a guy named Hibiki?" The lieutenant suddenly laughed.

"Ryoga Hibiki. If those two met up, I'm not surprised there was a fight. She hates his guts. He's the one that has the piglet curse. I've heard he used it to, well, kind of get intimate with her." Harada's eyebrows rose. "She thought he was her pet. Took him to bed..."

"Ah. I see. And she found out?"

"Oh, yes. In spades. It took an amazing long time, practically everyone else knew, but for various reasons didn't tell her. When she found out she went completely berserk. Almost killed the idiot, which takes some doing, aside from the Saotome boy he was probably the most powerful martial artist in his age group. Nowhere near Saotome but much better than the rest. You could probably shoot him in the head with an assault rifle and he wouldn't even bother to wake up if he was asleep. He's a tough bastard. She still kicked his ass. Put him in the hospital for months. It took two of the other lunatics to pull her off him long enough to get him out of here. He's avoided Nerima like the plague ever since."

"There was another young woman involved, I was told she had very long lilac-coloured hair."

"That would be Shampoo. One of the Chinese Amazons. She was, and for all I know still is, totally obsessed with marrying Ranma. Her great-grandmother is apparently the leader of their tribe in China, but at the moment she runs a ramen cafe across town. Very good ramen as it happens. The old woman is at least two hundred years old but is still a very dangerous fighter, as unlikely as that sounds. Shampoo turns into a cat when she gets wet with cold water. That made Ranma's life even more difficult, apparently he had a phobia of cats for some reason." Harada shook his head in amazement.

"I thought Minato was weird. It sounds positively sane by comparison."

His friend grinned. "It's certainly not boring. Although things have become a lot quieter in the last two, three years, the weirdness is still pretty strong here. Very odd things happen quite often. So, tell me what happened with this fight." Harada went over the story as best he could, from the
information he'd acquired from witnesses. Sasaki nodded at the end of it. "That certainly sounds like Akane on one of her rampages. This Yori must be remarkably skilled to shut it down so easily and quickly."

"She is. Both of them are, to be honest. While some of the magical girls may have more raw power I don't think any of them could really take on those two if they got annoyed. Certainly, they've had some fairly serious altercations with a lot of them and won every time. Usually almost instantly, they don't muck around with fancy attacks, they just go for the kill immediately. Most of the other girls seem to think it's cheating." He laughed. "There are a couple of groups they're training, one in particular, who are becoming nearly as effective. They'll end up running the place at this rate."

"What happened after they took Akane and the other two and disappeared?" Harada shrugged. "I don't know for sure. I'd think, knowing them, they healed them all up, then probably gave them the talking to of a lifetime. You certainly wouldn't enjoy Yori being angry with you. All I know is that the Tendo girl came back about a week later, apologised to everyone she could locate who'd been inconvenienced by the fight, accepted full responsibility for it and promised it would never happen again, then left. Yori and Chou set up a sort of reparations fund somehow just after they arrived a few years ago, which is paying for the repairs. It all got sorted out remarkably easily."

"Impressive. They can heal, these girls, then?" The sergeant smiled.

"Amazingly well. I'm constantly surprised by the number of things they can do. I've got no idea of where they learned all this stuff but they're certainly experts in a number of fields. Their martial arts skills are astounding, their healing abilities likewise, and the magic they use is like nothing anyone else has ever seen. Incredible people. I consider myself privileged to know them."

Lieutenant Sasaki looked amused. "Sounds like you like them a lot."

"I do." After a moment, he continued, "You told me something you shouldn't have, let me return the favour." The next ten minutes were spend recounting the story to date of the cult and the portal bomb problems. The other officer listened with interest and growing concern.

"Like you said, wow. That's both amazing and worrying. There are still five of those things out in the wild somewhere?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Yori and Chou are pretty sure that there are none in Japan, but that's not a lot of comfort. Sooner or later there's going to be a pretty unpleasant incident, I just hope they can get to wherever it is and deal with it before too many people end up dead."

"Shit. I'm glad we haven't had anything that nasty around here. I'll take the Tendo weirdness any day over magical terrorists." They were silent for a while, thinking about the problem. "Do you want to talk to Ms Tendo, then?" The sergeant shook his head.

"I don't think I need to. I trust Yori to have dealt with the problem correctly. I was mainly curious about the background to it, the whole event was a bit strange even around my district."

Lieutenant Sasaki glanced at his watch, then at his friend. "You want to get something to eat? It's nearly lunchtime, there's a nice cafe around the corner." Harada nodded.

"That's not a bad idea. I'm quite hungry, as it happens." Sasaki picked his coat off the back of his chair, putting it on as he opened the door. He nearly tripped over the old cleaner lady who was polishing the frames of some photos on the wall outside his office. Apologising to her, he closed the door to the office when Harada was out, locking it behind him.
"If you ever happen to come across anything about the Saotome fellow, let me know. I doubt you will, but just for my own peace of mind I'd like to know if he and the Tendo woman were OK. They were good people." His friend smiled as they left the building.

Behind them the old woman, eyes remarkably sharp now, watched them go for a moment before pulling a cellphone out of her pocket and dialling, as she stepped into an empty side room. "Hello. I've got some information for you, dear. A sergeant from Minato has been visiting our good lieutenant. Yes. Yes, that's the fellow. He was asking questions about the Tendo family, and Ranma Saotome. I'm not sure how much he learned, I didn't hear all of it." She listened for a moment. "I'll see what I else I can find out and email you a report. Thank you, dear. Good luck." Hanging up she dropped the phone back into her apron pocket and resumed cleaning.
"Everything looks fine, Akane," 'Chou' said, sitting back with a satisfied expression. "Your brain chemistry is basically normal, there doesn't seem to be any left over effects from the infection, or any other symptoms or problems I can see. How is your therapy going?" The blue-haired woman smiled in a way that was calmer than those who knew her would have believed possible.

"Very well, I think. The doctor is extremely pleased with my progress over the last month. It's done more good since you cured me than since I started. She can't believe the change. Neither can I." Sitting beside her, the blonde looked pleased.

"I'm glad to hear that. Is your temper improved?" Akane looked slightly embarrassed but proud as well.

"Well, it's still kind of short. The doctor is pretty sure there's some sort of psychological issue at work there, but she's also fairly convinced that she can deal with it now. The drugs still don't work worth a damn but the various therapies are finally having an effect. I feel... calmer, I guess. The sort of low level constant anger is gone. You have no idea what it was like, I didn't realise myself until it wasn't there any more. Oh, I know I still get too angry too easily, but I don't lose it like I did." 'Chou' looked very pleased.

"Good. Very good. Keep at it. I wish you a lot of luck in getting better." She patted the young woman on the shoulder.

'Yori' grinned at her, feeling rather satisfied despite her history with the girl. "You might also consider extending your knowledge of the art. Nabiki tells me you've been working harder on it for some time now, which I personally think is a good thing. It builds discipline, which from the sound of it is something you've been lacking. No offence." Akane looked at her with an amused expression.

"None taken. You're right. I can see that now. I doubt I'll ever be more than competent in the art, at least by Neriman terms, but I think I can improve quite a bit from where I am." She sighed a little. "I can see now that I was always too impatient to really work at it the way I should have done. I wanted too much too soon. Ran..." Her voice hitched a little. "Ranma always told me that. He made it look so easy, you have no idea what he was like. Or perhaps you do. Both of you are so good at it, like he was. But looking back on it I can see that was the end result of an absolutely huge amount of incredibly hard and dangerous work. I expect much the same is true of you two." The magical girls looked at each other, then 'Yori' nodded slowly.

"Essentially, yes, that's true."

"I don't have it in me to work that hard, give up that much, for anything. Not many people do. But I am sure I can get a lot better than I am now," Akane smiled at them. "Thanks to you both." The blonde woman beside her squeezed her shoulder.

"No thanks necessary. We did what needed to be done." She glanced at Nabiki who had been listening silently, sitting next to Nodoka, then at her partner, who nodded. "All of this started because you came to Minato to meet us, after you saw a demonstration we did in the park months ago on a video, correct?" Akane nodded.

"Would you be interested in us doing something similar for you here? Call it an early Christmas present." The youngest Tendo's eyes widened to the point they made everyone else feel
sympathetic pain.

"Really? You'd do that?" The excitement in her voice made 'Chou' giggle.

"Of course. Why not?"


"Call anyone you want. We can't do more than about fifteen minutes since we're going to need to get home fairly soon, but we don't mind." Bouncing to her feet Akane dashed for the phone, frantically dialling. Nodoka looked at the two women with gratitude.

"Thank you both for this, and all the other things you've done for us. We owe you a lot." 'Chou' gracefully waved this away.

"No you don't. Healing Akane was the right thing to do, and she's so interested in us it's only fair to let her see what we've shown lots of people back home."

"Still, it's very nice of you." The elder Saotome woman looked at Nabiki who had an amused look on her face. "Why don't you go and tell your father. I'm sure he and Genma, not to mention their students, would find this interesting." The middle sister grinned and got up, shooting both visitors a glance filled with laughter. Moments later Akane rushed back into the room.

"Ukyo and Konatsu will be here in a couple of minutes, Shampoo is on her way as well. Thank you so much for this." 'Chou' smiled, then looked at Nodoka.

"Where should we do this?" she asked. Nodoka thought for a moment.

"I'd suggest between the house and the Dojo. The back yard is slightly bigger but the pond takes up quite a large part of it. If there's any martial arts going on out there someone is bound to end up in it as well." 'Yori' snickered.

"Because it's possessed?" Laughing, Nodoka nodded.

"Oh, yes. I'm working on that idea. They're starting to look worried when they walk past it." Akane and the two other women burst out laughing while the older Saotome woman looked pleased with herself. A minute or two later there was a knock on the door and Akane went to answer it, coming back with Ukyo and Konatsu. The chef stared at the two magical girls with amazement, then turned to her companion.

"I was beginning to think this was some sort of practical joke." The female-appearing man looked amused.

"I am fairly sure that these are the real Yori and Chou. They certainly look like the pictures I've seen and they have an awful lot of ki." Moments later Shampoo jumped over the garden wall and tapped on the door to the garden, then slid it open.

"Hello, Yori. Hello, Chou. It's nice to see you again," she said politely. They greeted her, then everyone went out into the yard. Nabiki was coming out of the Dojo followed by the two fathers and all their students, who studied the two women with interest.

'Yori' strode into the middle of the yard, looking around at the various people watching her. 'This really is kind of weird,' she thought to herself with inner laughter. 'I wonder what would happen if I revealed who I really am?' Dismissing the thought, she grinned at the occupants of the Dojo,
slowly turning in place to see everyone. "OK, Chou and I are doing a special request demonstration of our form of martial arts, with added magic. It will have to be fairly brief, as we don't have long, but I hope you find it interesting." Turning to face Akane, she bowed slightly, then stepped neatly to the side as 'Chou' lunged for her out of nowhere. The blonde smiled, flipping twice in mid-air before landing facing the shorter girl.

They stared at each other for a moment, bowed slightly, then began sparring. Everyone in the yard gaped in amazement, the chill of the mid-December day forgotten. Nabiki looked around and quickly mimicked the expressions of awe, inwardly highly amused. Devastatingly powerful blows passed between the two females at lightning speed, almost too quickly for even the experienced martial artists to register. Style after style came and went, too many for any of them to count. Each was executed with expert precision and remarkable grace. Soun was nearly in tears at the beauty of it while Genma was lost in the sheer skill involved. Shampoo and Ukyo exchanged awed glances, realising that these two were undoubtedly the most dangerous martial artists they'd ever heard of.

The terrible power behind the blows was apparent from the remarkable sounds even a miss made. Several times the onlookers could swear they'd felt a shockwave from a punch or a kick. There were definitely snapping noises from tiny sonic booms when 'Yori' unleashed a flurry of unbelievably fast punches at 'Chou', who neatly blocked all of them. She promptly did exactly the same back, the black-haired girl laughing with delight. They bounced around the middle of the yard, jumping over each other in a way that made even Genma, whose branch of the Anything Goes school was rooted firmly in aerial work, gasp in amazement. After a few minutes they suddenly stopped while facing each other from a distance of about two metres. Everyone noticed they didn't even seem to be breathing hard, like this was just a simple exercise.

Each took up a fencing posture, making Akane look excitedly at Shampoo, realising what was next. Sure enough, bright glowing energy swords suddenly appeared in their hands, one golden and one purple. There were gasps from some of the students who hadn't been completely sure whether the DVD they'd seen was real. Raising their light-sabre-like blades the pair touched the tips together making a crackling sound, before starting their match.

The energy blades made humming roars as they flashed about, crackling viciously against each other. Everyone took a few steps back, the sound was very intimidating. Both women produced a second blade, then began leaping about wildly, somersaulting from the ground to the wall then to the top of the roof as they got into it. Out in the street people stopped and watched in shock. Laughing, 'Yori' jumped clear across the yard from the house to the top of the Dojo, pursued by 'Chou' who was grinning madly. They chased each other around the roof for a couple of circuits, first 'Yori' in the lead then 'Chou'. The students began clapping and laughing at the sight. Eventually 'Yori' leapt across the yard again, landing on the roof of the house, then looking slightly surprised as she slipped on the snow covering it, disappearing from sight behind the house. A splash echoed across the yard making Nodoka sigh and cover her eyes. Nabiki started giggling.

"AHHH! The possessed pond got me!" 'Chou' stood on the edge of the Dojo roof and laughed until she nearly cried, both energy blades vanishing, while Nabiki collapsed in a fit of giggles. Nodoka groaned.

Genma and Soun exchanged rather worried looks, then stared in the direction the yell had come from. Suddenly a soaking wet 'Yori' faded into existence standing in the middle of the yard grinning at them. 'Chou' dropped down beside her and hugged her, still giggling like mad. "Idiot."

"Hey, I couldn't resist," the shorter woman said with laughter in her voice. She shivered a little. "Damn cold, though, and the ice was about a centimetre thick." Stepping to the side she went cross-eyed, visibly and comically straining, before a huge cloud of steam burst from her clothes,
leaving them bone dry. Everyone stared, then burst out laughing. The two magical girls bowed with wide smiles, turning to Akane who clapped loudly, grinning with delight.

"Merry Christmas, Akane," they chorused, before fading from view. Stunned silence fell before they all started talking. Akane had the widest smile on her face anyone could recall seeing in many years. Nabiki looked at her sister, very pleased, then slipped away.

Outside the gate she looked around carefully, seeing no one looking at her, then stepped into the alley a few metres down the street. In a conversational tone she said, "That was very amusing." 'Yori' and 'Chou' faded back into view, giggling, as they extended a shield around the Tendo sister as well to ensure no one overheard them.

"Did it make her happy?"

"Oh, yes, that it did. She'll be in a good mood for days I suspect. Thanks." She smirked. "The bit with the pond was extremely funny. Your father and mine are looking quite upset." 'Yori' chuckled.

"Good. Mom really does seem to have developed a sense of humour, she may be able to keep that going for weeks." In a very good mood, 'Chou' hugged her sister.

"That was fun. I'm glad Akane is doing so well. Perhaps we can be open about who we are sooner that we thought." Nabiki smiled.

"Maybe. Don't rush it, everyone has too much to lose." Her elder sister nodded, looking sad for a moment.

"Ah well. One day, I hope." Releasing her sister she stepped back. "We'll see you on Christmas day, then. Only a week to go. Bye, Nabiki."

"Bye, sis. Take care." The middle sister watched as the two women jumped onto the roof, fading from view as they went, then returned to the Dojo after carefully checking no one was around, still smiling.

Descending the stairs early on Christmas morning, Nabiki yawned widely, closing her mouth with a snap and mumbling to herself. Never a morning person at the best of times she felt that seven AM was far too early for any normal person to be awake. Glancing at the window into the darkness of the winter morning she shivered a little. The temperature in the last two or three days had dropped very low and there was close to thirty centimetres of snow on the ground accompanied by a high wind. Drifting snow piled up against the side of the Dojo she could just make out in the darkness. As she passed it she moved the thermostat up a couple of degrees, the sight of the snow made her feel colder than the actual temperature of the house was.

The pond had finally frozen thickly enough that when fights ended up in it, as they inevitably did, the participants bounced rather than splashed. Peering out the door from the hallway she found that she couldn't even see it any more, the snow in the garden was thick enough it covered everything in a pristine layer of white crystals, only a couple of the larger stones around the edge protruding through giving away it's location. Looking at the snow blowing off the top of the wall she decided that she was quite happy to remain indoors for the moment. The brunette wandered into the kitchen in search of coffee, yawning again and knuckling one eye tiredly.

"Good morning, Nabiki," Nodoka said, turning from the stove with a just boiled kettle in her hand. "And Merry Christmas." The younger woman tried to respond intelligibly but yawned half-way through the words, making Nodoka smile, then busy herself making coffee. A moment later she
handed Nabiki a cup. "This should wake you up," she said, looking amused.

"Thanks, Auntie," Nabiki responded groggily. Taking the cup she drank half of it in one long swallow, coughing a little as she came up for air.

"Slowly, dear. Don't drown yourself." Nodoka giggled slightly, watching the middle sister with affection, before turning back to making breakfast for the household.

"Is anyone else up yet?" Nabiki asked feeling more human as the caffeine started to take effect. Nodoka shook her head without turning away from the stove.

"No, not yet. I'm a little surprised you are, in fact, this is earlier than you normally manage to drag yourself out of bed." The brunette laughed.

"All too true. But I though I'd come and help with breakfast." Looking over her shoulder Nodoka seemed pleased.

"Thank you, that's much appreciated." Both women busied themselves with cooking and setting the table, as over the next half hour the other three occupants of the house slowly arrived, taking their places in the living room. Akane smiled at her sister as the older woman brought the tea in, sitting next to her while Nodoka served the food.

"Merry Christmas, Nabiki," she said, sounding calm and happy. Nabiki looked at her, grinned, and wished her the same.

"You're looking good today, sis," she said, sipping some tea, "very happy." Akane nodded.

"I am. I just feel... kind of at peace with the world at the moment." She smiled. "The therapy is working well, I've been cured of a nasty problem, my family is here with me, it's Christmas, and I know a couple of magical girls. Well, six, really, but mainly Yori and Chou. And there's a nice Christmas lunch to look forward to." Reaching over with her hand Nabiki squeezed her sister's arm, smiled, and began eating.

After breakfast, Nabiki and Akane helped clear the table, loading the dishwasher while Nodoka cleared up the stove and counter-top. Once they were done, they all went back into the living room.

"So, would anyone have any problems with exchanging gifts early this year?" Nabiki asked the room at large. "I know we normally do it in the afternoon but I'm going out to a party around two and won't be back until tomorrow morning." She looked around. No one seemed to have any objections. "Great. I'll be back in a minute." She disappeared up the stairs, while the others looked at each other then got up and went to retrieve their presents. Shortly thereafter they were all sitting around a pile of colourfully wrapped boxes in the middle of the table.

"Who goes first?" Akane asked, inspecting the pile curiously. Nodoka reached out and picked up a small box wrapped in shiny red paper.

"I will. Nabiki, this is for you." She handed it to the middle sister, who accepted it with a smile. Unwrapping it she unveiled a cardboard box with a picture on the front that made her grin.

"Thanks, Auntie. I've been meaning to get a new phone for ages, this is the one I was thinking of. How did you know?" Nodoka looked pleased.

"You mentioned it to Akane once as you were going past the shop, she remembered, and told me. They were on special a couple of weeks ago and I couldn't resist." Opening the box the brunette removed her new phone and admired it, before unpacking the charger and plugging it in, then connecting the phone to charge. "Apparently it even works as a very small television," the older
woman remarked. "And it has a camera in it. The man in the shop said it had all sorts of options, although I think a lot of them are just there to make it sound better." Nabiki laughed, nodding.

"That's pretty common. But it's a very good phone even with all the gimmicks." Pulling a large green box from the pile she flipped it neatly to her father who caught it easily, smiling. "That's for you, Dad." She picked up another apparently identical one and bounced it off Genma's head, who winced, not having been paying attention as he was looking at the box in his friend's hand. "And that's for you, Uncle Genma." Everyone but Genma laughed, while he rubbed his scalp and looked mildly embarrassed.

"Thank you, Nabiki," he said, opening the box. Both men pulled out brand new Gis, made of soft but hard-wearing cloth, Genma's a dark blue while Soun's was deep green. She knew both were their favourite colours. Soun held his up and looked at it, a broad smile on his face growing as he noticed the embroidery on the back which read, "Tendo-Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts", in elegantly sewn Kanji. On the left breast was embroidered his name. Genma looked at the name on the back of the Gi and frowned, but before he could say anything, Nabiki pointed to his own present.

"Read yours," she suggested. He did so, finding that his one read "Saotome-Tendo School of Anything Goes Martial Arts", which made him laugh and nod his head.

"Thank you, Nabiki. A neat solution, and a nice present." Nodoka looked at both presents and laughed slightly, smiling at the middle sister, who grinned back.

Over the next ten minutes they exchanged more gifts, ending up with numerous items of clothing, various ornaments, expensive chocolate, books and DVDs. Akane received from Nodoka a necklace in the form of the same sort of duck she had in wood hanging on her door, which made her smile. It was quite small, gold with silver highlights, on a silver chain. She held it up in front of her and inspected it closely. "It's exactly like the sign. Where did you find it?" The older woman appeared satisfied with her reaction.

"An old friend of mine makes jewellery, she has done for many years. She's even supplied your Mr Ito a few times. I asked her to make this for me."

"It's beautiful. Thank you."

Eventually there was only one box left on the table. Everyone looked at it for a moment, then Nabiki picked it up and looked reflectively at it. She glanced at Akane. "I got this months ago, it was a once in a lifetime offer. I thought you might like it. On the one hand it wasn't expensive, but on the other it's very rare indeed, and based on recent events you might like it even more than before." She handed it to her sister who was looking very curious at this point, only slightly less so than everyone else. Akane gently shook the box, trying to work out the contents from the sound, then carefully unwrapped it. Revealed inside was a cardboard box with a lid, which she removed, then she froze for a second before a huge grin spread across her face. Nabiki enjoyed her expression with a smile of her own.

"Where on earth did you find these?" Akane asked in a reverent whisper, staring at the contents of the box. Her sister looked proud.

"Some friends of mine in Minato came across them, it's kind of a weird story, and long. The main thing is that they are very, very rare. Only a small number were made and it's unlikely that any more will exist. I've got two sets, one for you and one for Shampoo. The offer was made out of the blue and I grabbed it." The three parents were becoming very curious as to what was in the box, exchanging curious glances. Akane noticed and smiled. Putting it on the table she removed two
smaller boxes from the larger one, admiring them for a moment before turning them around and holding them up so the others could see. Nodoka started laughing while Soun and Genma grinned.

"I don't believe it," Soun said, reaching out and taking one as his daughter handed it to him, while she gave the other one to Nodoka. "It looks exactly like her." He read the side of the box the Yori doll was in and laughed. "Fantastic." Nodoka was admiring the Chou doll through the transparent front of the box.

"These are remarkably accurate, Nabiki," she said with an amused and impressed expression. The middle sister nodded, looking pleased.

"I know. They're pretty good, aren't they? Like I said, I never expected that Akane would actually go and bring Yori and Chou home with her, but I knew she was into magical girls and I couldn't resist. I must admit I didn't know how into magical girls she was." She gave her sister a sly look that was returned with a stuck-out tongue and a giggle. "Apparently they are pretty protective of their image, they're very smart and thought ahead. They have legal protection of their likenesses and so on and crack down on people who try to cash in on it. I'm a little surprised that it doesn't happen more than it does, but I'm told that people in their community tend to protect them. Anyway, these were made by a company that they set their lawyers on, they only made a very small number before they got shut down. A few of them have been given away as presents, my friend managed to get some and thought I might like them." She shrugged, smiling. "Not really my thing but I knew someone who'd appreciate them." Akane got both boxes back and looked at them again, grinning with joy.

"Thanks, 'Biki. These are fantastic."

"Normally, I'd say leave them in the boxes as an investment, but you couldn't sell them legally anyway, so it's up to you." Akane nodded as she listened to her sister, thought for a moment, then carefully opened the Chou box and removed the doll very gently. Looking at it she admired it from all sides before doing the same with the Yori one. Putting them on the table she leaned over and hugged her sister.

"Again, thanks. They're wonderful." Nabiki looked pleased.

"I hope Shampoo likes hers as well. I'll stop by the Café on the way to the train station." She and Nodoka cleared away the wrapping paper which was all over the room while Genma and Soun went to try on their new Gis, and Akane sat and played with the dolls for a few minutes, looking very pleased. Eventually she put them carefully back into the boxes which she took into her bedroom and placed on a shelf overlooking her bed. Nabiki came up the stairs and stood in the doorway, looking at their positioning with a smile. "Protecting you during the night?" she asked mischievously. Akane appeared slightly embarrassed.

"Um..." Her sister laughed gently.

"When I go to the station, do you want to come as far as the Cat Café?" The blue-haired young woman nodded.

"Yes. I've got presents for them as well."

"OK, I'll be leaving about an hour after lunch." The middle sister went into her room to put her presents away and to transfer all her contacts from her old phone onto the new one. By the time she'd finished and gone back downstairs Nodoka was just starting the lunch preparations. "Do you want any help, Auntie?" she asked. The older woman smiled at her.
"Thank you, Nabiki, that would be nice. Can you peel those potatoes, please?" They got to work, Akane joining them some time later, making them glance at each other with apprehension. "Um, Akane..." Her sister snickered.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to try cooking. I was just watching." Nodoka sighed slightly in relief, then looked at the younger sister with mild guilt, reassured when she smiled faintly. She watched with interest, the three of them talking while the two older ones prepared the meal. Finally Nodoka closed the oven, looking satisfied. She glanced at her watch.

"That will need to roast for about three hours, the potatoes and onions should go in around two hours from now. I'll do some vegetables and salad now and put them in the fridge for later." Turning to the two sisters she smiled. "Thank you for your help, Nabiki." Then she laughed, glancing at Akane. "And thank you for not helping." She smiled impishly. Amused and slightly startled by the quip, the two younger women exchanged a glance before giggling. Grinning to herself Nodoka went off into the house, leaving the other two in the kitchen. When she was gone, Nabiki laughed.

"She's really becoming quite funny," she said with approval. Akane nodded, smiling.

"I know. It's kind of weird, she's always had a sense of humour but until recently hasn't shown it very much. I like it." Her sister looked at her in an evaluating manner.

"I'm also rather pleased and impressed that her comment about cooking didn't make you angry." The blue-haired woman nodded a little, understanding what she meant.

"I know it's odd to you, bearing in mind what I've been like for so long. I wish I could cook better, but I'm not totally oblivious to the fact that I'm not very good. It does annoy me a lot, but lately I'm having a much easier time keeping my temper. Seeing the funny side of it helps." She laughed. "And Auntie Nodoka is difficult to get angry at." Nabiki listened in wonder. This certainly didn't sound like her sister, although she was more than happy to have an improved version of the youngest family member around. Suddenly feeling a surge of Christmas spirit she grabbed her sister and hugged her with a smile.

"Well done, Akane. Very well done. There's hope for you yet," she said with a smile, yet at the same time in a heartfelt manner. Akane looked pleased.

They went into the living room to see both fathers cheating their way through yet another Shogi game. Sitting down next to each other to watch, they amused themselves by whispering to each other just loud enough for the men to hear about how they were cheating, and giggling when either one looked up irritably. Every time one of them looked away the other would seize the opportunity to move pieces around, making them giggle all the more. After some twenty minutes of this Genma's left eyelid was beginning to twitch and Soun was gritting his teeth. Eventually they both stopped, exchanged glances, then turned to glare at the girls, who smiled innocently at them.

"Nabiki, Akane, my dears, don't you have something more interesting to do?" Soun asked sweetly, his fingers tightening on a game piece until they went white. Akane looked at Nabiki with her eyebrows raised. The older sister looked back and shrugged. Then they turned back to the two fathers.

"Nope," they chorused, appearing pleased. Soun sighed heavily.

"I'll play the winner," Nabiki said, taking them by surprise. They exchanged glances.

"Ah, Nabiki, you haven't played in years as far as I know," her father tentatively said. She
chuckled.

"Neither have you. Both of you just cheat." The men looked slightly embarrassed, although that didn't stop Genma moving a piece when he thought Soun wasn't paying attention. Akane burst out laughing. Eventually they resumed the game, Genma 'winning' after another ten minutes. Soun looked annoyed and stood up, waving Nabiki to take his place.

"Fine. There you go." He stomped into the kitchen to get a drink. When he came back he sat next to Akane to watch. Nabiki took his place and reset the pieces, slapping Genma's hand when he tried to help. Muttering to himself he pulled his hand back, looking slightly surprised. The girl was a lot faster than he expected. She smiled coldly at him, so coldly he almost thought the temperature of the room had dropped.

"My move, I think," she said, pondering the board. After a moment she made her opening move. He stared at her, then considered the board, slowly moving a piece. She responded rapidly. The first dozen moves proceeded fairly quickly but the game started to slow down at that point. Nabiki had taken several pieces, making Genma look mildly irritated. He stared hard at her, then made another move. Suddenly his eyes widened.

Pointing over her shoulder he cried, "Look, a ghost!", his other hand darting out to move a couple of pieces to his advantage when she turned to look. Unfortunately, she didn't take her eyes off the board, slapping his hand again as he reached for it. "Ow!" he said, quickly taking his hand back. The smile he got was pure ice. Even Soun shivered.

"I think not," she said in a voice that would freeze mercury. Genma mumbled imprecations, while Akane grinned, impressed. Eventually he made a legitimate move which she matched within seconds. Once more several moves played out without incident. After ten minutes or so Nabiki glanced up, then an expression of total horror slowly developed as she shrunk back from the door behind Genma, radiating terror and emitting panicked little whimpering noises. He looked at her in amazement then quickly glanced over his shoulder, as both Akane and Soun also whirled to see what she was looking at.

Nothing was visible, of course. Several seconds passed, after which they all exchanged glances, turning back to Nabiki who was sitting in the same place, a look of serene contentment on her face, her hands folded on her legs. Genma gazed at her for some time before suspiciously examining the board. Akane stared at her sister in wonder. Soun looked worried, then slowly a look both impressed and proud crossed his face, ending up becoming a faint smile. Her opponent couldn't see any change to the board from what he remembered, which worried him. She must be cheating in a way he couldn't see. Eventually he carefully chose a piece and moved it. Nabiki's expression became extremely predatory as she whipped out a hand and moved her own piece.

"Check," she announced with extreme pleasure. Genma stared in horror.

"Um..." He sweated a little, glancing at her face which made him shrink back slightly. He really didn't like the look on it. After a couple of minutes he reached out for a piece, then pulled his hand back, shaking his head. He tried again, slowly moving the piece, thinking hard, before taking his finger off it. Nabiki laughed, instantly making her move.

"Check mate. Thank you for the game, Uncle Genma." The smile she gave him was the most evil one he'd ever seen. Akane collapsed in laughter, while her father started clapping. Nabiki stood, bowed slightly to her defeated opponent, who stared in disbelief, before happily going up to her room for a nap.

"How did she do that?" Genma said slowly, staring at the board trying to work out how she'd
cheated. Akane shook her head, wordlessly going to the TV and turning it on. He turned to his old friend. "What did she do? How did she cheat, I didn't see anything?" Soun snickered.

"She didn't cheat. She beat you the hard way. Or for her, perhaps, the easy way." Laughing, he clapped his friend on the shoulder. "She may not be a martial artist, but my god she's got the attitude to be a good one. You didn't stand a chance." Genma was still trying to work out what happened nearly ten minutes later.

"Hello, Nabiki, and you, Akane," Cologne said, her croaking voice pleased. "Merry Christmas." Nabiki smiled at her.

"Elder. The same to you. How are you?" The ancient woman chuckled.

"Good, good. And your family?"

"They're all fine, thanks." Waving the two sisters inside, Cologne shut the door with a shiver.

"Damn, it's cold out there. At least the snow has stopped."

"It's about forty centimetres deep now," Akane said, stamping snow off her boots and taking her coat off. Nabiki followed suit, both of them placing their coats on one of the tables in the restaurant as Cologne locked the door again. They took off their boots and followed the elder inside the rear part of the Café, up the stairs and into the large room above the restaurant itself that served as the Amazon's living room. Shampoo and Mousse were in it talking quietly in Mandarin, looking out the window onto the street. They turned and smiled at the two Tendo sisters.

"Hi, Akane," Shampoo said happily. "And Nabiki, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks, Shampoo," the brunette said. She looked at the Amazon man. "Hello, Mousse, it's been quite a while." He nodded, walking over and shaking her hand, his eyes nearly invisible behind his thick glasses.

"Indeed it has, Nabiki. I hope your studies are going well?" The middle sister smiled at him.

"Very well, actually. That said I'm glad to have a couple of weeks off." He laughed.

"I can imagine. Merry Christmas, by the way." They all sat down in various chairs, Shampoo handing out drinks. Nabiki sipped her small glass of wine appreciatively.

"Nice. Thank you." Picking up the backpack she'd carried upstairs she held it up. "I'm off to a party so I can't stay long, but I've got some presents here." Reaching into it she pulled out a flat package and handed it to Cologne, who looked surprised. "I saw this a few weeks ago when I was visiting some friends, I thought it might appeal to you, elder." The old Amazon hefted the package, then unwrapped it to reveal a western-style book, obviously quite old. Her eyes lit up.

"A first edition of 'Tobin's Spirit Guide'!" she exclaimed, impressed. "This is a very rare book, Nabiki. Thank you very much. I've been looking for a copy for many years." With some care she opened it, flipping through the pages. It was written in English which she read easily. Closing it again she smiled at the middle sister, her wrinkled old face looking like a happy prune. "It's a wonderful gift. I hope it wasn't too expensive." Nabiki shook her head with a smile.

"Not too bad. Some friends of mine know the bookseller and persuaded him to give me a good price." She turned to Mousse. "I also found something I think you might like, Mousse. I know you're an expert with blades, another friend of mine mentioned she'd seen something in a shop in
Minato so I went to have a look, and found this." Handing him a small but heavy box wrapped in purple paper she smiled. "I hope you like it." Curiously the young man accepted the box, removing the wrapping to reveal a dark polished wooden container with a hinged lid. Flipping the catch on the front open he lifted the lid and stared at the contents, a smile spreading across his face.

Reaching in he pulled out a fifteen-centimetre throwing knife, the heavy blade comprising the bulk of the weapon with a ring at the hilt end to hold it with. It was made from dark steel with a wavy lamination pattern on the blade showing where the metal had been repeatedly folded. The box contained five more exactly like it in individual slots in the red-velvet lining. "It's beautiful," he said with wonder, putting the box on his knee and cautiously testing the edge with his finger. "And extremely sharp." She nodded.

"The shopkeeper said the set was nearly a hundred and fifty years old. Apparently they were made for some rich landowner back in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, but he died before they were finished. They ended up being sold over and over, he didn't think they were ever actually used. Because there's no makers mark for some reason they wouldn't fetch the price that they really should, the provenance is iffy at best, but they're very well made. I had someone I know who knows about weapons look at them and he says he's pretty sure they're authentic, and most likely made by a real expert." Mousse balanced the knife on the palm of his hand for a moment, then flipped it into the air and expertly caught it with his finger through the ring, spinning it around a couple of times.

"Very nicely balanced as well. Thanks very much, this is a fantastic gift." Looking embarrassed he added, "I didn't get you anything, I'm afraid." She laughed slightly.

"Don't worry about it. It was a spur of the moment thing. I hope you find a use for them." He smiled at her, putting the knife back in the box and slipping the entire thing away into ki storage.

"I will. Even if I don't they're still beautiful." She nodded, then turned to Shampoo after glancing at Akane who was trying not to grin too widely.

"For you, I came across something silly but also very rare, which I think you'll like. I got Akane the same thing and she's very pleased indeed." Her sister nodded with a wide smile. Shampoo looked intrigued. Pulling out the last gift Nabiki handed it over. Unwrapping the box Shampoo opened it and stared at the contents for a moment, before laughing delightedly. She pulled out the Chou doll in it's box, inspecting it closely.

"This is great, Nabiki. Thanks. How did you managed to get these?" She showed it to Cologne while Nabiki explained the story she'd told her family. The elder was grinning as she read the back of the box.

"Very impressive. And such a good likeness!" Shampoo nodded, amused, as she looked at the Yori doll. Mousse watched her face for a moment with a grin.

"Aren't you ladies a little old to be playing with dolls?" he asked with mild sarcasm. Shampoo and Akane glanced at each other, then shook their heads.

"Not Chou and Yori dolls," Akane said, laughing. "You're never too old for them." Mousse chuckled while Cologne roared with laughter.

"You've put a lot of thought into these gifts, Nabiki. It was very nice of you," the old woman said approvingly. "Especially considering our history." The middle sister shrugged.

"All water under the bridge, really. We've known each other for quite a while, been through a lot. Why not?" She glanced at her watch. "I'm going to have to go, the train is in about fifteen minutes
and with this much snow it's going to take me ten just to get to the station. Thank you for the wine. Akane, I'll see you tomorrow around lunch-time, OK?” Her sister nodded.

"Yep, that's fine. Have fun and say hi to Maiko and Rika for me."

"I will." Cologne took her back downstairs and opened the front door for her as she put her boots and coat back on. Just as she was about to leave, the old woman put a hand on her sleeve. The brunette looked down at the small woman.

"Seriously, Nabiki Tendo, thank you very much for the gifts. They were all very appropriate. You didn't have to go to so much trouble." Nabiki smiled at the elder.

"It was no trouble. I don't have many friends, but I think you three count.” She nodded respectfully to the ancient Amazon and slipped out into the cold, Cologne closing the door behind her with a thoughtful look on her face.
Chapter 32

Clutching a bottle of beer Nabiki sat on the sofa and looked around the living-room of her sister's apartment, smiling to herself. Aiko and Tamiko were talking to the female demon she'd seen at the warehouse the night she'd tracked the errant pair down, laughing loudly at something the demoness had said. Kasumi was talking to Uthryyl in the trade language, gesturing wildly, explaining some point about the use of the illusion spell, occasionally turning into something else by way of demonstration. Neither one of them seemed to consider this odd. Misaki was eating. Again. Ranma was talking to Uthryyl's wife who she'd been introduced to when she arrived. Shaking her head slightly, she looked up as Fumiko sat next to her and reached for one of the bottles on the coffee-table, grinning at her.

All four magical girls were wearing normal clothing for the first time Nabiki had seen, Fumiko had skin-tight black jeans and a very dark blue silk blouse on, which suited her. "Good party," she said, casually popping the cap off the beer bottle with her thumbnail in a way than made Nabiki snicker. She was clearly much stronger than she appeared even without the magic power boost. The middle sister nodded, taking a gulp from her own bottle.

"Yes, but the strangest one I've ever been to." Fumiko glanced around, looking slightly puzzled, which made Nabiki laugh. Eventually the off-duty magical girl worked out what she meant and giggled.

"OK, I see what you mean. I suppose it is a bit weird from that viewpoint. It's pretty much normal to us all now." She shrugged, smiling. "What did you think of the roast g'rargh?" Nabiki looked over to the dining table on which a very large plate held the half-eaten carcass of something with six legs and a long tail. It had been delicious, even though it looked extremely odd.

"I think I have a new favourite meat, to be honest," she said, making Fumiko chuckle. "It was nice of Uthryyl to bring it. Perhaps they should be importing those things at the same time as exporting chocolate." The other woman shook her head sadly.

"I wish. They're fantastic eating but apparently quite a delicacy even on his world. They simply can't farm enough of them to export them. Misaki is annoyed about that, she really likes fresh g'rargh. We've only ever had it about three or four times, but given the chance she'd be having g'rargh sandwiches for lunch every day." She looked over to her sister, who was heading for the table with determination, smiling a bit. "Looks like she's ready for a fourth course."

Nabiki looked at her own plate, working out how hungry she was. Not quite enough yet. "I've had two servings so far myself. Luckily it looks like there's plenty left." She laughed, making the other woman shake her head. "As you've heard, you can get used to anything. Even this." Her sister, carrying a heaping plate, slumped down on the other arm of the sofa and grunted happily at them, eating contentedly.

"You see? Never stops. She should be the size of three of me. I don't know how she does it." The middle Tendo snickered as Misaki looked at them with raised eyebrows before deciding that commenting was too much trouble. They all looked up as Ranma came over and stood next to Nabiki, smiling at them.
"Having fun?" he asked, glancing around. They nodded. Sitting on the other side of the Tendo woman from Fumiko he reached for the bowl of potato snacks on the table, popping a handful into his mouth. "What did you think of the roast g'ragh?" he asked, causing Fumiko and Nabiki to look at each other and laugh.

"We just had that conversation, Ranma," the middle sister said. He grinned. "It's very good indeed."

"That it is. Assuming Misaki leaves any, we'll have quite a bit to freeze. It's wonderful in a stew." The taciturn woman looked at him, then at her plate, then speculatively at the table across the room, before shrugging. They all snickered. "So, did Cologne and the others like the gifts you got?" he asked Nabiki.

"Yes, very much. Thanks for suggesting that book, and for persuading your friend to let it go so cheaply. She really liked it." The martial artist looked amused.

"I thought she would. It's the sort of thing she's interested in and it's quite rare. What about those knives for Mousse?"

"He was very pleased as well. The man certainly appreciates a good blade." She laughed. "At least he's not throwing them at you any more."

Ranma nodded with a wide smile. "I have to admit, even though it wouldn't do him much good now, I'm glad of that. The amount of weaponry he left lying around Nerima was amazing. I was forever picking it up. That's where half the stuff in the practice room came from. Kas and I both still have a couple of hundred kilos of the better metalwork stashed away in ki space, just in case." He shook his head in wonder. "I have no idea where he got it all, or why he never bothered retrieving most of it. He must buy in bulk."

"I think he'd bother to pick those knives up, he seemed very taken with them." She sipped her beer again, helping herself to some snacks as well. "Shampoo and Akane both loved the action figures of you two as well. It's extremely funny under the circumstances." She laughed, remembering the look on her sister's face. "Akane is still talking about your demonstration last week as well. She was hugely impressed and very pleased that you'd do that for her. The bit with the pond was inspired. Auntie Nodoka has been milking it for all it's worth. Your father is starting to look quite scared when he walks past the thing." Ranma laughed as Fumiko and Misaki exchanged quizzical glances. Noticing, Nabiki explained the story. Both of them were giggling furiously by the end.

The middle sister continued talking about the last few days, in the end all the occupants of the room joining them and listening. The three demons sat on the floor as the sofa was full, appearing perfectly at home, Uthryyl and the female who wasn't his wife, but had turned out to be his daughter Onkra, drinking beer while his wife Quannyr was sipping from a glass of wine. When Nabiki told the story of her Shogi game with Genma, Ranma nearly slid off the sofa he was laughing so hard.

"Oh, god, I wish I'd seen that. You psyched him out beautifully." She grinned.

"Damn right I did. He was completely sure I must be cheating and spent too much time trying to work out how rather than playing the game." She flipped a potato chip into her mouth looking pleased with herself. "What I didn't tell them is that I've been playing Shogi with friends at university for years. I'm not the best player by a long shot but I'm better than they are." The brunette looked very satisfied with herself. Kasumi giggled.

"Well done, sister. It sounds very funny."
"Oh, trust me, it was. Especially when I faked them out with the scared look. That worked
amazingly well." She demonstrated, adding a trembling hand pointing at some eldritch threat from
the kitchen. Everyone clapped. Straightening up from her pseudo-terrified cowering she bowed
slightly from a seated position. "Thank you." Ranma laughed, studying her with interest.

"Yes, you can act very well, even without the disguise. That was pretty good."

"Before I found you guys again I'd never really considered it, but it turns out to be fun. Ms Aoyama
was brilliant, at least with Ryoga." She got an introspective look. "I wonder if he's stopped running
yet?" Looking at Ranma again as a thought struck her, she added, "Oh, yes, Cologne was quite
annoyed she missed your demo. She was out shopping at the time. The old girl was bitching about
missing it for a couple of days according to Shampoo." This made him chuckle.

"Perhaps next time."

Onkra turned her head to look at Kasumi. "Is it time for the ice-cream yet?" she asked hopefully,
her ears cocked forward like an eager dog. Kasumi smiled at her.

"I think so. I assume everyone wants some?" The demons, Misaki, and Ranma all nodded
particularly hard. Nabiki watched with amusement. "I've got chocolate, rum and raisin, mint, and
strawberry." They all considered the options and placed their orders. Nabiki went to help her sister
dish it out in the kitchen, grinning to herself.

"I'm glad I came, sis. This is a lot of fun." She pulled the correct number of bowls out of the
cupboard as Kasumi opened the freezer.

"I'm glad you came as well. We don't have people over very often, and rarely this many, but I like
it. Sometimes I miss having people around me," the elder sister said, opening the first container of
ice cream while pushing the freezer door shut with her foot. "Don't get me wrong," she added
hastily, "I love being here with Ranma and we have a good life, but every now and then it's nice to
have a lot of people around." Nabiki nodded understandingly.

"It's a bit odd having a Christmas party with magical girls, never mind demons at the same time,
but they're all good people."

"Very much so. You know how we feel about the girls and Uthryyll's family are close to us as well.
We get on very well with them." She sighed a little. "There are a lot of other people we like as well
but very few of them know the truth about us. It's safer that way, but at times like this I'm sorry
about it. It would be nice to have parties as large as we used to have in the old days in the Dojo."
Her sister looked sad.

"I know. I miss them as well. We haven't had one since, well, since you left. The Dojo was a wreck
for ages and even since we rebuilt it we just haven't quite got around to it."

"Perhaps one day. Things do seem to be heading towards us being able to reveal ourselves
eventually." They piled the bowls and some spoons onto a couple of trays and went back into the
living room, Kasumi continuing the conversation when everyone had what they wanted. "I was just
saying to Nabiki that with the way things seem to be going over the last few months it's not
impossible that we could perhaps tell the people back in Nerima about us one day." Ranma looked
thoughtfully at her, a spoonful of chocolate ice-cream in his mouth, before swallowing.

"It's slowly heading that way. I have to admit I'm not all that fusssed about ever doing it but I know
you'd like to tell your family. I can understand that, especially with the improvements to Akane's
mental state recently." He sighed. "And I even admit that seeing my mother has made me miss her
a little. She's definitely changed for the better, from what I've seen. Pop still makes me want to kick the shit out of him when I see him, I'm going to have to work on that, but..." Helplessly he shrugged, unable to put what he was feeling into words. His wife smiled at him sympathetically, understanding his problem.

Aiko looked interested. "Assuming you do let them know about yourselves, would you tell them everything?" Everyone looked at her. "I mean, there's a hell of a lot of things that hardly anyone outside this room knows about. Some of those things could cause problems if they got out. Could your family be trusted to keep it a secret?" Ranma shrugged.

"At one point I would definitely have said no. But the main reason for that is stuffing herself with mint ice cream next to me." Nabiki glared at him, then snickered. He was basically right. Aiko laughed. "Now, I'm not sure, really. There are just so many people involved. The Amazons, Ukyo, my family, Kas's family." Sighing he waved his spoon a little, indicating the scope of the problem. "Too many to keep it a secret for long even if they all promised. It would leak."

Uthryyl asked, "If it did get out what would that mean for 'Yori' and 'Chou'? Your alter-egos are highly respected both here and in several other places. Do you think if it became known that they were actually Ranma and Kasumi it would cause problems?" Dropping his spoon back into his empty bowl and putting it on the table, Ranma looked depressed.

"That's something that worries me. The 'Yori' side of things has grown far bigger than I ever expected. At first it was mainly just fun but now it's also more important than that. I like being Yori. I'm helping people in a way I've never managed before. But I also like being me. Yori is as real as Ranma is, now, I can't see giving one up in favour of the other. If everyone finds out that we're the same person, never mind all the other people, I have no idea what would happen."

Sighing, he looked at his wife, who smiled at him.

"I feel the same about Chou. It's just another aspect of who I really am, one I very much enjoy. I wouldn't want to lose that."

"Do you even need to tell people about that part?" Tamiko asked. "Couldn't you just turn up one day as your real selves, meet your families, then come back here and get back to doing what you're doing? They don't need to know everything, or possibly much of anything." Ranma and Kasumi exchanged glances.

"You don't know our families and all the other loonies back in Furinkan. If they find out anything, sooner or later they're likely to find out quite a lot of the rest. The biggest problem is Cologne, actually, she'll recognise our power signatures aren't what they used to be at some point. We can disguise them very well but it would only take one mistake." Ranma shook his head. "Kas would be the weak point. It would be difficult to pretend she was still the same old Kasumi, she's changed much more than I have." He looked at his wife with pride. "In so many wonderful ways."

Everyone was silent for a while thinking about the issue.

Eventually Kasumi reluctantly added, "We also might have another problem on the horizon." They looked at her. "One of my agents found out that Sergeant Harada was at the Furinkan district police station talking to Lieutenant Sasaki recently. He was asking questions about Akane and the Dojo."

Nabiki looked shocked, while Aiko sighed.

"He's a very smart and persistent man is our Sergeant. I like him a lot but he could be a problem." Ranma nodded with a troubled expression.

"I like him very much as well. And respect him, he's an exceptionally good police officer. A good man. Hopefully we can trust him if it comes to that."
Uthryyl nodded slowly. "I think you probably can. I got a very good impression from him when we
had that nasty little problem a while ago. He strikes me as a man of honour and integrity." Smiling
in a way that to most people would have looked threatening just based on the number of teeth, he
added, "Any decent trader becomes very good at reading people, you have to know who you can
trust." Nabiki nodded, looking at him with interest.

"Very true." Turning to her sister she asked, "Did your agent give you much more than that?"
Kasumi got up and retrieved a printout from the study, coming back with it quickly. She handed it
to her sister before sitting down again. Skimming it Nabiki laughed at the From: field at the top.
"Agent Orange?" Kasumi giggled.

"She has a very strange sense of humour for an eighty year old woman." The middle sister
inspected the printout carefully, impressed despite herself. It was very detailed and professional, as
good as anything she could produce.

"OK. So, they're old friends, that explains why he talked to this Lieutenant Sasaki in the first place.
Hmm. Sasaki. I know that name." She thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. He's the one who
got the story in the paper about the assault case just after you guys left." Ranma nodded.

"Right. I know him a little, he was always a pretty decent fellow."

"Let's see... Talked about Akane, her history... Stuff about the background of the Dojo. Various
things about all of us. OK, he mentioned me..." She smiled. "Scary girl. I like that." Her sister and
brother-in-law looked amused. "Some info about when you left, not much there. Quite a lot about
Ranma, he seems fairly impressed with you." Ranma seemed pleased. "Harada asked some pretty
smart questions, but not some of the ones I'd have expected. Interesting." She put the report on the
table and tilted her head back resting it on the back of the sofa, staring at the ceiling while
thinking, working out possible actions and repercussions. "Very interesting. He's clearly interested
in Ranma Saotome, but my guess is not as a primary goal. He didn't ask the right questions if he
suspected Ranma and Yori are the same person. Not to say he won't work it out in the end, I think
he's probably capable of it, but I have a feeling that he's thinking along different lines." The
brunette fell silent, while everyone watched with a certain amount of respect.

Eventually she lowered her gaze and looked at Ranma, then her sister. "I think, based on that
report, that he may be working on the basis that Yori and Chou know Ranma and Kasumi, not that
they are Ranma and Kasumi," she said slowly. "Some of the questions were wrong if he was trying
to get evidence that you were the same people." With a small shrug she added, "The end result
probably depends on his motivations for even looking into all this. If it's just personal curiosity
probably nothing will come of it. If he was working on it from the viewpoint of a professional
capacity, I'm not sure. I don't know him enough to be able to predict his actions well."

"It's possible that he wasn't looking for information on Ranma at all, it just came up in
conversation," Fumiko said, having picked up the printout and read it curiously. "From what I can
see here it was this Lieutenant that raised the subject in the first place. If that's the case he might
not take it any further anyway." Nabiki looked at her for a moment then nodded.

"You may be right."

"Well, whatever happens we have some advance knowledge of it, which is a help." Kasumi sighed
a little. "I do hope that he's sensible about whatever conclusions he comes to and talks to us first." Her husband glanced at her.

"I think he would. He's not the type to just drop anyone in it without a very good reason." After a
pause, he added, "But I still can't think what to do about letting him or anyone else know the truth."
To be honest, he would probably be the easiest one to deal with. No vested interest in us except as Yori and Chou, no real reason to tell anyone. The others..." He looked irritated. Misaki looked up from where she was polishing off a fifth helping of roast g'rargh. Everyone twitched a little when she began speaking, it was such an unusual phenomenon.

"Use an information restriction spell." They stared, then many glances were exchanged. She sighed a little. "I read about it a while ago. There are spells that can be cast on a willing recipient that make it impossible for them to discuss a specific subject with anyone that isn't also in possession of the same information. They're used in high-security operations on some of the demon worlds." Shrugging a little she added, "I don't know much about them but it sounds like a possible solution." The girl went back to eating as they all looked at her in astonishment. Ranma glanced at his wife, then Nabiki.

"Um. OK, thanks, Misaki." Fumiko was staring at her sister in amazement. Uthryyl had a look of deep thought on his face. After a few seconds he nodded slowly.

"She may have a point. Now that it's been mentioned I do recall someone talking about something along those lines some years back. I'm trying to remember who it was." He exchanged a few words with his wife, then nodded again. "That's it. We sold some very expensive coffee beans to a guy I know who works for the government of a small kingdom in one of the worlds of the K'nn group." He grinned. "Made an enormous profit as well as I recall, they love the stuff and have more money than sense. We went to a meal at the palace, impressive place but a bit gaudy. He was talking about some security mage they'd hired who knew all sorts of spells to minimise leaks, which is something they'd had a problem with. That spell, or something very much like it, was one they were experimenting with. I seem to remember that the main problem was that it took very fine control and quite a lot of power to use successfully, so not many mages could pull it off, although otherwise it was reasonably straightforward." He looked at Ranma with amusement.

"Fine control and lots of power is pretty much your style. Would you like me to see if I can get some more information on it?" With another glance at his wife Ranma nodded.

"Yes, please. It sounds like it might worth looking into. We'd have to either translate it into our system or get a mage we trust to apply it, but if it does what Misaki describes it could sort out most of the problems." He thought for a moment. "We'd probably have to use it on both our families, Ukyo and Konatsu, and the Amazons. They're the only ones we'd have to tell most things to. For anyone else, Tamiko is right, we just don't mention anything much to them. Need to know and all that sort of thing." Nabiki was looking a little unsure, he noticed. "Problem, Nabs?"

"Don't call me Nabs," she shot back automatically making everyone smile. After a second or two she reluctantly nodded. "There's something about the idea of that spell that kind of worries me. I guess it sounds a bit like some sort of mind control. I'm not comfortable with that concept." Ranma smiled at her.

"Good. Neither am I. It's an obscene thing and luckily extremely difficult to do at all. I think, based on the description, that this technique is similar to the spell on our business cards but applied to a person. Remember that Misaki said it needed willing cooperation of the subject. I'd guess that it simply blocks the ability to talk or write about a very specific set of information, or possibly temporarily blocks even remembering it under the right conditions. I very much doubt it actually modifies the will of the subject, that sort of thing is almost impossible to do and requires an amazingly complex spell. Something which I am personally very happy about, trust me." She thought about his explanation and relaxed a little.

"All right. But check, OK? Just in case, before you use it on my family. Or even yours." She
giggled. "Well, Auntie Nodoka at any rate. You can experiment on Genma all you want." He laughed, very amused.

"Don't worry, assuming Uthryyl can get the information on the spell, and that it's even useful at all, we'll investigate it very thoroughly first."

Fumiko reached for another bottle of beer, flipping the top off with her thumb again and catching it in her other hand. "Aside from anything else, the problem may not be as big as you're worrying about anyway. I mean, you told us about Furinkan and your curse before you got control of it. Loads of people saw you change both ways for a couple of years but from what you've said a large number of them still didn't believe you and 'Ranko' were the same person." She laughed. "To be honest, it took me a while to get used to it and I'm very familiar with magic. It's pretty wild even by our terms. By now you're both so weird that even experienced mages tend to back off. How many people are going to believe that Ranma, Yori, Maiko, and all the others are the same person? Even in Nerima or Minato?"

Kasumi giggled as everyone thought about that. "She's not wrong. You and the cute redhead were mostly thought of as brother and sister." Her husband grinned and became the cute redhead.

"See? That's just bizarre even by magical girl standards," Fumiko said, snickering.

"Right, so we have a possible plan, for if and when we contact the various interested parties back in Nerima. The problem of what to do about any remaining fiancée entanglements can be worried about another day." The red-headed young woman jumped to her feet. "At the moment, I want some more well-cooked six legged demonic roast." She headed for the table, followed by Misaki, whose sister watched her and sighed.

"God, I have no idea where she puts it."

By the time the three demons announced they had to leave at nearly three in the morning, only Ranma, male again, Kasumi, Nabiki and Fumiko were still conscious. The other three magical girls were basically passed out in various parts of the room, Misaki snoring like a chainsaw finding a nail in an old log. Wincing at the noise, Nabiki looked at the girl's sister and said with a grin, "I can see why you don't want to share a room with her." Fumiko laughed, staggering slightly and putting her hand on the wall to steady herself as they all headed for the practice room.

"I love her dearly but she's hellish to try to sleep next to. It's a good thing this place is so well soundproofed or no one would be able to sleep." She hiccuped. "Pardon me." Laughing, they followed the others into the large room. Uthryyl was half-carrying his daughter, who had also drunk slightly more than she should have, but seemed not to regret this at all judging by the look on her face. Nabiki found it odd that she was in fact able to work this out, yet more proof of how normal all this was becoming.

"Wonderful party, Ranma, Kasumi. Thanks for inviting us." Kasumi smiled gently at him.

"Thank you for coming. And for the g'ragh. It was very nice indeed." Ranma shook his hand.

"I hope we see you again soon, Uthryyl."

"You will. I'll look into this security spell as well." The demon smiled.

"Thanks." Glancing at Onkra, who was definitely a bit the worse for drink, he added, "Would you like us to try to do the portal? I don't think she's in a state to help you right now." Uthryyl looked at his daughter with fond resignation while his wife laughed slightly.
"Probably not. Have you worked out portals, now?" Ranma and Kasumi looked at each other slightly uncertainly.

"Well, I think so. We nearly got one running a couple of days ago. But Kas thinks she knows where we went wrong and has tweaked the spell a bit." He shrugged. "If it doesn't work we can pour a litre of coffee down Onkra's neck and try again in half an hour or so."

"OK. Let's see what happens." Everyone but Ranma and Kasumi stepped back. The two martial artists conferred for a moment, then Kasumi turned to stare at the middle of the room. Concentrating, she focussed their weird blend of ki and magic through whatever spell they'd worked out, causing the three conscious magic-sensitive people to watch with interest and even Nabiki to twitch at the peculiar sensation of the inside of her head fizzing slightly.

"That's the weirdest way to make a portal I've ever seen," Uthryyl muttered mostly to himself, watching with fascination. The middle Tendo looked at him wondering what he could see. A flickering light at the point Kasumi was still staring fixedly into made her turn back to the ongoing effort.

"I think it needs a little more power over there, love." Kasumi nodded, slightly sweating. "I see it. Grab that bit, it nearly got away."

"OK. Whoops. Right, got it. Push here, then there." Ranma was also staring into the middle of the light which was steadily building in intensity, emitting a slight hissing noise. A wind started blowing gently outwards from it.

"No, It needs some more over there I think," Kasumi said. "Not like that, that's too much!" She paused as the light wobbled. "Better. OK, it's coming... nearly... Now!" Her husband nodded sharply, doing something. Abruptly the light stabilised into a brilliant blue glow, extending both up and down from it's position a metre off the floor into a tear in reality that looked just like the one Nabiki had seen in the warehouse months ago. Kasumi hopped up and down with excitement. "It worked! It worked!" she squealed happily, clapping her hands. Everyone stared while Ranma hugged his wife.

"Gods. That's amazing," Uthryyl said with wonder in his voice. "I have no idea how you made that work, it made my head ache to even try to follow it. But it certainly looks right." He walked around the portal inspecting it closely. "Very impressive. Especially with only two of you."

"It should be targeted to your normal coordinates," Kasumi said, showing no signs of strain now that the portal was stable. "Perhaps we should check first, though. Do you have one of your test probes with you?" Uthryyl looked at her, then at his wife. She sighed a little.

"You forgot to bring one, didn't you?" she asked. He gave her an embarrassed nod. Quannyr produced a small green and gold sphere from somewhere about her person, handing it to Ranma. "Here you go. Unlike some people I always come prepared." She looked amused. The martial artist laughed, walking over to the portal and fiddling with the device for a moment before tossing it into the middle of the light. It vanished with a slight crackle. Moments later it reappeared, hovering in mid-air, from where he retrieved it. Inspecting it he looked satisfied.

"Yep. Exactly where it should come out." He grinned, flipping the probe back to Quannyr who caught it easily and put it away. "Looks like we've got it figured out. We're going to have to practice that a bit to do it smoothly but the basic spell is working."

"Congratulations. That's a very complex spell to convert to that bizarre thing you seem to think is
magic," Uthryyl said with a chuckle, although sounding impressed. Ranma and Kasumi both laughed, bowing slightly.

"Thank you, Uthryyl," Kasumi said. "It was an awful lot of work but it taught us a huge amount. Now we can make portals we'll have to come and visit at some point."

"Please do," remarked Quannyr, hugging her, then Ranma. Uthryyl shook both their hands. Retrieving his daughter from where he'd basically propped her against the wall he shook her gently.

"Onkra? Come on, we're going home. Say goodbye to Ranma and Kasumi."

"Goodbye to Ranma and Kasumi," the young female demon mumbled, staggering after her father. Shaking her head with good-natured resignation Quannyr looked at her daughter, then waved as she guided her through the portal. Uthryyl followed with a final smile. The people remaining in the practice room watched the rip in spacetime for a second or two before Kasumi shut it down, making it contract and disappear with a faint pop that sounded like a cork coming out of a bottle. Nabiki stared for a moment then laughed.

"Bloody hell, sis, that was seriously impressive." Kasumi looked very pleased with herself, her sister thinking it was well deserved.

"I was fairly sure I worked out where we were going wrong but the only way to know was to try it. Now we need to optimise it a bit and practice." Fumiko was leaning against the wall, shaking her head in wonder.

"You two continually amaze me. That was incredible. There was something a bit weird about it, though, it wasn't like any portal I've ever seen before." Kasumi nodded with a glance at her husband.

"I know. When we were designing the new spell we found, um, I guess you could call it a bug, in the one we were using as a pattern. It wasn't nearly as efficient as we thought it should be. Ranma worked out how to improve it, although it took us some experimentation to make that part work. It uses a lot less power than the normal way of making portals. Our method may be unusual but it has some major advantages when you understand it." Fumiko looked impressed all over again.

"So you not only designed your own portal spell from the ground up, but you made it better than the original? Absolutely amazing." She yawned widely. "But even with all that I need some sleep."

They went back into the living room, prodding the various sleeping women into some vague form of wakefulness, with the exception of Misaki who was happily digesting a couple of kilos of alien meat. In the end Ranma picked her up and carried her to her room. Aiko grinned tiredly, waved to them all, then collapsed into her own bed, asleep again almost before she closed her eyes. Tamiko wasn't much better.

Kasumi put the remains of the food into the large refrigerator in the utility room, while Nabiki cleared away the various plates and glasses. "Leave everything else, Nabiki, we can do that in the morning," her sister said, coming back into the room.

"OK. Well, in that case I'm off to bed. See you later."

"Good night, sister." Ten minutes later the only sound in the apartment was a faint snore coming from Misaki's room.

"We're home," Nabiki called out as she, 'Rika', and 'Maiko' entered the Tendo house, stamping snow off their boots. Akane came down the stairs and smiled at them while they took their boots
"Hello again, both of you," she said.

"Hello, Akane," 'Rika' replied, "How was your Christmas?"

"Very good, thanks. How was yours? And your party, how did that go?" The blonde smiled.

"It went very well. Christmas was nice, nothing exceptional, just in a nice warm home with family. Did you get any interesting presents?" They walked into the living room where Nodoka was sitting with Soun watching television. Akane nodded happily.

"Oh yes. Especially one thing, or rather, a pair of things." She disappeared, running up to her room, as all three arrivals sat down. Nabiki grinned.

"She's certainly in a good mood." Soun looked up and smiled.

"Yes, she is. The difference from last year is remarkable. Mind you, your present seems to be responsible for quite a lot of that." Nodoka stood and looked at the guests.

"Tea?"

"Yes, please," 'Maiko' replied. The older woman disappeared into the kitchen. Akane returned holding both action figures in their boxes, sitting next to 'Maiko' and showing them to her.

"Look at these," she said with glee. "Nabiki got hold of them somehow. They're incredibly rare." The long-haired brunette accepted both boxes with a smile, looking at them with interest. Nabiki watched with an inner grin, amused at all the ways that Akane didn't understand the true situation. The thought of one of Ranma's alter-egos examining dolls of another one, while next to her Akane didn't realise any of it, was something she found hysterical.

'If they ever do come clean, she's going to go absolutely mad when she realises it,' Nabiki thought with a small smile.

"They're very well made," 'Maiko' said with a chuckle, handing the 'Chou' doll to 'Rika' while fully cognizant of the absurdity of it all. "They look just like them. I would imagine they'd sell very well. Where did you get them, Nabiki?" she asked with a mischievous look. The middle sister stared at her for a moment, knowing the joke but unable to say anything about it in present company. She explained the story, laughing internally, as she could see from her expression 'Maiko' was also doing. "Wow. That's amazing," the smaller woman said with a straight face. "And you got to meet Yori and Chou as well, from what I've heard. I've always wanted to do that." 'Rika' and Nabiki both looked at her and sighed a little. She grinned at them. "Hey, they're interesting people!"

They talked for a while, Akane also showing them the gold duck necklace which she was wearing. 'Rika' admired it. "That's very pretty, Akane. I like it."

"So do I." She tucked it back inside her blouse. Nodoka returned with the tea, pouring everyone a cup. Soun turned off the television as the news ended, leaning back comfortably. Genma came in, attracted by the sound of visitors, greeting both women politely then sitting down with a cup himself.

"I understand that you had a serious medical problem fixed by Yori and Chou?" 'Rika' asked politely. Akane nodded, looking momentarily sad.

"Yes. It wasn't my finest hour, the fight that triggered everything. But on the other hand I got to
meet two people I admire, and they fixed something that's been causing me trouble for a very long time, so I guess it was worth it in the end." She went over the story from her perspective, Nodoka and Nabiki adding details.

"So does that mean your psychological issues are cured?" 'Maiko' asked, accepting a biscuit from the plate that Nodoka handed around with a nod of thanks. Sighing a little Akane shook her head.

"No, not completely. It did make a huge difference, in fact it probably is what allowed me to finally begin making real progress with the therapy, but I've still got problems." She looked a little depressed. "My therapist says I've got trust issues combined with mild paranoid tendencies. Also the anger thing, which at least is coming under control. I can still get really angry much too easily but the random triggering of it seems to be almost gone. She's still trying to get to the bottom of why these problems exist. It may have something to do with the death of my mother, she thinks, plus some other things I'm not really comfortable talking about at the moment." The brunette nodded understandably.

"Don't worry, I get the idea. It's very personal, you don't have to tell us. Just keep at the therapy. By the sounds of it you're coming along well. Hopefully a real cure will come in time."

"I hope so. I really do. It's cost me so much, caused so much damage and pain to so many people..." The blue-haired woman trailed off sadly. Nodoka patted her hand comfortingly.

"Cheer up, dear. You're not perfect, no one is, but you're already so much better I have trouble believing it at times. You'll improve, I'm sure." Akane looked at her gratefully, taking an offered biscuit and nibbling it.

"Thanks. I hope you're right."

The room full of people talked for some time, before Nodoka got up to prepare a light lunch. It was about two in the afternoon when they sat down to eat. Afterwards Akane went out to the Dojo to practice, Nabiki and the other two following to watch for a while. 'Maiko' and 'Rika' were privately impressed, the youngest sister's new-found calmness had definitely improved her focus considerably. The disguised Ranma watched her with an expert eye, nodding to herself. At this rate she would end up close to Shampoo's level in a few months. Far better than she had thought likely for a long time. Nabiki caught her eye, walking over to talk quietly to her. Shielding the conversation a little so Akane wouldn't overhear, 'Maiko' said, "She's getting a lot better."

"I know. Still nowhere near you two, but finally some real improvement. She's much happier as a result, I think." 'Rika' smiled gently.

"Good. Poor Akane, she's had so much trouble in her emotional life. I've so happy to see her getting better." She watched as Akane went through a basic kata flawlessly, nodding approval. "She's still quite slow at that but it's good she's concentrating on getting it right before doing it quickly. I'm impressed. What a change from before!"

"No argument from me, sis," Nabiki replied, also watching with interest. "I can still hardly believe what a difference there is in about a month. I really hope her improvement continues. It's doing wonders for her self-esteem and confidence, but in a good way. The whole 'I'm a fantastic martial artist' thing seems to have long gone, now she's actually trying to learn. Father is extremely pleased. Even Genma seems impressed." 'Maiko' frowned slightly at the mention of her father's name.

"Keep an eye on him. I still don't trust him not to try something stupid." Nabiki giggled.
"Don't worry, I don't trust him further than I could kick him. Although, to be fair to the idiot, he does seem to be slowly becoming something closer to a real human being." She looked amused. "He's even spending more time as one lately. Not so much Uncle Panda. Mind you, that might be because it's so cold the water freezes in his fur." They all laughed at the mental image. Going back into the house they ended up playing board games for a few hours, something none of them had done since they were children. Eventually, as dinnertime drew near, Nabiki was grinning at everyone else over almost the entire contents of the bank due to having hotels all over the place on the 'Monopoly' board.

"I give up," Soun said, pushing himself back from the table. 'Rika' and 'Maiko' exchanged glances and conceded as well.

"Hah! That's what you get for trying to gang up on me," Nabiki said with satisfaction, counting her fake money with a satisfied look. 'Maiko' laughed.

"We absolutely destroyed you at 'Risk'." This was true, the team of 'Rika' and 'Maiko' had been unbeatable.

"That wasn't for money. So it doesn't count." Akane giggled from the sidelines where she'd been watching with amusement.

They cleared the table, then Nodoka went into the kitchen to finish the dinner preparations. Nabiki and 'Rika' went to help while 'Maiko' talked to Akane as they set the table. After a very nice meal they were all in the process of helping the elder Saotome clear up when 'Maiko's' cellphone buzzed. She pulled it out of her pocket, looked at it, then at the other occupants of the room. "Sorry, I have to take this, it could be important." Stepping out of the room for a minute or two, she came back with a grave expression. "We're going to have to leave. I'm sorry about that. It's a bit of an emergency." Nabiki looked at her with a sinking feeling, she had an idea what that meant.

Glancing at the middle sister 'Maiko' nodded slightly, causing her to sigh.

"Oh dear. I hope it's not too serious," Nodoka said with a worried look.

Putting a deliberate smile on her face 'Maiko' replied, "It might come to nothing, but we have to go and see. My apologies for rushing off. Thank you for the lunch and dinner, Nodoka, they were both very nice. I hope we can come back some other time."

"You're both always welcome here," Nodoka responded, Akane nodding. "Good luck with your emergency." She was curious but too polite to ask. Nabiki went into the hall with them as they put on their boots and coats.

"I'll come with you to the station," she said loudly enough for the rest of the family to overhear. As soon as the three of them were safely out of the house 'Maiko' shielded them heavily, becoming 'Yori' at the same time. Nabiki looked enquiringly at her. "It's another portal-bomb isn't it?" 'Yori' nodded.

"Yes, damn it. In London. Agent Naito got the word a few minutes ago, he called Sergeant Harada, who called me. It's bad. Very bad. Right in the middle of the morning Boxing Day sales in one of the main shopping areas. Apparently there are at least fifty casualties already, no word on fatalities." Nabiki and 'Rika' winced.

"Fuck." They ducked into the same alley that Nabiki had left from the night of Akane's rampage, her sister becoming 'Chou' then pulling out her own phone and calling Aiko. Thirty seconds later the magical girl appeared next to them, shivering in the cold.
"Come on, let's go. I'm not dressed for a dark snowy alley," she grumped. Nabiki quickly hugged her sister and sister-in-law, then stepped back.

"Good luck. Be careful," she said, worried. 'Yori' raised a hand and smiled before the three girls vanished in a bright flash. Nabiki opened her eyes and stared at the spot they'd been standing in for a moment before turning and walking home, thinking depressing thoughts.
Warrant Officer Walton grabbed for a handhold as the truck rocked violently, swerving around a car that hadn't moved fast enough when it heard the siren. The driver shouted a stream of invective out the window as he drove like a maniac across Vauxhall bridge, making an illegal left turn onto Grosvenor road and hitting nearly seventy miles an hour along a road that was posted as forty. Cars and other vehicles frantically swerved out of the way of the bomb disposal truck as it tore along beside the Thames, blue lights flashing. "So, what do we have, Captain?" he asked his superior. The three-man bomb disposal team had been loading the truck for a scheduled practice exercise when the call came in, allowing them to leave the base much faster than a normal response, so fast in fact that they were still waiting for full information. Only the Captain knew much about was going on and he didn't look completely sure. Looking curiously at the four heavily armed tactical anti-terrorist team members sitting on the other side of the vehicle he added, "And why the heavies? I thought this was an EOD operation." Captain Smith glanced up from his clipboard for a moment.

"It is, according to the report, but also according to the report a lot of people have been attacked. The information is fragmentary but it's possible that the terrorists are still in place and shooting, hence the backup. Our job is to deal with the device. Theirs is to make sure we can." The WO nodded with understanding. "As for what it is, I have no idea. One report is some sort of glowing green sphere in the middle of a mass of components. That could be a number of things, none of them good. Radiological, biological, chemical..." he shrugged, then grabbed for the edge of his seat as the vehicle swerved again. More swearing came from the cab. Walton looked in the direction of the driver, a half-smile breaking his serious mien for a moment.

"Johnny loves this part." Smith scowled.

"I don't. It's making my stomach flip around in a nasty way, which I really don't need right now." He shouted towards the driver, "For fuck's sake slow down a little, Adams, before you kill us all!"

"Sorry, Captain!" came the response, as the vehicle entirely failed to slow in any meaningful manner. One of the tactical team laughed. The captain glared at him and he suddenly became very interested in the finish of his MP5SD. His neighbour grinned at him.

"Don't annoy the explosives boys, Jack, unless you want your alarm clock wired with Semtex," he stage-whispered to his colleague. The captain looked momentarily amused as everyone chuckled.

"Five minutes, sir!" Sergeant Adams shouted from the cab. He turned onto Chelsea Bridge road and accelerated, hitting speeds that any resident of London would have sworn were completely impossible in the crowded city, a grin on his face. This was the best part of the job.

"Right. Listen up, you lot. We're heading for Knightsbridge, specifically Harrods, assuming that the idiot behind the wheel doesn't kill us in the process. About ten minutes ago the first reports started coming in, something happened. No one seems clear on what. The report suggested some sort of explosion, the front of the second floor is apparently in the street at the moment, casualties are high but currently unknown. One survivor the police found claimed he'd seen something that he thought was a bomb a few seconds before whatever happened, happened. Like I said, we don't know what type, how many, who planted it, anything at all useful. So we're taking everything. They pulled back, cordoned off a half mile radius and are in the process of evacuating as much of it
as possible. Then they called us. The tube has been shut down, all the traffic is being diverted, the usual." He paused for breath, looking at his notes again.

"The kicker is that after the initial explosion or whatever it was, people still seem to be coming under attack. There isn't any useful information on how or by whom. The assumption is that somebody is holed up shooting at the crowd, there are still hundreds of people in the area since the store was full because of the sales. You know how big Harrods is and there are all the other shops as well. It sounds like complete bloody chaos to be honest. So we're going to potentially disarm one or more devices under fire, which is just fucking joyous. As if this job wasn't dangerous enough already." He scowled. Looking at the tactical team, he went on, "You four are here to deal with whoever these sods are. Personally, I don't care if you shoot them in the head, but the orders are to try to take them alive for questioning. So I suppose you'd better do that." The four men nodded.

"When we get there they'll go first, covering us while we get some more information on what the hell is going on. Then we can make a decision on how we deal with it. The other team is about half an hour behind us. They have all the really serious gear with them in case we actually do have something nastier than usual. If that's the case we pull back and wait for them. I'd love to wrap it up before they get here, just to show Simmons who the better people are, but the way these things go..." He grinned darkly as his people laughed. The truck roared along Beauchamp Place, turning sharply right onto Brompton road, then screeched to a halt as Adams braked hard.

"Holy shit!" he yelled, as everyone in the vehicle complained. Staring at the scene in front of him he wondered whether he'd accidentally taken a wrong turning as he seemed to have ended up in the twilight zone.

"Christ, Adams, who the hell taught you to drive?" demanded the captain as he angrily stuck his head into the cab. Adams pointed mutely out the windscreen. Smith followed his finger and stared in disbelief. "What the fuck is that thing?" he yelped. Everyone in the back tried to see what was going on, discipline breaking down slightly for a moment.

Starting a hundred yards or so further along the road the scene descended into something from a badly made war film, with damaged or destroyed vehicles scattered around the tarmac, some of them on fire. A number of bodies lay around the road as well, the angle of the limbs and head of some of them proof that they were of no further use to their previous owners. Half the front wall of the Harrods building was indeed lying in the road, at least a dozen cars flattened under the stone, while smoke came from the hole where it had been. People were running past the truck in a frantic effort to escape the area, several police officers among them doing their best to keep order, but being overwhelmed by the terrified crowd. Standing on top of a crushed UPS truck was the apparent cause of the chaos. The soldiers stared at it in shocked horror.

"That's not a bomb," Warrant Officer Walton said inanely after a long pause.

"No, really?" snapped the captain with heavy sarcasm in his shocked voice. "Of course it's not a fucking bomb. But what in god's name is it?" The creature, a good ten feet tall with claws and a spiked tail that would give them all nightmares for years, jumped off the truck and grabbed at a middle-aged woman who had scrambled out of her car and turned to run. Ignoring her screams it picked her up by the head and raised her to it's mouth...

"Oh, shit," Jack said in a choked voice, watching in horror. He'd seen some pretty awful things in his career but that instantly went to the top of the list. The captain shuddered.

"It's fucking hostile is what it is," one of the other tactical team men said in a growl. "That makes it our business. Come on, lads, we've got a job to do." They grabbed their weapons, Jack looking back at the monster for a moment then opening a case on the floor and pulling out a 40mm grenade
launcher, shouldering it as well as his MP5. The captain studied at it for a moment then shrugged. Under the circumstances collateral damage seemed like a moot point. The four-man team bailed out of the truck, two of them heading for each side of the road, using the wrecked vehicles as cover as they headed towards the thing, which had finished it's snack and was looking around for seconds. Adams finally remembered the camera on the roof and turned it on, Walton going to the control console and aiming it to cover the correct area.

They watched as the soldiers closed in on the thing, which turned to watch one pair, although one of it's four stalked eyes could be seen tracking the others. One of the men, at that distance none of the people in the truck could make out which one, raised his weapon and opened fire, striking the creature in the chest and head. It screeched in agony, the sound making everyone in the area wince in pain, before bending down and picking up a mailbox, throwing the four hundred pounds of steel at the man firing on it. He managed to dive out of the way just in time, his eyes wide in shock.

"Fuck me," Adams breathed. Jack, the other member of the team, glanced at his colleague to check he was OK before lifting the grenade launcher to his shoulder. It was clearly time for something a bit heavier than 9mm rounds. Chambering an HE grenade he aimed for the chest of the monster and fired. The grenade struck slightly off-centre to the left, detonating with a flash and a very loud explosion, tearing the left arm of the thing completely off and blowing a large crater in it's chest.

"Yes!" shouted Walton in triumph, watching the clear image on the monitor in the truck. His jubilation turned to ash as they all watched in disbelieving horror when the beast regenerated it's arm and chest in a matter of seconds. "Oh my god," he said quietly. "What is that thing?" The soldier fired again and again, once he got over his shock, trying to overcome the appalling creature with sheer fire power. Five grenades later the firing pin clicked on an empty chamber, while the thing staggered slightly, then stood to it's full height and roared in fury. Dropping the launcher he opened fire with his MP5, knowing it was useless, while his team-mates did the same. The beast suddenly jumped straight at him, covering twenty yards in an eye-blink, raising it's hand to strike. He closed his eyes, knowing he was dead.

The inches-thick violet beam that screamed past the truck and impacted on the creature, vaporising it's lower legs with a loud crack, was a complete surprise to everyone. Jack twitched at the unexpected noise, staggering from the small shockwave and looking up in time to see the smoking remaining three quarters of the thing land heavily on the road less than a yard away, screeching in pain and anger. Already it's legs were regenerating. A sudden presence at his side made him look down, still in shock, to see a petite Japanese woman in black clothing staring at him with blue-violet eyes. "Run, you idiot," she snapped in very good English with only a trace of an accent, whirling to face the creature, her long braided night black hair slapping across his chest. Raising her hand she made him nearly faint by producing another energy blast. The creature lost an arm this time, decided this was a bit much, then turned and ran inside Harrods through the gaping hole in the front at horrific speed.

Lieutenant Jack Andrews was very difficult to surprise, having seen a lot of things in his military service, but even so the last ten minutes left him wondering whether he'd been slipped a particularly good hallucinogen. There didn't seem to be any other rational explanation for it. The girl watched the building warily for a few seconds before apparently deciding that it was safe to turn to look at him, while he simply gaped at her. A roar from inside the remains of Harrods made them both look, but nothing jumped out. She turned back to him, looked him up and down for a moment, then grinned in an unsettling manner, showing what looked for all the world like small fangs. She held out her hand.

"Come with me if you want to live," she said in a remarkably good Schwarzenegger impression, then snickered. He stared. "Seriously, we need to get you guys out of here before Mr Ugly comes
back for round two. Grab your weapons and your friend over there and get on with it." Shaking his head he stared at her for a moment more, then bent down and picked up the launcher, before walking over to the other man who was struggling to stand up with a sprained ankle. Offering him an arm he hauled him to his feet, both of them heading back to the truck. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the girl look carefully at the building for a little longer before following, walking backwards without any effort at all, neatly avoiding all the debris on the road without apparently looking. He and his colleague exchanged a look of befuddlement.

The other pair from his team had seen the whole thing and followed them, covering their rear with their weapons despite the futility of the effort. When they arrived at the EOD truck they found another young woman, this one taller and blonde, dressed in grey, along with a middle-aged man, both of them apparently Japanese like the first girl, accompanied by two men in suits who gave off a strong air of government official. Jack lowered his colleague to the ground, then sagged against the side of the truck, while the other pair of soldiers walked up. The back of the truck was open and the three occupants of it were looking out at the new arrivals, a certain amount of shock and horror on their faces from the events of the last few minutes.

Captain Smith inspected the new arrivals with puzzled interest, mixed with considerable respect based on what he'd just seen the short girl do. She grinned at him. "Who are you lot?" he asked. "And what in god's name is going on? What was that... that... That!" He waved a hand vaguely in the direction of Harrods, which was definitely on fire by now. She glanced in the direction he indicated, then looked back at him.

"It's a demon." There was a very long silence, broken only by the crackling of flames, distant sirens coming steadily closer, and footsteps from the thinning crowd still escaping the area while they could.

"A demon," he said with a peculiarly flat voice. All the soldiers were looking at him. She nodded. "Yes."

"You're sure."

"Oh, yes."

"Right." he closed his eyes and massaged his brow for a moment. "And you are?" One of the government men stepped forward, pulling out an ID card and holding it up.

"Harry Williamson, MI5. This is my colleague John Spence from the Ministry of Defence. And these are... specialists, I suppose you could say. Yori," he nodded to the shorter girl, "Chou," this was the blonde, "and Agent Naito from the PSIA in Japan. They're here to help us with our current little problem." Captain Smith choked a little at the description of this problem as 'little'.

"Specialists in what?" he asked suspiciously.

"Demon killing, of course." Williamson looked at him as if he was a bit thick. Yori laughed. Smith stared, then sat on the step at the back of the truck.

"This is all a bit much. Can someone please explain what the fuck is going on?" All the other soldiers were thinking much the same but were content to let the superior officer deal with it, still shocked at the carnage they'd walked into. Every now and then a faint roar came from inside the burning building making them look uneasily over their shoulders.

"Most of it is classified, I'm afraid, Captain," Spence began. Yori looked at him and sighed.
She stepped forward ignoring the glare he shot at the back of her head. "The short version is this. Magic exists. Demons exist. Travel to the worlds they come from is possible. There was a sort of cult of magical terrorists in Japan a few months ago that was trying to bring about an end of the world scenario, using a device that opened a portal between the world those horrors come from and here, which they planned to mass-produce and scatter all over the world. We stopped them. Unfortunately, six of the devices had already been planted and the only person who knew where was killed during the fight. We've found and destroyed one, leaving five. One of those was clearly planted here and activated earlier. That's where our bad-tempered friend came from. Understand?" She looked around with an inquiring air. The Japanese man, Agent Naito, sighed a little but was smiling. The MoD representative was shooting her an evil look while Williamson seemed mildly amused.

Lieutenant Andrews looked at her in some disbelief, then glanced at his team. They all shrugged. It sounded absurd but the evidence had tried to kill him mere minutes ago. The EOD technicians were clearly thinking much the same. "So who are you people, then? What I mean is, how did you do whatever it was you did back there?" He was very curious. She didn't have any visible weapons, not that he'd ever seen anything like the energy beam she'd used on the demon. It was like some sort of science-fiction laser or something. Agent Naito cleared his throat, making everyone look at him.

"Yori and Chou are what we refer to in Tokyo as Magical Girls." Everyone continued to look at him, only now a number of eyebrows were creeping upwards. "They have a number of special talents and abilities that are very useful in dealing with such problems, which we have an annoyingly large number of in some parts of Japan." He glanced at Yori who was grinning. "They're also probably the world's foremost martial artists." Both girls looked amused and pleased, bowing slightly to the man, who smiled. "Our government has the utmost faith in them in matters of this nature."

"Um, magical girls?" Sergeant Adams said, peering out of the back of the truck. Yori looked at him with a smile.

"I don't like the description personally, but it's kind of traditional where we come from." He nodded vaguely, staring at her. This was not at all what he expected when he reported for duty. She glanced at her companion. "Where did Aiko get to?" she asked. The blonde looked at her watch. "She went to get the others, they should be here any minute now. She thought it would be a good idea to have some backup."

Yori nodded. "Good idea. We're going to have to go in after them." Everyone stared at her as the impact of her words sank in.

"Them?" Spence asked slowly. She nodded again.

"Yes. There's two of them. That one, and the one that was still in the building." She glanced at Chou and Naito. "I think they both came through at the same time. Possibly a mated pair, although I hope not, or one was chasing the other. I could sense the other one watching us from inside." Naito sighed as Chou turned to stare hard at the building.

"Damn. Yes, you're right, there is another one in there. That's awkward," the blonde said with masterful understatement.

"We're going to have to make sure they stay put while we sweep for survivors," Yori said, "I can't feel many people inside the building still, but there is a small group on the top floor, and some at the back. The demons seem to have gone underground, a basement or something I guess. We can
put up some wards to keep them there while we get the building and street clear, then deal with them." She glanced at Naito. "Hopefully we can do it like we did in Minato. If they get out it will be more of a problem, the collateral damage would be quite high in such a built-up area. Unless we could lure them to a park or something." She looked at the soldiers. "Is there a park or some other empty ground around here, fairly close?" Adams stared for a moment, then pointed. The way the young woman seemed to have taken charge was amazing and a little scary.

"Um, Kensington Gardens is about a quarter of a mile due north. But it's not really a park. Why?" She grinned.

"Parks are good places for duck ponds." While most of the assembled people tried to work out the meaning of the apparent non-sequitur, Naito groaned.

"Yori... That's some of the most expensive land in London from what I know. Please don't make a pond." She laughed.

"I'll try not to." He didn't seem reassured for some reason. She looked around. The two suits were looking a combination of worried and annoyed, while the soldiers just mostly seemed confused.

"We need to get moving. There are a lot of injured people around here." Four more young women, dressed in ridiculously skimpy clothing, suddenly appeared out of thin air a couple of feet away making everyone but Chou and Yori jump. Jack swore and reached for his weapon. Yori turned to them without any surprise, speaking as if they'd been there all along. "Aiko, you and Tamiko take that side, Misaki and Fumiko the other. Find all the survivors and get them to safety." She pointed at Jack, who had lowered his MP5 again after his momentary startlement. "You, and your friend there, you go with Aiko. You two go with Misaki." He exchanged glances with the captain, who shrugged, throwing up his hands in resignation. This whole thing had gone so far into the weird that none of them particularly minded being ordered around by a woman who looked like she wasn't yet twenty. The girl seemed to know what she was doing although the air of command was worrying in someone so young.

"Phil is injured, I think it's a sprain," he said, nodding to the lieutenant on the ground. She looked down at the man who was sitting with his right leg out in front of him. Nodding, she knelt next to him. Putting her hand on his ankle she made them all stare when it glowed purple. The MoD man made a muffled exclamation while Captain Smith swore in shock. She nodded again.

"Yep, nasty sprain. Hang on." A few seconds later she removed her hand. Second Lieutenant Stross gaped at her. "Come on, get up," she said, standing and offering him a hand. Dazedly he took it, the small woman lifting him to his feet with no effort at all.

"How did you do that?" he asked in a stunned voice.

"Magic, of course. Come on, we don't have time for this." She looked around. "Good thing it's fairly warm. Is your winter always like this?" He shook his head at the sudden change in subject.

"Um, mostly, at the moment. It can get really cold but it's been very mild for the time of year recently."

She nodded, looking at the building down the road with a wrinkled brow. "We're going to have to get that fire out pretty fast or the whole place will go up." She looked at her companion. "What do you think, cold ki?" Chou nodded.

"That should work. I'll keep guard, you deal with the fire." They turned as the sirens that had been approaching suddenly got louder, another army truck slamming to a halt followed by several police vans and a couple of fire engines.
"About time," Captain Smith said grumpily.

"OK, you there, Captain, is it?" He nodded. "You get your men and all these guys to get the walking wounded back to a safe distance. Don't let the firemen near the place, if those things come out they'll be dead in seconds. We'll sort out the fire. Come on, we don't have a lot of time, people are already dead, I'd prefer to stop that happening any more." Everyone looked at her, although the four magical girls had already started heading towards the carnage. "Move!" she snapped, a tone of command striking the military men so strongly that two of them involuntarily saluted before looking embarrassed.

She and Chou ran off at remarkably high speed toward Harrods, making everyone but the Japanese visitors stop and stare as they simply jumped straight up and neatly in through the hole in the second floor wall. After a moment Jack and his colleagues turned and followed the magical girls who were carefully looking for survivors under the rubble. Lieutenant Stross stopped and watched in shock as the short brunette, Aiko, reached down and with little effort lifted a small car back onto it's wheels, peering inside before waving him over. "Hey, you, give me a hand, there's someone alive in here." He dashed over, watching as the girl ripped the twisted door off it's hinges with one hand while stabilising the car with the other.

"Bloody hell," he muttered to himself, before carefully helping the elderly woman who had been trapped in the wreckage out onto the street. She mumbled something in a daze.

"Doesn't look like much more than a concussion," Aiko said, inspecting the woman carefully. "Get her to safety and come back, I'll keep looking." He nodded, still slightly shocked, privately deciding that this girl was very dangerous indeed if she could tear doors off cars with her bare hands. Gently picking the old woman up he jogged back to the truck.

"Where are the ambulances?" he asked curiously, arriving at the little group around the rear of the vehicle. Captain Smith had apparently been arguing with his counterpart from the other EOD team. He was in the process of showing him the playback of what happened when they arrived, making the other man go a funny colour. The MoD man Spence was talking to a senior metropolitan police commander, who looked very angry about something, while the MI5 fellow listened with a neutral expression. Adams looked around then shrugged.

"Apparently the coppers decided it was too dangerous to let them through. Probably not a completely stupid call, but it's a bit of a problem. That Spence guy is getting pissy about it, but the commander over there is being difficult. He keeps insisting that this is their job as there isn't a bomb, so we should push off." Agent Naito stepped forward.

"It's not really my place, I'm only here as an observer, but I would suggest that you take the wounded into that restaurant over there where it's warm and wait for Yori and Chou. They are exceptionally good at healing, I'm sure they can do a better job than a fleet of non-existent ambulances." Lieutenant Stross looked at him for a moment then exchanged glances with Walton and Adams, who looked blank.

"OK, I guess that's better that leaving them outside. Grab those emergency blankets and give me a hand, will you, Sergeant? We have a restaurant to commandeer." Adams nodded, following the anti-terrorist man turned emergency medic into the abandoned Greek restaurant. Stross carefully put the old woman in a chair, then wrapped a crinkling foil blanket around her. She stared around in a slight daze then looked up at him.

"Thank you, young man. Is there any chance of a cup of tea?" He grinned. A very British response to practically anything.
"Hey, Adams, see if you can find a kettle and put it on, will you?" The sergeant nodded, smiling, heading for the kitchen.

"I've got to get back to work, OK?" Stross asked the old woman. She smiled.

"That's fine, young man. Thank you. I'll be right as rain once I get some tea in me." He chuckled, leaving the restaurant and heading back to Aiko, who was waving impatiently at him from beside another vehicle. As he was on his way back there was a very loud hissing noise from the burning building, clouds of steam shooting out of every opening on the front. The temperature in the street noticeably dropped for a few seconds as the flames rapidly diminished then went out, clouds of smoke and steam pouring from the building.

"What was that?" Stross asked, walking up to Aiko who was looking at the building. She shrugged.

"Yori did something impossible again. She does that a lot." He looked at her with a bemused expression.

"From where I'm standing this is all impossible," he replied. She laughed.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it." She pointed to a car underneath another, larger vehicle. "There's two people in that one, unconscious but more or less intact. I'll lift the van out of the way, you get them out, OK? You should be able to pull them out the side window, I doubt the doors open any more." He stared at her for a moment, then wordlessly nodded, wondering if she really could lift a couple of tons of van off the ground.

As it turned out, she could, although it was obviously not effortless. "Right, get on with it, this thing is heavy," she said, sweating a little. After a moment's incredulity he shook himself and dropped to his knees, reaching in through the smashed side window of the Ford. The man inside had his seat-belt on, which he dealt with using his combat knife, then carefully pulled the fellow out onto the road. Going back for the woman in the passenger seat he again cut the belt, having to climb half-inside the car to get at her, before backing out pulling her with him. Once they were all clear, he nodded to Aiko, who dropped the van with a crash and a sigh of relief.

"This is more Yori's thing, lifting enormously heavy stuff. She could pick this up with one hand and not even notice," the girl said, massaging her fingers. She examined the two people they'd recovered from the vehicle with a frown. "Crap. That's worse than I thought," she commented, looking at the woman who clearly had a badly broken leg. "OK, I'm going to have to carry her. You take him, he looks pretty much undamaged." They took the two casualties back to the restaurant, placing them on the floor once a few tables had been pushed to the side. The room was filling up, between them all four teams had recovered some twenty people so far. Sergeant Adams was busily handing out emergency blankets and tea to the conscious survivors who looked very shell-shocked. A couple of the less injured ones were helping. Once more they headed out. Shortly afterwards Yori and Chou dropped lightly to the street, looking around then walking over to Aiko. The other three magical girls saw them and came over, followed by the curious tactical team.

"We got the fires out and have managed to get some temporary wards up trapping the demons in the basement," Yori said with satisfaction. "Next we need to find any people still trapped inside and get them out." Her face fell a little. "There are quite a few people in there beyond help. I wish I could bring that bastard of a mage back so I could kill him again. Much more slowly this time." The look on her face made the four soldiers extremely uncomfortable, for a moment it reminded them of the demon only vastly more dangerous. A second later she smiled.

"How's it going out here?"
"We've rescued, um, twenty-one people?" Aiko said, looking at her team-mates.

"Twenty-two," Tamiko corrected after a moment's thought.

"Good. As far as we can tell there are about another thirty or so trapped out here under the rubble. There's about twenty more inside. We're going to have to pick up the pace, some of them are bleeding or have internal injuries, we need to get to them first or it will be too late." She turned to Chou. "I'll take the inside of the building, you help out here, will you?" The blonde indicated she would.

"OK. Let's see. You, Lieutenant Andrews, was it?" she asked, looking at Jack. He nodded. "Right. You come with me, the rest of you help these guys. See if you can get some of your friends over there to help rather than standing around with their fingers up their noses." She pointed back down the street to the collection of emergency vehicles, where the police commander was shouting at the MoD man, who was shouting back. She walked towards the building shaking her head. "God, it's like herding cats. This is a pretty poor excuse for an emergency response." Jack laughed a little hysterically.

"It's a very unusual emergency. We're not exactly used to demon attacks here. IRA terrorists, we can handle that no problem, but demons?" He shook his head, almost unable to believe what he was saying. She snickered.

"Point to you." He looked at his watch.

"Bloody hell, it's only been about forty-five minutes since this whole mess started. It seems much longer than that."

"Doesn't time fly when you're having fun?" Yori asked rhetorically, then laughed. He chuckled. This young woman, as crazy as the whole situation was, seemed an interesting and likeable person, not to mention very attractive in an exotic way. They went in through what used to be the front entrance of Harrods. The inside of the building was a mess, smoke damage and water from the sprinkler system had ruined everything. She looked around. "What a mess. This is going to be cost a bit to repair." He nodded. "Let's get to it. There are a dozen or so people upstairs, from what I can tell they're basically unharmed, I guess they must have barricaded themselves in somewhere. They can wait." She looked slowly around, then pointed. "Back there is someone who's quite badly injured. We need to deal with them first." Andrews looked at her with astonishment.

"How the hell do you know all that?" he asked. She smiled.

"That part isn't even magic, it's very advanced martial arts." They began pushing through the toppled displays and goods, heading for the rear of the ground floor. "When you get to a high enough ability level you start to be able to use something called ki, which is basically life energy. You can do all sorts of interesting things with it. If you are good enough you can actually sense it from a distance, which lets you get a pretty good reading on living things. Chou and I are very good indeed with ki." He looked at her with mixed respect and disbelief. She noticed, smiling. "I know it sounds a bit weird from your point of view. Even back home in Japan a lot of people don't believe it. It's true, though." They came to a point where part of the floor above had collapsed, blocking their path.

"We'd need a cutting torch to get through all this crap," Jack commented, looking at the concrete and steel reinforcements tangled on the floor. Yori looked amused.

"Well, no, not really." She held out her hand and a couple of feet of glowing purple energy sword appeared. He gaped, taking a step back.
"Fucking hell." Awestruck he watched as she easily carved away the obstruction, the energy blade passing through the various construction materials as if they were tissue-paper. The edges of the cuts glowed yellow-hot for a second after the blade passed through them, cooling much faster than seemed natural. Within a few seconds she had cleared a path. The blade vanished. She glanced at him, grinning at the look on his face.

"That's extremely advanced ki usage."

"It's bloody terrifying." Being in the profession he was, he easily pictured how effective a close-quarters weapon that energy projection would make, shuddering a little at the thought. She seemed pleased, which made him even more worried. This girl was off-the-scale lethal in his opinion.

"Come on, she's just over there, a few metres away." Sure enough, once they gently lifted a display stand of microwave ovens from the ground, a woman in her late twenties was revealed lying on the ground. Her arm was bent in entirely the wrong direction while a large cut on her head was sluggishly leaking blood.

"That looks very bad," Lieutenant Andrews said with worry in his voice. The Japanese girl knelt next to the young woman. Placing her hands on the woman's head where they began glowing, she moved them around slowly for about thirty seconds. When she removed them the gash on the patients head was completely gone. The soldier stared in disbelief. "That's... impossible," he muttered. She shook her head, concentrating on the woman in front of her.

"No, it's just quite difficult. Here, hold her arm like this." After a moment Jack knelt down and did as requested. Once more the glow came and went after a few seconds, the arm now looking normal. She passed glowing hands over the woman's torso, mumbling to herself.

"Hmm. Intestines good, stomach... No damage to the liver, kidneys, heart. Ah. Broken rib, punctured lung." She paused for a few seconds, the glow brightening a little. "OK, that's done. Nothing else wrong, but she's lost about half a litre of blood. Can't do much about that right now except push the marrow to make it a bit faster. Done. I can do more later when we have time." Glancing at him and the stunned expression on his face she smiled. "We're also very good at healing. It comes in handy if you're hunting demons."

"I can imagine," he replied faintly. A glowing hand touched the woman on the head again and her eyes slowly opened.

She looked around, wondering what was going on, before focussing on the Japanese girl bending over her with a look of calm competence, then at the large man in military gear behind her. "What happened?" she asked, feeling her head. She had a faint memory of something hitting it, but except for a slight headache felt nothing out of the ordinary.

"There was an accident," the girl said reassuringly. "You're fine now. I'm sorry about this, but my friend here and I need to help other people. If you just head straight in that direction the front door is right there, there will be people outside who can explain everything. Is that OK?" She nodded, wondering what was happening. Slowly getting to her feet with the help of the large soldier she looked around at the devastated shop floor, then gasped.

"What happened?" she asked, horrified.

"Just go outside, someone will explain everything." The girl gently urged her in the direction of the exit. She walked off in a slight daze.

Yori watched her for a moment, then satisfied she was going in the right direction, turned to the
lieutenant. "Good. One down, eighteen to go. Next one is in the far right corner." They headed off through the destroyed shop. Over the next twenty minutes Yori took them all over the building, healing half a dozen serious injuries, at least two of which in Jack's opinion would have been fatal within an hour. He guided several people out of the building while she was healing others, finally meeting her on the top floor. "There's, um, eleven people in the room back there, and two more in what I guess must be an office. You go and get the back room, OK? I'll deal with the office, one of the people in it feels like they have something wrong with them." The lieutenant nodded, heading off in the indicated direction. Getting turned around in the various corridors in the non-public area of the building he finally found a locked door. Knocking on it he waited.

There was no response so he knocked again, harder. "Hey! Open up." He heard footsteps on the other side of the door.

"Is it gone?" a woman's voice asked tremulously.

"Yes. I'm with the Army, we're evacuating the building. Open up, please." After several seconds the lock clicked and the door opened. A middle-aged Indian woman peered up at him, then down the dark corridor lit by emergency lighting.

"Are you sure it's gone?" she asked, looking around nervously. He smiled at her reassuringly.

"Yes, everything is under control. Come on, we need to get outside." She nodded, turning to call back into the room. Several more people came out from under desks and in cupboards. Eventually he counted eleven just as Yori had said. "Is that everyone?" he asked the woman. She nodded. "OK, let's go. Follow me." Taking the lead he headed back to the stairs where he and the Japanese impossibility had parted ways. When he got there he found her talking to a young woman, perhaps early twenties, who was clinging to an older man who looked upset. She looked up as he came around the corner.

"Good work, Lieutenant," she said. "This is Andrea and her boss Henry. He had a bit of a heart attack. I healed it, but she's worried he can't deal with the stairs." He nodded. "I'll carry him down, now you're here. Andrea, could you go with the lieutenant, please?" She gently separated the two. Jack watched as the girl picked up the man who must have outweighed her at least two to one with no effort at all, shaking his head in amazement. The people with him stared incredulously. "OK, let's get everyone outside."

Soon they were standing in the street, squinting in the winter sunshine. Yori put Henry down, supporting him as he wobbled. "Go over there where the trucks are," she pointed. "Get a cup of tea. I'll come and have another look at you when we're finished, OK?" He nodded, still stunned by the last hour or so, then slowly walked off in the indicated direction with his assistant helping him. The Japanese girl watched them for a moment, then turned to Andrews. "Good, that's everyone out of the building who's still alive. I counted forty-three bodies in there, though." She looked unhappy. He thought for a moment.

"That agrees with my count."

"Damn. This is the worst one yet." They walked in the direction of Chou, who was holding a truck in the air while Aiko and Fumiko pulled a casualty from under it.

"So there are four more of these things still out there?" She nodded, scowling.

"Yes. Each device is targeted on a single demon, but as we've seen it's possible for more than one to come through. The idea was that they'd activate on timers, then when their target demon was moving fast open a portal directly in front of it so it basically ran through before it had a chance to
stop. The portals only last a few seconds but that's obviously enough time for another one to come through behind the target one."

"And these demons then just attack anyone in sight."

"Pretty much. They're extremely aggressive, permanently hungry, and pretty stupid. Not to mention they have the most incredible regeneration ability I've ever seen. The only way to kill one for sure it to vaporise at least fifty percent of it's body mass including the head in one shot. Blowing it up isn't enough, it can rebuild itself from the bits if there's anything left. It might take a while if you blasted it completely to pieces, but even there it would probably survive. Plus it would be in an absolutely amazingly bad mood afterwards and they're always pretty angry at the best of times."
She looked up at him, her five foot four or so contrasting with his six foot five. "As you saw, grenades just piss them off. They barely notice small arms."
"He nodded with a grim expression.

"Thanks for saving my life, by the way." The girl chuckled.

"Don't worry about it. It's what we do."

"Still, I'm quite attached to it, so thanks." She looked amused. Something he'd been wondering about came back to him and he asked. "When you zapped it the first time, why didn't you aim to kill it?"
She sighed.

"I could easily wind up the power to vaporise the thing. Hell, I could vaporise that entire building in a pinch." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the badly damaged Harrods. He stared, appalled, but also somehow sure that if anything she was downplaying her abilities. "But there were too many people too close to it, you, your team, and a couple of casualties in the vehicles around it. I couldn't take the chance the shockwave would hurt anyone. I disabled it so you could escape, but anything more just wasn't safe at the time." He nodded in understanding.

"Fair enough." They arrived at Chou's position as she carefully lowered several tons of vehicle to the ground.

"How's it going?" Yori asked her partner. The blonde looked up at her from where she was examining the young man the others had recovered from the crushed car under the truck. He was missing several fingers on his left hand, the lieutenant noticed uneasily, as well as having some obvious crush injuries to his legs. She smiled slightly.

"There's one person still trapped under the stones, in a car, but she feels fairly unhurt. We've rescued forty-seven people, including this man, some of them are quite badly injured. I've stabilised everyone, but we're going to have to heal them properly later, I didn't have time to do much more than that. There are some nasty burns as well as lots of blunt-force trauma, and at least three amputations."
"Yori looked irritated and relieved in equal measure.

"OK. Good work. Regenerating limbs is a pain, we can leave them until last." She squatted down and helped the blonde heal the patient on the ground, her purple energy contrasting with the other woman's golden colour in a way that made Jack and the other soldiers stare. "He's stable. The legs are OK now, I got the intestinal rupture as well. We can do the fingers when we get a moment. You want to wake him up?" Chou nodded, golden light flaring around her hands as she touched him. Moments later the young man twitched, raising his head and looking around wide-eyed.

"What the fuck happened?" he yelped, staring wildly around at them. "Where is that thing? What is that thing?"
"Chou gently helped him to sit up.

"Don't worry, everything is under control. Calm down. These men are going to help you back to a
place where you can rest, all right?” Her calm voice seemed to settle him down a bit. Looking at her he nodded, then as he raised his hands he noticed the damage to his left one. Staring in horror, he went green, then began to scream. Chou's hand whipped out, touching him on the head, a flash of light coming from her fingers, then he relaxed so suddenly he nearly collapsed again. "Don't worry about your hand, we'll fix it. But right now we have to rescue some more people, OK?" He nodded drunkenly, giggling slightly. It looked like he was under the influence of a particularly good tranquilliser. Phil and Jack exchanged glances, then helped him to his feet.

"What did you do?" Phil asked curiously. She smiled.

"He was panicking, so I temporarily boosted the production of endorphins in his brain quite a lot. That should keep him happy for ten minutes or so, until you can get him back and explain things to him." She glanced at the man who was looking around with a peculiar expression. "You'd better hurry, it wears off quite fast and I don't want to keep doing it, it's not good for him." Phil carefully guided the man back down the road. Chou turned to Yori.

"Let's get this last survivor out, then we can heal anything important before we deal with those demons." The shorter girl nodded as they all headed to a large pile of stones and bricks that had originally been a large part of the front of Harrods. There were one or two cars partially visible under it, badly crushed, with signs of having been torn open to extract the occupants. One of them looked like the demon had done it which suggested the results had been unpleasant, while the other was clearly the work of one of the magical girls. Chou and Yori both stopped and inspected the pile.

"Right in the middle," Yori sighed. Chou nodded.

"Yes. I expect that a larger vehicle is holding up the rubble and protecting a smaller one or it would have been crushed." She concentrated. "It's definitely a woman. She's still conscious but very scared. Poor thing. We're going to have to be careful, this pile doesn't look very stable." All six magical girls conferred for a moment in Japanese, the three soldiers watching and wondering what they were saying, before they reached a consensus. Yori and Chou both went up to the pile, looking at it carefully, before picking the right point, then manifested energy blades again. The two tactical team members who hadn't seen this yet stared. The two young women began slowly cutting into the larger chunks of rubble, while the four from the other group removed the pieces they sliced out, carrying tons of stonework with little effort.

After a few minutes they slowed down, studying the pile before making any changes. It shifted suddenly with a crunching noise and everyone froze, then Yori jumped into the hole they'd made and supported the side that was about to collapse. "I'll hold this in place." Chou nodded, changing direction and directing the other girls to hold or move various items of debris. Eventually a hole into the pile was uncovered. Chou took up the load of the unstable rubble while Yori disappeared into the hole they'd made, reappearing a few minutes later after some nasty grinding noises, gently pulling a very dusty policewoman who was clinging to her with a grip of steel.

WPC Janet Oakley of the London Metropolitan Police wasn't someone given to fear, in fact most people who knew her would have said she was basically fearless. She'd confronted drunks armed with beer bottles, football hooligans waving knives and clubs, even a rare firearm once, and in every case had dealt with the situation calmly and professionally. But right now, squeezed into a tiny space in the back of what was left of her police car, buried under who knew how much rubble, she was absolutely terrified.

Dust covered everything, little particles of concrete in her eyes and up her nose making her sneeze occasionally, hurting her chest which was compressed almost to the point of being unable to breath
under the weight of the roof of the car, which had collapsed almost to the point of crushing her but by some miracle hadn't gone that extra inch. She could barely move, one hand was free and she could wiggle her feet, for all the good that did her. She was pretty sure she was going to die.

It was almost pitch-black under the rubble, small shafts of sunlight penetrating in one or two places. She could smell blood, smoke, broken masonry, diesel fuel, petrol, and her own fear. A little surprised she had maintained control of her own bladder, she looked around as much as she could while being almost unable to move her head. She'd never like confined spaces, now she knew why. 'If I get out of this I'm never going on the underground again as long as I live,' she thought with mild hysteria. 'Not that it seems likely that I will.'

Trying to work out what had happened took her mind off her precarious position for a while. She'd been driving slowly down Brampton Road, just passing Harrods, when suddenly hundreds of people started pouring out of the entrance in a panic. Stopping to avoid hitting a man who dashed right out into the traffic she'd stared in amazement before she heard the screams. People on the road had been pointing up, yelling and staring, then there was an enormous crash. Not an explosion, more like a huge impact, she thought. A thing, there was no better word for it, had dropped to the road just in front of her, crushing a Honda Civic as it landed on it, and as she was staring in horrified disbelief it had been followed by a rain of masonry. She'd just had time to take off her seatbelt and dive into the back seat before the car was buried in falling bricks. She remembered screaming in pain before everything went black for an indeterminate amount of time.

When she woke up her head ached fiercely, which actually reassured her, it was proof she was still alive. Attempting to move, though, had quickly brought home the fact that she was hardly free and clear. After a short period of panic she had managed to calm herself down with force of will, but as time dragged on and it became slowly more difficult to breath hope was fading and she was becoming more and more scared. Listening to her own heart-beats thundering in her ears she tried to breath slowly and evenly, staving off the wild emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. It wasn't easy.

Some while ago she had heard a number of muffled but loud thumps that sounded like explosions of some sort, accompanied by angry roars and screams like something out of a film. A pause, then a screeching sound unlike anything she'd ever heard, followed by another blast, some more roaring, then silence. She had absolutely no idea what it all meant. Her imagination ran wild. Was it some sort of terrorist attack? Invasion from outer space? The end of the world? None of these seemed to fit. She had no idea how much time had passed since it went quiet, if could have been minutes or hours, since there were no real indicators. She had tried a couple of times to see the clock on the dashboard but had no luck, she didn't even know if it was working. The interior light had gone out some time ago which made her think the battery had probably been damaged.

Attempting to relax she closed her eyes, counting breaths for lack of anything else to do. She could feel little trickles of blood running down her forehead from tiny cuts caused by flying glass, dripping off her left ear, which was remarkably annoying. Pushing the idea of rescue to the back of her mind she concentrated on just surviving the moment. At least she didn't think she was injured, or if she was, it was minor, nothing worse than a lot of small cuts. Janet had gotten to three hundred and fifty breaths for the second time, having lost count once, when she heard a crunching noise from somewhere behind her head. She froze, listening intently. Was the rubble shifting? She knew full well that the amount of masonry on top of the car should have crushed it flat, it was only the box van next to her holding some of the weight that had saved her life. If it shifted...

The noise came again, closer, accompanied by a faint hum, along with a hissing sound. Trying to twist around to see she found it impossible. Once more the noise came, then a painfully bright light shone through the rear window, or more accurately where it had once been. Her heart jumped as
she realised that she might actually live.

She tried to call out but found her throat so dry because of the stone dust that only a faint croak came to her lips. Trying again produced the same result and she clenched her fist in sudden anger. Slight sounds from behind her were followed unexpectedly by a female voice, rich with complex harmonics and a faint accent, which said, "Hello. I'm Yori. Let's get you out of there." She suddenly found herself crying in relief.

"Thank you, thank you," she said, tears running through the dust on her face. A hand gripped her shoulder, squeezing it comfortably for a moment. The woman behind her somehow managed to wiggle through the back window, her face suddenly appearing upside down above Janet. "Hi," the woman, Yori, younger than she expected and apparently Japanese, said, grinning at her.

"Hi," Janet whispered, coughing. She tried to smile back. Yori inspected her and the surroundings, then looked back.

"What's your name?"

"Janet. Janet Oakley." Her voice was slightly stronger this time.

"Hello, Janet. You're with the police, by the looks of it." Janet nodded.

"Yes, have been for eight years." She licked her parched lips. Yori produced a bottle of water with a Japanese label, unscrewing the top.

"Here." She poured a little into Janet's mouth. The trapped woman swallowed. She poured a little more. "Better?"

"Thanks. Yes." Putting the bottle away she smiled again.

"OK, I'm going to get you out now. From what I can see the roof of the car is pinning your hips and chest against the seat. I'll push it up, then you pull yourself out, onto the rear window shelf and out the window, all right?" Janet stared. How was the girl going to do what she'd described? She didn't seem to have any rescue equipment. For that matter, her silk clothes weren't exactly the sort of thing search and rescue workers normally wore.

The girl pulled herself further inside the car, somehow folding herself into an amazingly tight space next to Janet's head. Shifting around a little she put her hands on the roof, moving them until she was satisfied with their position, then simply pushed. Janet's eyes widened as the roof steadily rose with a chorus of crunches and grinding sounds as the tons of masonry and metal on top of it was lifted. She could feel the seat collapsing under the girl in reaction to the impossibly heavy load she was lifting with ease. Staring in disbelief she almost didn't notice when the weight pinning her in place disappeared. "How's that?" Yori asked. "Can you move yet?" Janet twitched in surprise, then tried to extract herself, wriggling backwards.

"My left leg is still stuck. I can't move it." The Japanese girl twisted her head to look, nodding after a moment.

"OK, I see it, the passenger seat has sort of come apart and it's wrapped over your leg. I'm going to have to cut the frame. Don't move for a moment, I don't want to hurt you by accident." She shifted around to support the weight of the roof on her back, then stretched out her left hand. Janet hissed in shock as two feet of thin purple energy suddenly sprouted from her palm illuminating the inside of the destroyed car with a weird light.

"Holy shit!" she yelped, twitching away from it, she could feel heat radiating from the thing that
looked for all the world like a special effect from the movies.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you, but you have to stay still for me, OK?" the girl said. Janet nodded slightly, still staring. Yori turned her head to check where she was cutting, then frowned slightly. The energy beam thinned down to a hair-thin thread. Carefully manipulating it she waved the tip through the seat, which cleanly separated into several pieces. Abruptly the obstruction that was holding the policewoman in place vanished.

"I'm free, I think," Janet said. Yori nodded, looking satisfied and turning the energy beam off.

"Right, back to the plan. See if you can pull yourself out the back window." With some struggling Janet managed to get her upper body onto the parcel shelf, her head out the hole where the window had been, feeling little crystals of shattered safety glass cut into her back as she moved. She winced but kept going. Finally, she found herself sliding down the boot of the car. Once her legs were outside the vehicle Yori scrambled after her. As soon as she released the force holding the rubble up the car groaned and began to steadily crush down to a fraction of it's original height, something that would clearly have been fatal if she'd still been trapped. Yori slid down beside her.

"So, ready to leave?" she asked, grinning at Janet. The woman stared for a moment, then threw her arms around her rescuer.

"Yes, please," she mumbled, holding the girl tightly. Yori laughed gently. Going first she retreated back down the tunnel that had been made in the debris pile, Janet following closely behind her, her hand holding the Japanese girl's as tightly as she could manage. After mere seconds they emerged into daylight. Yori stood, pulling Janet to her feet and nodding to a taller blonde girl, also Japanese, who seemed to be supporting the weight of most of the pile of stonework, then helped her walk slowly down the street towards a collection of emergency vehicles. Behind them there was a rumbling crash as the blonde jumped out of the hole and allowed the debris to seek it's own equilibrium. The policewoman looked around, aghast, at the damage, which looked like the aftermath of a particularly large bomb aside from there being no blown out windows in the buildings. Looking over her shoulder she stared at the remains of Harrods.

"It's a bit of a mess," Yori said. She followed the woman's gaze. "Was it a good shop?" she asked curiously.

Janet almost laughed. "It was very expensive." She noticed there were four large men in military clothing keeping pace with them, talking to several more young women, all of whom looked Japanese and seemed to have had trouble dressing appropriately for the weather. She stared for a moment. Yori snickered.

"Friends of mine. It's a long story."

"Aren't they cold?" Janet asked, unable to think of anything more worthwhile to say. The black-haired girl shrugged slightly.

"It's a lot warmer here than in Tokyo, so they're probably happy about that." Trembling from the after-effects of adrenaline, Janet suddenly found her legs going weak, slumping a little. "Whoops. OK, don't worry." She suddenly found herself being picked up, the girl carrying her effortlessly. Putting her arms around her rescuer's neck after the initial surprise, the policewoman gave in to the exhaustion that hit her and passed out.

She came around a few minutes later to find herself sitting in a chair, Yori and the blonde woman looking at her. "Ah, back with us. How do you feel?" Janet looked around, then down at herself.
"Very dirty. Other than that, not bad. My head hurts though." The blonde woman nodded, smiling gently at her, then reached out and put her hand on top of her head. A sudden wave of relaxation flowed through her, taking with it the pain.

"How's that?" the blonde asked.

"Much better, thanks." Janet looked at the woman curiously. "What did you do?"

"Just released some low-level endorphins, enough to deal with the pain for a moment, then lowered your blood pressure a little. When the endorphins wear off in a little while the pain should be gone." She stared at the blonde for a moment, then simply nodded, there didn't seem to be any other good response. The blonde smiled. "I'm Chou. Would you like some tea?" She nodded wordlessly again. "All right." Turning she waved to a man in fatigues on the other side of the room. "Sergeant Adams? Could we have some tea over here, please?" He waved back, heading in their direction with a stainless steel pot of tea and several cups.

"Here you go, miss," he said, putting a cup on the table next to her and filling it with tea. "I'm afraid we've run out of milk but there's some sugar there." Nodding thanks, Janet dropped a couple of sugar-cubes into her tea and stirred it with a spoon she picked off the table, noticing consciously for the first time that they appeared to be in a restaurant of some type. Sipping her tea she looked around. There were at least fifty people sitting or lying around the room, a dozen or so lying on the floor in the middle of the room where some tables had been removed to clear a space. Most of them looked like they'd been involved in a battle of some sort, blood-stained clothes being fairly common. She assumed these were survivors from whatever had happened. Looking up at Yori she asked, "What was that thing?" wondering for a second whether the girl would ask, 'What thing?'. Instead she looked grim.

"A demon. There's two of them, trapped in a basement under that shop." Janet stared, tea forgotten for the moment.

"A demon?" she asked incredulously. Yori nodded unhappily.

"I'm afraid so. It's a long story. The very short version is that they're here due to a left-over bit of magical terrorism. Chou and I, and the other girls, are specialists from Japan helping your lot deal with it. We have a lot of experience in demon attacks. Luckily we're also pretty good at healing. There were a lot of injured people and the ambulances have been delayed by your police, they seem to be having difficulty with the idea of a demon attack." Janet shook her head slowly, she was having difficulty with the idea. A through struck her.

"Did anyone die?" Yori glanced at Chou, both of them suddenly expressionless. Janet's stomach felt like it was in free-fall.

"I'm afraid so."

"How many?" She didn't really want to know but she had to ask. Both women were silent for a moment.

"So far, about sixty-five that we know of." The answer made the policewoman go white, closing her eyes in shock.

"Sixty-five people?" Yori nodded sadly.

"I wish we could have got here earlier, but no one had any idea where the device that brought that thing here was. We've been looking for them for months." Janet looked up at the words, paling
again. "Yes, there are more. Six got out, we've found two. We caught one before it activated, but this one triggered before we could find it." A call from one of the other girls attracted her attention and she looked over, then waved. "Sorry, I have to go. Drink your tea and relax, try to anyway, OK?" She waited for the nod then turned away, Chou going with her. Both young women talked to the one who had called them over, a short brunette who looked scarilly competent to Janet, before walking over to group of people lying on the floor. They conferred quietly about the old man on the end then knelt down beside him.

Janet's eyes widened as their hands began glowing softly, Yori's in purple and Chou's golden. They spent a few minutes slowly running them over the man's body, stopping occasionally, before sitting back looking pleased. He sat up, staring at them, then down at himself. The two girls moved to the next patient while behind them the other girl started talking to the man. WPC Oakley shook her head in amazed respect, then went back to her tea, watching with interest. After a few minutes she finally realised that all the little cuts from the glass crumbs had disappeared.

"This one has a badly crushed left foot, second degree burns on his back and side, and he did have some broken ribs, but I did those earlier." Chou ran her hands over the man lying on the floor while Yori nodded. Jack watched from a chair near them, sipping some tea. He was quite tired, these girls had been running his entire squad off their feet, darting back and forth on the road with boundless energy. None of them looked at all worn out, although they were all quite dusty. "You do the burns, you're better at things like that, I'll do the foot." Yori nodded again, carefully removing the man's scorched shirt and coat. A flash of purple came when she made a small energy blade and cut his sleeve from wrist to shoulder, missing the skin but cleanly severing the cloth. She put glowing hands on his bare torso, slowly moving them from waist to arm-pit, leaving pristine skin behind. Jack shook his head in awed respect.

"That's got to be the most incredible thing I've ever seen," his friend and colleague said from beside him in a low voice. He glanced at him then nodded. "How the hell is she doing that?"

"Apparently, it's a mix of magic and something called ki." He looked at Phil, shrugging helplessly. "I don't have any better explanation. I guess she'd know if anyone would." Lieutenant Stross kept watching, shaking his head in wonder.

"Magic? Before about two hours ago I'd have said it was impossible. Then all this happened. I keep looking around for a blue police box or something." Jack snorted with amusement.

"I'm damn glad there isn't a blue police box. From what I can remember of that show whenever the box turned up the soldiers tended to start dying." His colleague laughed quietly.

"True. They were awfully hard on the military support. These girls seem to want to keep everyone alive."

"I'm OK with that to be honest." He sipped his tea again. "Are that MoD bloke and that commander from the Met still shouting at each other?" Phil glanced at him.

"They were about ten minutes ago. It's a bloody shambles. Everyone wants to take control of this operation but no-one wants to accept responsibility. In the mean time the various services are just wandering around wondering what to do. I've never seen anything like it, these people are supposed to be professionals for god's sake!" He shook his head in disgust. "The Met won't let the ambulances through, the MoD keeps trying to classify everything, the fire and rescue people are looking confused, and that MI5 chap just smiles. He seems to be enjoying himself for some fucked-up reason. The only people who seem to have any idea what to do are these girls and their handler, or observer or whatever he is." The second lieutenant waved his hand at Agent Naito who
was sitting quietly at the side of the room sipping tea and watching the magical girls work.

"They'll get their act together sooner or later and then there's going to be hell to pay, I expect. A major London landmark has been pretty much destroyed, dozens of people are dead and more hurt, not to mention the only people with a clue what to do are representatives of a foreign government." Phil watched the girls as they rolled the man onto his side, handling him with extreme care, then Yori began erasing the burns on his back. Both of them winced at the sight of the charred flesh, blood and fluids leaking through the cracked skin, which quickly became unblemished in a manner that still astounded them. "Thank god they do know what to do, I hate to think what would have happened if those things had kept going. We certainly couldn't stop them with the weapons we have in the truck and by the time we could get something suitable the death toll would have been in the hundreds at least." Jack nodded sombrely.

"I really thought I was for it then. A bit of a relief when she showed up and handed the thing it's arse." His friend smiled slightly.

"I can imagine. I thought you'd had it as well. Glad you lived, you still owe me fifty quid." They exchanged looks and snickered a little.

"I'm amazed the press hasn't turned up yet and stuck their noses in." Phil nodded knowingly.

"The coppers are probably taking out their frustrations by making sure everyone else has a shit day as well. It won't last, one of the tabloids is bound to get someone past the blockade sooner or later, the sneaky sods." He seemed almost respectful. "Those guys will do anything for a story."

The man on the floor was now to the naked eye completely undamaged. Checking him over once more both girls looked satisfied, then Yori did something that made him regain consciousness. She passed him over to one of her skimpily dressed friends, who began explaining the situation while guiding him to a chair and a waiting cup of tea, before the two young women moved to the next patient. Jack followed the newly healed man with his eyes then sighed a little regretfully. "I wish we'd had someone like them on some of the operations we've been on over the years. We'd have more friends still alive." Phil nodded, then smiled slightly.

"But women aren't allowed in front-line combat operations in the British army." Jack chuckled.

"Fancy mentioning that to either of them?" His friend looked at him as if he was mad.

"No fucking chance of that. After what I've seen all of them do today, as far as I'm concerned they can do any damn thing they want, with my blessings. I'm not convinced an entire platoon could do more than annoy them in any case. Good thing they're the good guys. Or girls."

"They're very good, in fact. Some of the best people I have ever met." Both experienced soldiers jumped violently, reaching for their weapons, before recognising the voice of Agent Naito who had somehow ended up sitting next to them without either of them noticing. They exchanged a glance.

"Are all of you Japanese people fucking ninjas or something?" Phil said, adrenaline making his voice harsher than he intended. The other man didn't seem insulted. Naito grinned, shaking his head.

"No, but some of us have had some slightly unconventional training. Just minor tricks, really, compared to what our young friends over there can do, but it's sometimes useful. Plus it can be amusing." Jack laughed, Phil joining in after a moment.
Lieutenant Andrews looked at the Japanese man with curiosity. "So, who are they, anyway? Where did they come from, how did they learn to do what they do?" Naito smiled and shrugged.

"Honestly?" They nodded. "I have no idea." Both men stared. "It's true. Oh, I'm fairly sure someone in my government knows more than I do, it's practically certain to be honest, but whether anyone knows the complete story... With Yori involved, it's quite likely that they don't. She and her friend are something of an enigma. We have a considerably number of magical girls active in Japan currently, more than fifty that we know of just in Tokyo, but a lot of them are very hard to find out real information on. Magic makes that sort of thing extremely difficult at the best of times, not to mention that they tend to look out for each other even if they don't like each other. The entire magical community tends to be fairly protective of it's own." He smiled as the two soldiers exchanged glances.

"Yori and Chou are by far the most difficult to look into. They turned up out of nowhere about two, perhaps three years ago, quickly becoming a force to be reckoned with. Both of them seem to have a driving need to protect everyone as much as they can from anything dangerous, including overenthusiastic magical girls. Yori is very hard on the ones that put the public in danger, which regrettably sometimes happens. The girl is also very irritated by damage to property both public and private. More than once she's intervened to stop a fight and made all the participants clear up after themselves and apologise to the locals. It's very funny to watch. She can practically make them stand to attention just by glaring at them. Quite a force of personality, in fact she's damn near a force of nature. Chou is much quieter about it but at least as intimidating when she wants to be." He shuddered a little, apparently remembering something. "Trust me, you do not want to make either one of them angry. It takes a lot, but the results are... well, even men in your profession would have nightmares for years, I assure you." The British men listened with interest, studying the two women as they worked.

"Do you have a lot of incidents like this in Japan, sir?" Phil asked. "If so, I'm not sure I want to visit." Agent Naito smiled a little.

"We don't have too many with such wide-spread casualties although there have been a few very unpleasant cases in the past. The number of magical girls seems to have increased over the last decade to the point that they normally manage to deal with incursions very quickly, the death toll has dropped enormously in the last few years. And before you ask, yes, they're always female, and no, I have no idea why. No-one seems to know. Or know why demons seem so attracted to the Minato ward of Tokyo which is where almost all the incursions happen. It's very odd. Yori told me once that portals are easier to generate there although she wasn't sure of the reason." Phil thought about this for a while.

"They both work out of a district in Minato, they apparently live around there although we have no information on where, what they do when they're not doing the magical girl thing, or even how they keep people from identifying them. We know the true identities of some of the girls, but those two and their four friends over there are basically impossible to find out more about, they have security methods and protocols we can only dream of. To be honest we don't have any driving need to find out. A considerable time ago it was decided that they perform such a useful service to the country as a whole that it would be disrespectful to attempt to officially investigate them. Not to mention that some of them would look unfavourably on it if we tried and no one is particularly interested in finding out what would happen then. Best case, they just leave, then we have to deal with the problems ourselves which is somewhere between very difficult and basically impossible. Worst case they actively defend themselves. That wouldn't end well for anyone."

"They strike me as some very dangerous people," Jack said, glancing at the foreign man, then back at the girls, who had moved on to their fifth case. "I mean, Yori is very friendly and all but there's
something about her that reminds me of some of the more lethal combat specialists I've known over the years. Only more so." He shrugged. "It's difficult to explain." Naito looked amused, watching the two girls work as well.

"Oh, I know exactly what you mean. To be frank both of them can be absolutely terrifying. I have no doubt whatsoever that getting either one into a position where she had no choice but to seriously fight back would be the most terminally stupid thing anyone could do. Like juggling armed nuclear weapons and probably about as destructive. I also have no doubt that it would take the most amazing provocation to get to that point. They're very level-headed, calm, and competent people. I'd trust them with my life. Actually, I have trusted them with my life, Yori saved it a couple of months ago." They studied him curiously.

"The operation that rounded up the cult that's responsible for this mess was something they were heavily involved in," he explained, "in fact without them we'd never have succeeded in stopping them. Afterwards there was... a slight miss-step, I suppose you could call it, with the prisoners, which resulted in a number of shots being fired. One was aimed at my head. Yori saved me." He looked at them for a moment, smiling. "She caught the bullet."

"...What?" Phil managed after several seconds. Agent Naito nodded, enjoying himself.

"You heard me correctly. She caught the bullet. About fifteen centimetres from my face. Frightened the life out of me, I'm not ashamed to say, when she opened her hand and showed it to me. A copper-jacketed 9mm round, right there in her palm." They stared at him in disbelief then as one turned to look at the petite woman now working on her seventh patient. She clearly felt their eyes on her, looking up and smiling at them slightly, before going back to work. Both men got the impression that she knew exactly what they were talking about somehow.


"You want to know the really funny part?" They nodded.

"Another round hit her in the stomach. She didn't bother catching that one. The only thing she was annoyed about was the hole in her shirt. The bullet just flattened like it had hit a brick." This made them stare wide-eyed, then Jack laughed in a rather worried manner.

"What the hell is she, an alien or something? It sounds like something out of a movie. Proper superhero stuff." The Japanese man leaned back in his chair, picking up his tea and sipping it slowly.

"I think she's human, more or less. It can be hard to tell sometimes in Minato. She claims most of it is just very advanced martial arts plus some magic they worked out themselves. Neither one of them will go into much more detail. I didn't feel that pushing would be a good idea."

"I can see why." They all watched as Yori repaired a badly crushed forearm, then revived the owner of it, talking to her for a moment before sending her off with the auburn-haired girl from the other team. Chou came over to her having dealt with the last of their patients. They conferred for a while then approached the three men.

"Everyone with a critical medical problem or something quick to deal with has been fixed." Yori looked around the room, seeming satisfied. "There are five people with bits missing which will take more work after we sort out the demons. I'm a little uneasy about leaving them down there too long, just in case, so we're going to deal with them now before we get back to the healing. At least no one is in danger any more." She glanced at Chou for a second. "Unfortunately we didn't get here soon enough to save more people." The expression on her face was one of regret. Agent Naito
looked at the two soldiers, then around at all the people sitting and talking, most of them looking surprisingly calm for the survivors of a rather shocking disaster.

"You've done much better than anyone else could have, Yori. There are a lot of people alive and well now because of you two and your friends. Don't second-guess yourself." She smiled slightly and nodded.

"Sensible advice, Agent. I still wish we could have done more." The girl sighed a little, wiping her hand over her face, momentarily looking somewhat tired and annoyed. "Damned death cults." Her blonde friend put her hand on her shoulder and she put her own over it, smiling quickly at her. "Oh well. Right, let's go and deal with those bloody demons."

"What are you going to do?" Lieutenant Stross asked curiously. "Kill them?" She looked mildly irritated, although not at him, more at the situation.

"To be honest I'd prefer not to, even under the circumstances. I don't like killing." Phil looked at her, almost angry.

"They killed a lot of people here today." She nodded.

"I know, believe me. But they're animals, basically. Around as smart as an intelligent dog in most ways. That's their nature. Punishing them for doing what they are essentially designed to do is something that I find... difficult. It doesn't achieve anything, they don't know what they did is wrong. The ones to blame are the people who brought them here and they're either dead or in jail pretty much forever." Naito looked at her for a moment.

"If a dangerous dog hurts someone it is usually destroyed. Not to punish it, but to eliminate the possibility of a repeat action." Yori sighed, sitting down beside him, while Chou stood next to her listening.

"I know, and I understand. It's just... I've killed before, and I will again, I have no doubt of that. It comes with the territory. Sometimes there's no other way. But I don't like doing it in cold blood, especially if there is an alternative."

"Is there one?" She nodded with a glance at her partner.

"Actually, yes. We can send them back where they came from. Chou and I recently worked out how to make portals with our own magic system, which took quite a lot of effort. We've got the coordinates of their world, we pulled it from the portal devices when we destroyed the large batch, just in case. So, we could spin up a portal inside the warded area and push them through." The agent considered her words, while the two soldiers looked at each other for a moment. She turned to them.

"What would you like us to do? This is your country and these are your people that got hurt or killed. Most of your authorities seem to be outside arguing rather than doing anything useful. You and your guys seem pretty sensible, though. I'm perfectly happy to let you decide. Should we throw them back, or blow them up?" Somewhat taken aback by the question, the men glanced at each other for a second or two. Eventually Jack sighed.

"You may as well send them back. It's not like they'll ever bother us again, is it? And I know what you mean about killing when it's unnecessary." Phil looked hesitant but in the end nodded.

"Shit. I suppose you're right. Send them back." Yori stood up.

"OK." Walking over to Aiko she talked to her for a moment, then waved Fumiko and Misaki over.
She returned with the two girls. "We'll go and get rid of them, then come back and finish the healing. Aiko and Tamiko are going to stay her in case anything comes up." Phil and Jack shared a glance.

"Can we watch?" Jack asked curiously. He was very interested to see what a 'portal' looked like. She grinned.

"If you want." Glancing at Naito she asked a question with her eyes. Chuckling, he nodded.

"Yes, I'd like to see as well."

"All right. Come on then, we'd better get on with it." The seven people left the restaurant, stopping outside to listen to the police commander and the MoD man who were still exchanging heated words, then walking towards the remains of Harrods. "I'm impressed. Those two have been arguing for nearly an hour now without achieving anything useful. It that normal around here?" Yori glanced enquiringly at the two soldiers. Lieutenant Andrews snickered a little.

"It can get a bit inefficient. That particular copper is kind of political, he's obviously aiming at a higher office one day, so he's always looking for some way to prove how he can take charge. He's been involved in a few high profile cases over the last few years, it's amazing how he seems to have been central to them being solved." The Japanese visitors grinned, nodding knowingly.

"I know a few like that at home," Agent Naito said with a smile.

"Oh, they're all over the place, I have no doubt. I don't know the MoD bloke, Spence or whatever, but he gives me a slightly greasy feeling. I know his type even if I don't know him. Civil service security bloke, I expect. The sort that tries to cover everything he can up just because he can. Left to him all of this would probably disappear from the public record before you could blink." The soldier shrugged as they entered the building. "Secrecy is necessary in our line of work but people like him take it to extremes. Especially where it might reflect badly on him or his political bosses. This is going to reflect badly, believe me. Which is a bit unfair, in fact, it's not like anyone could really have done much about it." Chou looked sad, glancing at him.

"Unfortunately, no, there isn't much that could have been done. Without knowing where the devices are our hands are tied. All we can do is try to get to an event like this as fast as possible and stop it getting worse."

"And you have four more to look forward to..." Phil sighed. "I don't envy you." Yori and the other girls all sighed as well, in eerie synchronism, before giggling.

"That was weird." Fumiko looked amused. Pushing open an emergency access door at the rear of the shop floor Yori waved everyone through.

"Down here." She headed in the relevant direction lit only by emergency lights, the building power had been off since the fire. Everyone followed her until they ended up at a double set of metal doors which were badly scratched and dented. Yori and Chou each opened one, latching them in place with the hooks on the walls behind them, to reveal a large storeroom with a freight elevator on the far side. In the middle were two of the horrific monsters that the soldiers had seen outside. In a confined space and up close they looked even larger and more dangerous than they had done in the street. Both of them were squatting on the bare concrete floor, staring at the group of people with two of their four stalked eyes while the other two were slowly scanning around the room.

"Bloody hell those things are ugly," Lieutenant Andrews commented, looking at them with distaste.
"You're only saying that because one of them tried to take your head off," his friend joked. Jack glanced at him for a moment with an evil look.

"Damn right I am. I nearly shat myself. That's never happened in ten years of combat, it's embarrassing." Yori was watching him with a vaguely amused air as he walked slightly closer, inspecting the monsters. They were inspecting him right back, all four eyes of each now locked on him.

"Don't go any closer, Lieutenant," the black-haired girl warned him when he was about three metres away. "The wards start half a metre or so in front of you, they can't get out, but you could cross them inwards. That wouldn't end well." He froze, then slowly took a couple of steps back. Both huge demons almost seemed disappointed. One of them stood, pacing closer, before suddenly reaching for him with one lightning-fast grab, only to have it's taloned hand stop dead a metre in front of it with a sudden burst of transparent blue light, which gave a brief view of an immaterial cylinder some six metres across surrounding both demons. Jack and Phil both jumped a little at the sudden motion, the demon growling and Chou giggling very slightly. Agent Naito said nothing but prudently moved slightly further away.

The glow from the wards faded leaving no obvious signs of what was keeping the demons captive. They had clearly tried to dig their way out, the concrete was scarred and cracked, but had failed in their attempt. Jack wondered if the magic restraining them permeated the floor and ceiling as well, deciding that it most likely did as that was such an obvious escape route. It seemed very unlikely that either of the magical girls would have made a basic mistake like that. They seemed far too competent.

"OK, we'll create a portal in the middle there, next to the taller one. With any luck they'll go through by themselves, but if not we'll have to slowly decrease the ward diameter until they get pushed through." Yori looked at her friends to see if they understood. Misaki nodded wordlessly while Fumiko looked curiously at her.

"Will the portal go through the wards? It's an outbound one, surely they'll block it." Yori smiled. "We'll modify them to allow portal travel while keeping them physically solid in the outbound direction. They can't penetrate them but the portal can." The taller girl nodded in understanding. She and her sister took up places on opposite sides of the wards, having no difficulty seeing them, while Yori and Chou arranged themselves at ninety degrees to both the others, so they formed a square pattern with the demons in the middle. The creatures were watching them intently, making deep grumbling sounds, but seemed surprisingly passive after the sheer aggression before. Yori glanced at the three men. "Could you go over by the wall there, please?" They followed her instructions without a second thought. "Thanks." Turning back to the demons she and her partner concentrated.

"Got the coordinates?" Yori asked. Chou nodded. "OK. Let's try this." A few seconds passed in silence, then the observers stared as a pinprick of blue light sprang into existence a metre off the floor, wobbling slightly before steadying. Expanding slowly, it grew into a gibbous ball the diameter of a football, emitting a hissing sound, before suddenly stretching into a vertical tear in space reaching from the floor to the ceiling with a faint crackle. Yori looked pleased, grinning at her blonde friend, who smiled happily back. "That was a lot smoother than the last one."

"Indeed. I think we've almost got it optimised." Jack and Phil stared at each other, the matter-of-fact way they were talking about perverting the laws of the universe was both somewhat funny and very disturbing.

"Good god," Phil said faintly, looking at the portal. Agent Naito inspected it with interest. Neither
of the other two magical girls looked surprised, although both looked somewhat impressed.

"That was amazingly quick, Yori," Fumiko said, staring at the portal. "And it's taking so much less power than normal! Your new spell is very effective." Yori nodded, looking pleased.

"Yep. Not quite perfected, but it's getting there. Right, lets shove these guys through and we can call this part done." Both demons had turned to look at the portal, stepping back as far as they could get from it inside the warded circle. They were growling and hissing, apparently either frightened or angry, perhaps both, making no signs of wanting to go through it. Chou sighed.

"We're going to have to force them through I'm afraid." Nodding, Yori scowled for a moment.

"Oh well. It was a long shot that they'd go through voluntarily. Damn things don't know that's the way home. OK, start shrinking the wards." All four girls turned to face the demons, doing something invisible to the observers, although the effect was obvious. The demons started sliding across the floor despite their best efforts, their taloned feet scraping on the concrete with a screeching noise, while the wards glowed slightly, becoming visible again. Neither demon seemed happy. The larger one roared in anger making everyone wince at the sound, echoing through the basement and making things rattle. It did it again. Yori glowered at them.

"Be quiet," she said loudly. They ignored her, both of them now roaring. Jack and the others had their hands over their ears. She made a gesture of irritation and took a step forwards.

"SHUT! UP!" she bellowed astounding loudly, her voice deepening with a note of pure danger that the demons responded immediately to, cowering away from her. The three observers noted with shock that she was visibly glowing a faint purple colour and seemed very annoyed. The demons looked at her and froze, all their eyes locking on hers in a way that Jack would have sworn was terrified. Her hand came up, pointing. "Go home. NOW!" she hissed, radiating lethality to a level that made everyone in the room except Chou, and to a lesser extent the other magical girls, lean away. She followed it up with a growl that would have given a rabid tiger pause. The demons kept staring at her but began backing up, first one then the other disappearing through the portal with a crackle. As soon as they were both gone she relaxed, the air of imminent destruction vanishing as if it had never been. Phil nudged Jack, causing the other soldier to tear his fascinated and appalled gaze from the petite woman and glance at his friend.

"I think I found a new yardstick for dangerous," he whispered. Jack nodded slightly. Naito seemed to have recovered, he noticed, looking almost proud of the girl. Yori made a dismissive gesture and the portal imploded with a quiet pop, Fumiko and Misaki walking over to her through where it had been, making it obvious the wards were gone as well.

"Holy shit, Yori, that was scary even for you," Fumiko said with laughter in her voice, along with a note of respect. The black-haired young woman snickered.

"I was getting kind of pissed off. I didn't want to kill those things if I could avoid it but I'll admit I really don't like them very much." She glanced at Chou who looked back at her with a serene calm expression. "It may have come through a bit."

"Just a little..." Fumiko giggled slightly. "I think if they ever saw you again they wouldn't stop running for hours." She shook her head. "You can even scare the crap out of stupid demons now. That's impressive." All the girls seemed amused, turning to the three men who were still looking somewhat shocked.

"Right. That's that done." Yori grinned at them, the group of females heading out the door. They all watched as the girls left, then followed, Naito looking both amused and impressed, the two
soldiers trailing behind busy with their own thoughts. Both had seen considerable action, but what they'd encountered in the last two hours had left them feeling less sure of their place in the world than either liked.

"When I got up this morning I thought I had a pretty good handle on life, you know, Jack?" Phil mused, ascending the stairs. His friend nodded. "I had a nice Christmas, my girlfriend got me some presents, I got her some, we went to lunch with her parents, all was right with my world. Less than twenty hours later, I've seen magic, demons, girls two thirds my age who can pick up trucks with their bare hands, and one who is the most terrifying thing I've ever seen." He shook his head wonderingly. "I'm not sure my life will ever be the same again." Jack half grinned, half grimaced.

"I know what you mean. I can't say I ever gave the idea of magic much thought, but when I did it wasn't as something I thought was real. But this is pretty solid proof, wouldn't you say?" They fell silent, following the others across the wrecked ground floor of Harrods. The Japanese agent looked back at them, slowing enough to let them catch up while the girls went on ahead.

"It can be a shock when you see this sort of thing for the first time," he said when he was walking next to them. Both British men looked at the shorter foreign agent. He smiled. "Even in our culture most people never come across it like this and we have quite a lot of this sort of thing in places. Your government is well aware of magic, they had departments dedicated to it, but it's a very secretive thing here. In Japan it's more open." They exchanged glances. He grinned a little. "At least it's not like in the US. The Americans tend not to believe in magic at all. It can cause problems. When all this started we had an LAPD lieutenant and an Inspector from the RCMP over observing. The Canadian was fairly accepting of it all. Surprised, but accepting. The poor American had a very difficult time. He got used to it in the end though. Nice fellow, just had a different background."

Lieutenant Andrews smiled. "I remember the Americans in the Gulf back in ninety-one. Most of them were pretty decent guys, although kind of full of themselves in some cases. Good soldiers though. But I can imagine what you mean. A fair few of them weren't what you'd call flexible in their attitudes to life." Naito grinned. As they went out into the street, he glanced to the side and looked amused.

"Looks like your authorities have finally come to some sort of conclusion." Andrews and Stross followed his gaze. There were nearly a dozen ambulances parked behind the military vehicles, their lights flashing, backed up with several more fire trucks and more police that either of them could recall seeing before. People in high-visibility jackets were moving around rapidly, with some of them shouting orders to the rest, most of which seemed to either be ignored or at cross-purposes. They could see a heavily armed response squad climbing out of a couple of vans that had just arrived, unlimbering riot shields. The scene was rapidly degenerating into chaos. Both soldiers exchanged looks and sighed.

"This is just embarrassing," Jack muttered, glancing at the Japanese agent, who smiled slightly. They followed the four girls, who were watching the activity with interest, down the street as far as the restaurant. Aiko met them outside, she was also watching all the fuss. Turning to them as they arrived she grinned.

"These people have no idea what they're doing," she said happily, waving her hand at the crowd of police who were wandering around in the middle of the road, looking like they were trying to figure out what to do. The MoD man was still talking to the officer from the Met, although now they seemed to be in agreement. Yori watched for a moment then shrugged.

"Not our problem, really." She looked at her friend. "The demons are gone, so all we have to do is
finish up the healing, then we can go home. Which I for one will be quite pleased about, this isn't how I planned on spending the day after Christmas." Aiko giggled.

"Me either." Leading the way back inside the restaurant she rejoined her team members at the side of the room, talking to Sergeant Adams and WO Walton, who were leaning against the wall keeping an eye on proceedings while sipping tea. Adams had decided to requisition some snacks from a near-by sandwich ship, showing considerable initiative, so nearly everyone in the room was eating. They all looked fairly happy for survivors of such a bizarre disaster, Lieutenant Andrews thought to himself. He and his colleague followed Yori and Chou curiously, as they headed for the back of the room. Agent Naito went over to talk to Captain Smith, who was sitting at a table with Williamson, the MI5 man, discussing something. Looking around Jack couldn't see the other two members of his squad, momentarily wondering where they were, before shrugging. Discipline today seemed to have gone out the window, as had rationality, so if they were outside having a fag he was fine with that.

He noticed that the two young women had stopped next to the man from the top floor from Harrods, Henry something. He looked a lot better than when Jack had seen him earlier although still rather pale. Approaching he sat down a few feet away and listened.

"Hello, Henry. How are you feeling?" Yori asked, squatting down on her heels next to him. He looked down at her and smiled.

"Much better, thank you, Miss." She smiled back, putting her hand on his shoulder. It began to glow slightly. He didn't seem to notice, although his assistant, Andrea, did, her eyes widening. She started to say something but Chou caught her eye and shook her head very slightly, making her subside and just watch.

"Do you smoke, Henry?" Yori asked politely. He nodded. "You really should give that up, it's not doing you any good at all. Your heart isn't very healthy and the smoking will cause you a lot of problems." She moved her hand down over his chest, the glowing intensifying for a moment. Henry looked mildly upset.

"I know, my wife is always asking me to quit, but it's very hard." He sighed, while Jack watched with interest, having an idea what was happening as a more healthy colour seemed to be coming back into his face. Yori smiled gently at him.

"Try again, Henry. It will do you good. I'm sure you can succeed, all it takes is willpower." He nodded slowly, looking at the young woman who had carried him out of the building.

"All right. I promise I'll do my best." She looked pleased, standing up, running her hand over his chest quickly as she did. He seemed oblivious to this.

"Thank you. I have to see someone else now, but it's been nice meeting you." Smiling at him, looking much better than he had done mere minutes ago, he nodded.

"You as well, Miss." She grinned at him, then glanced at Jack, winking, before turning away. He smiled to himself. It seemed likely that she'd sorted out whatever problem the older man had, it wouldn't surprise him at all if Henry found giving up smoking surprisingly easy now. Shaking his head wonderingly he watched as the black-haired young woman walked over to the young man they'd rescued immediately before the final survivor. Andrews moved closer to watch. Sitting next to the man Yori glanced at Chou, who sat on his other side. The fellow, who must have been about twenty-five or so, was sitting staring at his left hand, feeling where the last three fingers had been in something of a daze. He was in no obvious pain but seemed to still be in shock.
"Hi." Yori said brightly. Startled, he jerked his attention away from his mutilated hand to look at her. "We didn't get introduced properly before. I'm Yori, that's my partner Chou." He glanced at the blonde who gave him a calm smile, before looking back to Yori. "How are you feeling?" The question seemed to take him by surprise. After several seconds he looked away.

"Not ideal," he mumbled, glancing at his left hand for a moment then sighing. She followed his gaze.

"Hey, come on, it's not the end of the world. You're alive. Everything else is trivial." Whipping his head up he glared.

"Trivial!" His damaged hand was thrust into her face. "Is this trivial? I'm missing three fucking fingers!" The Japanese girl inspected his hand for a moment.

"OK. Let's sort that out, all right?" This seemed to leave him stunned, as she reached up and took his hand between hers. When her hands began glowing purple he twitched, beginning to pull away, before Chou put her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry. We're helping you. Calm down and let her work, please?" Glancing at the serene face of the blonde he seemed to relax. Jack was fascinated, Chou had an ability to defuse tension like no one he'd ever seen. He chuckled. Yori clearly had impressive talents in the other direction when she desired. He got the impression that she could be chaos personified. As if she'd heard his thought the black-haired magical girl glanced over her shoulder at him with an amused look before going back to whatever she was doing. About two minutes later she released the young man's hand from between her own, appearing very pleased with the results. He stared in disbelief, as did Jack, even though he'd half-expected this. Phil, who had come up behind him a minute or so earlier, swore quietly to himself.

"My fingers..." The young man stared, wiggling the regenerated digits in shock. He reached out with his right hand and felt them carefully as if he feared they might disappear if he touched them.

"Like I said. Trivial." Yori looked smug. He stared for a moment, while Chou cleared her throat. The other young woman sighed slightly, looking at her partner. "OK, not trivial, but hardly the end of the world." Chou seemed satisfied.

"How..." The man looked at her in amazement and wonder. She smiled, patting him on the shoulder as she stood.

"Magic. Don't worry about it. Have some more tea and a sandwich, you deserve it." As the two young women walked over to a middle-aged lady who was missing a foot and staring at them with hopeful wonder, having witnessed the whole thing, the fellow went back to examining his repaired hand closely, testing each finger in turn. He looked up at the two soldiers as they moved slightly closer, also staring at his hand.

"How did she do that?" he asked in a stunned voice, turning his head to watch the two women, "Who are they?" Lieutenant Andrews suddenly smiled, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. Just be happy you met them today." The man nodded absently, still rubbing his left hand with his right one. He looked up as did almost everyone else in the room when there was a commotion at the entrance, to see half a dozen emergency services personnel rush into the restaurant, carrying a wide array of medical equipment and with expressions of grim determination. They got about twenty feet into the room before they noticed that no one appeared to be in any immediate danger of passing away, and in fact were staring curiously at them, mostly with cups of tea or sandwiches half-way to their mouths. After a moment's sudden silence the bulk of the people
went back to talking calmly among themselves, leaving the medical people looking rather confused. Several policemen and women came in behind them, also glancing around with odd expressions. Jack watched with amusement. Behind him he heard a chuckle, turning to see Yori inspecting the newly-arrived cavalry.

"Better late than never, I guess," she said wryly. He nodded with a small grin.

"They seem a bit embarrassed," he snickered. It was always funny to see someone in authority befuddled. Even on a day like today, his sense of humour was tickled by the expressions in play. She laughed.

"Indeed they do. Oh well, they'll work it out eventually." She turned back to what she was doing. Andrews watched the police and medics for a moment, noticing that Naito and the two British men he was chatting with had risen and were approaching the man who seemed to be in charge of the medical contingent, various IDs being produced. He shrugged. It wasn't his problem. Turning back to watching the magical girls he smiled at the expression of the woman they had been treating as she wiggled her newly regrown foot with glee before leaping to her feet and hugging Chou. Yori looked pleased.

The confusion at the dramatic entrance of the emergency services had died down, the doctor in charge talking quietly to Naito and Williamson with a peculiar look on his face as he glanced around the room. Most of the medical people had spread out through the room, no longer so intent on inflicting healing on people who clearly didn't require it, although they seemed to be curious about what had happened. Several of them were talking to people Yori or Chou had healed, apparently getting some fairly vivid descriptions of their now-vanished injuries, which were greeted with some scepticism. There was little evidence of them, of course.

After a couple of minutes the doctor threw his hands in the air, turning away from the two men with a look of irritation, then glanced around. He spotted Akio and her team, looking them up and down for a moment with an expression that mixed appreciation for the shapely female bodies so well displayed, puzzlement about what on earth they were doing wearing so little, and disbelief about what he'd been told of them and for that matter the entire situation. They smiled back at him unashamedly making him blink. Eventually he looked away, noticing Yori and Chou on the other side of the room. He also noticed that the man they were talking to was holding up an arm missing a hand, his tattered sleeve still damp with blood. Medical instincts jumped to the fore and he yelped, grabbing his bag and a passing paramedic, rushing over to do something about the clearly badly injured man. He missed the fact that the expression on the face of the patient wasn't worried in the slightest.

"Pardon me, Miss," he said shortly, elbowing Yori away from the middle-aged man wearing a UPS uniform. "Sir, please relax. We'll get a tourniquet on you immediately, then to hospital." He whipped out a stethoscope while the paramedic opened her bag and began rummaging through it. Ripping the man's shirt open sending buttons flying everywhere he listened to his heart, finding it was beating normally and in a surprisingly calm manner.

"Excuse me," came a mildly annoyed voice from behind him. He ignored it, checking his patient over carefully.

"Now, sir, do you know if your hand was recovered? If it's not too badly damaged and we can get it on ice we may be able to reattach it." He tried to keep a soothing tone in his voice to avoid panicking the man, who was still reacting in an oddly calm way. 'Shock' he diagnosed to himself, 'He's going to flip out when he comes out of it. Better get the sedatives ready.'

"Um, excuse me?" The voice came again, sounding slightly more annoyed, accompanied with a
tap on his shoulder. He brushed it off irritably.

"Not now, I'm busy." Turning to the paramedic he started to ask her for the emergency tourniquet, only then noticing she was holding it ready. He took it and tore open the sterile packaging.

"Hey!" The voice was now definitely pissed off. A small but impossibly strong hand clamped on his shoulder, forcibly turning him to look at the young Japanese woman who had been talking to the man he was trying to treat. Her expression wasn't a happy one. Neither was his.

"Do you mind, Miss?" he snapped. "I'm trying to treat this man, he's seriously injured." She glared at him.

"He's fine, and I was here first. Go find your own damn patient." The UPS man started snickering, both of them shooting him an annoyed look.

"Look, I don't know who you are, Miss, but I'm a doctor." He tapped the identity card on his chest. "I'm trained for this sort of thing. Perhaps you should go and get something to eat and leave the medical emergencies to the people who know how to deal with them." Behind her he noticed a couple of large soldiers, who had been watching the exchange with open amusement. For some reason both of them suddenly looked worried, the brown-haired one on the left wincing visibly. An abrupt drop in temperature made him glance around wondering why someone would turn the air conditioning on in the middle of winter. He shrugged, looking back at the girl, who was giving him an evil look. For some reason he began to feel a little uneasy.

"I'm Yori, not Miss. As it happens, I know a lot about how to deal with medical emergencies. Both how to treat them," she leaned closer and lowered her voice dangerously, "and how to create them." He stared for a moment.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked, shocked. She smiled, baring teeth that he noticed with a jolt bore a surprising resemblance to fangs. The smile wasn't particularly friendly. There was the distinct air of irritated predator about her for a second or two.

"Oh, no, not at all, Doctor," she said in a silky voice. "Just passing on some useful information you might find it helpful to know. Now, will you please step aside so I can continue treating my patient?" Her voice was simultaneously scrupulously polite and rather frightening. Without thinking about it he moved enough to let her take his place in front of the man with the missing hand, who seemed amused more than anything else. Doctor O'Connor was very puzzled about this. It seemed an odd reaction to a traumatic amputation, which he was certain was what had happened. There was far too much blood on his clothes for anything else. Something caught his eye, as he inspected the man's arm more closely than he had done previously. The wound wasn't a wound, the end of the arm at the wrist was capped in full healed skin. That didn't make any sense. He began to speak, Yori immediately shooting him a look that made him stop so suddenly he bit his tongue.

One of the soldiers behind him moved closer, bending slightly to get his mouth next to the ear of the somewhat shorter man. "Doctor, I'd advise you simply watch. Trust me, he's in good hands. But you really don't want to push your luck." O'Connor looked at him, then back at the girl. She had settled onto her heels in front of the patient, holding his wrist a couple of inches below the amputation in both her hands. The man was watching with an air of expectant interest, coupled with complete trust, which the doctor found weird. She glanced back over her shoulder at him for a moment, an expression of wry amusement crossing her face, before turning back to her patient. What happened next made O'Connor stare in complete disbelief. He was so shocked he couldn't even find it in himself to swear.

The girl's hands started emitting a soft violet glow, which spread onto the patient's arm. A few
seconds later a ghostly replica of the missing hand faded into view at the end of his arm, which slowly brightened and took on detail, first the bones fading in, then the blood vessels, nerves, muscles, and finally the skin. A perfect translucent hand was now present. As both the doctor and the paramedic stared in shock and awe real skin and bone began to spread slowly up from the amputation site, gradually filling in the immaterial replica of a hand with an actual hand. The whole process took about five minutes. When it was done the glow faded away, leaving perfectly normal appearing flesh behind. Yori sat back looking satisfied. The patient, now former patient, smiled at his remade limb, clenching his fist a few times and showing to everyone that it worked perfectly.

"Thank you, Yori," he said in a deep voice, grinning at her in gratitude. She nodded back with a smile.

"You're welcome, Ari. Try not to lose it again. It would be careless." He laughed. Looking down at his shirt, he turned his gaze to O'Connor, who was still staring at his hand in amazement.

"Thanks, Doctor. My wife loves repairing my clothes." His mildly sarcastic jibe shook the doctor out of his stunned disbelief.

"How... What..." He stopped, then tried again. "How..." There was a pause. "What...?" The paramedic glanced at him, then at the Japanese girl with the long black hair who seemed very amused. She sighed a little.

"I think you broke him." Yori grinned.

"That tends to happen sometimes." Standing smoothly she held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Yori, like I said. This is my partner Chou." She gestured to the blonde woman who had been standing to one side watching the entire scene play itself out with an expression of gentle amusement. The paramedic shook the offered hand.

"Roslyn Venn, paramedic. This is Doctor Kevin O'Connor." The doctor was still burbling to himself, switching his gaze between Ari and Yori. The UPS man looked very pleased, standing and walking over to the nearest selection of food, followed by the doctor, who was staring fixedly at his right hand as if he expected it to disappear in a puff of smoke. Roslyn watch him wander off with a slight smile. "He's a very good doctor, in fact, but he's a bit arrogant at times. A lot of doctors are in my experience. Plus his attitude to women isn't as good as I'd like, although it's not due to maliciousness, he just doesn't realise he's being insulting." She glanced at Yori who wore an understanding smile.

"Don't worry, I know what you mean. I've met a lot like that." She inspected the older woman with curiosity. "You took it a lot better than he did, I notice." The paramedic nodded slowly.

"I've had more experience than he has, he's only about thirty and fairly new to the trauma doctoring business. I'm nearly forty, and I've seen some pretty weird things over the years. Nothing quite as dramatic as that, I'll admit, but weird. I assume that was some form of magic?" Yori and Chou both studied her with interest, while the two soldiers who were listening silently exchanged glances. After a few seconds the Japanese girl smiled again.

"Yes. It's our own version, actually. Not something you're likely to have seen before, as far as I know it's unique to us."

"It's extremely effective," Roslyn said, meaning it. "And quite a sight to watch." Yori snickered.

"The glow is normal, but the visual replica of the regrowth pattern isn't required. It's useful to demonstrate the process, but in this case your man over there annoyed me and I thought it might be
an amusing idea to make it a little more dramatic." The older woman started laughing.

"Nice one. It certainly shut him up."

"That was the idea." They grinned at each other.

"So, what's the story behind all this?" Roslyn asked curiously, looking around at the room. Yori told her. When she finished the woman was sitting in a chair staring at her in shock.

"Demons?" The young woman nodded soberly, taking a bite from the chicken salad sandwich she'd acquired moments ago. "Christ. That's pretty hard to believe, even with what I just saw."

Chou sat beside her, sighing. "Unfortunately it's true. I've very sorry we couldn't prevent all this, but at least we could bring it to an end and heal everyone affected. As good as your medical people are, we're better, at least with this sort of injury." She looked around with a slightly sad expression. "A lot of these people would have died or been permanently affected by their injuries. I'm very glad we could fix that." The paramedic followed her gaze and shuddered.

"So am I. This would have been a major disaster, I suspect, without you lot." She looked at the two women, then over at the other four in the almost not there clothing who were talking to a couple of soldiers. "How did you get here so fast? By the sound of it you must have arrived within half an hour of the beginning of everything." Yori looked pleased.

"We teleported." The older woman stared at her for a moment, then giggled.

"Of course you did. Silly me, I should have guessed. All the way from Japan, right?" Yori nodded, grinning.

"Yes. Tokyo, in fact." Shaking her head in disbelief and amusement, Roslyn looked at them with an impressed expression.

"Incredible." Jack cleared his throat, from where he had been listening with interest, causing everyone to look at him. He indicated to Doctor O'Connor who was rapidly walking across the large room towards them.

"He doesn't look happy," the soldier said with a snort of laughter. Yori sighed.

"No, he doesn't. What does he want this time?" O'Connor stopped in front of them, staring at both the magical girls with irritation. He glanced at the paramedic with an expression of mild betrayal, then dismissed her as unimportant.

"I don't know how you pulled off that trick, but I'm not fooled. What I saw is impossible. I asked around, neither one of you is a doctor, in fact none of the authorities seem to know anything about you at all, or your ridiculously dressed friends over there. I'm going to have to insist you leave so I can treat these people." He waved to the two remaining people with missing parts, one of whom was down a thumb, the other one half her left arm. Both of them were patiently waiting for the Japanese girls to get to them, having seen first-hand how easily they fixed such problems, and feeling a considerable degree of confidence and trust. There was something about them that inspired such feelings. The two patients looked at each other, then back at the doctor, wondering why he was getting so wound up. Yori and Chou also exchanged glances, the blonde giving the smaller woman a warning look that to most of the witnesses seemed to ask her to be polite. Yori sighed and nodded very slightly before turning to O'Connor.

The two soldiers made as if to rise and approach the doctor, but subsided when Yori looked at them. Jack settled back with his arms crossed, feeling somehow insulted. He almost felt as if one of
his own people had been unfairly accused of something, which was a little strange bearing in mind that he'd only known these people for about three or four hours. Chou smiled a little at him as Yori studied the doctor carefully. "Did you talk to the MI5 representative?" she asked curiously. O'Connor looked slightly taken aback, that wasn't what he'd expected to hear her say. He shook his head.

"The police don't know anything about you," he said. She shrugged.

"Not my problem. Your government does. We're here at their request with their permission. Perhaps you should go and check. We can wait." He looked irritated.

"I don't really care about that. What I care about is untrained people playing at being doctors. Not to mention threatening me when I'm trying to do my job and trying to trick me with light shows, as impressive as they are. But magic tricks should be reserved for TV or something not serious incidents like this." He was waving his arms and talking quite loudly by now, which had the effect of drawing the attention of almost everyone in the room. A couple of policemen began moving in their direction. Yori sighed heavily.

"Doctor, you're causing a scene." He glared at her, unconcerned, so she shrugged again. "Your choice. By the way, I didn't threaten you. If I had threatened you, you wouldn't be in any doubt about it at all. People tend to remember my threats." The look she gave him made him take a couple of steps back. Jack and Phil smiled darkly behind him, while Chou put a hand on her arm.

"Go easy, dear, he doesn't understand and he's worried," she said in a low voice. With a look at her Yori relaxed a little. The policemen approaching them stopped a couple of feet away, looking at the doctor then the two Japanese women.

"Is there a problem, sir?" one of them asked O'Connor. He nodded, pointing at Yori, then moving his finger to Chou.

"Yes. These two young ladies are getting in the way of me treating people. Can you remove them, please?" Yori sighed again, very quietly. The policeman who had spoken gave the petite young woman an assessing look. As he moved closer she stepped back a pace.

"Come along, miss, let's leave the doctor to his work, shall we?" he said in a rather patronising tone, which even the doctor could immediately see was a mistake. Even Chou winced at it. Lieutenant Andrews covered his eyes with his hand and sighed while beside him his colleague snickered.

"Oops," Phil said with some amusement. He didn't much like the police, a remnant of a somewhat misspent youth. The look Yori gave the considerably older cop made him take a step back. Then another, as she slowly walked forwards. He reached for his collapsible baton, suddenly wishing that he'd kept his mouth shut. There was something about the woman, all five and a bit feet of her, which was abruptly extremely worrying.

"Now, Miss, let's not make things worse. Just come with me and we can let the doctor get on with it." He closed his mouth wondering why all of a sudden all he could say were things that seemed to make the woman in front of him, whom he was now getting a very dangerous feeling from, even angrier. His eyes widened, as did those of his colleague and both the doctor and the paramedic as she started visibly glowing, a faint purple aura surrounding her. The temperature in the room in her vicinity was dropping noticeably, little puffs of vapour coming from the mouths of people within a few feet. Everyone stared in horror. 'Oh, Christ, what the hell did I just upset?' he thought to himself, suddenly terrified and swallowing hard. The blonde girl standing next to her put a hand on her shoulder, making her turn her head to glance at her face, then after a few seconds, nod slightly.
The glow vanished and the sudden cold snap warmed up. Roslyn noticed with shock that the cup of tea someone had left on a table next to her appeared to have frozen solid.

O'Connor was watching all this with his heart thundering in his ears, more scared than he'd been since he was a child. The small woman turned her head towards him very slowly, staring for a long moment, then looked away, dismissing him and the policemen completely. She turned and walked back to the two patients who smiled at her, apparently not at all worried by whatever she'd just done. The whole time she hadn't said a word. Chou looked at him and shook her head sadly, before moving to join her companion, talking to her quietly in Japanese. He sagged slightly as the tension went out of him. The policemen looked at each other, somewhat shocked and unable to think of a good solution to the problem presented by the black-haired woman. Neither one of them felt that trying again was a good idea. Drunks and football hooligans were one thing, whatever the hell she was was something much, much worse.

WPC Oakley got up from where she had been watching from a few tables away, her eyes wide, approaching them and pulling them to one side. She showed them her warrant card, then talked in a low voice for a while. Both coppers nodded a few times, looking to where she pointed out Williamson the MI5 man and Agent Naito, both of whom had been observing but had decided not to intervene. They turned and walked over to the two men, where a discussion broke out. A more senior policeman joined them after a minute or two.

"Doctor," Yori suddenly said, making O'Connor jump. He stared at her for a moment. "Come here, please." With a certain amount of trepidation he slowly walked over to where she and Chou were standing next to the woman missing part of her arm. Yori inspected him with an emotionless face, then stepped to the side and waved at the woman, a tallish lady in her early sixties, of Nigerian descent by his estimation. She seemed remarkably calm under the circumstances, although her clothes were tattered and bloodstained. Once again it was clear that the injury she suffered from was recent, but she appeared to be in no distress, making him glance at her truncated forearm. Once again the wound that should have been there was missing. The arm looked like a fully healed amputation. He stared at it for a moment, then back to Yori.

"I'm not happy about having our competence called into question although I understand from your viewpoint you have reservations about us. I apologise if I was somewhat impolite." She glanced at Chou, who looked pleased. "However, so that we can make sure there are no further misunderstandings, I'd like you to examine Mrs Adeyemi here, to determine the extent of her injuries to your own satisfaction. She's in no immediate danger, by the way." The Japanese girl was speaking in a rather formal manner, making it clear just from the tone of her voice she still wasn't completely happy about the situation. After a few seconds he nodded.

"All right." Pulling a chair up beside the patient he smiled at her. She smiled back, giving him an encouraging nod. "Hello, I'm Doctor O'Connor. Do you mind?" Mrs Adeyemi smiled more widely.

"Not at all, doctor," she replied in a richly accented voice. "You go right ahead. But don't be mean to this young lady, she and her friends have saved a lot of people today. You didn't see it earlier." He nodded, pulling his stethoscope out of his pocket again, checking her heart, then taking the blood-pressure machine from Roslyn who had come up to him with his bag of equipment. Finishing with her vitals in a matter of minutes, he found she appeared to be in good health, calm, and relaxed. In fact, aside from missing her left forearm and hand she was basically completely healthy. Putting his equipment away he gently lifted what was left of her arm and carefully inspected it. The wound site, or what should have been a wound site, was fully developed skin, in his estimation something that you'd only see after a good eighteen months to two years of healing. There was no sign of scarring at all. Mrs Adeyemi looked at him with a twinkle in her eye.
"It happened about three hours ago." She could see the disbelief in his eyes before he opened his mouth. "I was getting on the bus when all this happened. When the front of the building collapsed it crushed the bus. My arm was trapped in the door." Examining the arm again he slowly shook his head.

"I'll take your word for it, I suppose, but by everything I've ever learned this is impossible. This wound is at least a year and a half healed."

"Three hours." She gave him a sympathetic look. "On my mother's grave, three hours at most. Chou healed it to this point about an hour ago." O'Connor lowered her arm to her leg and just sat staring at it for over a minute, thoughts even he was having trouble whirling through his mind. Eventually he looked up. Yori returned his gaze, a slight smile crossing her otherwise expressionless features.

"Are you satisfied? This is a real arm, really missing a significant part?" He nodded.

"Yes. I have no idea how, but it's completely healed." He stood, looking at the patient, who seemed quite amused.

"Mrs Adeyemi was missing the lower part of her arm when we managed to free her, she also had three sharp force trauma punctures to her abdomen, a severely lacerated lower intestine, crushed gall bladder, three broken ribs, a broken ankle, several lacerations to her side and back, and had lost approximately half a litre of blood." Chou recited the list of injuries dispassionately, making him look at her in shock. "In addition she suffered from gout and had much higher blood pressure than was healthy for her." He switched his gaze between the two young women. "I healed all the serious injuries on site as soon as she was freed to stabilise her, then Yori and I fixed the remaining problems when we had all the casualties here in safety. We left the five amputation cases until now as we had the cause of the disaster to deal with, which took priority. Now the emergency is over we're finishing up the work." She looked toward the smaller woman who took up the conversation.

"I'm doing most of the regenerations as I'm slightly better at it that Chou is. She's observing and assisting so she can see how I do it. On the job training you might say." A quick grin flashed across her face, gone in an instant. "Now, I'm going to regenerate the arm. I would like you to pay very close attention so you can satisfy yourself it's not any form of trick. All right?" She waited for his somewhat stunned nod of acceptance before sitting in the chair he'd just vacated. The expression she turned to Mrs Adeyemi was vastly warmer than the one she had given him. The elder woman smiled back, holding out her arm without being prompted. Yori took it in her hands, holding it gently just above the amputation site.

"Doctor? Please watch carefully. For your benefit I'll explain what I'm doing as I go." The purple glow jumped into existence, quickly spreading from her hands to the arm of the patient. "The visualisation effect isn't necessary but it helps to explain the process. Now, the missing parts are of course defined in the patient's DNA, and it's certainly possible to use that as the basis of the regeneration, but it's not required in this sort of case. There is a pattern stored in the ki signature of the patient, what you could call the life force for want of better terminology. I could explain in much more detail and more accurately but I'm afraid you don't have the background or vocabulary to understand it." She glanced at him. "I'm not trying to insult you, it's the simple truth. This is a specialist subject that very few people have the knowledge to understand." He nodded slowly, suddenly feeling out of his depth, but with a growing fascination.

"I can use the ki pattern to determine the damage and also the required corrective action. Using that pattern, I produce a map of the damage, which can be visualised like this." As in the previous case, a translucent skeletal three dimensional image took shape, showing the bones that should have been
present. O'Connor stared in amazement. Yori glanced at him again. "You see? This is the bone structure that should be there. Now, the cartilage, muscles, tendons, neural structures, blood vessels, subdermal layers, and finally the epidermal layers." As she spoke, each described structure faded into view. The final result was a perfect, astoundingly detailed representation of the missing forearm and hand, complete in every way. O'Connor groped for a chair and sat heavily in it, looking at the sight in front of himself in pure awe. There was no doubt this time it was real.

"OK. That's the desired regrowth pattern. Now, we start the actual regeneration. For this part I need to force cellular division to vastly higher than normal levels, which is easy, but it also causes side effects that need to be dealt with. Excess heat needs to be siphoned off to prevent cell death or damage, and you need to make sure the replicating cells follow the pattern without growing out of control. Replication errors could cause tumours at this point which isn't what we want." She gave him a slightly amused look. "I also need to feed energy into the cells to allow them to survive, since drawing on the patients own resources for a regeneration of this extent isn't a good idea. The cells can use that energy to build the mass they require." As she was speaking, O'Connor watched with fascination as the skin on the patients arm began to spread up through the glowing replica arm, wrapping around bone stubs that steadily lengthened. He could see what looked like a freshly cut cross-section of an arm, with no bleeding or signs of trauma. The sight was at the same time somewhat repulsive and totally engrossing.

"It takes a considerable amount of energy to keep the regeneration going at this speed. I could go faster, but then the heat removal becomes somewhat problematic. Slower is just a waste of time. So this speed is about optimal for me since we're not in a huge hurry." He nodded absently, leaning closer to watch the process closely. Half the missing arm was now regenerated, the skin looking like it had been there all along. As the process reached the wrist joint he moved around to get a better look, watching as all the bones and tendons in the joint took up their rightful place and were sheathed in muscle and skin. Glancing up at the young woman for a moment he saw she had her eyes half-closed, obviously concentrating on the job she was doing. Beyond her he could see the face of Mrs Adeyemi watching with admiration and gratitude. Chou was standing next to her with her hand on her shoulder, her eyes also partially closed, while her hand was glowing with faint golden light. He got the sudden impression that she was watching the process from the inside somehow.

Turning his attention back to the regenerating limb he saw it was half-way through the hand at this point. The remaining part regrew quickly. About eight minutes after she had started the arm was whole again. Opening her eyes she inspected the results and smiled. "That looks good. Now I can turn the neural pathways back on, I had them disabled so the patient wouldn't twitch or move. Also the regeneration itches like mad, which is uncomfortable, so I turned off the sensory nerves as well as the motor control ones." Mrs Adeyemi jumped slightly as feeling came back into her new hand. Yori released it, the glow disappearing, before her patient lifted her arm and looked at it wonderingly, turning her hand over and wiggling the fingers.

"Thank you, child," she said in a voice choked with emotion. The Japanese girl grinned at her, pleased with the results.

"You're very welcome, Mrs Adeyemi."

"Call me Odaro, dear." She leaned over and hugged the younger woman, who looked slightly taken aback for a moment, then hugged her back.

"Odaro. You're welcome, it's what we do." They released each other, the older woman holding her hand up in front of her face and wiggling each finger in turn with a broad smile. Yori turned to O'Connor.
"So, doctor. Was it a trick?" He stared at the former patient for a long few seconds before turning to the younger woman, studying her closely and respectfully.

"My apologies. I was entirely wrong about you both." He shook his head as he smiled at him, looking pleased. "That was no trick. I genuinely have no idea how you could possibly do that, but it's very clear you know a hell of a lot more about how the body works than I do." The girl gave him an assessing look, then made a shallow but formal bow.

"Thank you, doctor. I accept your apology. Please accept mine for being rather rude." She straightened up, grinning at him, an expression he somehow couldn't help but return. "You caught us at a bad time. Normally I'm not nearly as easy to upset, but recent events have been rather distressing, so I was perhaps a bit more short tempered that I should have been. We got off on the wrong foot, I guess. Why don't we start again." She stuck her hand out. "Hi. I'm Yori." Grinning he shook it.

"Doctor Kevin O'Connor. Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Yori." She laughed.

"Likewise. And don't put yourself down, I know full well how much training it takes to become a doctor. I'm sure you're a good one. We just do it differently, that's all." Glancing at Chou, who was smiling in a calm and gentle manner, radiating a certain feeling of serenity, she nodded towards the last patient. "You want to try sorting him out?" The blonde nodded.

"I think I see what I was doing wrong. Can you watch and make sure I'm doing it correctly?"

"Of course." Both young women walked over to the man, who was probably in his early twenties. He smiled at both of them in a winning manner, obviously pleased to have two good looking females attending to him. Sitting next to him Chou held out her hand, prompting him to put his right hand in it, showing off the lack of a thumb. Yori stood beside her and watched carefully. The blonde woman didn't bother with the visual effects, which made the slowly regenerating digit look even more eerie than it otherwise would have done. Everyone in the vicinity watched with interest and respect as his thumb slowly regrew itself. Yori nodded approvingly when it was finished.

"Perfect. You've definitely got it now." Chou looked very pleased with herself.

"Thank you. It was a problem with juggling the heat dissipation against the cell division rate. That large regeneration gave me enough time to see the process in detail, so I could see what I was doing wrong." She looked over her shoulder at O'Connor. "Rebuilding and repairing things that are still present, such as internal organs for example, is much more straightforward than replacing something that's completely missing." He nodded with some understanding. It seemed logical as far as this whole impossible situation went. The young man looked at his hand in wonder then smiled.

"Thanks." Chou gave him a gentle look.

"No thanks are necessary, but thank you." Standing, she stretched slightly, then turned to Yori. "That's the last of the survivors. The demons are gone, everyone is healed. I suppose we're done all we can do here." Nodding, the black-haired young woman looked around, a slight smile playing about her lips. She seemed satisfied.

"The final count was sixty-seven survivors." Her face fell a little. "And sixty-five fatalities." Chou nodded sadly, holding the other woman's hand for a while. "I really wish we could have prevented this." Lieutenant Andrews walked over, then clapped her on the shoulder.

"As your Agent Naito over there said earlier, don't second-guess yourself. Without you six ladies
this would have been much, much worse. Don't beat yourself up about something you can't change. We all do after a mission, it doesn't change anything, but it's difficult not to. Believe me, this is a remarkably good outcome all things considered." He spoke with the voice of bitter experience. She looked at him for a moment, her eyes meeting his with a look that told him she knew exactly what he was talking about. There was an air of combat experience there that rivalled or exceeded his own. A few seconds passed then she nodded heavily.

"Thanks." Glancing at Chou she went on, "Let's get the others then talk to the MI5 guy." Chou smiled at her then turned to walk over to Aiko and her team, who were sitting at a table inhaling sandwiches and chatting to Adams and Walton, with Agent Naito listening with interest to some frankly fairly unbelievable stories. She turned to the two soldiers, casting a quick look at O'Connor and Roslyn, who were standing fairly close, listening. O'Connor was still turning the word 'Demon' over in his mind, wondering what Yori had meant. "We'll probably be leaving pretty soon. It's been nice meeting you guys and the rest of your people. Thanks for the help." She stuck out her hand. Jack shook it carefully, feeling the raw strength in the delicate-looking appendage. Phil shook as well. Stepping back she smiled, then looked Lieutenant Andrews up and down for a moment, before nodding to herself. Her hand came up, holding a card that hadn't been there seconds ago. Everyone stared at it wondering where it had come from.

"Here. If you ever get involved in anything like this again and need help, call." Jack took the card from her feeling a strange little tingle for a second, reading it curiously. He showed it to Phil who stared blankly at it.

"Um, there's nothing on it," his friend and colleague said. Jack stared at him, then looked at the card again. He could clearly see 'Yori' written on it over a phone number and two long alphanumeric strings.

"Yes there is."

"No, there isn't."

"I'm telling you, there is. I'm looking right at it." Yori was snickering.

"Magic business cards." They stared at her. "Honest. It's a security measure." She explained, leaving them very impressed.

"Wow. That's pretty hard-core." Jack looked at the card again for a moment before carefully tucking it away in his inside pocket. She turned to O'Connor and Venn. After a moment's thought, she handed the paramedic another card.

"You're the one with previous experience in magic, however limited. You may find something you need our help for. If so, give me a ring." She glanced at the doctor with a small smile. "If you ever get into a situation you need us for, let Roslyn know as well, OK?" He nodded. Yori walked over to the table where her companions were, leaving the two soldiers and the medics to watch her go with various expressions.

"Good grief," O'Connor finally managed. Andrews glanced at him, then nodded.

"Yep. That about sums it up."

The doctor looked at him. "Um. Demons?" Jack laughed, then started explaining.

Williamson looked up from his phone as the Japanese contingent approached him, inspecting them quickly. He re-read the text he'd just received, sighed, then put the phone away. "Hello, ladies,
Agent. Everyone all fixed up, then?" The black-haired girl who was the clear leader of the entire
odd assembly nodded with a smile, before sitting at the table near him. The others did as well.

"Pretty much done, I think. I'm very sorry for the fatalities but all the survivors are as good as new.
Better, in a few cases." He looked at her with a puzzled expression. She grinned. "We came across
a few pre-existing conditions while we were treating the casualties. It seemed easier to deal with
them as well while we were at it. You know, heart conditions, gout, diabetes, chronic stuff like
that. Fairly simple." Staring at her and her blonde friend for a while he finally shook his head
wonderingly.

"Yes. Simple. I see." He didn't. "Well, on behalf of the British government, thank you all for
helping us. While the number of deaths is extremely regrettable, there was nothing you could have
done about that, while you certainly brought what could have been a much more unpleasant
situation to a speedy end." He glanced off to the side where he could see Spence and the police
commander had entered the restaurant and were looking around while talking quietly to each other.
Yori and the others followed his gaze, most of them looking unimpressed. Agent Naito had a
completely neutral expression, as did Yori. "I'm also sorry for the rather poor showing our own
people made. It was somewhat embarrassing." The small woman looked back at him, raising an
eyebrow.

"Your military people seemed to be quite effective, even though they were out of their depth.
Lieutenant Andrews, Captain Smith, and the others on his team were very helpful. I was impressed
how quickly they adapted to the situation which was certainly well out of their normal experience."
She looked over to the two men who had been with them for most of the time they'd been there,
noticing that they had rejoined the rest of their team and were talking amongst themselves. Smiling
a little she turned to Williamson again. "You've certainly not got anything to be embarrassed as far
as they go."

"Thank you," he said, slightly surprised but also gratified. "That's good of you to say." She waved a
hand dismissively.

"It's true. I don't bother buttering people up." Aiko grinned.

"Damn right she doesn't. If she thinks you're an idiot she tells you." Yori looked at her for a
moment.

"Thanks, Aiko. Thanks very much indeed." The brunette looked amused as did her team. Even
Chou was smiling a little. Williamson looked at them with a slightly bemused air. After a short
pause he sighed a little.

"There's a slight problem, though, that I think I may need your help for." Yori glanced around at
her colleagues then inspected him with interest.

"What sort of problem?" she asked in a slightly suspicious manner.

"Your sort, I think." He thought for a moment while she waited politely. "You are aware, I take it,
that we have a somewhat secret government department that is in charge of matters of a...
somewhat unusual... type?" he asked hesitantly, not sure if they would know what he was talking
about. Yori exchanged looks with Chou and Agent Naito, then nodded slowly.

"You call it the Ministry of Magic, I believe. A subsection of the Ministry of Defence, not publicly
admitted to. It's one of the oldest continuously operating departments of the British government,
dating to around 1230AD. A fairly small department but very influential. It regulates a lot of the
magical community in the UK, at least in theory, although not as effectively as they would like."
Williamson was impressed and slightly appalled. Most of this was supposed to be a secret. He said as much, causing her to laugh. "You'd be surprised at how many so-called secrets we know. Or perhaps horrified. Don't worry, we don't go spreading them around without good reason." Still looking at her oddly, he nodded after a while.

"OK. Good, I suppose. I'm not an expert in these things, although I am in the know, I suppose you could say. It comes with the job. Anyway, the various mages and the like in the MoM are even more secretive than most of the government, which is saying something. Spence works for them, I believe, even though officially he's an under-secretary to the defence minister. You may have noticed that he's been trying to keep all this under wraps even when it was obvious that he couldn't." They all nodded. Fumiko turned to look at the man who was watching them now, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"There's something unpleasant about his aura, to be honest. I noticed it when we first met him. I don't like him." Williamson almost smiled.

"Neither do I. I never have done, I don't trust him. There are stories... Anyway, that's not important right now. The important thing is that I've received information relevant to what happened here today that worries me a lot, and some of the people I work for." Yori looked at him for a few seconds, then looked at the MoD man. Glancing at Chou they seemed to hold a silent conversation for a few seconds, before the blonde nodded. Turning her attention back to Williamson the black-haired girl looked satisfied.

"OK. We're shielded. No one not at this table can hear or see anything they shouldn't." A little startled Williamson looked around, as did Agent Naito, both of them noticing that everyone else in the room now seemed to be ignoring them completely. Even Spence, who had been approaching them, looked like he'd forgotten what he was about to do and had wandered off to the other end of the room, a slightly confused expression on his face. The MI5 man and the PSIA agent exchanged impressed looks.

"Wow. That's a pretty good trick," Williamson said. Yori grinned.

"It has it's uses. So, talk to us. What's the problem?" He stared at the table for a long moment, wrestling with his conscience, before looking directly at her.

"They have another one of those portal weapons."

All six magical girls went absolutely still. Yori and Chou were both suddenly outlined in a faint glow, purple and golden respectively. Williamson shuffled slightly further away, feeling a wave of power rolling off them, with slightly lesser power flows coming from the other four. He glanced at Naito, who looked extremely uncomfortable, then back to Yori.

"Explain."

Her voice was flat and dangerous. With a slight shiver he tried to marshal his thoughts. "Understand, I'm not supposed to talk about this. I'm probably going to get into a lot of trouble. It may even be treason. But, my job is to work in the best interests of the UK. Based on what I saw today, I firmly believe that trying to do anything at all with that sort of magic, that sort of demon, is very definitely not in the best interests of the UK in any way at all. If it hadn't been for you people we could have lost hundreds, possibly thousands, of innocent lives. I do not want that to happen." Yori nodded curtly, waiting for him to get to the point.

"A contact at the MoM heard about what happened here. Her conscience got the better of her. Apparently, about three weeks ago one of the portal devices was discovered completely by chance
at Tottenham Court tube station, hidden in a service corridor. Through a rather unlikely chain of events it came to the attention of one of the research mages who works at the MoM. He'd seen the alert your PSIA had sent around and managed to acquire the thing covertly. It was immediately classified top secret. They've been working on reverse engineering it since then. Without a lot of luck, I'm told, there seems to be something unusual about the magic on it they can't decode at the moment." He sighed slightly.

"Something I'm very pleased about, but I can't assume will hold forever. One the one hand, it's a damn good thing it was removed from where it was, if it had activated during rush hour the death toll would have been incredible. There are tens of thousands of people going through that station every day, it's very busy this time of year. On the other hand, having seen what happened here, if it triggers where it is the results are going to be very messy. Leaving aside what would happen if those idiots manage to duplicate it. It's a terror weapon, pure and simple, there's no good reason at all why they should be looking into making more." The man shook his head sadly. "That's not something I can support, even if I work for the same government. It needs to be stopped."

After staring coldly at him for a few more uncomfortable seconds Yori nodded, her visible aura dying away. Chou relaxed as well. Both men felt much safer as a result, there had been the impression that at any moment sudden devastation could happen. Now they just looked annoyed. "Idiots," Yori muttered to herself. She studied him, then sighed. "Thank you for being honest with us. I think you're completely correct. Those damn things are horrific, they were the result of a lunatic trying to bring about the death of millions. We need to retrieve and destroy that one, along with any notes your mages may have made on it's construction, then impress upon them how much of a bad idea trying again would be." Shaking her head, she added, "I'm kind of surprised they haven't managed to trigger it. The mage who built them booby-trapped them. Your people are either quite good or very lucky."

"Add very arrogant, intolerant of non-mages, and generally pretty insufferable to that list and you've pretty much got the average MoM mage." Williamson half-snickered. "Some of them are all right but a lot of them are basically pricks." Yori chuckled.

"Sounds like a lot of mages everywhere. Right, I guess we're going to have to go and take their toy away from them before someone does something we all regret. Where is it?" Agent Naito cleared his throat, looking worried. She glanced at him.

"Ah, Yori? Could we possibly not cause an international incident? Please?" Reaching out she put her hand on his shoulder, grinning slightly.

"Don't worry, Agent. They'll never know what hit them." For some reason this didn't make him appear any happier. She snickered. "We'll go carefully. But you have to admit those things are too dangerous to be left lying around." Reluctantly he nodded.

"That's true. I just don't want to have to explain how you lot turned a foreign government building into a smoking hole in the ground." The small woman laughed.

"Oh, don't worry about that." Aiko grinned at him.

"Yes, when Yori really cuts loose there isn't even any smoke. Just glowing glass..." By now both Naito and Williamson were looking alarmed.

"Um, Aiko?" The brunette looked at her friend with an amused glint in her eyes.

"Yes, Yori?"
"Any chance you could stop helping?" The other girl giggled.

"Spoilsport." Shaking her head Yori turned back to Williamson.

"There shouldn't be any real trouble. So, where do we go? I assume it will be warded so we can't teleport in, we'll have to use more traditional methods." The MI5 agent explained the location of the MoM research building, which was fairly close, on the other side of the Thames a few miles away.

"How are we going to get in?" Tamiko asked curiously. "I'd think this would be a pretty high-security place and they're not going to be all that welcoming to unexpected visitors."

"I can get you in, I think," Williamson said. "My credentials allow access to the building. In fact, thinking about it..." He thought for a moment, then nodded. "That's probably the better option to try first. Hold on." Pulling his phone out he dialled a number, then spoke when it was answered. "Hi, Lucy. It's Harry Williamson, MI5. Yes, very well, thanks. Is the Minister available? We have a bit of a problem he could help with. It's rather urgent. Yes, I'll wait." Holding his hand over the microphone for a moment, he said quietly, "The Minister of Defence is someone I know fairly well. He's reasonably easy to deal with and quite sensible. Plus he really doesn't like the Minister for Magic at all." They waited quietly for thirty seconds or so, then he spoke again. "Oh, hello, Minister. It's Harry Williamson. Yes, that Harry. How are you, sir?" There as a pause. "Yes, I'm there now. The immediate emergency is over thanks to our colleagues from Japan. They were exceptionally efficient. Yes. I'll pass that on, thank you, sir. Yes, there was something else, we have a bit of a problem which I think you should know about." He briefly explained the situation as he'd told the Japanese contingent.

Once he stopped speaking there was a pause of several seconds, before the person on the other end of the line erupted in rage sufficiently loudly that he winced and pulled the phone away from his ear a little. The others could clearly hear a very angry voice shouting tinny. When the swearing died down he cautiously put the phone to his ear again. "You agree that this isn't a good idea, sir?" The Minister obviously did judging by the raised voice. "I think so too sir." He suddenly grinned. "I'd never call a superior that, sir, but I understand. Yes. They're not at all happy about it either. Yori would very much like to talk to the relevant people so she can explain just how disappointed she is. Yes indeed, sir." He laughed. "I think so as well. So we have your support, Minister? Thank you, sir. Yes, immediately. We'll meet you there. Ah, Sir? John Spence is here as well, he's getting very chummy with Commander Shipman from the Met." There was another outburst of anger. "I understand, Sir. Yes, it will be my pleasure. Good bye." He hung up, looking very satisfied as he put his phone away.

"Right. That went better than I expected. The Minister is extremely irritated about all this, he thinks it's a very dangerous idea leaving aside the fact that he should have been kept informed about it and wasn't. Quite an unusual politician, he actually understands his job. Anyway, he's given us his backing to do whatever is necessary to deal with the situation. He did ask that you refrain from causing any more damage than necessary, although for some reason he didn't forbid it entirely." Williamson smiled slightly nastily. "I think he read the report the PSIA sent about how you ladies dealt with the original terrorists. It may be he wants a demonstration..." Agent Naito groaned.

"Oh, god. Don't tell them that." Grinning, Yori looked at him.

"We'll be good. Probably."

"Oh, god."
"All right, now we just need transport. That's going to be a little difficult with the circus outside."
The MI5 man looked out the window of the restaurant to the crowd of emergency personnel still milling about in the road. Chou followed his gaze, then looked over her shoulder to where Captain Smith was sitting talking to Walton and Adams, eating some sandwiches.

"I think I know where we can get a vehicle," she said calmly, standing and walking over to the bomb disposal squad. Everyone watched as she talked for a minute or two, before returning with the three men following her. Yori dropped the shield, which had the effect of making all three soldiers stare as an entire table full of people suddenly became obvious in front of them. None of them could work out why they hadn't really noticed before. "Captain Smith is happy to give us a lift." Chou smiled at the captain who nodded back.

"The truck is big enough to carry everyone, we can get about a dozen people in it, more if they don't mind sitting on the floor."

"Thank you, Captain," Williamson said. "If you'll just excuse me for a moment I need to pass on a message." Standing, he walked over to Spence, who was looking at where they'd popped back into existence with a weird expression. The MI5 man's own face was filled with malicious enjoyment. Stopping next to the MoD man he talked quietly to him for a short time, the shorter man's face going more and more pale as he did. Eventually he stopped, appearing satisfied, before turning away. Spence looked like he'd just seen his first-born eaten by a tiger. When he got back to the table he looked at the curious expressions. "I enjoyed that. I don't think John did though. The Minister would like to have a very long talk with him."

The group headed out into the street, climbing into the army vehicle. Williamson sat in the front along with Adams who was driving to show him where to go, while the rest went in the back. Yori looked around at the equipment with interest, then down at the floor where several weapons crates were. She flipped one open with her toe seeing that Lieutenant Andrews had put the grenade launcher back into it. Curiously reaching down she pulled a grenade from the case, inspecting it closely, before putting it back. Captain Smith watched her but didn't say anything. The Japanese girl closed the case again. "Milkor MGL six shot 40mm grenade launcher, South African manufactured," she said casually, causing everyone to look at her. "I didn't think they were used by the British." Smith stared for a moment, then nodded.

"Generally, they're not. We have a few kicking around for evaluation, though. Lieutenant Andrews rather likes it and tends to check one out whenever he gets a chance. He came across them in the Gulf I believe, the Americans were using them." Yori rested her feet on the grenade launcher case, crossed at the ankle.

"Wrong ammunition for that type of demon, unfortunately. All the high explosive rounds would do is make it really angry."

"I noticed," the captain said, shuddering at the memory.

"You'd probably have better luck with incendiaries," she commented. He looked at her curiously.

"Would that have stopped it?"

"Nope. But it would have slowed it down for a few seconds more." The girl looked at him with a certain amusement. "Mind you, it would be even more pissed off about being set on fire than blown up." Agent Naito sighed a little.

"Yori, could you please stop terrifying everyone?" She grinned but stopped talking. Misaki snickered, peeling a banana she'd pulled from nowhere. Fumiko looked at her and muttered to
herself. Her sister looked at her out of the corner of her eye with a small smile. Sergeant Adams drove much more slowly this time, although he had the flashing lights going. Traffic cleared out of the way in front of them, he only had to use the siren a few times when someone was a bit slow or unobservant. Twenty minutes after leaving the restaurant they pulled up in front of a complex of old buildings near the Thames, surrounding a large open courtyard. The entrance had a barrier across it with a guard in a small hut, who was watching them carefully as the truck stopped. Adams and Williamson looked at him, then each other. Just as Williamson was about to get out of the truck a black Rolls Royce with darkened windows pulled up behind them. Sticking his head out of the window he inspected it briefly. "Ah, the Minister is here. Good timing." He pulled his head back in and peered into the back of the truck. "Stay here, please, I'll go talk to him." Getting out he walked back to the car, opening the back door and climbing in. A few minutes later he emerged, going over to the guard and showing him an ID which made him salute and open the barrier. Adams slowly drove into the courtyard under the stone arch the barrier blocked, stopping to allow Williamson to get back in. The Rolls followed them inside. The people in the back of the truck could see the guard picking up a telephone as the barrier lowered again.

"Well, they know we're here," Smith said, looking at the others.

"It's probably best if you three stay in the truck, Captain," Williamson said apologetically. "You're not really cleared for all this. Our friends aren't either, but it will be easier to get an exception made for them under the circumstances." The captain nodded understandingly.

"No worries, sir. We'll wait, we do a lot of that. Good luck." Agent Naito climbed out of the vehicle followed by the magical girls, who looked around with interest.

"Hmm. Strongish wards, reasonably well done. It would certainly block a teleport in most cases as well as any surveillance." Yori was staring upwards. Naito and Williamson followed her gaze, not seeing anything. The other girls nodded, looking about at the buildings and one or two people who had been walking across the yard, but had stopped to gape at the oddly dressed visitors.

"Nothing we couldn't deal with if it was required," Chou commented idly, inspecting one of the buildings carefully. Yori smirked.

"Not even close." They all chuckled in a way that made the hair on Williamson's neck stand up. The black haired girl closed her eyes and slowly turned a complete circle, then pointed. "That way. About a hundred and fifty metres. Someone has tried to add some more shielding but they didn't do a very good job. It's maybe thirty metres down." She opened her eyes again, turning to look at the tall white-haired man who had stepped out of the Rolls and was approaching from behind her. She'd obviously known he was there.

"Yori, ladies, Agent Naito, this is Sir Alan Chalker, the Minister of Defence for the United Kingdom." Williamson made the introductions. "Minister, please meet Yori, Chou, Aiko, Tamiko, Misaki and Fumiko, our Japanese specialists. This is Agent Naito from the special techniques department of the PSIA in Japan." Sir Alan looked carefully at the seven people before smiling. Yori and Chou bowed slightly, followed a moment later by the other four.

"Minister. It's an honour." The black-haired young woman was very respectful. Sir Alan smiled, his rather severe face changing considerably, showing that there was an intelligent and good humoured man in there.

"The honour is mine. You and your friends have helped us immensely from what I hear. We are in your debt." Yori straightened up and grinned.
"Thank you. It's nice to be appreciated." With a grin of his own the Minister greeted the others respectfully, not batting an eye at the unusual attire of the four girls of Aiko's team. Turning to Williamson, his expression became much less happy.

"Hello, Harry. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'm not at all happy about all this. Robert has stepped over the line this time, I fear. I think we should go and deal with it."

"Sir." Williamson waved in the direction Yori had indicated. "Apparently Yori can sense the device in that building over there."

"Right, then. Let's go." Sir Alan led the way in the relevant direction, walking fast. Entering the large and rather ornate marble building he looked around for a moment, then nodded. "I believe that the research laboratories are reached through the back. There are several basements where the dangerous work is carried out."

"That agrees with my readings," Yori commented politely. "The device is approximately one hundred and twenty metres away in that direction, I'd say around twenty-five meters below us now." With another nod the Minister headed to the rear of the building. He didn't look very pleased. A couple of people stepped out of an office half-way down the corridor they were walking along, spotted him and his expression, then promptly ducked back inside the room they'd just come out of. Looking back Agent Naito smiled when he saw they were peering after the little group with worried expressions. They reached a bank of elevators with a guard stationed in front. He stared at them, looking Aiko and her girls up and down with a lascivious expression, before noticing Sir Alan glaring at him.

"Crap," he muttered to himself too quietly for the Minister to hear, although all the women did. Standing to attention he saluted. "Sir Alan. How can I help you?"

"By stepping aside, please," the Minister said. The guard looked apologetic.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I was given orders by Minister Davenport himself that no one was allowed into these elevators without direct permission from him. No exceptions." Sir Alan began to go a funny colour.

"Look here, you do know who I am, I assume?" he snapped. The guard swallowed, paling slightly, but stood his ground.

"Of course, Minister. But I have my orders." About to start shouting, his complexion a rather unhealthy colour for a man of his age, Sir Alan felt a gentle touch on his arm. He looked around to see Chou standing next to him smiling calmly.

"Please calm down, Minister. Would you allow me to try?" He looked at the face of the young woman who was radiating serenity, relaxing slightly.

"Of course, my dear. Help yourself." Stepping back he waved her forward. Walking over to the curious guard she smiled at him.

"Hello, I'm Chou. It's very important that you let us past. There's an extremely dangerous device down there we need to dispose of." He looked at her, then at her companions.

"I really am sorry, miss, but I can't allow that." Reaching out she took his elbow gently.

"Are you completely sure?" she asked quietly. He nodded, then fell over, a smile on his face. Chou caught him deftly, lowering him to the ground and leaning him against the wall next to the elevators. Sir Alan and Agent Williamson gaped. Naito looked amused, he'd seen the brief flash of
golden light from her hand.

"Ah, that was impressive," the Minister said slowly, staring at her. She looked slightly embarrassed. Yori and the others were grinning. "What on earth did you do?"

"I temporarily turned off his conscious mind, it's what we do when we're healing badly injured people to stop them feeling pain. Something like general anaesthesia but risk-free." She checked the man over then stood. "He'll be out for at least an hour unless we wake him up again."

"Most effective, my dear. Most effective indeed." Looking at the unconscious guard again he shook his head with a small smile, then walked over to the elevators and pressed the call button. The doors slid open immediately. Everyone entered the surprisingly large elevator. The panel on the inside was unlike a normal one, it had some sort of fingerprint reader above a keypad. Sir Alan thought for a moment then entered an eight digit code, while pressing the thumb on his left hand on the reader. It flashed, beeped, and the doors slid shut. The trip down only took fifteen seconds or so, although all the magical girls could sense they were now at least twenty metres below the surface. When the doors opened they revealed two corridors stretching off for a considerable distance at right angles to each other, the elevator being in a small room at the corner. Everything was painted brilliant white, the floor seemed to be tiled, while there were a number of cameras apparent attached to the ceiling. The corridors were well lit, although the source wasn't apparent. Yori looked around, ignoring the few people passing by who stopped and looked at them for a moment before moving on, having recognised Sir Alan.

"That way," she said, heading down the corridor to the left. Sir Alan quickly followed her, the others bringing up the rear.

"I should have guessed," the Minister said with a slight frown. "This is the way to Robert's private research lab. He was a research mage before entering government and likes to keep his hand in. I wonder if he's there?" After walking for a minute or so they reached a large set of armoured double doors in the right side of the corridor. A communications panel was inset in the wall beside the door, a small screen above a speaker grill with an illuminated button next to it, the lens of a camera visible above the button. The screen was displaying the words, 'Current Status: Locked'. Sir Alan pressed the button and waited. There was a faint beep but other than that nothing happened. After a minute or so he pressed it again. Once more it beeped, once more that was the only result.

"There are four people in there," Chou said. The Minister nodded, looking annoyed. Pressing the button he held it down. Nearly a minute later an angry voice came out of the speaker.

"Stop that! What do you want, we're busy." Leaning close to the microphone the Minister spoke into it.

"It's Sir Alan Chalker. Let us in, please." There was silence for a moment, then a different voice came.

"What do you want, Alan? We're at a critical point in an experiment. Something odd is going on and I don't have time for you."

"Open the door, Robert. I know you have something extremely dangerous in there that doesn't belong to us. It needs to be destroyed." A long pause came.

"No. This is very important. We've nearly succeeded in working out the functions of this device. Go away, I'll call you when we're done." Sir Alan fumed. He pressed the button again viciously.

"Robert, open this damn door right now!" The screen changed to show a rather florid face, one that
clearly belonged to someone who didn't exercise enough. It looked furious.

"Look, Alan, just fuck off, will you? You're not coming in and that's final. This doesn't concern you, it's Mage Business." The way he said it one could hear the capitalisation. The screen reverted to it's previous display, the face disappearing, then the text changed to read, 'Current Status: Security Active, Lockdown Active'. A number of metallic clunks from inside the wall made it clear the door was far more securely locked now. Yori exchanged glances with Chou, then both of them inspected the door.

"Some fairly heavy wards just went up. There are some huge deadbolts in the walls as well that just engaged." The black-haired woman looked up at the tall official with a small smile. "He doesn't seem to want us to get in." Sir Alan nodded sourly.

Glancing down at he asked, "Can you get in anyway?"

"Of course," she replied, dark amusement in her eyes. "It'll cause some damage though." He thought for a moment, then grinned nastily. Stepping back he waved at the door.

"Do your worst," he invited. Agent Naito let out a groan while the other girls laughed. Yori grinned at him.

"Oh, trust me, you don't want my worst. I assume you'd like a building left afterwards?" Suddenly slightly pale he nodded. "No need for anything overly dramatic," she added, turning to Chou. "I'll kill the wards, you do the door?" The blonde nodded with a faint smile. Stepping to the side Yori looked at the door for a moment. "OK, the wards are suppressed." Chou moved into position, inspected the door for a moment, then produced a pair of yard-long golden energy blades. With a dazzlingly quick motion she pushed them through the door at the top centre, running them across, down, and back along the bottom. There was a yelp from inside, loud enough to be heard through the thick door. Dismissing the blades she put a hand on each half of the door and pushed slightly. With a creak the doors fell inwards, hitting the floor with an echoing crash. Sir Alan stared, exchanging a glance with Williamson, before shrugging.

"That works." Chou moved out of the way, waving him forwards with a small bow. Smiling he walked into the room. Inside the man who had been on the screen was stomping towards them while behind him two women and a man were staring at the people entering the large laboratory.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Alan?" the short rotund man screamed in fury. "How did you do that? Who are all these people?" Reaching them he looked up at the taller man from much too close, prodding him in the chest. "This isn't anything to do with you or the MoD. We have a very critical experiment going on, we need undisturbed peace. Now get out!" He yelled the last part at the top of his voice. Agent Naito looked at Yori, who returned the glance, looking amused. He felt that the fat little man was nowhere near as worrying as the young woman could be even on an off day. She studied the Minister of Magic for a moment, then walked past him as if he wasn't there, heading for the bench in the middle of the room on which a portal bomb could be seen, its energy storage sphere glowing a virulent green.

"Hey! You there, girl! Where do you think you're going?" Minister Davenport whirled, charging after the black-haired woman. Everyone watched as she approached the bench and the three people standing around it staring at her. "Hey! Pay attention to me, damn it!" The mage caught up with her, grabbing her elbow, while pulling out his wand with his other hand. She stopped, slowly looking around at him with her violet eyes. Her gaze dropped to his wand.

"Ah. I remember now, you guys use sticks." He looked extremely insulted.
"It's not a stick, it's a wand. A very powerful wand." She shrugged.

"Whatever. Point it at me, I'll take it away from you and put it somewhere it's going to really hurt getting it back from." The girl looked down at his hand on her elbow, then fixed him with her gaze again. He blanched at the look in her eyes. After a long moment he dropped his hand, sweating and pale, allowing her to continue moving to the bench. Sir Alan walked over to him, watching her as she stopped, inspecting the device carefully.

"Bad idea, Robert," he said in a low voice. Chou walked past him and joined her partner. They glanced at each other, then looked at the three mages watching them with worried expressions, unsure what was going on.

"You idiots are about five minutes away from a very unpleasant death," Yori said conversationally. "You triggered the fail-safe timer. The device will activate very soon." She looked around the room with an interested expression, before turning back to them. "Down here you won't stand a chance, there's nowhere to run to." The mages looked at the device with horror, then back at her. All of them began to back away. Minister Davenport went white. The Minister of Defence looked at the MI5 man, then they both stared at Agent Naito, finding him to be less worried that they would have expected under the circumstances. The four magical girls standing next to him looked positively relaxed.

Yori looked silently at the mages, before turning to stare at Minister Davenport. Studying him for a moment she looked unimpressed. "You really do seem to have a death wish." Dismissing him she turned back to the other three. "Which one of you had the bright idea to bring this thing back here, rather than letting us know like the warning said?" Both women looked at the tall thin brown-haired man, who looked nervous. "Well done. Very well done indeed." She shook her head in annoyance. He glared at her sarcasm despite his worry. The red-headed woman on the left reached out and hit his shoulder.

"Thanks a whole bunch, Colin." She turned to the Japanese girl who was watching them curiously. "What do we do?" Yori smiled suddenly.

"Oh, that's easy." She reached out and touched the sphere at the heart of the mass of tubes and components with one finger. The roiling green energy in the sphere faded quickly away, leaving a transparent crystal ball behind. All the mages gaped.

"What the hell did you do?" The other woman, a blonde of Scandinavian appearance, stared at the device and the girl alternately. "Where did the energy go?"

"I pulled it out of the storage sphere and absorbed it, of course. It's harmless now." All three of them looked at her in stunned amazement. She picked the device up and tossed it in the air, catching it again. Everyone winced involuntarily. With a smile she turned to Sir Alan. "Disaster averted. Now we just need to destroy it, along with any notes or other information these people made on it." Minister Davenport suddenly exploded in rage.

"No! I forbid it! That device is groundbreaking, there is a lot we can learn from it." Sir Alan glared at him.

"Robert, don't be an idiot. One of those things is responsible for killing sixty-five people less than four hours ago. Harrods has been practically destroyed! If it wasn't for Yori, Chou, and the others, we could have had hundreds of casualties at least. Those things are too dangerous to keep around, they have absolutely no defensive purpose, they're purely terror weapons. I will not allow you to do any more work on this in any way, do you understand me?" Both men were going red in fury.
"You won't allow me? Just who the hell do you think you are? I'm the Minister of Magic, not you. You're not even a mage! The Ministry of Magic doesn't answer to you, it answers to me. And I say we need to study that thing." A smooth female voice came from behind him.

"OK," it said. He turned to see the Japanese girl looking at him expressionlessly. She held the device up, touching the sphere, which immediately began glowing purple. His eyes widened. "Here you go." Suddenly it was flying through the air towards him. Frantically he grabbed at it, managing to catch it. When he looked up he saw that the blonde girl had guided Sir Alan a few feet away and the other one was staring at him with a small smile. Slowly he became aware that something else had happened, looking around quizzically. When he worked it out he suddenly looked sick. There was now an appallingly powerful set of wards surrounding him. Using his mage sight he looked at them, stunned. There was no way he could possibly crack them without hours of work.

"Feel free to study it," Yori said, black amusement in her voice. "You've got, oh, maybe three and a half minutes. I'm interested to see how much you learn in that time."

"Um, Yori? Could I talk to you for a moment?" Agent Naito sounded worried. She looked at him. "Sure. In about four minutes."

Misaki was snickering, eating an apple she'd pulled from somewhere. Aiko and Tamiko were leaning on a bench watching with interest, while Fumiko seemed to be checking her messages. Chou sighed a little but made no move towards her partner.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Naito said, staring at the man inside the wards, which were visibly slightly glowing. The other mages watched in horror. The amount of power in the wards was terrifying, it made the ones surrounding the building itself look like rice paper.

"He said he wanted to study the portal bomb. Since it's going to activate soon, it would be irresponsible to allow the demon that will come through loose, so I just made sure it couldn't get out. He can study it all he wants now and everyone else is safe."

"But he'll get eaten!"

"Oh, I expect so." She returned his look calmly. After a second she looked casually at the mage inside the wards, then at the device he was holding in trembling hands. "About two minutes now, I'd say. Have you learned anything yet?" The Minister of Magic stared at her, then at the portal bomb in his hands.

"Let me out. You've made your point," he said quietly. She walked closer, looking him in the eyes. "Are you sure?" she asked politely. "I can give you more time. Up to a little more than a minute and a half. You'll be quite busy then." He nodded, pale and dripping with sweat, his hands shaking. "OK." The wards vanished. Moving closer she took the device from him, reabsorbing the energy again. He relaxed so suddenly he nearly collapsed. Sir Alan, who had been watching with a mix of interest and worry, sighed gently. He hadn't been sure she wasn't serious. Hearing the sound she glanced at him, the look in her eyes making him shiver. She nodded a little, smiling very slightly, before turning to the other mages. "Notes, computer information, printouts, anything you have. On that bench, right now." They stared for a moment, then hastened to comply. Within a few minutes the bench was covered with a number of notebooks and other research items. She put the deactivated portal bomb on top of the pile. Chou gestured for everyone to retreat to the other side of the room. Walking over to them Yori looked at the four mages, then deliberately turned and raised her hand. Standing beside her Chou erected a cylindrical ward around the table, the
immaterial barrier softly shimmering a transparent golden shade. She nodded to her companion.

With no fanfare a ravening beam of purple-white light roared across the laboratory, penetrating the warded circle and striking the table. A loud thump shook the room hard as everything inside the barrier dissolved into subatomic particles with a brilliant flash. The magical girls didn't move, watching with interest, while everyone else ducked. "Fucking hell!" Sir Alan squeaked, then looked embarrassed. The mages went an unhealthy green colour when they looked up at the place the table had been. There was nothing left other than a shallow glassy crater in the floor, glowing a bright orange that was fading as they watched. When Chou dropped the barrier a wave of heat rolled across the room at them.

"Good god," Williamson whispered. Agent Naito looked at him, nodding. He knew exactly what the man was feeling. Things like this made him think he didn't really know these girls at all. Satisfied, Yori nodded in approval.

"Right. That should be the end of it. Unless you happen to have found another one?" She gave the three mages and the Minister of Magic a hard stare. They shook their heads violently. "Good. You know what to do if you do find another one?" They all nodded frantically. "Very good." Turning to the Minister of Defence she smiled.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Sir Alan. I'm sorry for the theatrics but some people take a lot of convincing. My apologies for the damage to the floor as well." He glanced at the crater and shrugged.

"I'm not worried, it doesn't come out of my budget." This made her grin.

"Fair enough." Shaking his out-thrust hand she added, "You know how to get hold of us if one of those damn things does pop up. I don't think it will, to be honest I'm very surprised that two of them were in London in the first place. At least there are only three left now." He shook Chou's hand as well.

"Thank you all for helping us. I'm sorry we had to go through this last little exercise, but all in all I think everything worked out as well as we could have hoped for under the circumstances, entirely due to you people. Once again, you have the gratitude of the British government." All the magical girls bowed a little. Yori turned to the others.

"Right, guys, I think it's time to go home. Mr Williamson? Could you make sure that you pass on our best wishes to Captain Smith and his team? Also Lieutenant Andrews and his squad, and Doctor O'Connor and Roslyn Venn the paramedic. It's been a pleasure meeting you all, even under these conditions. Hopefully we can meet again without all the chaos one day." Williamson grinned at her.

"Of course I will. Thanks for your help. If there's ever anything I can do for you let me know." He handed her one of his own, non-magical cards. Putting it away after glancing at it she smiled.

"I will." Looking at Agent Naito she asked, "Is there anything else we need to do that I've missed?" He shook his head after a moments thought.

"Not that I can think of. Get rid of demons, save the survivors, terrify everyone you encounter, destroy any portal bombs. I think you hit the high points." She looked amused. He was still slightly shaky from the last few minutes, the destruction of the device and all the notes had been rather dramatic. It wasn't something he was likely to forget any time soon.

"OK. Let's go home. I'm ready for bed." Aiko and her girls walked over to join her in the middle of
"I'm hungry," Misaki said. Fumiko stared at her.

"You're always hungry." Her sister shrugged, eating another apple. Sir Alan smiled, he got the impression this was a running joke between them. Agent Naito said his goodbyes to his MI5 counterpart, then bowed to the Defence minister, before standing next to the six young woman.

"Better close your eyes, it's pretty bright when we teleport out," Aiko warned. She glanced at Yori. "Are the wards neutralised?" The other girl looked around for a moment then all the mages gasped as they felt the wards for the entire building simply go dead.

"Yep. They'll come back in about ten seconds." Everyone waved, then in a brilliant flash of soundless light, the seven foreigners vanished. Sir Alan opened his eyes, looking around the room in wonder. Even knowing the little he did about magic the events of the last half hour seemed rather strange. He exchanged a look with Agent Williamson, who looked back at him, then smiled a little.

"Pretty impressive."

"That's an understatement." They turned to look at the three mages and the Magic Minister, who was staring at the crater in the middle of his lab with the strangest expression either of them had ever seen. "Robert?" The man looked at him. "I think we need to have a very long talk."
"...death toll stands at sixty-five, with sixty-seven people reported to have been seriously injured. Minor injuries are still being assessed but we have learned the authorities believe that some three hundred and thirty-one people described as 'walking wounded' escaped the scene of the disaster before it was brought to an end. Costs of the damage are estimated to exceed eighty-seven million pounds sterling, which is approximately one hundred and forty six billion yen. The internationally famous Harrods luxury store, the largest department store in Europe, which was founded in 1834 and counts the British royalty amongst it's customers, has been extensively damaged in the disaster. The owners have stated that they intend to rebuild the store with an estimated opening time given as late summer." Nabiki watched the news report with wide eyes, the aerial footage of the scene showing just how wide-spread the damage was. Smoke was still rising from a few places, while crushed vehicles littered the street along with piles of rubble, interspersed with clusters of emergency response people. The view switched back to the reporter, an attractive woman in her early thirties standing near a barrier placed across the street, beyond which the same scene could be seen from a different angle, the evening dimness lit by flashing blue lights.

"The cause of the disaster is still unclear. A number of different stories have emerged, ranging from an IRA bomb to a gas explosion, with more fanciful descriptions of huge monsters rampaging in the street." She smiled, injecting a note of humour into the report. "Some of the stories sound more like the type of thing that happens in certain wards of Tokyo. My enquiries even suggested that bystanders claim to have seen several young women wearing," she looked at a notepad she was holding and read from it, "Clothing that would be out of place on a beach in the middle of summer, never mind in the middle of London in the winter." Lowering her notebook, she smiled again briefly. "No doubt further details will become clear as investigations into this terrible event continue. An emergency session of Parliament has been called to discuss what happen here this morning, and it is expected a committee will be set up to oversee the process of explaining what happened, who, if anyone, was responsible, and what can be done to prevent such a thing happening again."

Akane glanced at her sister who was staring at the TV with shock, mixed with worry. Shampoo followed her gaze. After a moment they went back to watching the early news. "Commander Geoffrey Shipman of the Metropolitan Police is expected to make a statement later tonight. We have requested interviews with the police but they refused to speak to us, saying that we would have to wait until the press conference at eight PM local time. Witnesses we have managed to talk to have told us that the first emergency services on the scene were bomb disposal experts from the Army. Reports of heavy weapons fire immediately afterwards have been dismissed by the authorities as secondary explosions from car fuel tanks. We will continue to report as this story unfolds. This is Kaori Saito, reporting from London for the Japan News Network." The broadcast switched back to the studio in Tokyo.

"Thank you, Kaori." The mid-fifties new anchor, a well respected face of news broadcasting, turned to face the studio camera directly from where he had been watching the large screen to the side. "Kaori Saito live in London. We'll be speaking to her again during the midday news." The anchor paused, touching the discreet earpiece he was wearing, his face professionally neutral, then looked down at the monitor built into his desk, out of view of the camera. "New information has just come in. We have managed to acquire a segment of video taken by an amateur reporter in London as the disaster unfolded. We apologise in advance for the quality of the images." The view switched to a jerky shot of the same street that had been in the previous report, obviously from an extreme telephoto view at significant range. A large number of emergency vehicles could be seen around the area, the unknown camera operator moving around trying to get a view between them,
breathing heavily. Vague mutters in English could just be heard over the sound of sirens in the distance, as more vehicles arrived.

After a few seconds the operator managed to find a position where the camera had a mostly unobstructed view down the street. Several figures could be seen moving about although it was very difficult to make out details as the resolution of the image was too poor. Four of them were quite large and appeared to be dressed in olive-green clothing, suggesting they were military, while the others were smaller and less visible. The camera operator obviously found a place to rest his machine, the image suddenly stabilising and clearing up noticeably. Just as he put it down a large cloud of steam or smoke shot from the building that had been identified as the remains of the Harrods store, causing him to swear. The studio editor almost managed to bleep it out but not quite.

Now that the image had improved it could be seen that the other figures in the shot appeared to be female. The clothing they were wearing was familiar to everyone in the Tendo living room.

"Shh! Be quiet and we might find out," Akane replied quickly. The camera operator tried zooming in, but the image became even more grainy and a mutter of irritation was heard. The camera started shaking again as it was picked up, the person holding it clearly moving closer. Twenty or so seconds later he put it down again, this time from a position sufficiently close that the view was much improved. As he did one of the females in the shot picked up the back of a large van, holding it a metre and a half in the air, causing him to swear in shock again. The bleep was more accurate this time. The military person who was accompanying her dropped to his knees and disappeared under the vehicle, reappearing pulling a person, apparently male and unconscious. Dragging him clear of the van he went back under, returning with another figure who seemed to be injured. The female holding the van up dropped it then massaged her hands, before bending over the two casualties. Shortly afterwards she picked up one of them while the soldier collected the other, both of them walking out of camera shot. The operator turned to follow them but the scene was suddenly obscured as a large policeman appeared and put out his hand.

"Sorry, mate, you can't film here," his voice came, his hand over the lens of the camera. An argument could be heard starting as the scene switched back to the studio. The anchor was looking at the big screen to the side with his eyebrows up, seeming slightly surprised, which was an unusual expression for him.

Turning back to camera he said gravely, "Our experts tell me that the young ladies seen in that clip, based on the uniforms, would appear to be the members of one of the more discreet and professional Magical Girl teams that operate out of the ward of Minato. There is currently no word on why they are in the UK, or how they got there so fast. We will endeavour to find out more for our next report. On a personal note, it makes me proud to see our home-grown heroines helping with an international issue such as this. Now, over to Seiji Himura in Osaka with a report on the rash of incidents there in recent weeks apparently involving a small piglet and considerable property destruction." Picking up the remote control Nabiki turned the TV off, staring at it in wonder, before looking to her sister and the Amazon, who appeared equally shocked.

"Wow." Akane didn't seem to be able to think of anything better to say. Nodding, Nabiki looked at her.

"That's a good summation."

"I wonder if Yori and Chou were there as well?" Shampoo asked, "They seem to be good friends with Aiko and the others."
Akane smiled. "I'm sure they were. If anyone could help it would be them." She seemed certain of her words, making her sister look at her with amusement. "They're probably the ones who stopped whatever it was in the first place." Nabiki was pretty sure she was right but said nothing.


"We'll have to wait to find out, I guess," Nabiki replied, picking up her tea and finding to her annoyance it had gone cold while they watched the news. When the report had come on she'd been far too engrossed to do anything but watch. Getting up she went into the kitchen to make another pot. While she waited for the kettle to boil she stood in the doorway and looked at her sister and the other girl. "What were you two going to do today, so early?" she asked curiously. Akane seemed pleased.

"Shampoo is going to teach me some Amazon techniques." Raising her eyebrows the middle sister stared at them.

"Does Cologne know? I thought that the Amazon techniques were supposed to be secret." Shampoo nodded, smiling.

"Great-grandmother knows. It was her idea, actually. She feels that I'm getting rusty because I'm not practising enough, but there isn't anyone around here these days tough enough to really give me a workout properly except for Mousse, and his techniques are almost entirely based around weapons. I need a sparring partner for hand to hand as well. So she thinks I should train Akane in the Amazon methods, or as much as she will be able to learn at this point in her training, which benefits both of us." The Amazon giggled. "She said to think of it like a Christmas present for Akane." Nabiki smirked.

"I suspect after a few hours of you beating her black and blue it won't look so much like a gift as a punishment..." Akane gave her a dark look while Shampoo laughed.

"I'll go easy on her. To start with." Returning to the kitchen as the kettle boiled, Nabiki returned with the tea and poured them all a cup.

"Try not to kill each other. Or destroy the Dojo." She gave Akane a significant look, making her sister drop her eyes and blush.

"I'll be good, 'Biki."

"And try to keep your temper, will you? It's so much better now it's amazing, but you know you still tend to get overworked sometimes. This is a remarkable opportunity to learn something not many people will, so treat it with respect." The blue-haired girl nodded, smiling.

"I know. I really want to learn, I know I'm strong and quick, but Shampoo knows so many things I don't." She glanced at her friend. "Maybe you can teach me about swords and other weapons as well." Shampoo looked at her with slight worry, then at Nabiki who also seemed a little scared.

"Um..."

"That might not be a good idea right at the moment, sis," Nabiki said soothingly, while thinking, 'God, that's a terrifying idea. Akane with a sword? She's bad enough bare-handed...'. Her sister seemed mildly disappointed but nodded.

"Perhaps you're right. I should learn more about hand to hand fighting first, I guess." Somewhat relieved Shampoo and Nabiki shared another glance before the Amazon woman finished off her
tea and stood up.

"Come on, Akane, let's go out to the Dojo and get started." Smiling, the other young woman also finished her tea, jumping to her feet and following her friend out into the snow. Nabiki watched them go with amused interest.

'I never thought that would happen,' she mused as she cleared the cups and teapot away. 'Shampoo and Akane becoming good friends was weird enough, but Cologne deciding to trust her with the Amazon fighting techniques? Never in a million years...?' Shaking her head she put the various items in the dishwasher and started it before going up to her room to check online for more news about the Harrods attack. She read everything that was available on both Japanese and English-language websites, not finding out very much more. Her calls to her sister and brother-in-law went to voicemail. Leaving a message to call her back when they could, she began working on an assignment for her degree, deciding to get it out of the way early. It was too cold outside to do anything much, the amount of snow being a bit unusual for Tokyo although not unheard of, while there weren't any jobs around the house that needed doing at the moment. Sighing, worried, she opened the first book and began reading.

"Tetsuo! Come here, quickly!" The call from his wife brought Sergeant Harada from his study into their apartment living room, where she was watching the lunchtime news. "Look. Isn't that those magical girls you know?" she asked, pointing at the screen. Watching for a moment, he sat beside her.

"It looks like them. The uniforms are right, but they never come out on images, their magic stops it somehow." They listened to the report as the anchor announced another video clip that had come to light. This showed what he recognised as Yori and Chou, accompanied by what had to be Aiko and her girls, along with a couple of British soldiers and Agent Naito going into the destroyed London store. None of the features of the six women came out on the video at all, they were just a mass of blurs, quite unlike the familiar digital effect added by the studios to protect the identity of someone in a report. He shook his head slowly and respectfully. Their magic was very comprehensive and effective.

"It's horrible, what happened in London. You went there, once, didn't you say? Did you ever go to this Harrods store?" He looked at his wife with a smile.

"No, although I heard about it from some friends. It's apparently an expensive place to shop but it's got a good reputation. You can buy almost anything there." Turning back to the TV he watched the woman reporting from London, summarising the press report the police there had just held. "Hmm. A terrorist attack. So that's what they're calling it? I guess it's basically true, but it's hiding quite a lot. Like a damn great demon eating people." His wife shuddered.

"Tetsuo, that's a horrible thing to say." He smiled at her, holding her close.

"Don't worry, Emiko, I'm sure Yori and the others have dealt with it. I haven't heard from the PSIA agent since he called last night to get in touch with them, but he'll probably let me know how it went. If not Yori or Chou will." They kept watching the report.

"It has been confirmed by official sources that six young ladies from Minato with special abilities, so-called Magical Girls, went to London to help with this disaster. The aid of the PSIA was requested by MI5 due to previous dealing with the terrorist group blamed for yesterday's attack in London and they called in the girls as the situation required the talents they possessed. Amongst those talents reportedly are impressive healing abilities. Two of the Japanese team are being praised by a number of sources in the UK for healing some sixty to seventy casualties with life
threatening injuries and at least one doctor is claiming that they are the reason the death toll was so low under the circumstances." The view switched to an interview with a tall ginger-headed man wearing a reflective jacket with a red cross on the back and the breast. Scrolling text under the picture identified him as 'Dr. Kevin O'Connor, Trauma Specialist'.

"Doctor O'Connor, you had first-hand contact with these young women immediately after the survivors were rescued." He nodded, looking seriously at the reporter holding the microphone towards him.

"That's correct." The reporter pointed the mic to herself.

"Can you describe what they did, please?" She held it out for him again. A moment passed while he seemed to be carefully choosing his words.

"It's not something I can really tell you, it's more something you'd have to see first hand. I can say that the things I saw this morning rank as probably the most impressive I have ever experienced. You as a nation should be very proud of those young women." The unseen translator speaking Japanese on his behalf didn't seem to get across the passion in his words, based on his expression and tone of voice. The reporter looked both pleased and somewhat irritated.

"Thank you, Doctor, the people of Japan will undoubtedly be pleased about the praise. But can you say anything more about what they actually did, and how?" She held the mic out again. He shrugged slightly helplessly.

"Like I said, it's very difficult to get across quite how impressive it was. I saw wounds that were... life-altering... healed in minutes, in a process I have no understanding of at all. There's no denying the effectiveness of it though. Speaking to a number of the people they helped those two young women healed broken bones, serious burns, internal organ damage, even a case of cataracts that had no connection with the disaster. Without them I am certain that at least two dozen further fatalities would have occurred. I only wish my own abilities were anywhere near what they displayed." He seemed to run out of words. The reporter waited for a moment, then put the microphone to her mouth.

"Thank you for your time, Doctor." He nodded, while she turned to camera. "Well, as you can see, Doctor O'Connor at least is very impressed with the abilities of the girls from Tokyo. We have tried to get interviews with a number of the people that they apparently healed but so far none of them have agreed to talk to us. One soldier who was present during the disaster, speaking anonymously because he was not authorised to be interviewed, has said that he would be honoured to have any of them by his side in any battle no matter what the circumstances. It seems that six young women from Japan have made quite an impression here in England. More as this story develops.

"Thank you, Kaori," the anchor said, turning back to the camera. He cracked a very small smile. "Kaori Saito live in London, where apparently several young women from Tokyo have been showing the effectiveness of Japanese magical abilities. Little is known about the six girls in the report, although the names of two of them may be familiar to viewers from previous reports. Yori and Chou have made a name for themselves over the last two years as being very effective in handling not only supernatural incursions but also bringing under control some of the more spectacular excesses of the other magically powered guardians of the community in Minato. Since they became active in the ward collateral damages have plummeted by an estimated ninety-two percent, while the number of demon attacks has dropped by close to sixty percent. Indeed, some observers have claimed that a number of the alleged 'demons' are now engaged in trading with certain luxury food wholesalers, as difficult as that may be to believe. Our experts are divided on the possibility, although figures show that sales of chocolate, coffee, and ice cream in the Minato
area are up nearly one thousand percent in the last year. Make of that what you will." He smiled again, only a little.

"Now, back to Seiji Himura in Osaka with more on that bizarre 'demonic piglet' story. Over to you, Seiji." Harada listened to the report from Osaka with half an ear, turning the TV off after a minute or so. His wife glanced at his thoughtful face.

"Yori is a friend of yours, isn't she?" He nodded slightly.

"I suppose you could call it that. I don't know either of them very well, I don't think anyone does, they keep very much to themselves, but both she and Chou are remarkable people. Very effective, very dangerous, very trustworthy." He looked down at her leaning against his side. "I agree with that soldier. I'd be happy to have either of them with me in any operation." The woman he was holding smiled.

"Are they pretty?" Startled, he chuckled.

"Well, to be honest, yes, they're both very attractive. But I think they're both very involved as well. Yori at least isn't the sort of person who seems to relish the attentions of anyone else, and definitely not men." His wife nodded understandingly.

"Ah. I see." She was silent for a moment. "So they're no danger to me." He grinned at her smiling face.

"No, Emiko, they're no risk to you. Unless you turn out to be a demonic invader of some sort. Then you might be in trouble." She poked him in the ribs, giggling, as he hugged her.

Cologne and Mousse watched the evening report with interest. The aerial view of the location of Harrods showed there was still a lot of debris spread across the street, lit by the rising sun, with a number of large flat-bed trucks and a couple of cranes slowly removing the damaged vehicles and the rubble. The police presence was less obvious than previous reports had shown although the site was still cordoned off and guarded. "...worked through the night to clear the road to traffic. Tailbacks have caused chaos in the area for many kilometres around the site of the attack, both because of a major route into the city being closed and because of people trying to come and see it for themselves. Police are asking sight-seers, tourists, and anyone else without business in the area to stay away, warning that it is dangerous as there may be secondary devices buried in the rubble. Bomb disposal experts and sniffer dogs have been sweeping the area most of the night, although so far nothing has been discovered." The Amazon elder shook her head.

"They certainly seem to be trying to get across the idea it was some sort of conventional attack," she said with mildly irritated amusement. "Clearly it was nothing of the sort. I'd say it was more likely to be the result of a very nasty demon of some sort." Mousse nodded, listening to the TV carefully.

"I doubt Yori, Chou, and those other girls would be there if there wasn't some sort of magical disaster. From what I know of them, which isn't much admittedly, they're very effective in such things." His elder grinned suddenly.

"You haven't met them. I have, although I haven't seen them fight, but based on their power signatures there aren't a lot of demons that would stand much of a chance. Very impressive young ladies and not a little worrying." The near-sighted warrior looked at her curiously. She almost sounded slightly intimidated. Shaking his head a little he looked back to the news report.
"...remains of the device indicate it was filled with some sort of hallucinogenic gas, which eyewitness reports say appeared to be glowing green. This, we are told, is the source of the reports of a giant insect-like monster that some bystanders claim they saw. Experts we have talked to deny knowledge of such a gas and suggest it could be some new designer drug, possibly based on banned military technology from the break-up of the Soviet Union a decade ago. We are told that it must also have contained a significant explosive charge to have caused so much damage to the building, although one expert claimed it could have been quite a small device planted on a gas main to maximise the damage. The terrorist group blamed for planting the device was a previously unknown offshoot of Aum Shinriko, which apparently consisted of a small number of people, most of whom were arrested in Tokyo some months ago. A few members were killed in Los Angeles last year after a number of deaths there, sparking the man-hunt which led to the capture of the remaining terrorists. Unconfirmed reports suggest that there may have been a Magical Girl involvement with that attack as well, although so far we have no word on whether this was the same six girls who were spotted in London yesterday. Since the entire group is apparently behind bars at the current time, the assumption is that the device was planted some time ago, presumably on a delayed action mechanism of some type. This technique has been used by terrorists before, most notably in the IRA bombing of the Grand Hotel in the English town of Brighton in 1984 during a political conference. In that case, the bomb was planted nearly a month before it detonated."

"I wonder how much of this is true and how much is speculation," Mousse commented. Cologne shrugged.

"Difficult to say. I would imagine that the authorities in the UK are going to cover up anything they find either embarrassing or worrying, which for a demon attack could be a lot of it. So far I haven't heard anything I'd say outright was a lie except for that idiotic hallucinogenic gas idea, which is clearly a cover story to allow them to dismiss claims of a demon. Mind you, to the average person with no knowledge of magic it's probably a reasonably believable story." The young man looked at her, then back to the TV.

"If it was some sort of device on a timer, could there be any more?" he asked. She glanced at him.

"That's an unpleasant idea. It's certainly possible. I hope not, though. I've never been to the UK, but I wouldn't wish what happened on them or anyone else." Echoing their thoughts, the report concluded.

"The special session of Parliament is still on-going, but so far we have learned that a committee has been set up to examine the possibility of more such devices in the UK. Extra security sweeps have been ordered for all potential targets including large public buildings, the tube underground rail system, all railway stations and airports, and major sporting venues. Official sources are downplaying the risk to the public, saying that they are sure it was a one-off attack, but it is clear the British government is taking no chances. More later as this story continues. This is Kaori Saito, reporting from London for the Japan News Network."

The two Amazons listened to the remaining part of the story, before Mousse got up and went to look out the window into the evening. The snow on the roofs of the buildings reflected light from the street lamps, turning the entire scene into a postcard. "Hey, it's snowing again. That's unusual for Nerima, even at this time of year." Cologne joined him, shivering at the sight.

"I'm glad to be living somewhere with central heating on a night like this," she said to herself, looking slightly embarrassed when the young man overheard and grinned at her. She bopped him with her staff, making him wince slightly but not stopping the grin. Walking back to the TV he picked up the remote, changing the channel in the middle of the next report.
"... out of nowhere, smashed through three walls and went right into the hot springs. It was wearing a bandanna around its..." He flipped around before settling on an old episode of 'Cheers'.

"Hmm. I haven't seen this one," Cologne said, sitting down again. "Go and make some popcorn, duck boy," she ordered. He sighed, heading down the stairs to the kitchen.
Chapter 35

Grabbing her phone the instant it rang, Nabiki checked the name on the display before answering it. "Are you guys all right?" she asked frantically. "It's been two days since that London thing. I was getting really worried!"

"We're fine, sister," Kasumi's voice said calmly. "There was quite a lot of follow-up work to do in reports to Agent Naito's superiors, then we were all very tired, at least mentally, so we went to bed for the day. Aiko and the other girls stayed here. Would you like to come over?"

"Damn right I would. The usual place?" The middle sister could almost hear her older sibling nodding.

"Yes. Ten minutes?"

"I'll be there." Disconnecting the phone she dropped it into her pocket, then looked around the room for a moment, grabbing a small backpack and putting a change of clothes into it. Trotting downstairs she looked into the living-room, finding her father and Genma engaged in yet another game of Shogi. Walking past them she went into the kitchen, where Nodoka was poking through the refrigerator with an expression of distaste on her face. "Auntie, Rika and Maiko invited me over for the afternoon, and possibly tonight as well. I've got to hurry to catch the train." The older woman looked up at her, smiling.

"That's nice, dear. Please give them my best wishes. I hope whatever they had to rush off for the other day got settled all right." She glanced back into the refrigerator, then closed the door with a slight shudder. Nabiki looked at her oddly for a moment.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Nodoka sighed.

"I found some leftovers from one of Akane's 'cooking' episodes right at the back. I can't face dealing with it right now, aside from anything else the net has a hole in it from last time. I don't know what I'll do if it gets loose again." The middle sister winced, remembering vividly the previous occasion the net had been required.

"Ah. Pity we don't have a cat." Grinning, the auburn-haired woman shook her head.

"I don't think that would work, either the cat would run, or poison itself. Or possibly get eaten. Anyway, you run along and have a good time. I'll tell Akane where you've gone."

"Is she still in the Dojo with Shampoo?" Nabiki asked curiously.

"Yes. All day yesterday, and most of today. They seem to be having fun although both of them looked a bit battered last time I saw them." Shaking her head with amusement, Nabiki left the kitchen, putting her heavy coat and gloves on, then pulling on her boots, before venturing into the blowing snow. It was still very cold, the wind having picked up in the last few hours causing the snow to drift deeply against the windward side of obstructions. A number of children were risking hypothermia playing in the crisp white powder, bringing memories of doing the same with her mother many years before to the brunette, as she walked past them with a smile. Reaching the alley that had become their standard discreet teleportation point, she waited for a couple of minutes, before Aiko suddenly appeared, shivered, and teleported out again within seconds. Slightly startled by the sudden jump into the apartment hallway Nabiki staggered a little before catching herself.

"Hell, warn me when you're going to do that, will you, Aiko?" she asked with some irritation. The
other young woman smiled, stamping snow off her feet.

"Sorry, Nabiki, but you know these clothes aren't exactly ideal for this weather." She looked down at herself in some disgust. "God, I hope Ranma and Kasumi can figure out a way to turn off that part of the magic we use, Tamiko might like showing this much skin but I'm still not happy about it most of the time and it's been years. Maybe at the beach..." Grinning, Nabiki took her coat off and hung it up, before removing her boots, then following the other girl into the living room where everyone else was sitting around the coffee-table talking. Ranma looked up and smiled while Kasumi jumped to her feet, moving to hug her sister.

"Hi, sis." Nabiki returned the hug. "I'm very relieved to see you're all OK. The news reports were pretty terrifying." Following her older sister back to the sofa she sat beside her. "So, what happened? I think I have the basic idea from the TV, but I'm sure it's missing a lot." Her sister exchanged a look with her husband, then nodded.

"You might say that." She and the others all took turns explaining the events in London, while the middle sister listened with interest, shock, and some awe.

"Good grief," she managed, some seconds after the story was told. "That's... well, it's pretty strange even for you guys."

"It certainly wasn't very nice, a lot of the time," her sister said with a frown. "Mind you, we made the acquaintance of some very good people. The military people were extremely helpful, as was Sir Alan. I like him, he seems like a decent and intelligent person. I didn't like that horrible little Minister of Magic. He was a very arrogant person and not someone I want to meet again. I don't think Sir Alan liked him any more than we did. He didn't look very happy about what happened."

Nabiki grinned. Hearing her sister speak so familiarly about major political figures from other countries tickled her for some reason. Ranma watched her expression and smiled, having a fairly good idea what she was thinking. She looked at him. "Sounds like you really made an impression on those mages, though. I don't think they'll forget 'Yori' very quickly. Trapping him inside a force field with a portal bomb? That's cold." He laughed.

"It wasn't active at that point." The middle Tendo looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "I recharged the energy storage unit although the device itself was disabled. He was perfectly safe." An evil look crossed his face, while Aiko snickered. "But he didn't know that." Kasumi sighed slightly, a look of fond irritation passing across her countenance, making him hold her hand. "It had to be done, Kas. He needed to understand how dangerous what he was trying was, and that seemed like a quick and effective method to get it across to him. It worked, didn't it?" She nodded, sighing again, but smiling.

"You have a flair for the dramatic, dear, but you're awfully hard on people's mental well-being sometimes." He chuckled. After a moment she added, "In his case, though, I approve. It probably did him good." Nabiki started giggling, while Kasumi looked slightly embarrassed but resolute.

"There is the point that if we'd been about five minutes later they'd all have been dead, as well. That part was very real. They had no idea how close to disaster they came." Ranma looked annoyed. "One of those things loose in that basement? It would have been a real mess."

Standing, Kasumi looked around the room. "Does anyone fancy something to eat?" A series of nods met her question, the most vigorous coming from, predictably, Ranma and Misaki. Exchanging glances they grinned at each other. "I have some very nice frozen pizzas that need to be used. I'll put them in the oven." Disappearing into the kitchen she busied herself with the task, coming back a few minutes later with a tray full of coffee mugs and a large pot. "It will be about
half an hour." Everyone helped themselves to drinks.

Picking up a sheaf of papers from the table Ranma sat back to read through them. "What's that?" Nabiki asked curiously. He looked over at her.

"Copies of the report we gave Agent Naito, plus some information I asked him for. It's all the data we have on the mage and his travels over the last three years. I'm trying to work out where the other portal devices might be. There are still three left. If we cross London off the list, which seems reasonable, in fact we can probably cross off the UK entirely, that still leaves more than a dozen places around the world where he could have planted them. London was horrific, I'd really prefer to find the other ones before they activate, not go rushing off to do disaster management after the fact." He flipped through the paperwork, then handed about half of it to his sister-in-law. "Here, have a look at this. Maybe some fresh eyes on it will help."

Nabiki took the documents, reading them with interest. Flight itineraries, passenger manifests, purchase invoices, a whole range of paperwork covering at least two dozen trips to widely spaced destinations was present. She became engrossed in studying the information, only looking up for a moment when Kasumi brought several pizzas out. She absently helped herself to a slice, flipping the pages with her free hand as she ate. Ranma was doing much the same. Her sister looked at them fondly, then across at the other girls, who seemed amused. When the pizza was finished she motioned with her head in the direction of the practice room. Tamiko smiled, while Misaki quickly stuffed the last piece of pizza into her mouth before wiping her hands. All five of them got up and left the room.

A couple of hours later both Ranma and Nabiki had read everything, some of it twice, exchanging piles of papers as they each finished them. Eventually, the middle sister picked up her half-full cup of coffee and sipped it, grimacing when she found it was cold. She drank it anyway. "This is ridiculous," she muttered. "The bastard jumped around all over the damn planet. There doesn't seem to be any pattern to it at all. The bloody devices could be almost anywhere by now." Nodding heavily, Ranma dropped the last piece of paper onto the table and leaned back, closing his eyes and massaging the lids.

"Yes, damn it. I was hoping there might be some little clue, some hint, of where we could at least try looking. I really don't want to have to go through something like London again if we can avoid it. Or worse. We got there pretty fast, but only because the British government took our warnings seriously and someone called as soon as they had the first suspicion it might be a portal bomb. What really worries me is if it happens somewhere where they try to deal with it themselves first. If those things had been rampaging around for a few hours the casualties would have been in the hundreds rather than the dozens. Even that is far too high." He sighed, opening his eyes and looking at Nabiki. "I hate those things. So many people dead, for what?"

She looked sympathetically at him. "I know. I also know all of you are doing everything you can to help. A lot of people who would have died, didn't, all because of you six." Nodding, he still seemed downhearted.

"True. It helps a bit, but..." After a moment he sighed again, then got up to make some more coffee. She followed him to the kitchen. Handing her a mugful of the hot drink, they both leaned against the counter-top and sipped in companionable silence.

"You guys seem to have managed to make some good newsworthy stories, at least," Nabiki said after a while, glancing at him. He snorted.

"I know. Not exactly something any of us wanted, to be honest. Hopefully it will all die down soon enough."
She grinned at his tone of disgust. "Oh, come on, surely it's every girl's dream, to be famous on TV?" He looked sidelong at her, then suddenly shimmered into a busty girl that looked about sixteen, dressed in party clothes with her pink-tinted hair in twin pigtails.

"EEEeee!" the girl squealed, jumping up and down and clapping her hands together delightedly. "I'm famous! I can get all the boys and become rich and get a nice house and a pony and everyone will talk about me and the clothes will be amazing!" She bounced happily, her breasts jiggling, while Nabiki stared, then burst into laughter.

"You are completely insane," she said, gasping for breath, making the girl pout at her with her hands on her hips, before shimmering back into the form of Ranma, who picked up his coffee mug again, sipping it. He was grinning. When she recovered the middle sister looked him up and down, shaking her head in wonder. "Such a weird talent. You have got to use it for something funny at some point."

"I'm open to ideas," he said, looking amused. "We could do with some fun after the last couple of days."

"Let me think about it. There has to be some amusement value in a pair of shape-shifters with incredible acting skills. I just have to work it out." She grinned at him. Finishing his coffee he put the mug in the sink.

"I fancy a swim. Want to join me?" he asked, taking her mug when she handed it to him. Surprised, she nodded. "Don't look so worried," Ranma laughed. "You do remember we have a large heated pool on the roof?"

"Of course I do. I've swum in it a number of times. But it was kind of a random question."

"I'm kind of a random person," he replied with a smirk, becoming female mid-word. Nabiki giggled.

"You can say that again." The red-head snickered, disappearing into their bedroom for a moment before re-emerging wearing a one-piece bathing suit. She tossed Nabiki another one.

"Here. This should fit. Kas has several of them." Taking it Nabiki went into the room that had unofficially become hers whenever she stayed at their apartment, quickly changing into it. Going back into the living room she found Ranma waiting for her, the pair of them then heading into the practice room where Kasumi and the other four girls were sitting on the floor with their eyes closed. She stopped and inspected them curiously. Aiko and her team were sitting facing Kasumi, all of them breathing deeply and evenly in eerie synchronism.

"What on earth are they doing?" the middle sister asked in a whisper. Ranma smiled.

"Learning ki control. Kas is taking them through an advanced exercise in ki visualisation. They're coming along very well, all of them recently crossed a threshold in their abilities." She was also talking quietly as they headed for the stairs to the rooftop pool. "It can take quite a long time to get the basics across," she continued in a more normal tone as they ascended the stairs, "but once you reach a certain point it sort of clicks into place. Or at least that's what happened with Kas." She pushed open the door at the top of the stairs, flipping on the lights in the pool room, the smell of chlorine meeting them in a burst of warm humid air.

"We hoped that we could do the same with the girls, but for a while it didn't look like it would work for most of them. Misaki got it first, then her sister. The other two finally worked it out just before Christmas. Since then we've been kind of busy a lot of the time, but when we have a
moment one or other of us takes them through the exercises. Soon I'm hoping that they will be able to work on it effectively by themselves. They should progress pretty fast at that point." Opening a cupboard she pulled out some towels, handing one to her sister-in-law, before moving to check some instruments on the wall. "Hmm. Ph is a bit out, I'll have to adjust the chemicals a little later." They walked to the edge of the pool where Nabiki knelt down, testing the water temperature with her hand, before dropping her towel to the floor and slipping into the water. Ranma joined her.

"Like I told you months ago, the new method I came up with for teaching ki use without keying it to a particular emotional state is more difficult to learn at first but makes things easier later on. So far that seems to be holding true with them. It's a useful experiment on tweaking the teaching method, if nothing else." Nabiki rested her arms on the side of the pool, raising her legs and floating, relaxing completely with a smile.

"This is a wonderful thing to have available. Especially at this time of year." Rolling her head to the side she peered out at the roof garden which was looking rather barren, most of the plants barring a few evergreens just skeletal shapes in the late afternoon light, smothered under snow.

"I know," the redhead replied, lazily stroking back and forth in front of her. "Both of us come up here three or four times a week, sometime more. Aiko loves it as well. She'd practically live in it sometimes if she had a choice." Nabiki giggled, the sound echoing in the large pool room.

"So can any of them do any of the ki manifestations yet?" she asked curiously. "Ki balls, that sort of thing." Ranma shook her head.

"Not quite yet. Misaki has managed a pretty impressive battle aura a couple of times, she's definitely coming along well, but even she is probably a couple of months from serious energy manipulation. I have no doubt they'll all manage it in the end, probably very effectively. Their ki reserves are growing pretty fast, they're going to be impressively large by the time they know how to really use them. It's already increasing their strength and durability noticeably, not to mention improving their healing and so on. I'm very pleased with the results." She rolled over onto her back and paddled in small circles, looking very relaxed. "I needed this. Lots of stress recently." Nabiki nodded lazily, pushing off from the edge and floating towards her feet-first. "The thing I'm really looking forward to is when they get good enough that we can start trying to teach them our method of magic control. Hopefully they'll be able to make it work. It would be incredibly helpful to have more people who could manage the ki healing, even if they don't have medical degrees."

"Do you think you'll be able to teach it to them?" Nabiki raised her head to look at the other woman for a moment.

"Well, I taught Kas, so it clearly can be taught to others. Mind you, she's something exceptional in almost every way you can think of. It's not impossible that we have a talent for it that others don't, in fact it's practically certain, but I'm fairly sure that they do as well. Possibly not to our level, but..." She waved her hand around for a bit. "We won't know until we try." Flipping over and treading water she grinned at her sister-in-law. "I still think you'd be good at it. Possibly as good as Kas is. One day I'm going to prove it." With a grin she bent at the waist and dove under the surface, heading for the deep end, surfacing a few metres away and dropping into a smooth front crawl at speeds an Olympic gold medal swimmer would weep over. Raising her head again, Nabiki watched with an impressed grin, before herself beginning to swim, at a respectable but far slower speed.

She did a dozen lengths in the thirty metre pool before stopping for a rest in the shallow end again, watching as Ranma completed her return length, stopping beside her. The redhead had done at least three lengths for every one of hers, but didn't look like she'd been exerting herself much. She
grinned at Nabiki. "Good grief, you can swim like a fish," the brunette said with an impressed tone. "Is there anything you can't do in physical activities at superhuman levels?" Ranma shrugged.

"I'm not sure. Both of us seem to be pretty good at anything we try. We're a hell of a lot stronger and faster than most people, which certainly helps. Ki mastery tends to have that effect. Even Pop can swim for hours without any real effort. We did swim to China and back after all, years ago, when I wasn't anywhere near as powerful as either of us are now." She sank underwater, pushing off the bottom of the pool with sufficient force she came clear out of the water, gracefully flipping mid-air to land sitting on the edge of the pool. Nabiki laughed. Pulling herself out the more traditional way she sat beside her swishing her feet in the cool water.

"You guys still impress the hell out of me. I never fail to be surprised by something you've come up with." Leaning over she quickly hugged the smaller woman, who appeared slightly surprised but also pleased. "I'm so very glad I finally tracked you down."

"Me too." Ranma grinned at her. She abruptly developed an amused look, which quickly shifted to a mischievous one. "Swim like a fish, hmm?" she mused. Nabiki looked askance at the other woman, that expression in her experience meant trouble. The sensation of her feet in the water changed, making her look down. She stared open-mouthed for several seconds, before slowly reaching down to feel the bright yellow scales on the fish-tail that had replaced her legs. Ranma was giggling furiously. "Swim like a fish," she chortled, slipping back into the water. "See if you can keep up now," she said, laughing as she shot off across the water.

The new mermaid Nabiki stared at herself in wonder, flexing the tail she now possessed, before shooting the swimming redhead a narrow-eyed look. "You're completely nuts, you do know that, I hope?" she called after the young woman, looking at herself again before shrugging and dropping off the edge of the pool into the water again. It took her considerable effort to work out how to swim with a mermaid's tail but she managed it eventually, finding to her delight that she could move several times faster than she'd ever been able to before. Both women raced back and forth across the pool, ending up swimming lengths completely underwater, which amazed Nabiki considerably. By the time the five from downstairs came up, attracted by the yells and whoops of delight, the middle sister was familiar enough with her new configuration to surprise all of them by leaping out of the deep end of the pool several feet into the air, somersaulting neatly, before disappearing under the surface again with barely a splash. Even Kasumi was rather startled, while the other four stared in astonishment.

Popping up again next to where they were staring into the water, Mer-Nabiki wiped her wet hair from her eyes and grinned at her surprised older sister. "Your husband is crazy," she informed her happily, flipping over backwards and with a twitch of her tail zipping off across the pool. Everyone stared, then exchanged glances. Five minutes later seven mermaids were chasing each other around the pool, laughing like lunatics.

Some two hours later they were relaxing in the jacuzzi, in their normal forms again. Nabiki grinned at her current sister-in-law, looking very happy. "I still think you're insane. But that was a hell of a lot of fun. Thanks." Ranma looked back, pleased.

"No problem. I enjoyed it as well. Perhaps we should have mermaid parties more often, it's damn good fun." Her wife watched her with amusement.

Once they were back in the living room, Kasumi looked at the four magical girls. "Would you all like to stay for dinner?" she asked. They nodded, smiling.

"Of course. You don't have to ask, Kasumi, you know how much we all enjoy your cooking." Aiko looked pleased, while Misaki nodded rapidly and eagerly. Kasumi laughed, heading for the
kitchen. Ranma, male now, went to help her. Nabiki laid the table, then joined the others on the sofa. She glanced around at them.

"How's the ki training coming?" she asked curiously. Tamiko grinned.

"Pretty well, I think," she replied. Concentrating she managed to produce a visibly glowing battle aura, a pretty pale yellow colour. Misaki snorted with amusement, lighting up the room with a considerably brighter orange one. "Show-off," Tamiko muttered, looking at her team-mate with mild annoyance. Nabiki snickered.

Running her fingers through her still-damp hair she teased it into the shape she preferred, then looked at the magical girls. "Hey, something I've always wondered, what do you guys do when you're not hunting demons or running around dressed in silly clothes?" Aiko laughed.

"It's sort of a problem, actually. We all got roped into the magical girl bit in school as you know. It was difficult balancing a normal life and the weirdness, but we managed to do it and graduate high school, all of us with pretty good marks. I suppose that since then we've all been pretty much professional magical girls most of the time. Tamiko has a part-time job in a bakery, Misaki is interested in mechanical engineering and helps out at a local car repair garage, I've been bouncing from job to job while Fumiko is thinking about going to university to get a degree in biology. The demon-hunting bit makes it hard to hold down a full-time job or educational career, though. I have no idea how those two can make it work, especially with something as time-consuming and complex as medical degrees." She jerked her thumb at the door to the kitchen where cooking noises could be heard faintly.

She sighed a little. "Money is always a problem. Misaki and Fumiko share a pretty small apartment, while Tamiko and I still live at our homes with our parents. It would be nice to get out on our own but it's difficult at the moment. Ranma and Kasumi have helped us all financially several times, which is kind of embarrassing, although we're all grateful for it. We own them a lot." Coming out of the kitchen Kasumi heard this last sentence and smiled.

"You don't owe us anything. You're as much family as Nabiki is, family helps family. That's just the way it works." She patted Aiko on the head gently as she walked past, sitting beside her sister. "The food will be ready in about an hour." Aiko grinned at her.

"Thanks, Kasumi, that means a lot to us all, but it's still embarrassing. We're all legally adults now except for Fumiko, she'll be twenty in three months, yet none of us can make ends meet without a lot of trouble." She shrugged a little helplessly. "It's not like we can give up the lifestyle. Even if we wanted to, which none of us do, we like helping people, the lifestyle wouldn't give up. You know how it goes." The older woman nodded sympathetically.

"Oh, very much. Once you're in, you're in. I knew that right at the beginning but it never changed my mind. Even with the problems we've run across I very much enjoy what we do and how we live. Especially after, well... before." She seemed slightly sad. Nabiki put her arm around her shoulders.

Aiko smiled slightly. "You two make most of it look easy. Without you I think the whole ward would be in a much worse state." Kasumi seemed slightly embarrassed by the praise, looking up at her husband as he joined them.

"Aiko is trying to claim we're very important to Minato." Ranma grinned, then put on an insufferably smug look.

"Of course we are," he said in a haughty voice, sounding remarkably like Tatewaki Kuno. "The
peasants know when a superior being is amongst them." Nabiki started giggling helplessly while everyone else laughed. He relaxed and looked amused. "We can't take all that much credit. We know some tricks that most people don't, we have more power than a lot of them, but mostly it's a combination of skill, luck, and good friends. Plus the occasional shouting match. Never forget the shouting, it's important. Ask any decent drill sergeant." His wife giggled, kissing him.

"Still, you are the ones who brought a lot of the chaos under some vague form of control. Even the news people seem to have noticed." Tamiko laughed gently, remembering the last report they'd watched that afternoon. "At the rate it's going the Diet is going to give us all some sort of award for helping with international relations with the UK." Ranma groaned.

"Oh, god, don't say that. We're trying to keep a low profile here, not make the evening news on a regular basis. Before you know it they'd be asking for us on chat shows." Kasumi laughed. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"You haven't checked your email today, have you?" she asked him. He shook his head with a worried expression. "They are asking us to appear on chat shows. Our lawyers have passed on three requests so far, one from the UK and two from here." He stared, appalled, before groaning again.

"Oh, hell. As if life wasn't complicated enough."

"If you will insist on bouncing around the globe sorting out people's problems you have to expect a certain amount of attention," Nabiki said with amusement in her voice. "It sort of goes hand in hand." He nodded glumly.

"We may have to bring out the heavy shielding next time, stop people being able to remember anything about us at all. I'm not entirely happy about the idea of becoming internationally famous, it kind of mocks the entire idea of hiding."

"No one knows who you really are, and it's not likely they could find out," his sister-in-law said calmly. "You're far too good to allow that to happen. Even the security agencies don't know who you guys are, any of you, so I doubt the news broadcasters can work it out. Even I only figured it out because I knew you so well from before, and then it took a lot of luck and nearly three years work." Glancing at her he nodded, looking slightly relieved.

"I suppose you're right. I hope you're right. We have enough on our plates without fans turning up by the bus-load getting in the way. I don't mind the occasional passer-by asking for an autograph but I'm not keen on hundreds of them at once. We're not rock stars." Nabiki laughed.

Looking at Aiko and her team she replied, "Some of you dress a bit like it." Tamiko seemed amused while the other three looked slightly embarrassed.

"Hell, I wish we could do something about that damn clothing spell," Fumiko moaned. "Especially in weather like this. My legs were freezing last time I went out." Kasumi smiled at her.

"We'll have to work on showing you how to use your ki to heat your body, that should help." The other woman looked interested.

"That's certainly something I'd be interested in."

After a moments silence Kasumi glanced at her husband, who looked curiously at her. She leaned close and whispered into his ear for a few seconds. He seemed slightly surprised, then pleased. Nodding, he whispered back. The other five exchanged glances. Eventually the pair reached a
consensus, turning to look at the four girls. "We have an idea, which might interest you," Kasumi said, appearing pleased with herself. "The biggest cost in living is the accommodation. You two can barely afford that little place of yours, while Aiko and Tamiko are living at home." The girls all nodded, wondering what she was getting at. "We happen to own a huge apartment building. There are nine large apartments that are empty. If you like, you could move in here." They stared at her, then Ranma. Nabiki smiled, she'd worked out what they were going to suggest instantly.

"Here?" Aiko asked, shocked. Kasumi nodded happily.

"Why not? The apartments aren't being used, they're fully furnished, heated, power is available, the whole thing. We're paying for all of it already and you know that's no problem for us, Happosai made sure of that. Aside from anything else, with the contacts we have through Uthryyl we could make as money as we'd ever need even without Happosai's generosity. We'd both be very happy to let any or all of you live here as long as you want." The four young woman stared at them, thunderstruck, before exchanging glances.

"That's a very generous offer, Kasumi, but..." Aiko started, before Kasumi waved her nascent objections aside.

"It's not a problem, honestly. I told you, you're family. It would help you, it's no trouble for us, so...?" They looked at each other again. Eventually Misaki spoke after a look at her sister.

"I've got to admit I'm getting very tired of tripping over everything at home. That apartment would be too small for one of us, never mind two." Her sister nodded slowly.

"I can't deny it. Plus your snoring is much too close in the next room. That place hasn't got anywhere near enough sound-proofing." Misaki gave her an annoyed look, making her laugh. Aiko and Tamiko looked at them, then each other.

The auburn-haired girl spoke after a few seconds. "I've got no objections. My parents would probably be quite pleased, they've been leaving heavy hints for a while now that I should be out earning a living. Or getting married. Or both. It would help if I could tell them about... the other stuff, but..." She shrugged helplessly. "They wouldn't really understand. Especially the clothing. My mom is kind of conservative about things like that."

"Oh, hell, why not?" Aiko said, grinning. "If one of us does we probably all should. There's no sense breaking up the team all over the place. We're here half the time at the moment anyway. We can always commute by teleporting, if we need to deal with problems on our own patch. That's more or less what we do already." Kasumi smiled broadly.

"Wonderful. We can go and pick out your apartments after dinner. We'll have to modify the building wards as well to allow you to access them, plus give you security cards for the doors on the ground floor and the roof." Looking slightly bewildered by the speed of the conversation all four girls nodded.

Ranma smirked a little. "You'll need the access cards for the swimming pool if nothing else." Aiko brightened up, then grinned.

"That's a damn good point. I love that pool."

"Oh, trust me, we know." He looked very amused. Nabiki laughed, causing them to look at her.

"It's going to be like something out of a manga. An entire apartment building full of magical girls. You'll need to come up with a suitable name for your new secret headquarters." Tamiko started
giggling wildly while Ranma frowned at his sister-in-law.

"I'm not a magical girl."

"Want to bet?" The middle sister looked at him with a grin. He muttered to himself but let it pass.

They discussed the details of moving the four girls in over a very nice dinner. By then end of it they'd come up with a set of plans on how to proceed, which was much less problematic than most people would have found it. The combination of teleporting, extreme strength, and ki storage spaces you could have lost a number of large trucks in meant that they could do all of it themselves with ease. They cleared the table then everyone wandered around the building for a while choosing apartments. In the end they took the two floors immediately below the penthouse apartment, preferring to be as high as possible. The only question that arose was whether Fumiko and Misaki would share an apartment as they had done all their lives, or have separate ones. Eventually they decided to try sharing one, with the knowledge that if it became too difficult one or other of them could easily move across the hall.

Moving in would take a couple of days even for them, as the two living with their parents would need to let them know they were leaving, while the apartment the other pair rented would have to be cleaned properly before it was handed back. But it looked like they'd all be living there within a week. Getting mail redirected for their 'civilian' identities, setting up new addresses for employers, all the usual issues of moving would occupy several days, but they felt it was worth it.

Aiko looked around the apartment she'd picked, then turned to Nabiki who had followed her in with a wide grin. "I can't believe how big this place is. I never thought I'd live somewhere as nice." The middle Tendo chuckled.

"Be careful to keep it clean. I hear the landlords can be difficult." They giggled, going back upstairs. Fumiko was talking eagerly to Tamiko about their apartment and where she was going to put everything, while Misaki was listening with a smile and nibbling some leftovers. Ranma and Kasumi sat on the sofa watching, feeling very pleased. Sitting next to her sister Nabiki smiled at her.

"That was a very nice thing to do, both of you," she said quietly. Kasumi looked at her for a moment.

"It was the right thing to do. The space is empty, it will be nice to have people using it. I love living here but sometimes I miss having more people around, family, friends, whatever. They're all of those. So are you. If you ever want to move in, just do it. Here or one of the spare apartments, either is fine." She gave her sister a pat on the hand, smiling, before going back to listening to the excited younger women. Nabiki looked pleased.

"Thanks, sis. Perhaps one day I'll take you up on that."

Sometime late that night Nabiki suddenly woke, snapping instantly awake. She had been having a very odd dream, one that seemed to be trying to tell her something. Staring into the dark she tried to remember what it was. A considerable time later, irritated with her inability to remember, she slowly fell asleep again. Hours later she awoke once more, lying still for a moment before whipping the bedclothes back and jumping out of bed, hurrying into the living room, swearing a little as she whacked her knee on a chair. Turning on a table-lamp she rummaged through the pile of paperwork on the coffee-table, looking for the piece of paper she remembered from the evening before. It took several minutes but she finally found it. Staring at it she sat down, before getting up again and hunting around for a notebook and pen. Once she had it she sat again, scribbling on the pad urgently, occasionally looking through the papers again.
When Ranma came into the room on the way to the kitchen early in the morning he was rather surprised to see the middle sister sitting on the sofa, staring at a notebook. She looked up tiredly at him, but with a weird expression of triumph on her face. "I think I know where one of the portal devices is," she said quietly, then yawned.

Staring for a moment, he changed course and sat beside her. "Really?" She nodded.

"It came to me last night, something I'd seen in all this. Look." She picked up a couple of photocopied pages from the mage's notes. "These are notes on the manufacture of the devices and the spells he was trying to combine, right?" The martial artist nodded, studying them with interest. "He's scribbled all over the pages, written all sorts of random crap in the margins. Here it looks like he was trying to write some sort of poetry. Not very good poetry. Some of it is in English, some in Kanji, even some in what looks like German. This bit, though..." She pointed. He read it out loud.

"I will see her at the bridge of the night, whereupon is found a department of great stores." After a moment he shrugged. "It's gibberish."

"Yes, but I think it's gibberish with some meaning. I don't know if he was playing word games on purpose, or just idly doodling, or maybe was simply drunk. But think about it. Department of great stores. Bridge of the night. Harrods is a great, meaning big, department store in Knightsbridge." He stared at her, then at the paper in his hand.

"That's just stupid!" he muttered. Nabiki nodded, looking amused.

"I know. But it sort of works. I can't find anything I can relate to Tottenham Court road tube station, or London, or for that matter Kyoto or Tokyo. But, I did spot this one. 'A theatre of men, their hands by their feet.'" Ranma looked at the paper she held up, then at her.

"And?" She sighed a little impatiently.

"Have you ever heard of Mann's Chinese Theatre, in Hollywood? On the walk of fame, where all the movie stars leave their hand and foot prints in the concrete pavement?" After gaping for a moment he nodded.

"Holy crap. Which is in LA. Where we know he went." It was her turn to nod.

"Exactly. It's a weak clue at best, but again, it kind of fits. That's a touristy area, lots of people, almost all the time. An ideal place if you wanted to cause chaos with a random demon attack." She shrugged. "No indications of timing or anything useful, or even a specific place. It might be a complete red herring. But on the other hand..."

"...It's worth checking out," he finished. Studying her with respect, he smiled. "That's pretty damn good, Nabiki." Casting a glance at the clock, he saw it was only six AM. "Kind of early to phone Agent Naito. That said, I don't think he'll mind." Pulling out his phone he smoothly became Yori, making Nabiki smile. The girl smiled back, dialling. When it was answered after several rings by a groggy PSIA agent she brightly chirped, "Hi, Agent Naito. Aren't you up yet?" The response made her laugh.

"Sorry. I know it's early. Listen, we might have a lead on the location of at least one more portal device." She grinned at the sound of someone becoming very rapidly awake, and by all indications tripping over his own feet. "Yes. That's right. Some very clever thinking by a colleague you haven't met. Yes, we can trust them, don't worry. OK. Yes, we can meet you there. Thirty minutes? That's fine, it gives us time to get breakfast. See you soon." She put the phone away, changing back to Ranma in the process.
He wants to meet us at the police station. I'll go and wake the others. Stick some coffee on, will you, please? We're going to need lots of caffeine." She headed for the kitchen while he went to push some magical girls out of bed. Fifteen minutes later they were all sitting around the main table drinking coffee and eating some breakfast Kasumi had quickly made. Nabiki was explaining her reasoning again, on her third cup of coffee, quite wired by this point.

"That's very impressive, sister," Kasumi remarked, looking at her notes. "No one else spotted it." Nabiki shrugged a little.

"I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for all the news reports about the Harrods attack. These things are a lot easier in hindsight. But it made me start thinking about it, so I finally spotted that one. It's weird, it kind of came to me in a dream. My subconscious must have been working on it all night." She finished her coffee, filling the mug for a fourth time. "Whether it actually means anything is anyone's guess at this point, of course. It's entirely possible that it has nothing to do with the portal weapons, it really might just be random gibberish. But it's at least a reasonable starting point which is more that we had before."

Her sister smiled at her. "It's certainly worth looking into. We've been running completely blind on this problem so far, so any help at all is good."

Finishing his miso soup, Ranma glanced at the middle sister. "Hey, do you want to come and meet Agent Naito?" She looked at him, surprised. "As someone else, of course. Can't have him associating Nabiki Tendo with Yori and Chou. Ms Aoyama would work." After a moment, she nodded with a small grin.

"Why not? It could be amusing, Ms Aoyama is fun to do." She looked thoughtful. "I wonder if I can scare a PSIA agent?"

Kasumi gave her a severe glance. "Be good, sister. He's a nice man. Try not to terrify him." Her husband laughed.

"Why not? The rest of us do." They all snickered while Kasumi sighed slightly.

When the group of young women appeared in the middle of the main office at the district station, they found the night shift just leaving. Several officers greeted them warmly, both coming and going, giving the severe-looking green haired woman with the dark glasses curious glances. Agent Naito was talking to Sergeant Harada, both of them looking a bit tired. They turned to greet the magical girls. "Hello, ladies," Naito said, smiling at them. He looked curiously at the woman in the expensive suit. 'Yori' shook hands with him.

"Hi, Agent. This is Ms Aoyama, a colleague of ours. She's the one who worked out what might be a clue." The PSIA man held out his hand. The woman looked coldly at it for a moment, then carefully shook it.

"Um, pleased to meet you, Ms Aoyama," he said, slightly taken aback. She 'smiled' in a way that made the temperature in the room seem like it had dropped ten degrees.

"Indeed, Agent." She turned her head to look at a corporal sitting next to her, who gulped and hastily stood. Offering her his chair with an apologetic smile he looked relieved when she sat in it without a word. 'Chou' glanced at 'Yori' and rolled her eyes a little, provoking a small private grin which everyone else missed. Staring at the intimidating woman Agent Naito exchanged a glance with Harada, who shrugged.

"So, you looked at the information that Yori requested from us?" he asked. 'Ms Aoyama' nodded
"Yes. It was most fascinating. Something struck me about some of the marginal notes made by the mage you deleted." Naito winced at the terminology she used. This seemed to amuse her slightly. "There was the possibility that some of the apparently meaningless scribblings were actually significant. Due to the recent activity in London I was able to find a phrase that appeared to have some bearing on the incident. That led me to another phrase that may possibly indicate the location of one of these unpleasant devices. There is no guarantee, of course, the correlation is weak at best, but I believe it would be prudent to investigate even so."

Grinning to herself, 'Yori' explained in more detail. Naito began to look very interested. He nodded as she showed the paperwork and explained the thought processes they'd come up with. "It's not much, I agree, but it's a lot more than we've had up until now. We definitely need to check it out. If there is one of the devices there somewhere, will you be able to detect it?" 'Yori' nodded.

"Oh, yes. The problem has always been that we simply had too many places to check. If we can narrow it down to a smaller area, even if it's a few square kilometres, we can scan it thoroughly and find the thing if it's there. With all six of us looking we could check quite a large area fairly quickly." He seemed satisfied.

"All right. I'll have to get clearance to go to the US. They can be very pushy about people just turning up, and they haven't been all that cooperative up until now anyway."

"We could just go there and look. No need to get the authorities involved." 'Yori' smiled at him. For a moment he looked tempted, then shook his head.

"I think we'd better play this one by the book. Americans can be..." She nodded, understanding what he meant.

"Yes, I know. I've met some. Lieutenant Harrison was a nice guy after he got used to us, but some of the ones I've run into are a little... difficult." He grinned.

"Exactly. So let's not give them any reason to complain." Tamiko laughed from where she'd been listening.

"They'll have enough reason to complain if we have to blow something up." Naito groaned, glaring at her.

"Thanks a whole lot for that thought." She looked pleased. He turned to 'Ms Aoyama' again. "Will you be coming with us?" After a moment she slowly shook her head, reaching up to remove her sunglasses. He and Harada stared at her catlike eyes for a moment then realised they were being rude.

"My area of expertise is more in the information gathering and analysis regime," she said, her emotionless voice beginning to really get to him. "I am not really a field agent. In any case I'm sure that with Ms Yori and Ms Chou available my abilities will be unnecessary." She smiled again, if you could call the thing she did with her mouth smiling. He shivered a little. Several of the policemen in the area moved further away, slowly, so as not to present a target. He rather wished he could do the same thing. There was something deeply unsettling about the woman.

"Ah, all right, then. Thank you for your help." She nodded, replacing her dark glasses. "Um, if I might ask, do you work for a government agency?" He was very curious. The green-haired woman looked at him dispassionately for a few seconds.
"That information is unavailable," she said. Nodding, he said nothing more to her. He was pretty sure he had his answer.

'Yori' was smiling in an odd manner. Turning to him, she said, "OK, we'll wait for you to call when you've arranged it with the Americans. It would be nice if we could see Lieutenant Harrison while we're there."

Naito smiled. "I'll see what I can do. It's in his jurisdiction, certainly. I would like to see him again as well, I like him." The unsettling woman sitting across from him stood, tipping her head for a moment then walking over to stand next to Aiko without a word. 'Chou' joined her.

"See you soon, Agent. Bye, Sergeant," 'Yori' said, before the entire group vanished with a flash. This time Naito remembered to shut his eyes. Swearing from across the room made it obvious one of the policemen there hadn't. Turning to his colleague Naito wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his brow.

"Holy shit. Where did Yori find her?" he asked the sergeant. Harada shrugged.

"Not a clue. She's pretty damn worrying, though. I wonder what she does for a living aside from scaring the crap out of people?"

"Some black intelligence operation, I'd guess. Way out of my pay grade. Probably a good idea not to think about it too much, just in case." He picked up the phone to call his superiors, so he could arrange a quick trip to LA. "Not human, either, judging by those eyes. And did you see her ears?" The phone was answered quickly and soon he was deep in a discussion of the requirement to go to the US.

As soon as they reappeared in the living room, Nabiki collapsed in hysterical laughter. Ranma shimmered back into her normal female form, snickering. Kasumi, having dropped the Chou persona, gave them both a disapproving look. "That was a little cruel, Nabiki. You really scared them."

"I know," her sister chortled, slumping onto the sofa. "It was fantastic. I could practically feel them trying to stand as far away as they could. When I took my glasses off I thought that poor policeman was going to run away."

"Sergeant Harada is a good man, sister. Try not to upset him." Nabiki nodded, still laughing. After a moment Kasumi's lips twitched. "I have to admit, you've got wordless intimidation down to an art form," she said reluctantly. Looking up at her, her blue cat's eyes in her 'Reiko' face twinkling, her sister grinned.

"Thanks. That was a hell of a lot of fun. I'm sorry if they were really scared, I guess, but I was curious to see how well it worked on someone other than Ryoga, Shampoo, or Akane."


"If it's worth doing, it's probably worth overdoing." Ranma dropped the illusion, making her shimmer and resume her true appearance. The sunglasses she was holding evaporated out of her hand. "Damn, that's weird. Oh well. So, I guess we wait for the call. Do you think it will take long?" Ranma shrugged, still grinning.

"No idea. With the British it was minutes, but with the Americans? Might be in ten minutes, might be a week." In reality it took about two hours.
"OK, Agent, we'll pick you up in about ten minutes, we just have to finish off something here. OK. See you soon." 'Yori' hung up. "Right, that's it. Aiko, can you jump Nabiki back home?" The brunette girl nodded, as Nabiki finished putting things into her backpack. "See you later, Nabs. I'll let you know what happens." She smiled.

"Good luck. Be careful. And don't call me Nabs!" The two women vanished with the familiar flash.
Embedded Sidestory the Third’ is herewith embedded.

This one took some thought, there were a number of threads to keep track of and strange people kept inviting themselves into it. Hopefully they didn't make me forget anything important.

Captain Martinez put the phone down pondering the conversation he'd just had with some puzzlement. After silent consideration, he picked it up again and prodded a couple of buttons. "Harrison? Could you come in here, please?" he requested, before putting it down again and swivelling his chair around to look out the window, only turning back when there was a knock on his door. "Come in," he said, watching at the door opened and Lieutenant Richard Harrison entered, glancing at him enquiringly as he closed the door behind him. The captain indicated a chair, which the lieutenant promptly sat in.

"I've just had a very odd conversation with some people you wouldn't believe. Your name came up." Harrison looked slightly apprehensive yet very curious. Studying him for a moment, Martinez asked, "There was more to that trip to Japan than was in your report, wasn't there?" The other man immediately looked slightly guilty. After a pregnant pause, he nodded slowly.

"You could say that. It was... eye-opening. But very difficult to explain."

"Try me." After a moment, Harrison shrugged, then started talking. Martinez listened non-committally, nodding occasionally. When his lieutenant stopped talking, he looked at him for a moment then swung around again to look out the window. The late afternoon light picked out the famous Hollywood sign that he could just make out in the distance through a gap in the various buildings between his fifth-floor office and it, miles away. "Interesting."

"It was that. Also terrifying." Still inspecting the view he nodded. Eventually he turned his chair back.

"Why didn't you put all that in your report?" he asked. Harrison looked at him for a moment with a raised eyebrow. "OK. Stupid question. So, it's real then? Magic, I mean?" The younger man sighed.

"All too real. Some of the things I saw will give me nightmares for years. Some of them are memories I'll treasure for the rest of my life. But, I can state without a doubt that magic is real, and can be unbelievably dangerous. As can the people who can use it." He looked past the captain out the window, remembering the few days in Tokyo and the friends he'd made. "But they were also very good people. Trustworthy, the sort you could count on when you were in a bind." Martinez watched his face for a moment then smiled.

"Good. There will be some visitors in about," he glanced at his watch, "ten minutes, that I'm assigning you to help." Harrison seemed slightly startled by the apparent change in subject. The captain suddenly grinned. "They're friends of yours. Help them, try to keep them from blowing anything up." He made a shooing motion with his hand. "Go on. Get to work." Standing the other officer looked somewhat puzzled, heading out the door. As he left the captain called after him, "I don't want any duck ponds in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard!" A slow grin crossed his face as he went down the stairs to his desk.

A few minutes later, as he had just finished hastily tidying the weeks of paperwork that had
accumulated on the desk, a uniformed officer came over to him. "Lieutenant, there are some... people... here to see you." She looked somewhat confused, also a little scandalised. Even in a city that contained Hollywood, the clothing that four of the young women were wearing was a bit out of the ordinary. He looked up, then followed her indicating hand to the other side of the room where he could see seven familiar Japanese people standing looking around interestedly. Most of the male police officers present were studying them with interest, quite a lot of it somewhat prurient. He smiled.

"Send them over. And, Nadine?" The officer looked at him. "Be very polite. Those people are good friends of mine." She nodded, looking at him curiously, then walked over to the group of six girls and one man. All of them were looking in his direction, one of them waving. As he gazed at them he was amused and impressed to find he could easily put faces to names once more, something that had eluded him since he left Japan months ago. Tamiko was the one waving, grinning at him.

"Hi, Lieutenant," she called happily. He waved back with a smile. Lieutenant Rojas, sitting at the next desk, glanced at his colleague.

"A pimp and his girls, Harrison?" He grinned. "They're awful young, but very pretty." Harrison glared at him.

"I wouldn't say anything like that where they can hear you, Rojas," he grated. "And no, they're not that. They're probably the most intelligent and highly trained people it's ever been my privilege to work with. Without them we're never have settled that terrorism case." The other lieutenant looked slightly taken aback at the ferocity in his colleagues voice. He raised his hands defensively.

"Woah, don't get like that. It was just a joke."

"Well, don't make stupid insulting jokes, then. Especially about them. Especially if they can hear you. You really wouldn't like what could happen in that case." Rojas smirked at him.

"Defending their honour?" he asked in an amused voice. Harrison shrugged, smiling at him coldly.

"No, they can do that fine all by themselves. I'm just trying to keep you alive," Looking a bit confused, the other officer glanced at the six women and one man who were walking over to them through the crowded room, a trail of men and women staring at them curiously and in some cases with either shock or lust. None of them seemed to pay any attention at all to the stares.

"What are a bunch of girls without much dress sense going to do?" he asked curiously. Harrison smiled grimly at him.

"Pray you never find out." He turned, his expression becoming much more open and friendly. "Hi, guys. It's nice to see you again." Tamiko came up to him and gave him a quick hug, then stepped back. She looked him up and down, grinning.

"You look good, lieutenant." He laughed.

"As do you, Tamiko." Glancing at the others he saw they were all smiling.

"Good to see you again, Richard," Agent Naito said, shaking his hand. The police officer nodded, smiling.

"You as well, Masao. I saw the news reports on CNN about that incident in London. Very nasty. I hope everything went well?" The Japanese man looked slightly upset.
"As well as it could have done under the circumstances. It wasn't a lot of fun, though." Yori, standing beside him, chuckled a little causing both men to glance at her.

"Oh, come on, Agent, the last part was pretty funny, you have to admit." He sighed, looking back at the lieutenant.

"Magical girls. Odd sense of humour." The officer seemed slightly puzzled, although amused. "I'll tell you about it later." Nodding, Harrison turned to the black-haired girl, looking at her for a moment then grinning. She returned the look.

"It's very good to see you again, Lieutenant," she said, shaking his hand.

"And you."

Chou greeted him with typical serene grace, leaning forwards to kiss him lightly on the cheek. "How have you been since we last saw you?" she asked quietly.

"Very good, actually. My daughter is doing well in school, it's looking very likely she'll end up at a decent college, and my wife got promoted at work. We've cleared up several cases that were being difficult, plus I got some very nice comments on my records about the Japan visit." He laughed. "It turned out that Captain Uehara wrote a surprisingly complimentary report about me and Laura. Both of us received small commendations as a result." The blonde smiled.

"That's very nice. Have you heard from Inspector Deveraux recently?" He nodded.

"Yes, she visited a month ago, before Christmas, for a couple of days, and we've talked on the phone a few times. She'll be sorry to have missed you. I know she enjoyed Japan, at least the parts of it that weren't trying to kill us." Chou looked amused.

"Perhaps we should stop in on the way back and say hello. I like her." Yori seemed interested in the idea.

"It's hellishly cold in Toronto at the moment," Harrison said with a grin. "You should stay here where your clothing is more suited to the temperature." Glancing at Aiko and her team he raised an eyebrow. The short brunette laughed.

"Good to see you, Lieutenant Harrison." She shook his hand, as did Misaki and Fumiko. The tall girl was eating a pear she'd acquired from somewhere, smiling at him wordlessly. He snickered, remembering her constant grazing on whatever was handy. Her sister rolled her eyes, then giggled.

Sitting down, he gazed at them all with amusement. "So, I assume this visit is about the portal devices? The captain didn't tell me much about this, but I've been assigned to help you. And keep an eye on you. No ponds!" He fixed Yori with a glare, making her snicker. Behind her, Rojas, who had been unabashedly eaves-dropping, laughed.

"Nursemaid duty for the civvies, Harrison? Did you piss off the captain again?" Harrison gritted his teeth, but the expression on Yori's face made him stop. She winked.

"I believe that your colleague considers it an honour to work with us, Lieutenant Rojas. As we do with him. He was exceptionally brave in Japan, doing something that very few people would even try. We owe him for that. He helped save the life of a very good friend of mine, so I would appreciate if if you would be more polite." She hadn't turned around. The man behind her looked slightly puzzled.

"How did you know my name?" he asked. Harrison was trying not to snicker, watching as Yori
looked through a wallet with interest.

"Lieutenant Diego Rojas, born July fifth, nineteen sixty-four. Height five feet eleven inches, weight one hundred and ninety pounds. Eyes brown. Hair brown." He stared at the back of the young woman in front of him, looking surprised and irritated.

"How the hell do you know that, girl?" he asked carefully. She turned around, smiling.

"It's all here on your driving license," she replied, looking amused. He stared at the wallet she was holding, thinking it looked extremely familiar. To one side, Agent Naito sighed. Everyone else was smirking. Reaching into his jacket he felt where his wallet should be, then scowled.

"Give that back," he growled, catching it as she flipped it to him. "How the fuck did you do that?" he asked, looking suspiciously through it to make sure everything was present. Glancing up he noticed she had the most unusual eye colour he'd ever seen. There was something in those eyes that made him abruptly feel slightly uneasy.

"Very easily. Anyway, Lieutenant, could you please not be so rude to our friend? It doesn't make a good impression." He sneered a little, reacting to the momentary sensation of uncertainty.

"Why should I worry about making a good impression on a bunch of foreign schoolgirls?" Agent Naito and Lieutenant Harrison exchanged worried glances. All the young ladies turned to stare at him in a way he didn't like at all. It made him think of feeding time at the zoo, in the tiger enclosure, for some reason, his cop's instincts suddenly screaming that he was in an extremely dangerous situation. His hand slowly crept towards his gun, unconsciously reacting to the perceived threat.

"Yori..." Naito had a warning tone in his voice, mixed with slight worry. She glanced at him, then smiled a little. The smile had more teeth in it than was entirely necessary.

"Don't worry, Agent. We won't start anything." Staring at Rojas for a moment more, she shrugged a little. "Not worth the hassle, to be honest." Dismissively, she turned back to Harrison, who looked relieved. The remaining girls continued to inspect the other lieutenant for a moment before also looking away. He slumped slightly, unsure why he felt that something horrible had nearly happened. Looking down he was a little surprised and embarrassed to see his hand was on the butt of his weapon, dropping it with quick look around to see if anyone had noticed.

"Sorry, Lieutenant," Yori said to Harrison. "We don't like people insulting our friends." He grinned.

"Don't worry, Yori. Nothing happened. Let's go and find somewhere private, so you can tell me what's going on." She nodded. As they walked past Rojas' desk she paused, looking at him for a moment.

"These are yours as well," she said, opening her hand and dropping a number of .45 ACP cartridges on his desk in front of him. "Bye." She walked off after the others, while he stared, then looked down. Eight rounds. Slowly removing his weapon from his holster he popped the magazine out and looked at it. Empty. Looking up again he watched as the group of visitors followed his colleague out of the main room, Yori glancing back and smiling before disappearing around the corner. Slowly reloading his magazine he wondered what had just happened.

"Sorry about Diego, Yori," Harrison said as he closed the door of the conference room he'd led them to. "He's a good cop but he can be a real asshole at times, especially to women." She smiled at him.
"No problem, Lieutenant. We run into people like that from time to time. The world is full of them." They all sat around the table.

"So, what's going on?" Harrison asked with curiosity in his voice. She glanced at Chou, then looked back to him.

"There's a chance we might know the location of another portal device. We took two out of circulation in London, although unfortunately one of them had already activated by the time we got there." He looked interested.

"Two? I got the impression from the news that only one was involved." The young woman looked irritated.

"A bunch of government mages in the UK had found another one and were playing around with it. Luckily, we got to it a few minutes before it would have triggered and stopped it. We destroyed it and their notes." Laughing, Harrison looked at them all.

"I bet they didn't like that." She snickered.

"Not even a little. They were quite rude to start with. By the time we left they were much more polite." He could easily imagine why. "We destroyed the first one once we got the demons that came through it sorted out. In addition to the one we found in Kyoto that means we've dealt with three out of a possible six." She glanced at Chou again. "A very smart colleague took a look at copies of the paperwork we got from the raid on the cult and discovered something interesting. It led to what may be a clue to a possible location, or at least general area, where another device could have been left." Harrison sighed.

"And that location is here in LA?" He knew the answer already. The black-haired girl nodded soberly.

"We think so, unfortunately. The clue seemed to suggest somewhere in the area of Mann's Chinese Theatre."

"Damn. There are a lot of people around that area almost all the time," Harrison said, worried.

"I know. Presumably that was the whole point. The last device was set to go off during peak shopping times in the post-Christmas sales in London. If he used the same thinking here, if there is one, it's probably set to activate during some sort of holiday. The obvious one is New Year's Eve." This didn't make him any happier.

"Fuck."

She smiled grimly. "At least it gives us a couple of days or so to find it, although there are a number of variables. We don't know for sure that there even is one here, or that it's set for the thirty-first. It's basically just educated guesswork backed up with some admittedly flimsy evidence. But it's about all we have to go on." The lieutenant sighed slightly, looking at the others, who were listening silently.

"The obvious choice for one on New Year's Eve in the US would have been Times Square in New York, I'd have thought," he commented idly, thinking about the huge number of people that packed into the city on the other side of the country. Yori exchanged a slightly wide-eyed glance with Chou.

"Crap. That's a horribly plausible idea, Lieutenant," the young woman said, looking appalled. She turned to Agent Naito. He was already dialling a number on his cellphone. After speaking for a
"Our contact at the US state department is making arrangements for us to go there as well. He'll call back as soon as he's got everything sorted out." Yori nodded, looking around the table.

"I think we might have to split up. Chou, you, Aiko, and Tamiko could go to New York and check there. I can stay here with Fumiko and Misaki and try to locate the one here if it exists." Her blonde partner nodded, a worried expression on her face. Yori turned to Agent Naito. "You should probably go with them, in case there's any official trouble. You're the one with the relevant security ID." The agent looked at her for a moment before agreeing.

"Try not to cause any issues we'll regret, please, Yori?" he requested. She laughed, but nodded.

"I'll do my best. Don't worry, I won't deliberately stir things up." He didn't seem completely convinced, Harrison noticed with mild amusement.

They had got half-way through a quick recap of the London and Kyoto portal devices when Naito's phone rang. He answered, talking for a short while, then hung up again. "OK, it's all arranged. Someone will meet us at the Japanese Consulate-General in New York." Chou nodded, smiling at her partner for a moment, then stood. Aiko and Tamiko did as well.

"Be careful," Yori said, looking slightly worried. The blonde nodded with a serenely calm look.

"We'll be fine. You be careful as well." Stepping closer to Aiko, they vanished with a flash as everyone else look away for a moment. Harrison stared at the place they'd been, then looked at Yori. She was also looking at the same spot. Feeling his gaze she turned to meet it, smiling slightly.

"I always worry a bit. But they can all look after themselves." She seemed to cheer up a little. "Right, Lieutenant, I guess we should go and have a poke around, see if we can find that damn portal device." They all stood. Harrison opened the door, leading them out into the corridor again.

"Without Aiko I guess we'll have to use more standard methods of transportation," he said with a laugh. Yori grinned.

"Fair enough." He led the three young women back through the main room and to the elevators to the parking garage. Once more many curious eyes followed them. He noticed Lieutenant Rojas holding the magazine from his sidearm, staring at it, before looking up and fixing Yori with an unreadable gaze. The black-haired woman returned it dispassionately. When they were in the elevator he glanced at her. She looked back, smirking slightly. Deciding he wasn't going to ask, he shrugged, turning to the doors and waiting.

Soon they were in his SUV heading through the traffic towards Hollywood Boulevard and Mann's Theatre. On the way they finished filling him in on the events surrounding the last three devices. Shaking his head in wonder he glanced at them occasionally, when he could take his eyes off the traffic. "Good grief. That's incredible," he said when Yori finished the story. She nodded, leaning back in the seat and watching the early evening LA scenery go past with interest.

"It was pretty strange. Pretty horrible as well, a lot of it. I'm still upset about all the people we couldn't save, but I'm pleased about the ones we could help. We met some very interesting people as well." She glanced at him with a smile. "You'd have liked Lieutenant Andrews, I think. He reminded me of you for some reason."

"I'm no soldier," Harrison said, grinning. Fumiko giggled from the back seat.
"I liked Second Lieutenant Stross. He was funny," she said, reminiscing. Misaki snickered, unwrapping a chocolate bar and breaking off a piece. Her sister looked at her.

"Got enough for everyone?" she asked acidly. The other girl nodded, handing her one. Rolling her eyes Fumiko took it nevertheless, quickly unwrapping it. Harrison watched the byplay in the rear-view mirror with a grin. Yori chuckled.

"I've missed you girls," the policeman said. "Japan was terrifying but I'm damn glad I had the experience. Most of it." Indicating left he waited for the traffic to clear, then made the turn. "Hopefully when this is all over you can stick around for a little while. I know my wife and daughter would like to meet you all, I've told them quite a lot about what happened. Not all of it, of course." The three girls seemed pleased.

"If we can find this damn thing, I wouldn't mind meeting your family. The portal devices have to take priority, of course." Yori glanced at him.

"Of course." A few more minutes passed, suddenly broken by Harrison standing on the brakes. The SUV skidded to a halt. He'd just turned onto a smaller side road, only to discover that the road was unexpectedly blocked by a number of cars. A queue quickly built up behind them, the drivers sounding their horns impatiently. "What the hell is going on?" he muttered to himself, craning his neck to see what the obstruction was. It was getting dark, making it difficult. Looking behind him he could see that there were so many vehicles that there was little hope of reversing. "Damn it!" Unclasping his seat belt he opened the door and stood on the running board of the vehicle, managing to get high enough that he could see over the smaller cars in front. The car shifted a little, making him look, to see Yori standing on the roof peering over the cars as well.

"Hang on," she said, jumping easily from the roof onto the next vehicle so lightly it barely moved. The occupant looked startled when he saw her jump to the next car along. Harrison watched with a smile as the girl hopped from car to car, stopping on the sixth one and looking around with her hands on her hips. After a moment she came back. "Looks like someone had too much to drink. There's a small truck on it's side just at the end of the road, I'd guess he took the corner too fast and hit the kerb. Doesn't seem to be any injuries but there's a hell of an argument going on. The road is completely blocked," she reported, then looked back behind their own vehicle. "It's not going to be easy to go back either, the road's completely clogged all the way back to the next junction."

Harrison sighed. She grinned at him. "No problem." Dropping to her knees she bent over and stuck her head inside the car through the open door. "Hey, Misaki, come and give me a hand." The other girl popped out of the vehicle, quickly and easily pulling herself onto the roof and standing beside her friend. Yori looked at Harrison with a smile. "This won't take long." Both girls bounded off across the cars again. He watched, then exchanged glances with Fumiko who had stepped out of the SUV as well. She shrugged. There were a number of car horns from up ahead, then everything went quieter, except for the sound of engines. The cars ahead began to move slowly. Both of them jumped back in and Harrison put his belt back on. A couple of minutes later they reached the point where the truck had overturned.

It was now back on it's wheels by the side of the road, the driver, who was very obviously inebriated, standing beside it swaying back and forth trying to argue with Yori while ogling Misaki. Harrison pulled off the road behind the truck, allowing the vehicles behind him to drive past. He got out and walked over. "You're not a damn cop," the driver, a short wide man around fifty-five said pugnaciously, "You can't tell me what to do. Even if you were a damn cop, you couldn't tell me what to do. I'm going to get back into my truck and go home, and you can't stop me." He staggered towards the drivers door, only to find it was clamped firmly shut by the young woman leaning on it with one hand while looking at him with a raised eyebrow.
"I really don't think you're in a fit state to drive," she said mildly. He swore at her drunkenly from much too close. She wrinkled her nose a little. Several bystanders, who had watched with wide eyes when the two foreign girls picked the truck up with their bare hands and neatly put it on it's wheels, looked worried, although a couple of them also seemed to be waiting with interest to see what happened next. It was clear to everyone but the drunk driver that he was in way over his head. Harrison walked quietly up behind him, Yori catching his eye with a slight smile. "You need to brush your teeth," she said, returning her attention to the man. Suddenly enraged he swung at her with a meaty fist, puzzled by the way she didn't move a muscle. He was more puzzled by the way his arm suddenly stopped moving with his fist about half an inch from her face. Tugging on it he found it didn't seem to want to move at all.

Everyone watching was impressed. They hadn't even seen the little Japanese girl move, but somehow she was holding his arm at the wrist completely still, no matter how he struggled. "Let go of me," the driver shouted, when he finally worked out why he was unable to hit her. Waiting until he was pulling hard she did so, causing him to stagger back and nearly fall over. "Little bitch," he muttered, idiotically trying again. Exactly the same thing happened. "Damn it, let go!" he shrieked. Several people in the growing crowd were laughing. Harrison snickered.

"Look, it's fun and all, playing with you, but I've got more important things to do. So be a good man and stop this." She looked slightly exasperated.

"I told you, you're not a damn cop!" The rotund man got ready to try hitting her again. Harrison stepped forward and tapped him on the shoulder, holding his shield up when the man looked blearily.

"I am a damn cop. And you're under arrest." Yori and Misaki laughed as the man's face fell. Making an abortive attempt to run he got about three feet before tripping over his own feet. Chuckling, Harrison pulled him erect then handcuffed his hands behind his back. "I don't think I need to bother with a breath test, to be honest." Reading him his rights, he pushed him to the kerb and made him sit. Yori walked over to him, grinning.

"Lieutenant? You might want to check his left pocket." Harrison looked at her, then at the man.

"A weapon?" She shook her head.

"No, narcotics." Raising his eyebrows the policeman patted the man down rapidly and expertly, then slipped his hand into the left pocket of the man's jeans. He found half a dozen small plastic bags full of a pale yellow powder.

"Hmm. Now, what's this?" he asked the man sardonically, holding one of the bags up to the light from his car headlights. The driver swore, then slumped. "It looks an awful lot like heroin. You do know that it's not exactly legal, I hope?" Misaki was walking around the truck, looking at it carefully from a few feet away, being careful not to touch it. Harrison watched her with interest. Walking over to him she looked amused.

"There's quite a lot more in the back of the truck in some sort of hidden compartment," she said, producing an orange which she began to peel. "Also several firearms under the seats." Staring at her in shock, suddenly feeling much more sober, the driver groaned.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered. Harrison laughed.

"Oh, fuck, indeed. Better than a sniffer dog, my friends here."

"You don't seriously believe them?" the driver asked, hoping it was worth a try. Lieutenant
Harrison laughed again.

"As it happens, I do." Turning to Yori he smiled. "Minor delay, but worth it, I think. Thanks." She nodded.

"No problem. I'm not fond of drug pushers. We don't get them at home any more. Not after what happened to the last one..." Deciding he didn't really want to know, Harrison phoned the arrest in and requested backup. Within ten minutes two patrol cars had pulled up, lights flashing, and the driver was unhappily ensconced in the back of one, looking very sorry for himself. The uniformed officers inspected the three girls with curiosity but didn't ask any questions. Shortly afterwards they were back in the SUV heading to their original destination. Harrison was still intermittently chuckling as he remembered the it-was-so-bad-it-wasn't-even-a-fight fight the driver had tried.

"That was very funny. Although I'm glad you kept the violence to a minimum." She nodded, grimacing a little.

"That wasn't difficult. Even if he'd been sober, he wasn't any kind of threat. He was more a danger to himself and people on the road than us." The policeman nodded, falling silent as he concentrated on driving. About a quarter of an hour they arrived at their destination. Pulling over and parking on the side of the road, Harrison pointed out the windscreen.

"There it is. Mann's Chinese Theatre. Opened in 1927. It's kind of famous. Please try not to destroy it." He grinned at her, while Fumiko giggled from the back seat. They all got out, then he locked the SUV, following them across the road. Yori looked around, then down at the celebrity hand and footprints in the concrete slabs on the forecourt of the ornate building, set back a way from the road, with the wings on either side of it boxing in the clear area in front.

"Neat," she commented. Fumiko and Misaki were wandering around looking at the slabs, picking out names of movie stars they recognised. A significant number of people, mostly obvious tourists, were doing the same, quite a few of them looking at the girls curiously. One of them, after watching them for a moment, came up and asked what movie they were advertising. Misaki started laughing, which made the teenager rather annoyed. Yori watched with a smile on her face, then turned to Harrison. "It's a bit of a nuisance it's dark now, but we can still start searching." She called something in rapid Japanese to the other two, who nodded and went in opposite directions, making people gape as they ran towards the buildings on either side of the forecourt area, leaping four stories feet into the air and landing on the roof. They rapidly vanished from sight. The LAPD lieutenant watched, renewed amazement at their abilities rendering him speechless.

"I'll take the other side of the street. We'll check a couple of kilometres in either direction, if it's anywhere here we should be able to sense it." He smiled at her.

"OK. I'll stay here then." Laughing, she bounded across the street, jumping to the roof of the shops on the other side and heading east. People stared after her, then at the lieutenant, who shrugged at them with a weak smile, unable to think of anything else. The teenager who had approached Misaki walked over to him, gaping in the direction Yori had gone in.

"Seriously, man, what movie are they in? I want to see it."

Half an hour later Harrison was sitting in his car, to which he had retreated due the entreaties of the annoying teenaged action movie fan, eating a burger. He jumped when someone rapped sharply on the window. Fumiko was grinning at him from outside. She walked around the car and got in the passenger seat. "Find anything?" he asked, hopefully. She shook her head.

"No, unfortunately. I went about two kilometres up and over, even up into the hills, searching a
grid pattern, but nothing. If it's there it must be deep underground, more that two hundred metres or so, which seems unlikely." She shrugged. "Perhaps Yori or my sister will have more luck." Helping herself to some of his fries, she leaned back in the seat, tipping it back further with a smile. "This is a very comfortable car." Watching her for a moment he went back to waiting and eating.

Yori arrived ten minutes after that, looking disappointed. Leaning in the drivers side window she snagged a fry as well. "Nothing. Two kilometres either way, a kilometre or so deeper into the city, no sign of it." She looked at Fumiko who shook her head without opening her eyes. "Damn." A few minutes later the magical girl's phone rang. Pulling it out of nothing she answered, then opened her eyes.

"Where? OK, we're on our way." Snapping it shut she made it vanish again. "Sis says she might have something. About two and a half kilometres east, looks like some sort of school. Um, St. Andrews Place or something." Harrison thought for a second.

"Shit. I know it, it's a girls school." Starting the car he waited for Yori to dive in the back before flipping the lights and siren on, then roared off down the street. Other traffic mostly got out of the way although occasionally he had to drive frantically around obstructions. They arrived surprisingly quickly, finding Misaki sitting cross-legged on top of a mailbox eating an apple. There were half a dozen teenagers standing around her, a mix of male and female, looking at her with interest. She was inspecting them calmly. When the SUV screeched to a halt she made the apple core vanish, which caused a certain amount of interest in her small audience, then smoothly rose to her feet on the mailbox, before jumping over their heads and landing next to the car. They gaped.

"In there," she said, nodding at the entrance to the school. "It's a weak trace, there's something odd about it, but it's real." Yori jumped out and stared at the building, nodding after a moment.

"Yep. That's definitely one of the portal devices." Glancing at the lieutenant she asked, "Is there going to be a problem with me going in?" He looked uncertain.

"Well, normally we'd need a search warrant, but... Can you get in without damaging anything? At least, not too much?" She nodded with a grin.

"Oh, that's not a problem. Their security system won't even know I'm there." Sighing slightly he nodded.

"OK, then. Under the circumstances I think the Captain will understand. Try not to break anything." She grinned once more, then faded from view. The watching teenagers gaped again, before talking excitedly in low voices. Misaki leaned against the SUV, waiting patiently. Fumiko glanced at the LAPD man, who was watching the school looking pensive.

"You look like you have a lot on your mind." He glanced at her, then looked back to the school.

"I'm having real trouble understanding how anyone could pick a girls school as a target for something like this. What did he hope would happen?" She shrugged, looking angry.

"He was a fucking lunatic, so were all his little friends. All they wanted was pure terror, for it's own sake. Just death and destruction while they sat back and watched. If he was still alive I'd kill him myself. Much slower than Yori did." Nodding slightly, he waited with them. A few minutes later Yori faded back into visibility walking across the road towards them, looking annoyed and slightly puzzled.

"It's not there." Harrison sighed slightly in relief. "The weird thing is that it was there. Recently, probably no more than a day or so, and for some time. The trace you picked up, Misaki, is a
residue from the energy storage sphere, it felt like it was leaking a little. Must be a bad one." The other woman nodded slowly.

"That fits."

"So where is the damn thing?" Harrison asked angrily. She shrugged.

"I don't know. I can't trace which direction it went in. I assume someone took it, but I have no idea who or why. All the cult members are either dead or buried in jail in Japan, unless we missed one, but Agent Naito and the PSIA are pretty sure we got them all. You guys got the rest here in LA nearly a year ago." The girl looked around rather helplessly. "I'm not sure what to do next. There's a live portal bomb somewhere in LA, we know that for sure, now, or at least a day ago there was one. It could be almost anywhere in the world now."

"Fucking hell. What a nightmare." She nodded. They all stood there for a minute or two, then she looked at him.

"Let's go back to the theatre. I want to check something." With a slight shrug he got back into the SUV. They all climbed in as well, Misaki waving to her admirers, before Harrison did a three point turn and drove off. One of the girls in the small group looked at her friend.

"I wonder what movie they're in?" she asked, making them all look around for cameras.

When they got back to the place they'd started, Yori and the other two jumped out, followed more slowly by their police escort. The black haired girl went to the middle of the courtyard of the theatre, looking around for a moment, before starting to walk in a slowly expanding spiral, inspecting the ground carefully. Harrison watched her, puzzled, before looking at the other two for an explanation. They both shrugged, watching curiously as well. Various tourists muttered as they had to get out of the way of the circling young woman, several of them stopping what they were doing to observe. To the lieutenant's irritation the action movie fan was still there, staring at all three girls and smiling.

After some fifteen minutes of slow careful exploration, Yori stopped next to a very large ceramic pot, one of several that were around the main entrance, each containing a small palm tree. She studied it for a moment, then knelt down, running her hands over the pot carefully. Nodding, she waved them over. "It was here as well. I'd say about a week ago, perhaps. The trace is very faint, you can barely make it out, but it's there." Misaki squatted down and also inspected it, then stood up again, looking annoyed.

"I missed that completely the first time."

"I'm not surprised, it's very weak. I only felt it because I was close and was expecting it." She turned to Harrison. "The device was planted here, as the clue suggested. In or under the pot. Someone moved it, to that school first, then somewhere else. If we can figure out who, we can hopefully find it." Staring at the pot for a moment, he nodded slowly.

"OK. I can look into who supplied these, who looks after them, that sort of thing. I'll get a list of students and parents at the school, also the staff, and cross-reference them. With a little luck we can find the link." He glanced at her. "Can you get any idea of when it's likely to activate?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I'd need to see the device itself. There is a bit of a wild-card, in fact. The energy leakage is probably screwing things up. There's a slight possibility that it might deactivate itself, which is a best case scenario. There's also a similarly slight possibility that it might activate randomly, regardless of the timer or the booby-traps on it. Other than that, the portal might not
form correctly, or not last long enough for anything to come through. It depends on how much it leaks before it goes off." He stared, then sighed heavily.

"So, it could either become safe, or go off at any moment, and we have no idea which."

"Afraid so."

"Oh, damn it to hell." He glared at the innocent palm tree for a moment. "Is the energy leakage itself dangerous?" She shook her head.

"No, it's safe enough. It might give you a headache if you were right next to it for a long time, but it won't cause long term problems."

"I guess that's something." Misaki and Fumiko had been poking around the pot while they were speaking, looking at it very carefully, the latter producing a bright illumination from a small device she'd produced which seemed to project a small ball of light that hung in the air a foot or so away from it. Harrison recognised it as the same type of artefact that he'd seen used on the demon he and Deveraux had shot at in Tokyo. "Isn't that a weapon?" he asked curiously. The girl looked over her shoulder, then down at the device she was casually waving around.

"At higher power levels, yes. Like this it makes a good reading light." She shrugged. "I wanted to see what I was doing." Going back to whatever it was that she was doing, she and her sister poked the pot some more. "I'm sure I felt something..." she mumbled, then stopped at a particular point on the pot. "Ah." Pressing it she smiled as one side of the bottom of the pot faded away to reveal an opening big enough to put a standard briefcase into. Or a portal device, which would easily fit inside such a briefcase. Yori walked over to inspect the opening with interest.

"That's very well shielded," she said, impressed. "You can barely sense it even when it's open. That damn mage didn't do that spell, certainly. He must have paid a lot for it." Dropping to her knees she probed the opening very carefully, then stood up again. "I'll have to remember that one, it's a neat trick I haven't seen before." Looking at Harrison who was watching with interest and surprise, she explained, "It's something like the ki-space folds Chou and I store things in, but anchored to the pot. It's a very cool little spell. There's an energy storage unit in there somewhere, probably in the fold itself, which is powering it. I'd say it would be good for three or four years. The device must have been inside." The officer nodded.

"Could anyone open it, or just someone with magical abilities?" She looked at him, then at the pot again.

"I'm not sure. Fumiko, did you need to give it any power?" The other girl shook her head.

"No, it seems to be keyed to pressure. I just pressed in exactly the right place, I think. Hang on, let me..." She poked the place she'd pressed in the first instance a couple of times, mumbling to herself, before she discovered she had to press and slide her finger across the surface for a short distance, in just the right manner. The opening disappeared again leaving flawless ceramic.

"Interesting. So if I do this." The opening reappeared. "Yep, it's just pressure. Anyone could open it if they knew the trick. I guess it could even be accidental if they got really lucky."

"Damn. So, our suspect list just expanded to anyone who might have touched that thing in the last week." Harrison looked around at the tourists who even now, around half past six in the evening, were wandering around in significant quantities, a number of them watching the little group. He scowled, making the watchers look away. "Talk about needles and haystacks." Yori nodded with an irritated expression.
"It's a difficult problem. One we're going to have to solve, as soon as possible." She sighed, looking depressed for a moment. "I really, really don't want another London scenario."

"Neither do I," Harrison replied, remembering the news reports with internal horror. Misaki and Fumiko stood, rejoining them, not having discovered anything else of interest. He stared at the pot. "Fingerprints or DNA would be useless now, it's rained pretty hard twice in the last week, never mind the number of people who have probably touched it. So there's unlikely to be any physical evidence we can use. I can get a crime scene team down here to look at it but I don't think they'll find anything. We might get lucky with CCTV if there are any cameras pointing this way, but I can't see any." With a sigh Yori agreed. After a moment, she seemed to get an idea.

"Hmm. Let me try something." Approaching the pot she knelt down, then lay on her stomach, peering into the opening. Putting her hand into it she ran it carefully around the inside, stopping occasionally, before suddenly smiling. "Ah. OK, I see." She pushed her arm deeper into the hole, eventually reaching all the way to the shoulder, making Harrison and some of the onlookers stare in amazement, as her hand was now further in than the diameter of the pot. There was an expression of concentration on her face. Finally she made a sound of triumph, pulling her hand out of the opening, which immediately vanished. In her hand was a familiar-looking crystal globe glowing a soft yellow. The small crowd that was watching clapped.

"Hey, come on man, please tell me what the movie is called. I can look it up online." The spotty teenager tugged on Harrison's sleeve, making him close his eyes and growl softly.

"Go. Away." he grated. The boy looked insulted.

"That's not very good public relations, dude," he muttered, upset, before walking a few feet away and staring at the back of the officer's head. Harrison sighed deeply. Sometimes he really hated LA.

Standing, Yori moved to stand beside him and the other two. She held the sphere up. "This is the power core for that spell. I deactivated the spell itself but it's still there. A very neat design, actually, it's stored in the sphere along with the power to run it. I'd like to talk to the mage who designed it, this thing is a masterpiece. Anyway, the important thing is that there's a chance that it will have traces of the ki signature of the last people to use it still present, they sometimes stick, since the things are designed to store energy in the first place. Not ki energy, as such, but it's sort of compatible. I'm going to have to study it for a while to work that out, but if it does, it will hopefully give us something to go on." Flipping the sphere into nothingness, she looked a little surprised when there was a ripple of applause from the dozen or so tourists watching. After a moment she grinned and bowed slightly, making the lieutenant shake his head with amusement.

"Come on, let's go back to the station, I can get started on the records search." She nodded, then looked around as a shout came from just down the street near a group of tourists.

"Hey! My bag! You bastard, get back here with that!" The female voice sounded extremely aggrieved. Harrison turned to see a group of five youths, probably late teens, in what he recognised instantly as the colours of one of the somewhat less violent but more irritating gangs that plagued the area, legging it rapidly away from the woman who had shouted. She was hurling epithets after them, while several other people in the immediate area were checking their belongings, a number of them looking angry. Turning to Yori, he wasn't entirely surprised to find he was staring at an absence of magical girl. Misaki and Fumiko were missing as well. He looked back in time to see all three of them leaping over the heads of the crowd, bouncing off the walls of the buildings as if they were made of rubber, to land in front of the running teenagers. All the tourists stared, most of them clapping and whooping.
"Man, I have got to see that movie," the action fan said as Harrison hurried past him.

The five gang members slid to a halt, staring at the two girls with almost nothing on and the other one with silk clothing. Yori stared back at them, then started to speak, only to stop when Fumiko leaned in and whispered to her, pointing at various posters nearby advertising current and past movies. She was grinning. Yori snickered and nodded. Straightening up, she raised a hand dramatically, pointing at the youths, who were exchanging puzzled glances. Fumiko and Misaki took up a position on either side of her, slightly behind.

"Halt, evildoers! Return that which you have stolen to it's rightful owners!" She gazed imperiously at them as the two other girls posed slightly with glowing weapons they'd pulled from nowhere. The gang members stared in disbelief, as did quite a number of onlookers. Others were looking impressed. Harrison sighed, pinching the ridge of his nose. Yori maintained the pose for a moment, then relaxed and began laughing. "No, this is just silly. I have no idea how those colour coded idiots back home can keep a straight face talking like that." She dropped her hand, Misaki began giggling, while Fumiko dismissed her twin Sai and grinned. "Come on, guys, give the stuff back and we'll let you go, we have more important things to do."

"Who the hell are you bitches?" the tallest of the youths, a Hispanic boy probably around eighteen, said with mixed anger and curiosity apparent in his voice. His compatriots were looking around nervously, although making time to gawk at the amount of feminine skin on display in the form of the two under-dressed girls. Twenty feet away, Lieutenant Harrison winced a little. Yori didn't seem to take offence although Fumiko stopped grinning.

"That's very rude, you know," the black-haired girl said, looking sadly at the youth that had spoken. He momentarily dropped his eyes, suddenly feeling slightly ashamed, before coming to his senses.

"Hey," he muttered, wondering how the girl had made him feel like that. She grinned toothily at him.

"We're just visitors, but we don't like thieves," Yori commented, answering his question. He shrugged.

"Tough. Move or there's gonna be a lot of blood." Her expression became calm and neutral.

"That's certainly possible." For some reason he started to get a little worried. Not liking the feeling he nudged one of his fellows.

"Pablo, show the bitch why she should move." The shorter boy smiled revealing several missing teeth, pulling a large butterfly knife from his pocket and flipping it open with a dexterous twist of his wrist, betraying considerable expertise. Misaki was watching while leaning on her pole-arm, looking mildly bored by now, while Fumiko had wandered off a few feet and was sitting on a parked car. Yori looked at the knife and raised an eyebrow. This seemed to irritate Pablo, who slid gracefully forward a couple of paces, waving the knife in a way that showed he knew how to use it. The various bystanders backed away, just in case. Harrison caught Yori's eye, trying to get across the idea that it would be best if she kept the violence to a minimum. He certainly wasn't worried about her safety, but didn't want to have to explain a number of sliced and cauterised gang member bodies, even if in his opinion they got what they deserved.

She nodded slightly, understanding what his pleading gaze signified. Returning her attention to the youth dancing around in front of her waving his knife in a fluid display of skill, she sighed a little and took it away from him. "What the fuck!?" he muttered, looking at his empty hand, then at the girl, who was inspecting his blade with interest. The crowd gasped, no one could believe how fast
she'd moved, her motions had been nothing more than a blur.

"Aren't these things illegal here?" she asked curiously, feeling the edge with one finger.

"Hey, you bitch, gimme that back!" he yelled, infuriated. She raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"Cause it's mine!" He was fuming, glaring at her.

"Annoying when someone steals something of yours, isn't it?" she asked sarcastically. He missed the point entirely, although several on-lookers laughed. After a moment she flipped the knife shut expertly, then open again, making it look incredibly easy. He stared. Tossing the knife into the air she balanced it on one finger by the point, then with a quick motion flipped it closed once more and tossed it back to him. Almost fumbling the catch he grabbed it and held it tightly. The leader of the little group looked puzzled, wondering why she'd return a weapon like that, not quite working out that the ease with which she'd take it away suggested she could do it again just as quickly.

"I'm going to cut you up," Pablo snarled, opening the knife again and holding it in a manner that suggested he was no stranger to following through on this threat. She smiled slightly.

"I doubt it." This only infuriated him, prompting him to lunge at her with fairly respectable speed. The only problem was that when his knife passed through the spot she'd been standing in, she wasn't there any more. Blinking, he looked around, finding her standing behind him.

"What the...?" he mumbled, whirling and slashing in one motion. Once more she wasn't where his knife was. The next sixty seconds were extremely frustrating for poor Pablo whilst being rather entertaining for everyone else, as he turned, slashed, and stabbed frantically, only to find that he missed completely every time. She wasn't even attempting to look interested. Even the leader of the group was watching with a small smile. Eventually, panting, Pablo stopped trying to stab the slippery bitch, glancing sideways for a moment then jumping to grab the taller girl propping herself up with that long pole with the blade on the end, looking half-asleep. Without seeming to notice she moved just enough that he slid past and slammed into the side of the building she was standing in front of.

"AAARGH!" he screamed in frustration, turning and throwing the knife at her, heedless of the fact it was a particularly poor choice of projectile weapon. She plucked it out of the air with her free hand in a remarkable display of speed and coordination, without even bothering to look, then examined it for a moment.

"Thanks," she said, flipping it closed and making it vanish. The shorter girl who seemed to be in charge chuckled. Pablo exploded with rage, throwing himself at the tall girl with his fist leading, only to find the world whirling about him. When he recovered from a stunning impact he found himself staring up at the neon signs, flat on his back, with no idea of what had happened. The crowd, which had swelled to forty or fifty people, clapped, finding this a wonderful spectator sport. The speed with which the tall girl had grabbed the gang member's outstretched arm and neatly flipped him several feet onto his back was breathtaking, especially as she hadn't actually moved from the spot she was occupying or released the pole-arm with her other hand.

The girl in the black silk clothing looked at the leader of the gang members. "Now, could you please give back what you took, so we can all get on with our lives?" He inspected her for a moment, then looked around. The crowd had him and his friends completely hemmed in, it wouldn't be easy to simply run. Recognising a face in the people surrounding him, he smiled a
little, then looked back to the girl.

"Think you're hot shit with the martial arts, do you, bitch?" She sighed a little.

"Please stop calling me that."

"Bitch, I'll call you a bitch if I want." Waving the person he'd spotted over, he watched as two more followed the Chinese youth as he pushed his way through the crowd. "Meet some friends of mine. They're hot shit with the martial arts as well. Bitch." The girl shook her head a little, then turned to inspect the new arrivals. "Seven to three now, girl." Bumping fists with him the new arrival and his cohort turned and looked at the three girls. The one with the pole-arm still looked bored, but straightened up a little. The one sitting on the car was grinning, while the black-haired one with the long braid was carefully assessing the two Chinese youths and their Caucasian friend.

"Kick-boxing, Wu Shu, and Karate," she said pointing at each young man in turn. They looked at each other, surprised.

"How the hell did you know that?" the first youth said slowly. She replied with a brief Mandarin phrase, making his eyes narrow. The leader of the first group wondered what she'd said. Looking at his colleagues, the new arrival pointed at the girl. "Get her." They grinned hungrily, then attacked.

Seconds later everyone was staring in disbelief. The girl rose from crouching over one of the other Chinese youths, having been apparently checking he was still breathing. No one could work out exactly what she'd done, it had been so fast, but despite the obvious skills of her opponents she'd laid them both out in a blur of motion. She smiled lazily, her eyes boring into those of the new boy.

"I was hoping for a bit of a workout, but I couldn't even draw that out. You guys aren't very good."

The first set of gang members were looking uneasily at each other, while the crowd was completely silent, watching something better than a reality TV show with rapt attention. Neither of the young woman's companions had bothered to move when the two youths had attacked her. The remaining member of the reinforcement squad stared at his friends on the sidewalk, then at the girl standing over them. He paled with rage, dramatically shrugging off the long coat he was wearing to reveal a sword on his back in a sheath. With a flourish he reached over his shoulder and drew it, dropping into a slight crouch, the highly polished blade reflecting the illuminated signs from the shops across the road. Watching from the crowd Harrison groaned.

The Chinese youth was slightly puzzled by the way the girl's eyes lit up with glee, not at all the response he was expecting. The one sitting on the car started giggling while the other one somehow made her pole-arm vanish and was leaning against the wall peeling an apple with Pablo's knife, grinning. "OK, girly, let's see how you do against a real expert," he said, boastfully. The manner in which she simply stood there a wiser man would have found caution in but he took it as her being frightened. Stepping forwards he slashed the sword at her a couple of times menacingly, smiling at the tearing silk noise the razor sharp blade made as it ripped through the air. She raised an eyebrow, looking at her friends. The one on the car shrugged.

"Fine, if that's what you'd like," she replied. As an afterthought, she asked politely, "May I use a weapon as well?" He grinned waving the tip of the sword in small figure eight patterns a couple of feet from her chest.

"If you want," the boy said with a nasty grin, looking her up and down, amused since there was clearly nowhere for her to conceal anything larger than a small knife in those clothes. She nodded, holding out her hand and taking up a sort of fencing pose. His expression of superiority changed rather suddenly when with a faint humming noise she was suddenly holding a sword made out of violet energy, her face and arm lit eerily by the glow coming from it. He froze, staring in shock and horror. The crowd, as one, gasped. Harrison covered his eyes.
The grin the Chinese youth received made his skin prickle. There was something completely horrifying about it, something that reached into the middle of his chest and squeezed. Feeling breathless he stared at the energy manifestation. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' he thought frantically, 'she's got a fucking light sabre! What the hell is she?' Old tales his grandmother had told him years ago came to mind, about martial artists who could control powers that made ordinary weapons useless. He'd always thought the old woman was going senile, but...

"It's a trick," he said shakily, staring fixedly at the beam of light coming from her hand. She waved it gently from side to side, which made it produce a throbbing hum straight out of the movies. The crowd watched with fascination. A voice could be heard from the back somewhere.

"I really want to see that movie! When does it come out?"

"Oh, it's a very good trick." The girl sounded amused. "Shall we?" He risked glancing at her face for a second, then went back to looking at the energy projection. "Come on then, I want to try my luck against a 'real expert'." There was a distinct hint of sarcasm in her voice. All the conscious gang members were gazing at her in awed disbelief. One of them started emptying his pockets of stolen wallets.

"Um..." The youth didn't know what to do. All his training in both martial arts and gang membership seemed rather inadequate at the moment. She looked disappointed.

"Don't give up now! You were really quite intimidating there for a moment. The dramatic unveiling of the sword was very good. I like your coat, by the way." She gestured with the energy sword. "Let's get on with it, I've got other things I need to do." Shakily, he raised his sword, pointing it at her. She smiled, then with a motion too fast to follow, whipped her own 'blade' in a tight circle, before bringing it back to a rest position in front of her. Everyone watched as the last inch of his sword dropped onto the sidewalk with a faint clink. The end was glowing red in the dark.

"Oh, fuck," he moaned, before letting go of the sword. It fell to the ground with a clatter. The girl looked disappointed again.

"You certainly give up pretty easily," she said, making her energy blade vanish. Walking past him she patted him encouragingly on the shoulder. "Keep trying. One day you might be properly scary." The youth watched as she stopped in front of the leader of the original group, looking him in the eye. He swallowed. "Last chance." Snapping her head around she glared at one of the other gang members who had put his hand in his pocket. "Touch that gun and you'll need a new hand." He froze, very slowly pulling his hand from his pocket again and holding it up to show it was empty. Feeling a presence beside him he turned his head to find the girl who had been sitting on the car standing beside him, one of the weird knife-like weapons she had been holding earlier poised ready. People were staring, once more the speed with which the young woman had appeared next to the gang member was unbelievable. The girl smiled sweetly at him, which didn't make him feel any better.

Returning her attention to the tall youth, the black-haired girl waited. Reaching very carefully into his pocket he pulled out a wallet. The one standing to his left held out the bag that had attracted all the attention in the first place. Seconds later a surprisingly large pile of stolen goods was on the sidewalk at the girl's feet. She raised an eyebrow, then looked meaningfully at the sword on the ground. Shortly there was also a pile of discarded weapons including two handguns.

"Lieutenant?" she said. He walked forward from behind the gang members, looking both amused and mildly irritated.
"I can't take you anywhere, can I, Yori?" he asked rhetorically. She grinned.

"You know the way trouble follows us around."

"I'm certainly beginning to." Inspecting the gang members who had decided standing very still was the better part of valour, he sighed a little. "We don't really have time for all this."

"All the stuff they stole is there. Why don't we let them go with a very severe warning?" She studied the young men, then smiled nastily. "I can always find them again if you need to talk later." They all shuddered. Harrison looked at her, then his watch. After a moment he nodded.

"OK. But the weapons stay." He looked at the two gang members that had possessed the guns. "You're in luck. I'm too busy at the moment to deal with this properly. But I'm going to have ballistics run those weapons, and if I find that they were used in the commission of any crimes..." They looked worried. "I'm very good indeed at remembering faces." Yori seemed very amused. "Get out of here, all of you. Don't let me see you again for a long time." They turned and shuffled away, embarrassed and angry, but relieved. The crowd opened a passage for them to move through, people watching and smiling. Several took photos.

"Well, that was a waste of five minutes," Yori said. "Not much of a fight at all." Walking over to the two still unconscious young men on the ground she prodded a couple of pressure points, making them regain awareness in seconds, looking around wondering what had happened. "Get up and go away." They looked at her, then each other, before rising and following their friends.

The three girls spent the next few minutes handing the stolen goods back to their rightful owners, while Harrison went to his vehicle and returned with a number of transparent evidence bags and some gloves, putting each weapon in a different one, then sealing and signing it. He looked up to see Yori looking askance at a young man who had attempted to claim a wallet, making him sweat. "Nice try, but we both know this isn't yours." She nodded to an older man walking over. "It's his." The younger man looked embarrassed, stepping back as the older one claimed his property. He thanked her, having overheard the conversation.

"How did you know it was mine?" he asked curiously, quickly looking through it before putting it away.

"It's got traces of your ki signature all over it. Wallets and the like usually do since they're in close proximity to their owners so much." Looking rather baffled at her explanation, the man nodded politely.

"Thank you for returning it. There are a couple of tickets in it that I'd never be able to replace, which my wife would never forgive me for losing." He studied her for a moment then grinned. "And thanks for the show. It was damned impressive." Giving her a brief wave he walked off happy. The crowd slowly dispersed although there were a number of people hanging around taking photos, hoping for more spectacular displays of whatever it was that the young women had done.

"Please! Tell me what the movie is! I'll pay you!"

"Go away before I shoot you in the foot."

"FUCK, DUDE! You really haven't got the hang of this movie promotion thing, have you?"

"GO AWAY!"

"OK, OK, there's no need to shout. Damn, you're bad tempered." The youth wandered off, casting dark glances in the officer's direction. Harrison glared after him until he disappeared into a shop a
few dozen yards away. Giggling, Fumiko helped him carry the bagged weapons to the car.

"Hollywood makes me long to be back in Minato with the demons," he grumbled, causing her to laugh quite a lot. He was still muttering to himself as they drove back to the station.

Ichiro peered out the window into the driving snow, which had nearly shut New York down for the last two days. The call from the Consul General wanting him to go to the office and reopen it so long after normal hours was unusual to say the least. It was nearly eight in the evening, very cold, and he wanted to go home but at the same time didn't want to venture back into the conditions he could see outside the window. He wondered who these people he was supposed to meet were. The Consul had asked him, as he lived closest, to meet them, then bring them to his home. Why they couldn't have gone there directly he wasn't sure.

Stepping back from the window he sighed a little. There wasn't even a good view, like there normally was from this high in the building, the snowstorm outside had reduced visibility to little more than the other side of Park Avenue. Sitting at his desk he put his feet up and leafed through a brochure for trips to the Caribbean, thinking that his holiday was long overdue. When the phone rang he jumped, quickly dropping the brochure back into the drawer it had come from and picking the receiver up.

"Mr Kimura? This is Andrea in security. Your guests have arrived." The guard's voice sounded slightly odd. Getting up Ichiro closed the desk drawer.

"Thank you, Andrea. I'll be right down." He put his shoes and coat on, then left the office, locking it behind him, heading for the bank of elevators. A quick trip down left him in the security lobby, where the metal detectors and X-ray machines for the high-security building was. Walking quickly to the entrance he nodded to the other night guard, entering the main lobby of the building. The four people standing there with Andrea, the senior night security officer, made him stop dead in surprise, before walking over and bowing respectfully.

"It's an honour, Ladies," he said quietly in Japanese, making Andrea look at him oddly. "I saw the news reports from London. You brought great honour to our country with your actions." The tall blonde woman in grey silk smiled at him, bowing in return.

"Thank you. It was our pleasure." The other girls, dressed in a manner that made him shiver to look at under the current conditions, also bowed, as did the older man accompanying them. "I am Chou. This is Aiko and Tamiko, and this is Agent Naito from the PSIA."

"I'm Ichiro Kimura. The Consul General has asked me to take you to his home. Apparently someone from the American government will be joining us there shortly. My vehicle is in the parking garage. Will you follow me, please?" With a nod to Andrea he led them through the lobby to the elevators. The middle-aged woman watched them go, puzzled.

"Weird clothes for this time of year," she muttered, before returning to her post.

In the elevator, Ichiro pressed the relevant button, then waited for the doors to close. He watched the reflection of the three women in the shiny interior panelling, marvelling at how young they were to be capable of the things he'd heard. When they arrived in the parking garage he led them to a large SUV, unlocking it and opening the rear door. "I don't normally drive this in the city but under the current weather conditions it's about the only thing that can manage," he said, as the three women climbed in, smiling at him. Closing the door once they were in he opened the front door and climbed in, starting the engine. Agent Naito shut the passenger door and put his seatbelt on. Soon they were cautiously driving down the almost abandoned streets.
"The weather here has been horrific recently," he commented, struggling to see where he was going. "It snows quite a lot in New York most winters but this has been a bad one. I live closest so the Consul asked me to meet you. His house is about a twenty minute drive under normal conditions at this time of night but like this it will probably take an hour."

"It's been very harsh in Tokyo as well since Christmas," Naito said, looking out at the scene through the action of the wiper blades, which were having difficulty. "But not quite as bad as this."

Aiko glanced at Chou. "We could just have teleported there," she whispered to her friend.

"Shh. He'd doing his job, let him," she whispered back with a small smile. "It's a nice car as well."

The brunette nodded, looking amused.

Ichiro managed to make it in a little under the predicted hour, pulling into the driveway of a fairly large house some way from the city centre. The snow had stopped falling shortly before they arrived, leaving a pristine covering over everything, marred only by his own tyre tracks. Parking as close to the front door as he could manage he turned the engine off, then looked over his shoulder into the back seat. "I hope you don't get too cold," he said, inspecting the lack of sensible clothing two of them were wearing. Even Chou was dressed very lightly for the weather.

"We can run," Aiko said with a grin. Opening the door, she jumped out, zipping across the snow at a remarkable rate. Ichiro watched with shock. He noticed after a couple of seconds that she hadn't left any footprints in the snow, only slight scuff marks. Agent Naito looked amused as Chou and Tamiko followed, doing the same thing. Chou didn't even leave the marks the other two did.

"Impressive, isn't it?" the agent said with an amused note to his voice. The Consulate aide nodded wordlessly. "It's not even magic, apparently, it's a martial arts ninjitsu thing. You have to move very fast, Chou told me the first time I saw her do it." Ichiro looked at him with a stunned expression.

"As a friend of mine says at times like this, don't worry, you'll get used to it." Naito grinned at him, then got out, pulling his jacket close and trudging through the snow. He did leave footprints. Shaking his head Ichiro got out, locking the vehicle and following the others to the door of the house. Opening it he waved them in. Aiko and Tamiko were looking somewhat chilled by this point although Chou didn't seem to notice the temperature at all.

"We have to learn that ki heating trick," Tamiko mumbled, her teeth chattering. Aiko nodded. Closing the door behind him Ichiro took his shoes and coat off, as did Naito. The others just removed their shoes. As he was hanging his coat up the Consul General came down the stairs, smiling. Reaching the bottom he bowed briefly.

"It's an honour to meet you, Chou." He shook hands with her, then the others. "I've heard a lot about you, my cousin lived in Minato until recently. She told me quite a few things I had trouble believing about that place, although the news reports from London make me think that perhaps she was understating the case." Chou looked quietly amused. Turning to the other two he shook hands as well.

"I'm sorry, I know the names of your group but I can't match them to your faces." Aiko laughed.

"That's the idea. I'm Aiko, this is Tamiko. Pleased to meet you, Consul."

"Please, call me Tadao. Come into the living room, it's a lot warmer in there." They followed him down the hallway into a large room with a number of chairs, two sofas, a large table, and quite a lot of artwork hanging on the walls. Chou looked around with interest.
"Very nice, Tadao."

"My wife did most of the decorating. She's back in Yokohama visiting her mother, she's not well, I'm afraid. Old age, really." Walking across the room he opened a cabinet. "Would any of you like a drink?" Chou demurred, but Aiko and Tamiko both had a small glass of wine. Naito took a glass of sake, as did Ichiro. "We should be joined by a young man from the FBI fairly soon. The US government would like to be kept informed about this affair, although I don't think they really believe it. Or in the magic part of it, at any rate." He smiled. "You know what Americans are like with magic." All his visitors nodded.

"They're in many ways very nice people, but a lot of them tend to have fixed ideas about the way the world should work and try to force it to fit those ideas," Naito said, with the voice of experience. The consul nodded, sighing a little.

"Very true. They've achieved so much but a lot of the time they seem to sabotage themselves with that attitude. Still, we're in their country and it's only polite to go along with their conditions. As much as we can, under the circumstances. Our own history is full of some unpleasant mistakes as well, so we can't complain too much." The doorbell rang, the consul looking at Ichiro who nodded and went to answer it. He returned a minute later with a tall dark-haired man who looked around the room with interest, before fixing his gaze on the three women. He looked slightly startled.

"This is FBI Special Agent Cameron Foster, sir," Ichiro announced. The consul rose, walking across the room to shake the FBI man's hand.

"A pleasure, Consul," he said politely. The older man smiled.

"Likewise. Please sit. Would you like something to drink?" The agent shook his head.

"No, thank you, sir, I don't drink alcohol."

"Ah. A good idea." Introducing the others, he then sat down himself. "Agent Naito? Could you explain the situation? I'm aware of some of it but not the particulars or why you're here tonight." Naito looked at them for a moment.

"This information obviously isn't for public consumption." Both Japanese men and the FBI agent nodded. "All right. Approximately three months ago, due to a joint operation between the RCMP and the LAPD, a matter was brought to the attention of the PSIA which concerned us considerably. Once we looked into it, we realised it was a case that required special skills, which is where the young ladies came into it..." He went on to explain the entire sequence of events, with Chou adding some details. The portal devices were explained, as was the one found in Kyoto, as well as the London incident. He didn't mention the Ministry of Magic, just said that the UK government had discovered another device before it activated, which was safely destroyed. Chou took up the story, explaining about the breakthrough that 'Ms Aoyama' had with the paperwork and a possible clue. The mention of the cold alien woman made Naito shiver a little, he still remembered the effect she'd had on him. This seemed to amuse Chou.

"Yori and the other two from Aiko's team are in LA looking for the device that may be there. Lieutenant Harrison made the suggestion that if the mage who was behind all of this was seeking to cause massive panic and damage at public events, the most likely target would be Times Square in New York during New Year's Eve. We felt it made a horrible amount of sense, so we decided we should check. Which is why we're here." Special Agent Foster listened quietly, nodding occasionally. When the story was over, he sat for a moment without saying anything, completely blank faced.
Looking at Chou, then Aiko and Tamiko, he said, "Magical girls?" They nodded. "Demons?" They nodded again. "Insane magical terrorist cults trying to end civilisation?" Once more, they nodded. After a long moment, he smiled. "Cool."

Agent Naito exchanged glances with the consul. Chou laughed.

"I always wanted to meet a superhero," the FBI agent said with a sly grin. "I was way into comic books when I was a kid. Probably why I went into the FBI." Aiko looked at Tamiko, then they both giggled.

"That's a refreshingly open attitude, Agent Foster," Chou said, smiling. "We had quite a lot of trouble convincing Lieutenant Harrison that magic was real." The man shrugged.

"I've seen some pretty strange things. There was one case, way out in the back woods in Arkansas, which gave me a lot of problems for several years, late at night. Magic would go a long way to explaining it, to be honest." She smiled.

"There certainly are pockets of old magic around North America," the blonde said thoughtfully. "Arkansas, Louisiana, a couple of places on the coast in Massachusetts, they all have something of a reputation in the magical community. I've never been to any of them, but some people I know have. Odd things happen, even by our terms." She grinned. "Mind you, odd things happen at home, as well. Some people even claim we're some of the oddest things."

Aiko laughed. "I can't see it, myself. All my friends are completely normal." Naito looked at the three girls with raised eyebrows, then sighed.

"Yes, to you I'm sure they are. To the rest of us, the demons at least are slightly strange. Although I have to admit a lot of people around your part of Minato are weirdly comfortable with them, as long as they only want to buy chocolate not break things." Aiko grinned at him, while Foster listened with interest. The consul looked amused. Ichiro was sipping his sake wondering how many of the stories from back home he'd dismissed in the past as obviously exaggerated were actually true.

"Uthryyl and his family are very nice people, Agent Naito," Chou said mildly. "I'll introduce you one of these days. You'd like him." While he thought about that she looked at the man from the FBI. "We're not sure a portal device is actually here, but we have to check. The sooner the better." He nodded.

"The weather is appalling at the moment. Most of the city is almost impossible to get a car through, even the snow ploughs are having trouble. It might be best to wait until tomorrow, the roads should be clear by then. New Year's Eve isn't for a couple of days yet." She thought about it, then shook her head.

"I'd be happier if we could find it sooner rather than later. If someone else runs across it they could trigger it accidentally, which would be bad. Not as bad as if the area was full of people, but still unpleasant. Now might be good because there won't be many people around to get in the way. Travel isn't a problem, we'll teleport there." He looked surprised for a moment, then accepted it.

"I suppose that's reasonable." Foster studied the three girls. "It's extremely cold out there at the moment, are you going to be all right dressed like that?" Chou smiled.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Aiko, why don't you and Tamiko power down, I have some spare clothes I can lend you that will keep you warm. You probably won't need the magic boost and you're more than capable of doing what we need with your normal abilities." The other two looked at each other.
"I'll have to do that after the teleport," Aiko said. Chou nodded. Making the three men who were unfamiliar with her skills stare with interest, she pulled several items of clothing out of nowhere.

"These should fit you, Aiko, they're spares for Yori. Tamiko, these are my clothes, which might be a little too big but not too bad." She also produced a pair of jackets and some gloves, also two pairs of boots.

"How much stuff do you have in there, Chou?" Tamiko asked curiously, inspecting the spare set of clothes she'd been handed. The blonde smiled.

"Quite a lot. Clothes, weapons, books, things like that. Useful things. Oh, and a sewing machine." Even the magical girls looked slightly oddly at her at this. She smiled gently. "Sometimes you need to repair clothes away from home." With another sideways glance at her friend, Tamiko turned to the consul, who was listening with amusement.

"Do you have somewhere I can change, please?" He pointed to the door with a smile.

"Upstairs, first door on the right is the bathroom."

"Thanks." She disappeared out the door, returning a few minutes later with a copy of Chou's silk clothes on. "This is really comfortable, Chou. I like it." Looking down at herself she frowned a little. "Although the legs are a little too long. It would fit Misaki better."

Turning to the FBI agent, Chou smiled. "We should probably get on with it. It's only going to get colder the longer we wait." He nodded, standing. Agent Naito got up as well, both of them going into the hall to retrieve their coats and shoes. When they came back Naito handed Chou her boots, which she took with murmured thanks. When they were ready they stood in a group at Aiko's direction. The blonde recharged the shorter girl's amulet, then Aiko turned to the new member of their group.

"You'll probably feel pretty nauseous the first time through a teleport, most people do. It passes quickly, but be ready, OK?" He nodded. Looking at the other two men, she warned them to close their eyes, then performed the teleport. As soon as they appeared in a nearly deserted, snow-covered, and extremely chilly Times Square, she grabbed the FBI man and held him until he stopped swaying.

"Urgh. That was unpleasant," he mumbled, looking green.

"Don't worry, it only hits you like that the first time." She shivered. "Damn it's cold." They were standing on the sidewalk in six inches of snow, looking at a scene familiar from countless TV shows and movies. Chou handed her the clothes she'd produced, then after a few seconds concentration produced a warded circle a meter or so in diameter.

"Change in there, I've warmed the air inside. I'll make the wards opaque."

The shivering girl dived into the faintly glowing circle which began to glow more brightly, becoming impossible to see through. Foster stared in amazement. Agent Naito looked at him with a smile.

"You get used to seeing the impossible if you hang around these girls for very long." The other man nodded slowly, reaching out and tapping the honest-to-god force-field that had appeared in the middle of the sidewalk. Chou glanced at him with a calm expression that showed no signs of noticing the below-freezing temperatures.

"How does she get out?" he asked curiously.

"I set it to allow inbound travel until she was inside. Then I changed it to the other direction. From
the inside she can simple walk through it."

"Incredible," Agent Foster said. She laughed.

"It could be useful. I haven't tried this before, it suddenly occurred to me when we arrived. I'll have to remember it." A minute or so later Aiko stepped through the wall of light, dressed like Yori. She looked down at herself, zipping up her jacket. "Better?" Chou asked, dismissing the warded area. She nodded.

"Much. We have got to figure out how to turn off that damn clothing spell. Especially if we're going to muck around in the snow."

Naito looked around. "So, where do we start? This is a large area and most of it is under a lot of snow." The others followed his gaze.

"Tell me more about these portal devices," Foster asked, putting his hands in his pockets to keep them warm. Looking at Chou standing there in thin silk clothing was making him feel cold. "What are we looking for? What sort of range do they have?"

"They look like a collection of metal tubing perhaps fifteen centimetres on a side, forming a rough cube, with a ten centimetre transparent sphere in the middle. It will be glowing bright green." He measured out the size in his head, converting from metric to inches.

"About a six inch cube. Not very big. You could hide that almost anywhere." She nodded.

"That's the problem, they're very portable. These ones are quite crude, they're the prototypes. The large batch we destroyed was even smaller. We could detect one if it was within two to three hundred metres under these conditions, although so far I can't feel anything. It's possible that it's shielded somehow, although the shielding would have to be very good to reduce that range much." After a moment, she reluctantly added, "I think we should assume that it is shielded to be on the safe side, which means we'll probably have to check the entire area very closely." Foster thought for a while.

"The range of the devices is very short. The portal opens a couple of metres away from the device in clear space. That's an automatic result of the way the spell works, you can't open a portal into an existing mass. So you could bury one, but only less than two metres depth at most, or it wouldn't function." He nodded, understanding the concept.

Foster and the others looked around. The cityscape could have hidden hundreds of the things without changing in the slightest. It seemed like an almost impossible task. "He was going for maximum casualties", Naito said slowly. "So, logically, he'd want to put the thing somewhere where the most people would be to minimise the likelihood people could escape." Chou glanced around the deserted streets.

"Somewhere at or near street level, then. Probably not in a building. It could be high up, the demon could simply drop to the ground, they're unbelievably resilient, but it would have made his job of planting the thing more difficult. Underground would probably open the portal into a basement or the subway system, if it worked at all, which would have less people." Foster listened to her analysis carefully.

"That all sounds good. So, I guess we just check the easy places first, then move on to the more difficult ones if nothing turns up."

"Aiko, you take Agent Naito and check the left side, Tamiko, you and Special Agent Foster do this
side. Sweep at twenty metre intervals, that should give us a chance of detecting anything even if it is shielded. I'll go higher up and check along the first and second floors of the buildings." Everyone nodded, happy to let the blonde take command. They separated to start their sweeps.

"This is something we'd usually use a team of hundreds of people for, if it was a normal bomb," Foster commented to his companion. She glanced at him, then went back to slowly scanning the immediate surroundings.

"That would be ideal if we happened to have hundreds of magic-sensitive people. Unfortunately..." He sighed, looking around in case he could spot something unusual.

"True." Falling silent for a while, he followed her as she walked back and forth, the two of them leaving neat rows of parallel footprints. Looking up he watched, impressed, as Chou scrambled up and down the buildings around the area, going up to perhaps twenty-five feet then back down again. She was moving fast and easily, making him shake his head in wonder. Tamiko followed his gaze then giggled.

"Pretty weird, I guess."

"You could say that. I like to think I'm open-minded but this is certainly unusual." She laughed, continuing her scan. They kept walking for nearly two hours, combing the entire area. Eventually they met Aiko and Naito in the middle of the snow-covered road.

"Anything?" Aiko asked hopefully. Tamiko shook her head with a disgusted expression.

"Nope. Either it's not here, we're looking in the wrong place, or it's very well shielded." They turned as Chou walked up, looking disappointed.

"Nothing. I suppose we should probably start moving higher." They were looking around trying to work out the best place to start when her phone buzzed. Pulling it out of thin air she answered it.

"Did you have any luck?" She listened for a while. "I see. That's awkward. No, we haven't found anything yet either. This is a very big area to cover, there are more places to hide a device that you'd think possible." Once more she listened, her eyebrows going up. "Ah. Interesting. I wonder how well it would shield the device itself?" Tamiko and Aiko exchanged glances. "He might have tried the same trick here. I wonder why he didn't in London or Kyoto? Yes, that's possible, they could well have been planted first. I suppose it might have been done by someone else as well."

There was a pause as she listened, nodding thoughtfully. "That sounds like a good idea. I'll ask Aiko to come and get it." She glanced at the other woman who nodded. "About ten minutes. Same place? OK. Thanks, dear." Flipping the phone closed and into nothingness in the same motion, she looked at the people watching her. "Yori hasn't found the device we thought might be in LA but they found proof it exists. The mage seems to have used a rather interesting subspace pocket spell to hide it. Unfortunately, someone has moved it, at least twice. They're working on who at the moment." The blonde woman looked at Aiko.

"She pulled the power core that was running it, hoping to find a ki trace that would lead her to whoever opened the pocket last. She's found a trace, it looks like a young female, but so far has no idea who it is. Anyway, she thinks it's worth considering that the same idea might have been used here. The pocket is extremely well shielded, we might not detect it unless we were practically standing on it, but her idea was that it might be easier to try to find the pocket spell itself rather than what's in it. Can you go and get the power core from her, please, Aiko? I'll need it's pattern to trace the one here, assuming it exists."
"No problem. Um, I'll need to change first. Yori won't like me replacing her clothes with another uniform. She was really annoyed the last time." Chou giggled, remembering. Quickly generating another magical changing booth, she waved at it.

"There you go." The brunette ducked inside, emerging quickly dressed in her normal uniform.

"Keep it warm, I'll be right back," she said, looking chilled. She vanished in a flash that briefly illuminated the entire area, reflecting off the snow brilliantly. Chou snapped her hand out just in time to cover Agent Foster's eyes which he didn't close.

"Sorry, I should have remembered," he said, embarrassed. Smiling at him, she lowered her hand.

"Don't worry." They waited for a few minutes, until Aiko suddenly reappeared holding a glowing yellow sphere. Tossing it to Chou she quickly dived back into the warmth of the warded circle. The blonde inspected the ball carefully.

"Oh, my, that is an interesting spell," she murmured, staring at it with interest. Not for the first time Agent Naito wondered what she saw with her strange senses. By the time Aiko popped out of the warded area wearing warmer clothes she seemed to have learned something.

"So what next?" Aiko asked. The taller woman looked at the sphere for a moment longer before vanishing it.

"I think I can track the pocket spell, it's pretty subtle but then our methods are unusual. But even so I'll have to be within about forty to fifty metres." She looked at Foster. "If we could work out the most likely place to put the device, I could check it. Where would the most people be at New Years?" He turned to point.

"There. One Times Square. That's where the ball drop ceremony is, on the roof. Everyone gets packed around the building. Back here where we are now gets damn busy, but nearer the front it's almost impossible to move. There were close to a million people in the area last year." They looked up at the building with the iconic electronic ticker-tape display running around it, and several enormous video screens playing advertising. The Japanese people thought it reminded them of home, Tokyo was full of that sort of display.

"I seem to recall reading that most of that building is empty?" Tamiko said slowly. He nodded.

"Pretty much everything above the fourth or fifth floor, I think. The advertising revenue is so large they don't need to rent it out, not that most companies could afford the rent in that location anyway."

"That sounds like a pretty good location to stick a portal device," Naito said, looking up at the building. "Assuming he could get inside somehow." Chou sighed a little.

"He wasn't a particularly good mage in many ways but the average lock wouldn't present much of a challenge, neither would most security systems. I think we can assume he could walk in and out easily."

"Good place to start, then," Aiko said. Her friend nodded. They headed for the building, to a door that Agent Foster pointed out.

"We should have a warrant for this," he said calmly.

Chou glanced at him. "Would you like to get one?" The agent shook his head.
"I don't think I could without a lot of explaining. My superiors sent me to keep an eye on all of you but I don't think they really believe all of this. It's more along the lines of being careful."

"Someone in your government believes it," Naito said, "Or we probably wouldn't be here in the first place. Officially, at any rate."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that. But I'm pretty sure everyone in the FBI thinks it's impossible. They're just following instructions, or there would be more people than just me." Chou listened with interest while examining the door carefully.

"This is easy. Do you mind?" Foster waved at the entrance.

"Help yourself."

"Don't worry, I won't damage anything." She smiled at him, before turning to the door and doing something he couldn't make out. The door clicked and opened. Pushing it further open she went inside, followed by the others. Closing the door behind her she grinned at him.

"Impressive. Kind of scary, but impressive." He smiled back. They were standing at the bottom of a flight of cement stairs, that disappeared up into darkness. Looking around he found a light switch and flipped it on. Lights came on all the way up a very large number of stairs. Moving to the base of the stairwell and looking up the gap between the alternating floors he sighed. "That's a lot of stairs."

"We should probably start at the top and work our way back down," Aiko said, also looking up. Chou nodded, turning to the two men.

"Would you like us to carry you?" she asked mischievously. Naito sighed at the look on her face.

"You're as bad as Yori sometimes," he said. She laughed, bowing slightly, then waved towards the stairs.

"After you."

Twenty floors later the two law enforcement agents were looking somewhat tired, not to mention irritated at the way the three girls were bounding up the stairs as easily as they'd taken the first flight. "You could at least have the decency to work up a sweat," Naito said, breathing more heavily than he liked. Aiko turned around and smiled at him, climbing the stairs backwards.

"You need more exercise, Agent. You should ask Yori, I'm sure she could come up with a decent workout plan for you." He muttered to himself, making her snicker. Chou, who was in the lead, suddenly stopped, tilting her head curiously. Everyone looked at her.

"Odd." Looking around, she slowly walked back down the stairs past them, stopping on the next landing down. "Hmm." Walking back up she stopped again, a few steps up from the bottom, staring at the wall.

"What is it, Lassie?" Tamiko called with amusement. Chou looked up at her.

"Woof," she said. The auburn haired girl laughed. Pointing towards the front of the building, the other woman smiled. "I can feel something that way. It's odd, it feels like it's between the floors."

"On the wall?" Naito asked. She shook her head.

"No, it's further away than that. I think it must be near the front somewhere. Possibly outside."
Going back down to the landing she investigated the fire door, popping it open having bypassed the alarm effortlessly. Everyone filed in as she held it open, following them afterwards. The floor they were on was largely an empty shell, with a few light fittings in the ceiling but little else. It was possible to see where partition walls had been removed at some point in the past, possible several times as the building usage changed over the years. Walking slowly across the floor, stopping every now and then to change course slightly, Chou headed steadily for the front wall. Eventually she stopped, pointing.

"Right there. It's got to be on the outside. I can feel it only a few metres away." Foster walked to the window and looked out at the back of the huge display that covered it.

"This side of the display or the other?" She joined him at the window.

"It must be on the other side. I wonder how he got it out there?" Inspecting the window carefully she shrugged. "This hasn't been opened in decades. Oh well, I guess we go up to the roof and climb down." Going back into the stairwell they ascended the final six floors, Chou opening the door at the top onto the roof, which was covered in a thick layer of snow. Walking out onto it she went to the edge of the roof and peered over, before swinging herself over the side. Foster winced a little, knowing how high they were. Aiko noticed.

"Don't worry. If she fell, which she won't, she'd just bounce." Moving to the edge she looked down. The others joined her. Chou was easily moving down the face of the huge display, illuminated by it nicely. Her shadow was cast enormously across the snow on the ground, outlined in shifting colour. Stopping half-way down she moved sideways for a moment, then paused. After a couple of minutes she climbed back up. She was grinning.

"Got it," she said happily, producing the portal device in one hand and another power storage sphere in the other. Naito and Foster inspected the virulently green-glowing device. Chou put the yellow sphere away, then reached one slender finger into the midst of the device, touching the storage unit. The glow quickly vanished. "It's safe."

"When was it set to activate?" Aiko asked.

"As we thought, New Year's Eve, sometime late at night. He was obviously aiming for midnight but his timing spells weren't quite as accurate as that, so it would have been somewhere between probably ten PM and perhaps one AM."

"That would have been bad, whenever it went off," Foster said, looking at the thing curiously. Chou nodded, making it vanish.

"I'll destroy it when we have more space."

"Well, mission accomplished," Agent Naito said, looking very relieved. "More easily than I expected."

"Indeed. If Yori can track down the one in LA, that means there's only one left. Which is probably not in the US, either, which will please your people, Special Agent."

"Yes, it will. Thank you for dealing with it." They headed for the door. Halfway there, Tamiko stopped, looking around, then walked slowly over to the base of the mast on top of the building, staring intently at it. Aiko noticed and watched her curiously.

"What have you found?" she asked, joining her. Instead of answering, her team-mate looked around at the roof surrounding the pole.
"Special Agent Foster?" He looked over as she turned around.

"Yes?"

"You know what you were saying about normal bombs?" Aiko looked sharply at her, then down at the roof, inspecting it carefully. She swore.

Foster stared, then hurried over. "What do you mean?" The girl gestured to the roof.

"There would seem to be quite a lot of explosives immediately below us."

"Um, what?!" Tamiko nodded soberly.

"I can sense it. Must be a couple of hundred kilos at least." Foster looked at the roof beneath his feet uneasily.

"Are you sure?" he asked. She nodded again. Chou joined them, staring at the roof.

"She's right. It's a pretty large bomb. I'd guess if it goes off it would blow most of the roof off if not worse." Naito and Foster shared a glance, paling slightly.

"I think it would be a good idea if we left," the blonde said, waving them to the door. They made the trip down in silence. At the bottom, Foster pulled out his phone.

"I'll call it in. I have no idea how I'm going to explain this, though."

"Information received from a reliable informant is probably the best method," Naito suggested. The FBI agent nodded slowly.

"Guess so." He made the call. After a considerable amount of talking he hung up, then sighed a little. "I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"We should probably go outside, or the explanations will become even more difficult," Chou said, opening the door. Once they were standing in the snow she relocked it using whatever method she'd unlocked it with in the first place. Foster watched with interest.

"You'd make a damn good thief," he said. She grinned, then handed him his own wallet.

"Indeed, but that would be wrong." While he stared at her Agent Naito chuckled.

"That's sort of her party trick. No, I have no idea at all how she does it."

By mutual unspoken agreement they walked away from the building, ending up next to a shop on the other side of the road, while they waited for the reinforcements. Only a few people were about, bundled up and moving as fast as they could. It had started snowing again. Naito and Foster began shivering. Chou looked at them for a moment, then concentrated. After ten seconds or so they both looked surprised. All of a sudden it had become much warmer and the snow had stopped. They peered around then glanced at each other. The little group was standing inside a circle a few feet across in which the snow wasn't falling. Foster stared upwards, watching open-mouthed as the snow above them slid off the sides of an invisible dome, piling slowly against it's base. The wind seemed to have died completely inside the area as well.

"Wow," he managed after a moment. Chou seemed amused by his reaction, while Tamiko and Aiko simply unzipped their jackets and enjoyed it. "That's a very useful trick."

"That's sort of her party trick. No, I have no idea at all how she does it."
Moving to the edge of the circle the FBI man cautiously reached out with his hand. He was slightly surprised to feel nothing when it went past the point that the snow was sliding down, although the sudden drop in temperature outside the shielded area was noticeable. He looked at Chou questioningly.

"Wards are directional. This blocks things from outside coming in. Going out from inside is unaffected. That's what I did earlier, for Aiko, you remember. If you want to block both directions at once you have to nest one inside the other in opposite directions and link them. It's very complicated to do properly. It's also almost impossible to move them around. You can expand and contract them easily enough, assuming you have enough power available, but moving the centre of them is extremely difficult." Nodding understandingly, he stepped back.

"How does the air get in?" he asked, suddenly thinking of a potential problem. Chou raised an eyebrow approvingly.

"Good question. This one is set to deflect kinetic energy above a certain level, which means air molecules will diffuse slowly through it, but it blocks the wind, the snow, things like that. It's not powerful enough to block anything moving very fast but it doesn't need to be." Foster was very impressed by the level of understanding the young woman clearly possessed of her field of expertise.

Naito was listening with interest, while thinking about the bomb they'd found up on the roof. After a while he mused, "Is it simply a coincidence that there's a lot of explosives in the same building as a portal device, or are they linked? It seems unlikely that there could be two simultaneous different terrorist attacks. Although I suppose this is a high-profile target."

"I'm not aware of any current threats that could be behind this," Foster said, turning to his Japanese counterpart. "That's not to say there isn't one we don't know about. But I'd agree it's stretching credulity to think the bomb and the portal device aren't linked."

Aiko looked up at the building thoughtfully, musing out loud, "I guess he could have arranged a huge explosion as a backup method. The number of people here would be so large that if they really panicked the stampede could kill as many people as the demon would. Plus it would block all the roads, tie up the emergency response people, just cause chaos in general. Which was certainly what he was working towards." Agent Foster looked at her for a moment, then followed her gaze.

"Plausible. Very plausible. If the blast was big enough it might cause the entire front of the building to collapse which would kill hundreds. Adding the demon into that, the death toll would be... unbelievable." He didn't look happy. Glancing at his watch, he muttered, "Where the hell is everyone? I called it in twenty minutes ago."

"The weather is so bad they're probably having trouble. I don't think anyone is going to want to fly a helicopter in these conditions, in such a crowded city, so they'll have to come in ground vehicles, which will have trouble as well." It was snowing very hard by now, visibility dropping to only fifty or sixty feet, the small number of pedestrians having vanished entirely. Foster looked at the short woman, nodding in agreement, then inspected the foot or so of snow in a perfect circle around them, leaning against something that wasn't there, at least to the eye. He was very grateful for the protection provided by Chou. A few minutes later they heard the first sirens, although the vehicles they were attached to didn't come into view for a surprisingly long time.

Eventually, though, a large military style SUV slid to a halt, accompanied by several smaller ones, along with a couple of police cars that were having considerable difficulty with the weather conditions. They disgorged quite a lot of men and women wearing various uniforms with heavy
jackets, from both the NYPD and the FBI. A number of them immediately began moving towards One Times Square, while others produced barriers and flashing lights which were used to block all the roads in the immediate vicinity, a task made more difficult by the drifting snow. A man who seemed to be in charge of the FBI group looked around, spotting them immediately. Heading in their direction he picked up an escort from the police bomb squad en route. As he neared the warded area his eyes widened when he noticed the fact that they were standing in a snow-free bubble, the snow that had been present having mostly melted by now, running outside the wards and refreezing. He stopped for a moment, then resumed walking.

When he and the other two men he'd picked up were close enough Chou expanded the wards to cover them as well. They all looked very surprised at the sudden warmth, which wasn't all that hot but after the temperature outside the little zone, seemed almost tropical. One of the men looked around with shock on his face while the other smiled.

"Cool. How's that work?" he asked curiously. Chou smiled back at him.

"Magic." There was a long pause.

"OK." He seemed surprised but after a moment simply shrugged, accepting it. The other bomb tech stared at her, then the others. He didn't seem to know how to react. The FBI agent ignored them, looking at Agent Foster.

"What's all this about, Foster?" he asked sharply, turning to inspect the four Japanese people. "You were supposed to be looking after the people from Japan, whatever it was they were doing. Not that the State department has told me what that is. Now you're calling in major bomb alerts in the middle of the city. How did we get here from there?" Special Agent Foster looked slightly worried, glancing at the others, who watched with interest. Chou smiled a little at him.

"Well, sir, we happen to have come into information that there's a large quantity of explosives at One Times Square, on the top floor. Several hundred pounds of it. I don't know anything else yet." Both bomb squad men fixed their attention on him immediately.

"Yes, I got that much from the initial report. What I'm curious about is precisely how you know this." Foster swallowed.

"It was a reliable tip, sir," he replied. The senior agent looked at him narrowly.

"From whom?" he asked suspiciously. "That's a very interesting bit of information out of nowhere, we don't have any current investigations leading us to anything of this magnitude. I know, I checked before I left the office." Looking guilty, Foster glanced at the magical girls, who looked back.

"Um, an informant, sir." His superior followed his gaze for a second.

"And how did this informant happen on this information, Special Agent? Why should we believe it?" Chou sighed a little, attracting his attention.

"We discovered the bomb while we were in the process of recovering a terrorist weapon." The senior agent transferred his hard gaze to her. It didn't seem to have any intimidatory effect, which puzzled him a little. He'd practised it for ages in the mirror and it usually worked.

"A terrorist weapon. Would you mind explaining that to me?"

"Yes."
He stared at her. "What?"

"Yes, I would mind explaining. You're being very rude." She gave him a look that made him feel small inside, bringing his childhood back with a rush. Wilting a little his attitude changed considerable. Foster watched with astonishment, while Naito and the other two girls tried not to smile.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, wondering why he was apologising yet unable to stop himself. "Would you please explain that to me?" She smiled brilliantly.

"Of course!" She did so. He listened impassively until she finished. To one side the two bomb technicians exchanged glances. When she stopped talking he looked at her, then her colleagues, then his own agent.

"So let me get this right. You four teleported here from Japan, used magical powers to enter a locked building, then you, miss, climbed down the front of the building nearly four hundred feet up in a snowstorm to retrieve a magical terror weapon that summons man-eating demons from another world, then on the way back down you happened to notice a very large bomb?" She nodded, smiling slightly.

"We teleported from Los Angeles, it wasn't snowing at the time and it was Tamiko who spotted the explosives, but yes, that's basically it."

The senior agent in charge stared at her for several seconds wordlessly.

"Bullshit." Her expression didn't change, but he took a step back, then wondered why.

"You're being rude again," she said politely. Shaking off the effect he glared at her.

"Tell me why I shouldn't arrest you for breaking and entering? And you, what the hell are you doing letting foreign citizens just walk into a private building? Without even a warrant? What sort of proof do you have for any of this crap? Magic, for fuck's sake!" He was almost shouting.

Tamiko looked at Aiko, then shrugged. They turned back to watch what happened with lively interest. Agent Naito was once again wondering why he kept getting mixed up in this sort of thing.

Chou looked at the senior agent for a moment, then around at the circle on the ground where the snow wasn't falling. Following her eyes his determination faltered slightly. He jumped when she pulled a six inch cube of metal and glass out of thin air. "One deactivated portal device." She handed it to him. Inspecting it curiously he stared when she reached out and touched the glass globe in the middle, making it light up a golden colour like late afternoon sunset. "One activated portal device." Agent Naito moved slightly further away. Foster, after a wide-eye stare, did the same. Both bomb squad technicians studied the device more calmly than one might expect, but working with temperamental high-energy chemistry on a regular basis tended to produce people who didn't panic easily.

"Ah..." The senior agent looked at her, then back at the device he was holding. Gently taking it from him she touched the sphere again. The glow faded, visibly siphoned into her fingertip.

"And now it's deactivated again. You see?" Glancing at Aiko she commented, "Yori's approach does concentrate the mind wonderfully, I must say." The other girl looked amused, while Naito sighed a little.

"May I see that, please?" the bomb tech that had accepted magic as an explanation asked politely. She smiled at him, handing it over. He and his colleague examined the device carefully, pulling out very bright flashlights to look at it. There was quite a lot of ambient light from the various displays,
illuminated signs and street-lights around Times Square but with the snow diffusing it the lighting wasn't ideal. "Interesting. No visible power source, too light to have much of a hidden battery, nothing inside that ball in the middle anyway." He shone the flashlight through the storage sphere from the other side to check. "No, it's just a transparent ball. No timers, electronics, or anything else I can see." Looking up he saw the blonde looking at him with an interested expression.

"So how did it light up like that?"

"Like I said, magic. The 'ball' is essentially a magical battery, it stores the energy required to generate the portal. The rest of it controls and shapes the various spells that do the target acquisition, tracking, and timing functions." He stared for a moment, then looked at his colleague.

"Can you light it up again?" She reached out again and touched the sphere as he held the device up. It glowed brightly, illuminating them and the surroundings. "Weird." Glancing at the senior agent who was watching this with an uncertain expression, quite unlike his earlier aggressiveness, he said, "I have no idea at all how this works. It's certainly nothing I've ever seen before. In the absence of a better explanation than magic I think you should probably listen to her." His colleague didn't seem as convinced but was still silent, staring at the portal weapon. Handing it back he watched carefully as she de-powered it again then made it vanish.

"I'd like to study that some more," he said hopefully. Smiling regretfully, she shook her head.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, the device will be destroyed like the others." The senior agent gazed at her.

"We could make you turn it over to us," he said, attempting his intimidating expression again, without much luck. She gave him a gentle look.

"No, you couldn't." Despite the serene expression he got the feeling somehow that this was an avenue which led to far more trouble than he wanted. Dropping the subject he turned back to the other FBI man, pretending he hadn't said anything. Tamiko snickered, but he manfully ignored it.

"OK. I guess we go and check. But I'd like to talk with you later." Foster didn't look wildly keen about this. Turning to the lead bomb expert the agent nodded. "Go ahead." The technician turned and walked into the snow, his colleague following. "Stay here," the senior agent said, looking at them all, before going after the bomb techs. The five people inside the bubble of warmth were quiet for a moment.

"A little pushy, isn't he?" Aiko said in a slightly amused tone of voice. Agent Foster nodded glumly.

"He's not an easy man to deal with. A good agent, but he's very by-the-book. We don't get along as well as you'd like." They watched through the falling snow as various people ran around, getting equipment out of the vehicles and setting it up, before a pair of people headed for the door they'd entered by, which was being guarded for some reason by two very chilly policemen. A crowbar was produced and used, the door yielding to it after some effort. An alarm could immediately be heard going off, falling silent seconds later. Chou sighed a little.

"That's very destructive. I could have opened it for them." Agent Naito laughed.

"I think they want to do it themselves, Chou. Leave some work for the rest of us." She giggled, looking over her shoulder at him. The EOD team disappeared inside the building and everything went very quiet.
"They won't use radio, in case it triggers the bomb," Special Agent Foster said after a while. "I think they run a cable behind them and use that for communications. One person will go ahead when they get close." Agent Naito nodded.

"We use the same technique in Japan. It's normally an optical fibre, it's much lighter and can carry video and audio as well as data for computers at the same time." Twenty minutes crawled by very slowly. Eventually the senior FBI man could be seen walking back towards them. He didn't look happy. Entering the bubble of warmth, which Chou had quickly made a hole in for him so he wouldn't bounce off, he gave them all hard looks.

"They can't find anything. The top floor is completely empty, apparently. No sign of a bomb. Nothing on the roof either except for a lot of fresh footprints which I assume must be yours." Aiko and Tamiko exchanged puzzled glances with Chou.

"There is definitely a considerable amount of explosives up there, Agent," Tamiko said. He shrugged angrily.

"Well, they're invisible, then, because they checked the roof, the top floor, and the next two down. Nothing, and no signs anyone has been in there for months. Possibly years." Chou looked up at the building as did the other two girls.

"That's interesting." After a moment, enlightenment crossed her face. "Ah. I think I know what the problem is. I suspect that there is a spell diverting attention away from the bomb. It's quite easy to do a basic form of, which would suffice for anyone not magically aware. They can be difficult to spot from a distance." Staring at her the agent sighed.

"Magic again. Why am I having so much trouble believing anything you tell me?" The blonde shrugged.

"I have no idea, it's all true."

"Well, without any evidence I'm going to have no choice but to call this all off."

"I can go and check for you, and remove the spell." He shook his head.

"I can't allow that." She sighed.

"Why not? If there is no bomb, it's perfectly safe for everyone. If there is a bomb, I'm the only one here at the moment who can locate it for you." He looked unconvinced. Smiling at him she stepped forward. "Agent, surely there's no harm in letting me look. Your State Department was prepared to let us come here and deal with the portal weapon, let me help you with this bomb."

After staring at her for a long moment he glanced at Foster, who shrugged and nodded. "Oh, hell, all the rules seem to be bending right now. All right. Against my better judgement you can go up." Looking pleased, she dropped the wards, making everyone else squawk as the cold wind suddenly drove snow at them, following him back across the empty street to the bomb disposal truck. The others followed. Arriving at it he spoke to the man sitting at a control console, who looked at the blonde with surprise, then spoke into a microphone for a moment. Once he received the response he turned to them.

"They're waiting for you at the twenty-second floor." Chou nodded, turning and heading for the entrance. She went inside, the operator in the vehicle looking surprised by the message he received less than half a minute later. "Holy crap, how did she do that? They say she'd already there. Twenty-two floors in thirty seconds?" Tamiko laughed.
"I know. She must be getting tired." He looked at the girl for a moment with a weird expression.

Ken Francis was worried. The Japanese girl had put on some pretty convincing demonstrations of something, although he wasn't certain exactly what. 'Magic', she called it. He wasn't sure he believed in magic or any supernatural thing at all, although he wasn't averse to sometimes asking Saint Barbara for a little help on a tricky job. A habit he'd fallen into when working with an old Irish Catholic bomb expert years ago. The man had retired at a ripe old age, which was proof of something, since the job quite often ended early. As did the experts.

The blonde and her friends had been very insistent that there was a large bomb up here, but for the life of him he couldn't find anything at all. Looking through the visor of his blast suit he turned around in the middle of the floor, pointing his light into every nook and cranny. The lights up here looked like they didn't work, not that he'd been tempted to try them, just in case someone had gotten clever with triggers. It wouldn't have been the first time. He'd checked the roof, the top floor, then the next two floors as well just to be sure, but nothing had shown up. Still, he'd decided to recheck the top floor again. He couldn't get that little demonstration involving the alleged demon weapon out of his mind, which made him take the warning they'd received seriously despite the lack of evidence so far.

"Ken?" His colleague Alonso's voice came through his headphones.

"I'm here. Nothing yet. Again."

"Russ called from the truck. That blonde girl is coming up." Surprised, he turned around in the cumbersome suit, heading back to the doorway, careful not to trip over the cable coming from the waist comms pack.

"What for?"

"Apparently she thinks that the bomb is disguised and she knows how to find it."

"I'm not convinced there is a bomb."

"I know, but she is. If the FBI is letting her in here, they must think whatever she's got is worth listening to. Shit!"

"What, Al? You suddenly suffering from Tourette's?"

"She's here. How the hell did she get up here so fast, that wasn't even a minute!" Arriving at the door he looked out. The girl was coming up the stairs towards him, moving fast but gracefully. She didn't look winded at all after what must have been an incredible race up the stairs.

"Hello again," she said, looking pleased to see him.

"Hello, miss." Smiling, she corrected him.

"Chou, please." Holding out his hand in the heavy suit, he shook hands with her clumsily.

"Ken Francis. Call me Ken. You think you know where the bomb is, assuming there is one?"

Nodding, she waited for him to back through the doorway, then turn around. Slipping in after him she looked around carefully, then up. Her eyes widened.

"That's a very large bomb." He followed her gaze to the roof. Nothing was visible, only bare cement with cable trays running across it, the suspended ceiling that would have been there long
since removed during one refit or another. Cables ran through the wall to the front and sides of the buildings, looking newer than the power and lighting feeds, presumably driving the signage on the outside of the building.

"I can't see anything," he said slowly.

"I know. There's a sort of illusion over it, it shows you the roof before the explosives were put in place. I'll disable it." He sucked in a horrified breath as the roof wavered and changed.

"Oh, hell. That's a big bomb," he said in an extremely worried voice. "A really, really big bomb." Al's voice came in his ear.

"You found something, Ken?"

Nodding, despite the fact his colleague couldn't see anything, he described what he could now see. "There's what looks like about a quarter of a ton of C-4 attached to the ceiling. It's all over the place. Someone must have spend hours setting this. It looks like it's been specifically placed to collapse the roof." Sweeping his light around he added, "There's some on the walls as well. If this goes off the entire top floor, at least, is going to end up on the ground." There was silence for a moment, broken by some soft swearing in Spanish.

"Could it collapse the building?" Al asked.

"I don't think so, looking at it, but it would drop tons of debris into Times Square. If this really is timed to go at midnight on New Year's Eve a hell of a lot of people would be killed or injured."

After another long pause, his friend asked, "Can you see the control mechanism?" Once again sweeping the light across the explosives, Ken followed the strands of det cord that linked all the clusters of explosives along the ceiling to where they gathered into a bundle. It ran down the wall to a small box on the floor.

"Got it. This is a really professional job, it looks like it was done by a demolition expert. That's good, it's not likely to go by accident."

"Any booby-traps?" Cautiously approaching the box, he kept the light on it, looking for tripwires or anything else obvious.

"Not that I can see. Although a good booby-trap is the one you can't see, of course." He laughed, feeling slightly light-headed, something that always happened when he was in this situation. "Al? This blast suit won't do a damn thing if this lot goes up. I'm taking it off so I can work better." There was a pause, then his colleague replied.

"You're the man on the spot. Do what you need to."

"You should probably get out. You're not safe where you are if I fuck it up." Al laughed.

"Then don't fuck it up." Chuckling, Ken struggled to get the top of the heavy suit off. Slim hands helping him caught him by surprise. Turning he saw Chou smiling at him. He'd forgotten she was there in the shock of finding himself sharing the room with a huge amount of unstable chemicals.

"Thanks, Chou. But you should go. Thank you for showing me the bomb. I can take it from here." She grinned at him, shaking her head.

"No, I think I'll stay as well. Don't worry, we'll be fine." Looking at her for a moment, he nodded.
"If you insist. By the way, you don't have any magical bomb disposal techniques, do you?"

"For something like this, spread out all over the room, that's a little difficult." She looked at the roof again. "If it was all in one place I could put a heavy ward around it then vaporise everything inside, which would deal with it neatly, but this is awkward. I suppose I could do it in sections, but I'm not sure that it wouldn't detonate other parts in the process. It's probably not a good idea to experiment with such a high-profile building. Your government would be annoyed if I damaged it." Ken laughed a little.

"Yes, people would be upset. It's something of a landmark." The blonde smiled at him.

"I can protect you, though, and your friend. You should let him know not to worry." Looking intrigued, Ken picked up the helmet of the suit and put it on so he could talk to Al.

"Al? Chou says not to worry."

"About what, exactly?" His colleague's voice was heavy with suspicion. Glancing at the woman Ken saw she appeared to be concentrating on something, looking in a slight downwards direction that he suspected was directly at the other man below them.

"I think you'll know it when you see it." A few seconds later his friend yelped, then went silent. When he came back on his voice was a little shaky.

"Um, OK. I'm looking at it, but I'm not sure I believe it."

"What happened?" Ken was very curious. Chou was looking pleased.

"A damn forcefield or something just surrounded me! It's the same golden colour that girl made the device she had glow earlier." Thinking for a moment, the bomb tech laughed.

"Stay inside it. I have a feeling that even if this thing went off you'd be fine." There was a wordless grunt from his compatriot, but he thought the other man would follow the instructions. He took his helmet off again. "That was you, I assume." She nodded.

"Producing wards at a distance is harder than close up, but it's good practice. That one is strong enough to protect your friend if anything bad happens." She concentrated again, while Ken watched. A few seconds passed before a golden transparent curtain surrounded them completely. He looked at it in wonder. "This one should protect us. You can put your hands through it, but it will block things coming in from outside." He experimentally waved his hand through the visible wall of light, feeling nothing.

"Good grief. That's amazing." The young woman nodded, again looking pleased.

"It should help. It's a lot more effective than your suit, I think. The colour is there so you can see where it is." The edge of the ward was only a short distance from the control box, so he turned his attention to it. It looked safe enough, which made him extremely paranoid instantly. Handing Chou the light and pulling his toolbag towards him he opened it and took out a magnifier, very carefully inspecting the box, paying particular attention to the lid fasteners. She held the light rock-steady.

"As far as I can see it's a standard commercial demolitions unit, the sort of thing they use for controlled implosions on old buildings." Chou nodded silently. "They're normally remotely activated, but this one presumably has a timer." Turning his attention back to the box he performed several tests, before very cautiously reaching through the ward to open the lid, which wasn't locked. It simply swung open very undramatically. "Hmm. I have to admit I was expecting something horrible to happen." He grinned at her.
Looking at the revealed interior of the box, his eyebrows went up a little. "Weird. That's very neatly laid out, with no obvious traps at all. It's a textbook demo job. Not what we normally see." Despite working extremely cautiously, describing what he was doing and seeing into a small tape recorder as a log of the procedure, it only took him ten minutes to render the device safe. "That was a hell of a lot less difficult than I thought it would be," he commented, removing the last component. He'd completely disassembled the box, photographing each stage once he was certain there were no sensors the camera flash could trigger. "Not that I'm complaining," he added hastily. Chou giggled from behind him.

"Don't worry, I know what you mean."

"It's weird, like whoever put this here knew exactly what to do but had no idea how to make it difficult to disarm. That's very unusual."

"My guess is that they were relying on the illusion spell to hide it, so they didn't bother with traps. Perhaps they wanted to be sure they could work on it safely. I'd assume that a booby-trapped bomb is dangerous to the bomb-maker as well." Ken nodded, putting his tools away.

"Sometimes more dangerous than to anyone else. I've run into a lot of cases where someone setting a bomb blew themselves up, either because they made a mistake or simply forgot their own trap. It happens. This one was much more professional and also much simpler. Improvised ones are often a dangerous mess." He snickered. "As if there's such a thing as a 'safe' bomb, but you get the point." Chou dismissed the wards while he went around the room carefully removing all the detonating cord stringing the blocks of C-4 together. The cluster of four blasting caps he'd removed from the other ends of the cord were placed safely into a heavy box full of sawdust. "That's it. We'll need to remove the primary charge, but that stuff is very stable, it won't go off accidentally."

"I've scanned it thoroughly and I can't find any other mechanisms hidden anywhere that could trigger it. I think that one was the only timer," Chou said.

"Good." Picking up the box of blasting caps carefully he grabbed his toolbag with the other hand. The Japanese woman helpfully carried his suit top section and the helmet. They headed down the stairs to where Al was. When they reached him he took the suit from Chou with a grunt, wondering how she was carrying it as if it was weightless, which it certainly wasn't. Ken put his tools down then gently lowered the box of caps to the floor, before sitting on the bottom step. "Thanks, Chou."

"You're welcome." She smiled at them both. "I need to go, we have to get back, but it's been nice meeting you both." Shaking hands with them, she disappeared back down the stairs at high speed. Watching her go both men then looked at each other.

"That was certainly one of the strangest people I've ever met," Al said reflectively. Ken nodded.

"Nice ass, though." They exchanged glances again, laughed, then began packing up.

Special Agent Foster had watched his superior's face when the bomb truck operator had passed on the report that Chou had uncovered a massive amount of military explosives in the top floor of the building. He'd gone pale, then very thoughtful. When the young woman exited the building and walked over to them, he studied her for a moment. Eventually he said, "I'm sorry if I was disrespectful earlier. This sort of thing is out of my comfort zone." After inspecting his face, she smiled.

"I understand. You Americans don't have very much experience with magic and it can be rather surprising at first. It's sometimes a shock even to people from our own society who are much more
familiar with it."

"Thank you for averting this disaster. I hate to think what would have happened if you hadn't found that bomb." Leaning against the truck she nodded soberly.

"It would have been very bad. The demon would have been worse. Luckily, that won't happen now." She glanced at Aiko, standing next to her. "We should go back to the consul's house, then to LA. We can help Yori and the others find the other portal device."

The short woman grinned. "I'll need a changing booth again, please." A few seconds later everyone in the area stared as a cylinder of golden light appeared, Aiko walking into it. The senior agent gaped, then deliberately controlled his expression. Tamiko and Chou were looking at him with smiles.

"Ah, right." He glanced at the opaque cylinder again for a moment then turned his attention to Chou and Agent Naito. "We'll start tracing the explosives. That much C-4 is going to leave a trail." Naito looked pensive.

"I suspect you won't find the bomber. I'm not sure but I seem to recall that one of the cult members shot dead in LA last year was some sort of explosives expert. My guess is that he was responsible for that bomb."

"We can hopefully still locate whoever supplied the explosives and shut them down," the agent said, looking grim. "That needs to be done in any case." Naito nodded.

"True. Good luck." He shook hands with the man.

"I'll make sure the PSIA gets a copy of both mine and Foster's report on this," the FBI man said.

"Thank you." Naito looked at Aiko who had just stepped out of the wards in her normal uniform. Everyone who hadn't seen it stared in surprise. She shivered.

"Damn, it's even colder now than it was when we got here. Let's go, quick, before I freeze!"

The four Japanese people and Special Agent Foster clustered together. "Close your eyes," Aiko warned the people watching, then teleported before she saw whether they'd listened, her legs felt numb. A few people had heeded her warning but she left a lot of cops blinking and swearing behind her.

The quintet appeared in the middle of Consul-General Mori's living room, making him jump and spill his drink. Ichiro was looking in the other direction and missed it. "Ah, ladies and gentleman, welcome back," the consul said genially, recovering nicely. The two glasses of whisky he'd already had probably helped. Looking mournfully at the rather expensive puddle on the floor he sighed, then put his glass down. "How did it go?"

"Very well, thank you, Tadao," Chou replied, producing the portal device and showing it to him. He inspected it with interest. It matched the pictures he'd seen, aside from not glowing green. "I deactivated it when we found it. I'll destroy it when we get to LA. The noise might wake your neighbours."

"Very considerate." She put it away again. Agent Naito took his coat off and sat down, looking at the snowy footprints they'd left on the carpet with some embarrassment. The consul noticed, then laughed. "Don't worry about that, it will clean up. It's only water."

"We found something else, Consul," Special Agent Foster said, also sitting. The older man looked
at him with a raised eyebrow. "Or rather, your people did. I didn't do much except watch." He explained the bomb, with the others adding details where relevant. Consul Mori listened with interest until he'd finished.

"Remarkable. You've outdone yourselves, ladies. I think this will certainly make the American government feel grateful. Thank you, once again you've helped international relations immeasurably and brought honour to yourselves and your country."

"It's what we do," Tamiko said with a grin. He laughed.

"Apparently it is." He offered them all drinks again. This time everyone but Foster accepted a small glass of sake. When they'd finished it, Chou looked at her watch.

"We should be going. Yori and the others in LA are going to need our help tracing the other portal weapon, she says it's unstable and could activate at any moment." The consul nodded understandingly.

"It's been a pleasure and an honour meeting you all. I hope we can meet again."

The three girls bowed slightly. They made their goodbyes, Chou looking at Special Agent Foster for a moment. "Thank you for your help. I'm very sorry if we got you in trouble." He waved this off dismissively.

"Don't worry. The results are the important part. I'm sure once all the reports are in the fact that a horrible tragedy was avoided will be the part people concentrate on." She smiled at him kindly.

"I hope so. Good luck."

"You too." They all waved, Aiko reminding them of the flash before teleporting as the three men looked away.

"What remarkable people." The consul inspected the spot on his carpet where only damp footprints remained, then poured himself a replacement whisky.

"You're sure it was a female, this trace you found," Harrison asked. Yori looked mildly insulted.

"Of course I'm sure."

He grinned at the expression on her face. "Don't worry, I'm not questioning your competence. I just wanted to be certain." She stared at him for a moment, a small smile playing about her lips.

"You can check for yourself if you want." He sighed. Snickering, she leaned back in the chair she'd stolen from Rojas' desk as soon as he'd left. "No, it was definitely female. I'd say between fourteen and sixteen. Can't tell you much more than that, the trace was too faint."

"Could you match it to a person?" Fumiko asked, from where she was leaning against another desk. The large room was two thirds empty, only the night shift and them present. They'd been in the station for a couple of hours, trying to work out the next step. The other officers occasionally looked over but so far no one had interrupted. Yori shook her head slowly.

"I don't think so. It was very weak. I was lucky to get that much. It must be about eight or nine days old, possibly as much as two weeks, but I doubt it."

"OK, so we're looking for a girl between fourteen and sixteen who was in the vicinity of Mann's
Theatre between one and two weeks ago." Harrison groaned, banging his head on the desk. "That narrows it down. Wonderful."

"Hey, it's a start. That's more than we had an hour ago."

"True. All right, let's think this through. The device was definitely in the subspace pocket in that pot two weeks ago. By a week ago it was definitely in the school." Yori nodded. "We don't know when it was put in the pot, but several months ago is likely." She nodded again.

"At least three months or so, which is when the mage... ceased, but probably less than six. Actually, from his records we know that he was in LA twice, which narrows it down, so it was most likely between four and five months ago."

"OK. We also know that all the cult members are either in jail or dead, and that there were no more than a dozen of them in the first place. So it almost certainly wasn't anyone directly associated with the cult that moved the device either time." Yori nodded for a third time. "The ki trace you found indicates a young female was involved."

"The obvious conclusion is that the young female probably attends that girls school," Fumiko said slowly. The others looked at her, then at each other.

"It's a good working theory," Harrison said. "This girl, whoever she is, somehow finds the subspace pocket, opens it, removes the device, closes it again, takes the thing to school for some reason, then... what, takes it home? Throws it away? Sells it? How could she find the pocket, never mind open it or close it? It took Fumiko some careful searching to discover it and she was looking for it."

"Closing it isn't the odd thing, it's designed to close itself after a short period. A security measure, I'd say. Opening it in the first place is the good trick. If I had to guess I think it was most likely a complete accident. Either that or she's a magic-sensitive who noticed something, then poked around until she found it, but that seems unlikely. Not actually impossible, though. The first explanation is simpler." With a sigh Yori looked around the room, then back to her friends. "It's still unlikely but it's all I can think of. As far as why she took it to school, perhaps she wanted to show it to her friends? The things look quite impressive, after all, especially if you don't know about magic."

"OK, I can see that. To a teenaged girl it might well be something she'd want to show off. But why leave it there?" Yori shrugged.

"No idea."

"Where in the school did you find the trace signature?" Misaki asked, unwrapping another chocolate bar. Glancing at her, Yori looked amused.

"It was in some sort of storage area."

"Not a locker or anything like that?" Harrison asked with interest. She shook her head.

"No. The place was full of mops and cleaning stuff. It was pushed into an air duct. Obviously to hide it."

"Hmm. Odd." The lieutenant looked up as another officer approached. "Got anything, Suzie?" The tall woman shook her head.

"Sorry, Lieutenant. There are several covert security cameras covering that area, but for some reason none of them have recorded anything for about four and a half months. The manager is
furious, he hadn't noticed. When I left him he was shouting at the security company on the phone." She looked amused. "He has quite a vocabulary."

"Nothing from across the street or anything like that?" She shook her head.

"No. Only one camera in the area points in that direction and it's blocked by the angle of the building." Harrison sighed.

"Well, there goes that idea." Yori was thinking, scratching the back of her head. She looked at the police officer.

"Was their entire security system not working, or just those cameras?" she asked curiously. The woman looked at her.

"Just those ones. Everything else seems to be working fine." Nodding, the young Japanese woman pondered this.

"Thanks." The officer went back to her desk. Harrison looked at the girl sitting across from him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

Looking up she replied, "We probably know when the subspace pocket was put there." He saw what she was getting at.

"Four and a half months ago."

"Yep. I suspect part of the spell blocks surveillance. I know a number of ways of doing the same thing to one degree or another. It's quite a complicated little spell, I haven't checked it thoroughly yet." Pulling the sphere out of her ki space pocket she studied it for a couple of minutes. "I thought so. That's not a method I've seen before but it would certainly stop cameras working. Interestingly, only electronic ones, I think film would work. Weird. Why limit it like that?" After a moment she shook her head and put it away again. "I'll have to track down the guy who made it and ask."

"So, four and a half months ago, the mage turns up with that thing and the portal device, installs it in the pot, sticks the device inside with the timer running, and goes away again. A week or so ago, some schoolgirl trips over it and removes the device then takes it to school. Well, that hopefully narrows it down a bit. But assuming it's true, we have to figure out which schoolgirl. There are hundreds of them there."

"Presumably not all of them are fourteen to sixteen, though?" Fumiko moved to take a chair from an empty desk, sitting in it and leaning back.

"No. I can find out how many. Hold on." Turning to his computer he searched for a while. "About ninety-five girls in grades eight to eleven, which covers that age. Probably about two thirds of that are exactly the right age range."

"Too many to check one after the other. It would take days, and we don't have that." Closing her eyes, Yori sighed. "We need to figure out a way to check them all at once."

"It's the Christmas holidays so they won't be in school for another few days, after New Year's. The obvious solution would have been to arrange some sort of assembly at the school and just ask them, 'Did you find a thing with a glowing green ball in the middle of it?'" Yori grinned, then suddenly opened her eyes.

"Hey, that's right. It's the holiday period right now. When did school let out?"
"Two days before Christmas."

"Which is nearly a week ago. So, unless the girl has some way of getting into the school when it's closed, she didn't remove the damn thing a day or two ago. Someone else did." Harrison groaned.

"Oh, hell, that makes it even more complicated."

"This is all assuming that the female in question even goes to the school," Misaki said, cutting up an apple. Harrison looked at her, noticing with amusement she was using the butterfly knife she'd 'acquired' from Pablo.

"Very true, but it's the only lead we have." She nodded, eating a slice of the fruit.

A number of ideas were discussed and rejected, until Yori pulled her phone out, looking irritated. "May as well see how the others are getting along. Hopefully they're having better luck than we are." Dialling Chou, she waited. "Hi. Well, yes and no. We found that there definitely is, or was a portal device here. Right outside Mann's, like the clue suggested. But someone moved it somewhere between one and maybe two weeks ago to a nearby school, then again to parts unknown. We're trying to figure out who the first person was. How are you getting on? Did you find it?"

"I can believe that. The problem might be worse than you think. The one here was in a very clever little subspace pocket. I want to find who came up with the spell, the shielding on it is incredible, it's nearly as good as ours. The traces were barely visible even right next to it when it was closed."

"I'm not sure, but I suspect very well." Harrison was wondering what Chou was saying.

"No idea, aside from the fact that he clearly didn't come up with this spell, he had to have bought it in. It would have been expensive, maybe he couldn't afford many. Or he didn't think of it at first."

Looking thoughtful, she listened for a moment, then replied, "I managed to pull a very faint ki signature trace from the power storage sphere after I turned the spell off. I've got something, looks like a female between about fourteen and sixteen, but we're having trouble working out what to do with it. If he used the same system in New York you might try looking for it rather than directly for the device. You could use this one to get the pattern. It's a long shot but worth trying."

"OK. How long? Yes. I'll meet her with it. Good luck." Hanging up and putting the phone away, she summarised the conversation for them. "I'll go and meet her where we teleported in the first time, no sense scaring the locals." She grinned as she stood. "I'll be back in a minute." She walked out the door, returning a few minutes later. "Right, hopefully that will help the others. It still leaves us with a problem."

Fumiko was swinging her chair from side to side, slowly, thinking hard. "You said it was in a storage closet." Yori nodded. "Was it locked?"

"Actually, yes, it was." She looked intrigued. "That's a good point."

The other girl stopped moving her chair and looked at Harrison, then Yori. "Can you find out whether that closet is normally locked? If it is, whoever put the device in there had to have access to the keys. That should narrow it down a lot."

"Assuming they don't have ninja lock-picking skills like you lot, or whatever it is you do." He grinned at her. Turning to his computer he typed for a while, then picked up the phone. Fumiko looked at Yori.

"Do you have ninja lock-picking skills? If so, can you teach me?" She was smirking. Yori laughed.
"I don't pick them. I persuade them. That's a more advanced lesson, you're not ready yet. Just stick to kicking the door in for the moment." Fumiko started laughing herself.

"OK. I like doing that."

Amused, Harrison waited as the phone rang. It was eventually answered by a somewhat breathless woman. "Sorry, I was in the shower. Who is this, please?"

"Hello, this is Lieutenant Richard Harrison from the LAPD. Is this Margaret Coren?"

"That's me. How can I help you, Lieutenant?" She sounded puzzled.

"You're the principal of Saint Winifred's School for Girls?"

"That's correct." She was sounding slightly worried now.

"I'm hoping you can help with a case. There's nothing to worry about, I just need some information."

"All right, Lieutenant. I'll do my best. Do I need to talk to a lawyer?" Her voice took on a slightly amused tone.

"No, it's nothing like that. OK, in your school there's a storage cupboard on the ground floor near the cafeteria, I believe."

There was a pause, then she slowly replied, "Yes, there is. Why?"

"Is it normally locked?" The pause this time was much longer.

"Yes."

"Who has access to the keys to that cupboard, please?"

"Myself, the head of cleaning services, and I suppose my secretary Joan, since my key is kept in my desk. What's this about, Lieutenant." She was back to worried.

"Please don't worry. It's just confirming some information for a case I'm working on. Now, do either of the people you mentioned, or yourself, have a daughter aged between fourteen and sixteen who attends your school?" There was no response, although he could hear her breathing. Eventually, she spoke in a deeply suspicious voice.

"I'm going to have to insist that you tell me what this is about, Lieutenant. I'm not comfortable with the direction your questions are heading." After a moment, she added, "How exactly do you know about that cupboard in the first place?" He sighed a little, he'd been desperately hoping she wouldn't think to ask that question.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't tell you much more than that. I do need to know about the possibility of anyone with access to a key who has a daughter between those ages who attend the school."

"And I need, Lieutenant, to know why you want to know that. I take my responsibilities to the school and my girls very seriously."

Harrison sighed softly. "That's as it should be, Ma'am, but I'm working under something of a time constraint here." He looked up as Yori gestured to him. "Excuse me, Ma'am, I'll be right back. Please stay on the line." Pressing the hold button, he turned to the black-haired girl.
"We're going to have to bring her in on it, I think. I've had experience with school principals before, believe me, when they dig their heels in they can be a pain." The expression suggested the experience she mentioned had been hard-won.

"How do you suggest we do that?"

"Ask her to meet us. Tell her we can explain what the problem is, but only face to face." After a moment's thought he agreed.

Pressing the mute button again, he said, "I'm sorry about that, Ma'am, I had to talk to a colleague."

"That's all right, Lieutenant. So, are you going to tell me why you want to know all of this or can I go back to my shower?" He smiled a little, she sounded more interested than annoyed for some reason.

"All right, Ma'am, I see I have no choice. But I can't tell you over the phone. Would it be possible for you to meet myself and some colleagues? Here at the station, or at your house. Or even at the school." Yori nodded, giving him the thumbs up for that last suggestion."Actually, the school would probably be the best choice." She was silent for a few seconds.

"OK." She sighed audibly. "It's about ten past eight now. I'm going to finish my shower, then have something to eat. My husband has made a very nice meal and I'm not going to let it go to waste. It will take me about half an hour to get to the school, so I'll meet you there at, ah, let's say ten PM?"

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'm sorry to get you out of the house so late, but this matter is somewhat urgent."

"It's not a problem Lieutenant, although I expect the story to be a good one." He laughed.

"I think you'll find it interesting. Good bye, Ma'am."

"Good bye, Lieutenant. Please don't be late. I despise tardiness." She also laughed, then hung up. Looking at the receiver in his hand for a moment, he put it back on the phone.

"Interesting woman, I suspect." Turning to the three girls, he told them what she'd said, and her reactions, most of which they'd worked out already. "It'll take us about half an hour at this time of night to get there so we should leave in an hour or so. Let's see if there's anything edible in the cafeteria." There being no dissenting opinions, as he had rather suspected, he led the way downstairs.

Sitting around the table eating some rather tired macaroni and cheese, they tried to think of other avenues of attack, without much luck. LA was simply too large a city for even all six magical girls to scan in the time available, especially with the fairly short range they could detect the device at. "If it activates, we can trace it easily, portals stick out like mad, but it will be too late then," Yori grumped, stirring her food with a fork. "I'd prefer it not to be after the fact."

"We could call in some help from the other groups at home," Fumiko suggested, popping open a can of Mountain Dew and sipping it experimentally. She grimaced, then took another sip. Yori nodded slowly, not looking overjoyed at that idea.

"I suppose that's possible, but there are only about a dozen of the girls I trust not to screw things up."

"Come on, there are more than that." Fumiko looked at her friend with a small smile.
"Oh, yes, sure there are. We could have loads of fun with some of those idiots, the first time some tourist looked up their skirt and said something inappropriate it would turn into into total chaos. You remember what happened with Amaya?" Harrison watched as both the other girls paled. Clearly they did. He was curious but decided not to ask. "No, there's us, maybe ten or eleven others I more or less trust not to destroy half the neighbourhood if they get surprised, then everyone else. Half of them don't speak English well or at all, which wouldn't help, and most of them have a track record of collateral damage that's impressive but not exactly useful. It could be worse than if the device activates. I'd prefer not to have someone accidentally set the San Andreas fault off because they got angry and missed." She suddenly grinned while Harrison shuddered a little at the matter of fact way she suggested this as a possibility.

"If that pigtailed blonde menace and her crew turned up, the Americans would probably declare war on Japan the next day." Fumiko laughed, while Misaki grunted agreement, shovelling the mac and cheese in with every sign of enjoyment. She was on her third helping. "There's also the fact that if we bring half the girls from Minato over here we reduce the protection at home, where it's most likely to be needed."

"I guess so. Oh well, it was just an idea." While they were discussing other possibilities, Chou, Tamiko, and Aiko walked in, looked around, then approached them. Yori grinned at her partner.

"Hello, dear," Chou said, leaning over and giving the smaller woman a quick hug. Fumiko and Misaki looked at Tamiko, wearing one of Chou's outfits, then glanced at each other. She grinned at them. "Agent Naito needed the facilities, he'll be here soon."

"How did it go?" Harrison asked as the three arrivals sat down around their table in the unoccupied chairs. Chou smiled at him, producing a deactivated portal weapon and two glowing yellow power cores. "Ah."

"It was just as you suspected, Lieutenant, the device was in Times Square. It was half-way up the big display at the top of the One Times Square building, hidden inside the same sort of subspace pocket as the one here was." She turned to Yori, handing her the original sphere. "Thank you, it would have been very difficult to find if I hadn't had this as a pattern." The other woman accepted it and stored it away.

"Did you have any problems?" Yori asked. Tamiko stifled a giggle, making the blonde look at her with a small smile.

"Well, it did get slightly complicated near the end." Chou smiled calmly, then the three young women took turns describing the events of the last few hours. Harrison stared in horror as she explained the discovery of a huge bomb. Agent Naito came in a few minutes after they did, taking a seat quietly and listening. When they finished the story, they got up to get some food. Once they returned the blonde woman continued.

"I've been thinking about it and it occurred to me that perhaps the cult had put the bomb in place before they finished the design of the portal weapons. Ken, the bomb disposal man, said that it was the work of a very good professional, and probably took many hours of work to build. There was a lot of dust on it, more than just a few months worth, I think. It could have been there for a year or more, the batteries in the electronic control box were good for at least that, he told me." Taking a bite of her food she looked surprised, then faintly disgusted.

"So, what, they planted a massive bomb, disguised it with a spell, then later came back and put a portal device there as well? That's serious overkill." Lieutenant Harrison looked appalled.

Naito sighed a little."I don't think they knew the meaning of that word. The goal was simply to kill
as many people as they could."

Chou ate some more food, then put her fork down and pushed the plate away with an expression of mild distaste. Misaki raised an eyebrow, then pulled it across and finished it off, making the blonde smile and wince at the same time. "Special Agent Foster was very nice, although his superior was a little rude. I never did get his name. That bomb disposal man was nice as well. I'm glad I was able to help him. Tadao has a lovely house."

"Tadao?" Harrison asked curiously.

"The Consul-General of Japan for New York. A very pleasant man to talk to. He and his aide Ichiro seemed to know a lot about the problem, they were quite complimentary about the London situation." She smiled. "Apparently they watch JNN. And I imagine they have access to the official reports from the PSIA. I think both of them probably have quite high security clearances."

Harrison picked up the dead portal weapon and turned it over in his hands as Yori explained what they'd managed to achieve while the others were in New York. It looked harmless, like some sort of artsy trinket that his wife would put on the mantelpiece. Chuckling at the thought, he put the thing down again, listening to the petite woman's recap of the current situation. "So, we're going to meet this school principal, explain at least some of the problem to her, and hope that any information she can give us will lead us to the device." Yori leaned back, pushing her plate away. Misaki immediately finished it off for her. Fumiko stared, then shook her head. Her sister smirked, making her sigh.

"Since you're here now we can just teleport to the school," Harrison said, looking amused at the words he'd just spoken. It took some getting used to. "You wouldn't all fit in my vehicle anyway."

Looking at his watch, he added, "In that case we have about twenty extra minutes."

Picking up the device again he turned it over and over, staring at it, thinking about possible ways of tracking it's twin. Yori glanced at Chou, both of them watching him curiously. "We'll find it, Lieutenant," the blonde woman said comfortingly. Looking up at her for a couple of seconds, he stared at the weapon in his hands again, then handed it to Yori.

"I sure hope so. What happened in London will keep me awake at night for weeks, and I wasn't even there. I don't like to think of it happening again."

Shortly afterwards they all left the room, stopping in the main office for Harrison to get his jacket, before clustering together in the conference room they'd used before, to avoid the teleport flash blinding anyone in the main room. Yori recharged Aiko's amulet then they jumped.

Principal Coren unlocked the staff entrance to the school and tapped in the correct code on the keypad inside the door, silencing the alarm. Heading to her office she turned the lights on, then walked down the stairs towards the cafeteria, stopping outside the closet that LAPD officer was asking about. Trying the door experimentally she found it was firmly locked as it should be. Puzzled, she headed back to the main entrance, flipping the switches that lit up the parking area, then standing just inside looking out into the parking lot while glancing at her watch occasionally. At one minute to ten she looked up from her wrist to see that there was a group of people standing fifty feet away, looking around curiously. Unlocking the door she stepped out, then wondered where their car was. Or cars, there were eight of them, two men and six young women.

Three of the women were dressed in a manner she felt was rather inappropriate. As they approached, she studied them. The group was an odd mix. The taller man was presumably this LAPD lieutenant, he had a look she associated with 'policeman'. The other man, Japanese if she
was any judge, was also almost certainly some sort of law enforcement person. The six girls, on the other hand...

All of them were Japanese, although the tallest one's blonde hair looked natural. They all seemed to be late teens to perhaps very early twenties in age, very fit and healthy. The three dressed rather like something you'd find in an adult convention, not that she knew anything about that, she thought guiltily, remembering an episode from her youth, showed enough skin that she could easily see they had the bodies of athletes. The other three were dressed more modestly, in what looked like very good silk. They all moved with extraordinary grace, more like gymnasts or dancers than normal people. After a moment she remembered what it reminded her of, thinking back to a martial arts competition she'd once attended with the school. Some of the participants had walked like that, only not to the same degree.

The taller man was leading them, although looking at the group, she got the distinct feeling that the smaller woman with her long, braided, extraordinarily deep black hair, so dark it almost vanished into the night even under the floodlights illuminating the parking lot, the blue stripe contrasting brilliantly, was in some way the leader of the group. There was an air of assurance and confidence about her, shared by the other girls, but more obvious with her. Margaret was suddenly sure that anyone who tried to best them either physically or mentally was in for a nasty shock. Smiling slightly, always liking to see confident young women, she waited for them to reached her.

"Principal Coren?" the tall man asked politely, holding up his ID. She nodded, holding her hand out.

"Yes. Hello, Lieutenant Harrison." Shaking her hand, he held the door as she waved everyone inside. "Come in, I'll have to lock the door behind us. We've had problems with theft before." Once they were inside she relocked the door, then led them to her office. Eight people plus her was a bit of a squeeze but it was a fairly large room so they all fitted. Harrison and the so far nameless Japanese man were waved to the two available chairs by the black-haired young woman, who looked at them with a slight smile.

"Age before beauty," the one with the pretty auburn hair said, making both men look at her. She giggled. The black-haired one sighed a little and nudged her. Grinning, Lieutenant Harrison and the other man sat, while Margaret walked around her desk and dropped gracefully into her familiar chair. Looking at them across the desk she raised an eyebrow, suddenly feeling like she was dealing with parents and their daughters. A small smile flickered across her face, matched by one on the black haired girl's lips. Her eyes, a remarkable violet-blue colour, sparkled.

Pointing to each girl in turn, Harrison introduced them. They greeted her in very good English although she could hear from their accents it wasn't their native tongue. The short girl, Yori, and the blonde, Chou, seemed to speak it most fluently, having only a trace of an accent. The Japanese man was introduced as an agent of the PSIA in Japan, some sort of security agency. Once the introductions were made she turned back to the LAPD man.

"So, Lieutenant, what is going on? Why were you asking such strange questions?"

Sitting up a little, the man seemed to be thinking about the best way to start. After a moment, he asked, "Did you by any chance happen to see the news reports about an incident in London, England, the day after Christmas?" Looking at him, puzzled, she slowly nodded.

"I saw some of it. I was busy with family, but I seem to remember there was some sort of bomb in a large store, Harrods, wasn't it? I've always wanted to visit there, but haven't had a chance yet. It sounded like a horrible thing, quite a few people were killed."
"Sixty-seven," Yori said quietly. Margaret winced, closing her eyes for a moment.

"How terrible. But what has that got to do with you being here?" He looked slightly unsure, glancing at the girl, who made a small gesture that seemed to indicate 'Get on with it.'

"I'm going to tell you something you're going to have a lot of problems believing, Principal Coren, but I assure you, every word is true. I can easily prove it. I need your promise that you won't tell anyone else, though." The principal studied him for a moment, intrigued and a bit worried.

"All right. I won't tell anyone, I can keep confidential matters confidential. So, explain all this, if you would." Taking a deep breath, the lieutenant started talking. She listened with a neutral expression as he told her a story that would have produced quite good marks in one of her creative writing classes. When he was finished, she sat and looked at him for some time, silently, then inspected the others. Eventually she stood, pushing her chair back.

"Thank you for the most inventive story I've heard for a long time, Lieutenant. You should see if you can get it turned into a movie, we're in the right city for that. Now, if you don't mind, I need to get back to my husband and help him finish painting the spare room." He sighed, looking over his shoulder at Yori, who seemed amused. She stepped forward.

"What would convince you we're telling the truth, Principal Coren?" she asked. Margaret looked at her for a moment.

"My dear, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. I hope you've heard that?" The young woman nodded with a smile. "You are expecting me to believe in magic, and demons, and a number of other things that even in Hollywood sound frankly ridiculous." Yori looked at her for a moment.

"Fair enough." She turned to the other girl about her height, who Margaret remembered as being called Aiko, speaking to her quietly in Japanese for a moment. Aiko nodded, then left the room. Puzzled, the principle watched as Yori closed the door behind her, leaning against it. The other girls all moved to the sides of the room leaving a space in the middle of the carpet.

When Aiko suddenly appeared out of thin air in the middle of the room and shouted, "BOO!", Margaret shrieked and dropped into her chair hard enough to make it roll backwards into the wall by the window. After a moment she produced a stream of foul language that made Harrison blush and Yori grin. She got the impression the girl was making mental notes. When her heart rate dropped from insane to merely silly she recovered enough to sit up, looking at the brunette with shock.

"How did you do that?" she asked, straightening her clothes and trying to forget what she'd just said. She was privately very surprised she knew so many swear words, and also guiltily proud of herself.

"Magic, of course," Aiko replied, looking slightly ashamed at the reaction she'd provoked, although also somewhat amused. Agent Naito appeared as if this was yet another in a long line of regrettable things this group had been responsible for, a look she was intimately familiar with from the parents of a few of her students, the more boisterous ones. He sighed very faintly. Yori looked at him and shrugged.

Stepping forward she raised her index finger, which began to glow a particularly pretty shade of violet, then drew a smiley face in thin air! Margaret stared in shock, as did Agent Naito and Lieutenant Harrison. Giving it a flick with her finger she made it start slowly rotating. "Perhaps I should have started with this," she said, sounding slightly embarrassed. Chou gazed at her in a way
that made her look guilty.

"It might have been less frightening, dear," she said quietly.

Moving slowly forward, the principal stared at the rotating collection of glowing lines, looking at it carefully. Reaching out cautiously she tentatively tried to touch it, waving her hand around through it when she found she could feel nothing at all. The glow passed through her hand with no sensations. "Magic as well?" she asked, bending slightly to look upwards at it curiously. There was a feeling deep inside her of a lot of the certainties about life she'd had slowly crumbling away. Yori nodded. "I see." Sitting down again she watched the smiley face spin around and around, until the girl reached out and stopped it. A moment later it vanished.

"I'm sorry Aiko's teleporting scared you," she said. "But it's a pretty good demonstration."

"Yes, it is." Margaret looked at the brunette. "Can you go anywhere like that?" Aiko nodded.

"Pretty much. It can be blocked with the right wards, but I don't think it has a distance limitation as such. I've been all over the world."

"That breaks most of the laws of physics I'm aware of," the principal said. Yori laughed.

"Magic tends to treat physical laws as rough guidelines, or at least optional." Standing, Margaret walked to the window, looking down at the car park. She turned to Aiko.

"Show me again. Go down there." She pointed to a position in the middle of the car park. Aiko grinned.

"Close your eyes, the outbound teleport produces a very bright flash." After a moment, she followed the instructions, seeing a brilliant white light through her eyelids, with no sound accompanying it. Opening them again she saw the girl was gone. Quickly turning to the window she marvelled at the sight of Aiko standing in the spot she'd indicated, waving at her. After a few seconds, Margaret motioned to her to come back, quickly turning around. A flash was visible through the window behind her, then Aiko was standing where she'd departed from, smiling.

"All right. I think I believe you." Sitting again, the principal looked at Harrison, who smiled reassuringly.

"Sorry about that. I know it's a lot to take in in five minutes. If it's any consolation I took a lot more convincing."

"So, it's all true, what you told me?" He nodded seriously.

"Every word." Leaning back in her chair she looked at them all. Eventually she leaned forward again.

"Fine. What does that have to do with my school?" Yori stepped forwards and explained the missing portal device, how they'd traced it here, and their findings and conclusions. Margaret listened looking more and more worried.

"One of those unholy things was here?" she asked, horrified.

"I'm afraid so. Somewhere around one to two days ago it was removed. We're not sure when it was brought in, but my best guess is a little over a week ago. I'm making the assumption that it wasn't brought in after the school closed for the holidays, but that seems safe as the traces were fairly strong, it had to have been here for several days." Something about what she said made the
"Hold on. How do you know where it was?" she asked suspiciously. Yori got a slightly guilty look.

"Um, I looked. We traced it here from outside, Misaki spotted it, so I went and checked." Margaret stared at her with sharp eyes.

"You broke into my school?" She sounded scandalised. Aiko and Tamiko snickered. Chou sighed.

"Not exactly. It wasn't breaking and entering it was... entering. Then leaving. Don't worry, I didn't cause any damage."

"Young lady, I don't know what you're taught in Japan, but in my school we teach our girls to respect other people's property." Misaki was giggling now while Agent Naito was grinning. Yori blushed.

"Sorry," she said in a small voice. "But it was important." Fixing her with a stern eye, Margaret shook her head sadly.

"The youth of today... I despair sometimes, I really do." Chou slid down the wall laughing quietly, tears running down her face. Fumiko had both hands over her mouth trying to keep the giggles in. Yori looked at Lieutenant Harrison, who shrugged.

Eventually Principal Coren smiled. "I'll forgive you, this once." She turned to Harrison, making him jump a little. "In answer to your question on the phone, I have two daughters, but both are now in college. The head of cleaning services only has sons. Joan, my secretary, on the other hand, does have a daughter of the right age, who attends this school. Sophie, her name is, a very smart but rather lonely girl. She doesn't have a lot of friends, she's a bit of a tomboy and a lot of the girls here tease her about it. I can't work out how she could have got access to the key for the storage room, Joan wouldn't have let her have it, but I suppose it's not impossible. As I said, she's smart. I'd like to think she would be more responsible, though."

"Can we have a look at this closet?" Naito asked. She nodded, standing.

"Of course." As they left her office she glanced at Yori with a small smile. "Would you like to lead the way, dear, since you've been there before?" The young woman hung her head, while several of her friends burst out laughing again.

Chuckling slightly, Principal Coren headed off down the stairs. Behind her, she heard someone, she thought it was Aiko, whisper, "I like her." She grinned to herself. 'That will teach you to scare me like that, my dear,' she thought with amusement.

Arriving at the door, she waited while they all looked at it for a moment. Yori reached out and turned the knob, pulling the door open. Looking at it oddly, sure it had been locked, she glanced at the girl, who had a small impish smile of her own now. 'Impressive,' she thought, but said nothing. Inside was just a small room with cleaning supplies on shelves, some mops and buckets next to a floor polisher, while a pair of heavy duty industrial vacuum cleaners squatted at the back. Yori pointed.

"It was inside that air duct on the wall. It had been carefully removed then put back. Several times, I'd say. There were traces in the dust inside, someone has been using it for storing things for a while." The air duct was near the ceiling, some eight feet off the ground, near one of the shelf units.

"Someone could climb up that and reach it," Chou commented. Margaret looked at her for a
moment then nodded.

"Well, that certainly takes Liz out of the equation. She's about sixty-eight and somewhat... large. I can't picture her climbing a set of shelves." Harrison stepped into the room, looking carefully at the shelves, then the floor. Yori joined him.

"Someone has definitely climbed these," he said, "You can see the marks where shoes have been." She nodded, looking at them from a short distance. "We could probably lift some good prints from the duct, assuming they didn't use gloves. But it would take hours to get them run, the lab is backed up at the moment."

"We should work on the assumption that this Sophie girl is the one who put it here, I guess, and ask her. With luck she can tell us what we need to know. If that doesn't produce results we'll have to try fingerprints, but even if we get some, wouldn't they only be useful if the person in question is on record in the first place?"

Harrison nodded glumly. Turning to Margaret who was watching and listening just outside the door, Yori asked, "Could you give us the address of your secretary, please? We're going to need to speak to her daughter."

"All right." Leaving the closet Yori closed the door again. Curiously Margaret tried the knob. It was locked. She looked at the Japanese girl with a raised eyebrow, which was met with another one and a smile. Shaking her head, she led the entire troupe back to her office, turning her computer on while sitting down. A couple of minutes later she handed Harrison a piece of paper from the printer. "Here you go. Could you do me a favour? Please go easy on the young lady. She hasn't had the easiest of lives."

"Don't worry, we just need to talk to her. She's not in any trouble."

"Thank you."

They followed her back down to the staff entrance, as she turned off lights and locked everything. Setting the alarm again she waited for them to file out before locking the door behind her, waiting for the solid tone that indicated the alarm was armed. She looked curiously at Yori. "Did you disable the alarm when you... invited yourself in?" The young woman grinned at her.

"No, I have other methods." She slowly faded into invisibility, then faded back a few feet away. Margaret stared.

"Amazing. I hope you never take up a life of crime, dear, you'd be very difficult to stop." The girl laughed. "You're all martial artists, aren't you, as well as the magical things?" the older woman asked curiously. Yori gave her a look of interested respect.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The way you move. I've seen something like it before, although nothing nearly as... powerful. I noticed it when I first saw you."

"Not many people who aren't involved in the Art notice that," the young woman said, Margaret easily hearing the capitalisation. She obviously took it very seriously.

"I assume you're very good?" She watched the face of the girl. She looked quietly self-confident, not boasting, but with the pride that comes from genuinely knowing your own abilities and limitations.
"Yes. Chou and I are quite possibly the best in the world. We're training the others, who are also becoming extremely good." Yori stated it as simple fact.

"Interesting. Perhaps, one day, when you have a spare moment, you might come and demonstrate for the girls. It would be nice to show them what a woman can do with determination and skill. They don't have as many role models in pursuits that are normally the preserve of men as they should." For some reason Yori seemed to find this amusing, although the reaction passed quickly. She bowed slightly.

"I'd like that. When we're not busy saving people from horrific demon-producing terror weapons, I'll see what we can do. It's been nice to meet you." Shaking Margaret's hand, she walked over to her companions, who had been standing twenty feet away waiting for her. "Remember the flash," she called, just in time. Closing her eyes as the light came and went, she opened them to an empty and dark parking lot. She was smiling as she headed towards her car, her keys in her hand.

"I don't think we should all go in," Chou said, looking at the house. It was set back a little from the road, a decent sized front garden insulating it from the road, large trees surrounding it. The area was obviously fairly well off. "She's only fifteen, we don't want to overwhelm her. Eight people might be a bit excessive." Harrison nodded, following her gaze. He looked back at the cluster of magical girls standing under a streetlight.

"Good point."

Aiko looked at him with a grin, then turned to her team. "Come on, guys, let's see if we can find some gang members to annoy. I read about a place that they're supposed to hang out a lot." Looking alarmed, Harrison opened his mouth. She laughed. "Don't worry, lieutenant. We'll go and find somewhere to have coffee. Yori will call us when you're done." She waved Agent Naito over to her. "Come on, Agent, let's find something fun to do."

He walked past Harrison, mumbling, "Help me," as he did so. Misaki put her arm around his shoulders with a smile, then waved as they all vanished. The flash started a dog barking somewhere nearby. Opening his eyes the police officer grinned, then turned back to the other two.

"Right, let's go and talk to this young lady. I hope she can tell us something useful."

"Well, I can tell you from here that we're on the right track. The device was definitely in that house for a while, the traces are faint but still there. About a week old." Yori looked up at him as they walked up the driveway to the front door. "My guess is that she brought it home, then took it to school. After that...?" Pressing the doorbell button, Harrison waited. When it was answered by a pretty brunette in her mid-thirties he showed her his badge.

"Joan Simpson?" She nodded, looking surprised. "I'm Lieutenant Richard Harrison from the LAPD. I need to talk to your daughter Sophie. Is she in?" Now looking worried, the woman nodded again.

"Yes, she's in the games room. Is this the sort of thing I need legal advice for?"

"No, don't worry, we just need to ask her some questions, she may be in possession of some information we require. She's not in any trouble." After a moment, the woman nodded for a third time, her shoulder-length hair moving around her face.

"Come in, lieutenant." Casting Yori and Chou an odd look as they followed Harrison inside, she led them down a hallway to a room at the back of the house from which the noises of a computer
game could be heard coming at considerable volume. "Because it's the holidays she's allowed to stay up later, although I wish she'd turn the volume down a bit when I ask. If her father was here he'd be annoyed, he doesn't like it that loud, although he loves playing those silly games with her. Unfortunately he's in San Francisco at the moment visiting a friend." Harrison nodded politely, looking around the large room. There was a pool table in one corner, a dart board on the wall, with the other side of the room devoted to several sofas surrounding a large rear-projection television, on which a fighting game was being played enthusiastically by the young woman in jeans and a t-shirt sitting in front of it on the floor.

She was working the control pad frantically, putting her whole body into it. He smiled, it reminded his of his own daughter, she played video games on occasion, although by the look of it this girl was seriously good. Her character bounced around the screen, kicking and punching, loud music and synthesised cheers mixing with the smack and crunches as the opponent was mercilessly pummelled. "Sophie," her mother called.

"Sophie!"

"SOPHIE!" The girl looked over her shoulder, startled, then quickly back at the screen as her character took a special attack to the face and promptly expired.

"Damn it!" she shouted.

"Sophie! No swearing!" Her mother looked irritated.

"Sorry, Mom," Sophie said, pressing the pause button and turning back to them. Her eyes went past her mother, fixing on Harrison for a moment, then looking past him at Yori and Chou who smiled at her.

"Turn that down, Sophie, it's much too loud." Sophie looked over her shoulder to see her mother behind her.

"Mom, you have to have it loud to get the full effect." She looked back to the screen in time to see her fighter lose her head. "Damn it!"

"No swearing! You know that." Her mother sounded only slightly annoyed. Looking back at her with a smile, Sophie assessed her mood. Stage one, no imminent danger, but safeties unlocked. She turned the volume down, knowing from past experience how little she could get away with. Her mother nodded. Ah. Safeties re-engaged. All was well. Pressing the restart button, she was soon engrossed in another match.

Fingering the pads of her playstation deftly, she made her pixelated avatar bounce and flip across the screen, violently kicking the computer-generated opponent in the chest. His life bar dropped considerably. "Hah!" she mumbled, "Take that. And that. And some of this. And..." she went for a difficult combo hit, successfully, "This!" The playstation grandly announced she was the winner. Grinning, she dropped back to the menu and ramped the difficulty up to maximum. All this practice was paying off.

Restarting, she picked a different character, looking at the figure on the screen wistfully. She wished she could fight like that. Reaching up she felt the scab at her hairline, picking at it. Yes, it would have been nice to be able to really fight. That said, she'd done some damage. Her mother had been furious, a full stage five meltdown. Sophie was lucky to still be allowed to stay up late and play games, for a moment she'd thought she was going to end up on bread and water for a week. In the end, a lot of fast talking had minimised the punishment, the fact that it was Christmas helping
as had the fact that her father was away. She wasn't looking forward to explaining when he came back, though.

Turning the volume up a little she began the match, pressing buttons as fast as she could, watching her opponent collapse under her strikes. He fell. Smiling, she brought him back so she could torture him some more. A sound at the edge of her consciousness was dismissed. Another hit, pretending it was him. Ha, take that!

"SOPHIE!"

"Eep." She jumped, too late working out what the noise was. She looked, her mother was standing in the doorway with three strangers. A sound from the TV made her look back in time to see her opponent brutally slay her character.

"Damn it!"

"Sophie! No swearing!" That sounded perilously close to a stage two, armed and ready.

"Sorry, Mom," she said, pausing the game and giving her mother her full attention. The man standing beside her wasn't someone she'd ever seen before. Looking curiously at him she thought he looked official in some way. Also rather good looking, although pretty old, he had to be at least thirty-five. Beside and slightly behind him she could see two women, older than her but younger than him, dressed in weird clothing, kind of like something she'd seen on TV in a martial arts movie. They looked Asian, Chinese or Japanese. She decided Japanese in the end, based on a couple of people she knew at school.

The shorter girl had amazing hair, when she turned her head to look around Sophie could see it was in a braid down to the base of her spine, with a bright blue bow at the end. Despite this feminine touch, the woman seemed to her to not be someone you'd take lightly. She had fingerless gloves on, her long fingers with blue polish on the nails sticking out, and on her feet some really nice leather boots.

Sophie wondered where she could get clothes like that. And how long it would take to grow her blonde hair that long. Although the blue stripe wouldn't work with her hair colour, but perhaps red?

The woman smiled at her, an expression that seemed to suggest someone who was ready for anything, and if nothing was ready for her, tough. She smiled back. Looking at the taller woman standing next to the first one, she studied her for a moment. This one was blonde, much shorter hair, similar clothes but in a neutral grey. Her expression was calm and gentle, yet still made her think this wasn't someone that it would be a good idea to annoy. Still, there was something comforting about it.

Returning her attention to her mother, she asked a question with her eyes. "This is Lieutenant Harrison from the police. He needs to ask you some questions." That made her stop and think hard. Was it about the fight? She'd been defending herself, after all. OK, so one of them was limping a lot when she last saw them, but... The policeman smiled at her.

"Don't worry, Sophie, you're not in trouble. We just need to ask you some questions. These are my friends Yori and Chou, they're from Japan."

'Nailed it,' the girl thought, pleased. She nodded, standing up and moving to one of the sofas. Her mother sat beside her, alert but calm. The three visitors sat on the other sofa, looking at the pair of them.
"Hi, Sophie," the shorter woman, Yori, said, studying her disconcertingly closely. Her eyes, a
colour Sophie had never seen before, fixxed on the scab on her head, apparently noticing it even
though it was under her hair, then moved back to her face. "We think you can help us. We're
looking for something." The girl waited, volunteering nothing. She'd seen enough cop shows to
know that was how they trapped you. Yori looked amused. "Have you seen one of..." She made a
theatrical gesture with one hand, which was suddenly holding a mass of metal tubing with a glass
ball in the middle, "...these before?"

Sophie stared. How the hell had she done that? Her mother looked at the woman in shock, then at
her daughter, then back at the woman. After a long pause, she began to shake her head. Yori
grinned at her.

"OK, that reaction tells me all I need to know. Tell me about it." Not quite sure what she was
talking about, Sophie looked at her. She was sure she'd controlled her expression when she'd seen
the thing in Yori's hand. One look into her eyes made her sigh slightly. There was no doubt at all
that she knew.

"I found it nine days ago. Outside Mann's. Only the one I found was glowing." Her mother stared
at her. Whoops. That was a stage three look, severe danger incoming.

"Sophie Marie Simpson. What did you do?"

"Nothing, Mom! I just found it."

"How exactly did you find it, Sophie?" Yori asked, curiously. "I know where it was, it was very
well hidden." The girl sighed, then started telling the story.

"I took a bus to Mann's Theatre after school, I wanted to look around because I was bored, plus I
was in a bad mood. The girls at school had been teasing me again about not having a boyfriend. It's
all most of them think about. It's so boring! Hardly any of them want to do anything interesting,
like video games, or model airplanes, or go-karting. Just boys and dresses." She made a sound of
disgust. Her mother smiled at her a little, putting her hand on her head and rubbing it affectionately.
Yori and Chou exchanged glances, seemingly amused.

"You sound like someone I know," Yori said, chuckling a little. "Go on."

"I just walked around for a while, looking at the tourists. Some of them are really weird, taking
pictures of everything. Anyway, it was getting dark, I got a soda and a burger, then went and ate it
while I was looking around. I couldn't find a garbage can so I was going to put my bag into one of
the pots they have there with the little palm trees in." She looked slightly ashamed. "I leaned on
this pot with one hand and slipped. The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground with my knee
hurting. When I started to get up I saw that the pot had some sort of opening in the bottom of it. It's
weird, I could have sworn it wasn't there before. One of those things was in the hole." She pointed
at the metal and glass object Yori was holding.

"But the ball in the middle was glowing green. No one was looking at me so I pulled it out, then
put it in my backpack."

"Why?" Chou asked with interest. Sophie looked at her.

"It looked cool. I've never seen anything glow like that. I took it home and looked at it for a long
time with a magnifying glass, trying to figure out how it worked, but I couldn't find any switches or
batteries or anything like that. It just glowed." She shrugged.
"Yori smiled again. "So, then you took it to school?" She stared a little.

"How did you know?"

"I'm really good at this sort of thing." After a moment spent trying to puzzle that out, Sophie nodded.

"Yes, I took it to show to Alice. She's the only one who really understands cool things like that. But she was off sick."

"Why did you leave it there?" Chou asked. She shrugged again.

"I had a lot of books to bring back and my bag was full. I didn't want to carry it around in case someone saw it, so I hid it. I have a special place there to put things, my locker got broken into a couple of times so I don't trust it."

"In the ventilation duct in the storage closet next to the cafeteria?" the policeman said, studying her. She nodded after a long moment. "How did you get the key?" he asked curiously. Sophie ducked her head, ashamed.

"I stole it from the principals desk and got a copy made," she said in a small voice. She could almost hear her mother click over to stage four, countdown to detonation, evacuate all personnel to minimum safe distance. The indrawn breath was the dead giveaway. Throwing caution to the wind, she added, "I was visiting Mom in her office one day after school and she went to the bathroom. The door to the principals office was open so I went in to look around. The key was there on her desk. I knew which one it was because I've seen Mom use it once when she had to get some whiteboard cleaner. I... borrowed it." She looked guiltily at her mother.

"I put it back the next day! No one even knew it was gone. But I went and got a copy made. One day when no one was looking I unlocked the closet and went in, some of the girls had been really mean and I wanted to go somewhere to get away from them. Sometimes I'd eat my lunch in there. Alice knew about it but she promised to never tell any one and she hasn't. About the fifth time I was in there I noticed the air duct, so I climbed up the shelves and looked at it. It was easy to get the cover off. That's when I saw it was a perfect place to hide things." Sophie smiled a little. "I even made some fake screws so it looked like it was screwed in but it wasn't. The cover fitted pretty tightly, it didn't need the screws to hold it." She was quite proud of that touch. She could feel her mother fizzing next to her, the explosion only held off by the presence of the visitors, for which she was momentarily grateful.

"That was on the second to last day of school. I had a cold the next day, so I didn't go to school. After that, it was locked up so I couldn't get to it. But Mom had to go to school to get something she'd forgotten before Christmas a couple of days ago, and I went with her, since Dad's away. When we were there I told her I was going to the bathroom, then went into the closet and got the thing back. I hid it in my backpack so she wouldn't see it." She risked a glance at her mother, who had a dangerous look.

"Where is it now?" Yori asked, leaning forward intently. Sophie sighed.

"I don't know." The three visitors exchanged glances. "It was stolen. We got back and I was going to go over to see Alice and show it to her, she lives quite close to here. I took a short cut through the park and two guys came out of nowhere and grabbed my backpack. I kicked one of them in the nuts, then grabbed a branch and smacked the other one in the face, but he still managed to knock me over. I hit my head on the ground really hard. I got up again pretty fast but he was too far away for me to hit." She smiled a little. "The one I got in the nuts was screaming. His friend ran away
with my backpack, so I kicked him again. He screamed even louder but he got up and ran away as well. He was walking funny, though. I hope it still hurts." Yori looked amused, while Chou was nodding approvingly.

"Well done." Her mother gave the blonde girl a look.

"Well done? My daughter was mugged. It's only blind luck she wasn't more severely hurt." Yori returned the look.

"By the sounds of it she gave as good as she got and then some. I'd suggest some martial arts and self-defence classes, I think she's got the correct attitude to do well at them." Sophie's mother stared at her.

"Martial arts?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. She's a bit old to start in an ideal world but better late than never." Looking at Yori in wonder, her anger somewhat deflected by the sudden right angle the conversation had taken, her mother pondered the comment.

"A bit old? How young would you consider was the right age?" Yori grinned.

"I started when I was about two." This seemed to leave her mother speechless. While she was gaping, the Japanese woman looked back to Sophie, who had been listening in amazement. "Do you know the people who stole your backpack, Sophie?" She shook her head.

"No. I've never seen them before. They were older than me, around eighteen, maybe older."

"Can you describe them?" The policeman pulled out the smallest tape recorder Sophie had ever seen and turned it on.

"One of them was about a foot taller than me, he looked Japanese like you two are, he had brown hair and grey eyes, I think. The other one was a white guy, about my height or a little taller. He had black eyes and a sort of dirty blond hair. They were wearing jeans and T-shirts. The tall one had a black shirt with some sort of logo on it, I think it was a band. The other one had a plain dark blue shirt. He smelled of tobacco, so I think he smoked." Harrison looked impressed.

"That's a lot of detail to remember, especially under the circumstances. You must have been very frightened." She glared at him.

"I wasn't scared, I was mad! If they try it again I'm going to get them both in the nuts until they scream for mercy." Yori laughed.

"Oh, yes, you'd do very well as a martial artist." Her mother looked annoyed, while Sophie grinned. Yori was cool.

"Can you remember anything else about them, Sophie? Jewellery, tattoos, shoes, anything like that?" Lieutenant Harrison gave his companion a look that made her smile.

"Well, they both had Nike sneakers on, I remember that. The short one had a gold tooth, I saw it when he was screaming." She thought for a while. There was something she'd seen out of the corner of her eye... "The tall one had a tattoo on his arm. It was really complicated. Sort of gold and green, but under the sleeve of his t-shirt, on his shoulder and upper arm." She indicated the position on her own arm. "I saw it when he grabbed my bag, his sleeve moved. It looked like some sort of fish with some oriental writing around it." Yori looked at her with interest. "Oh, the other thing is that I think one of his fingers was missing a bit. It looked too short." Yori and Chou looked at each
other for a moment.

"Was it his little finger? On his left hand?" Yori sounded intrigued. She thought, then nodded.

"Yes, I think so."

The blonde woman said something in Japanese to her friend, who nodded slowly. She replied, then turned to Harrison. "Yakuza, we think. Or ex-Yakuza. They don't look favourably on theft in general, mugging schoolchildren would be highly unlikely normally. The missing finger strongly suggests it, the tattoo is also evidence." The policeman looked worried, although for some reason Yori seemed slightly pleased. She turned back to Sophie.

"I think you did very well, Sophie. Thank you for your help." Her eyes moved up to the scab. "Were you injured anywhere else?" Sophie shook her head.

"No, just here." She rubbed the healing wound, wincing at the pain. Yori stood, moving next to her.

"May I look?" She dropped her hand. Her mother started to say something, but stopped when Chou caught her eye. Yori put her fingertips on the scab, then smiled. "Nothing to worry about." Stepping away, she bowed slightly to both of them.

"My thanks. You have helped a lot." Looking at Sophie's mother, she added, "I'm serious about what I said earlier. I think your daughter would find martial arts very interesting, and she has the drive to be good at it. Consider it. Start with Aikido." Sophie looked at her mother for a moment, seeing with relief that she'd dropped back to stage two at worst. She was safe for the moment, if she could make it through the interrogation that would come as soon as the visitors left. Picking up the object that she'd put on the sofa, Yori looked at it for a moment, then somehow made it vanish. Sophie watched with interest. There was no hint as to how the trick had been performed. Yori noticed her attention and winked.

"What is that thing?" her mother asked.

"Nothing to worry about now. But Sophie?" She looked at the woman's face. "If you find glowing things hidden in strange places in future, it's probably best if you leave them there." Yori smiled, then pulled a phone from somewhere, dialling then speaking in rapid Japanese to whoever she was calling. Hanging up she looked at the Lieutenant. "They'll meet us outside in a minute." He nodded, putting his recorder away and standing, addressing her mother.

"Thanks for letting us talk to your daughter. It's been very helpful with an annoying case." He shook her hand, as did Yori and Chou. Both of them turned to Sophie and shook hers as well. She followed her mother as they all went to the front door, the three visitors walking down the driveway to meet five more people who were standing on the sidewalk. Sophie inspected them with interest, four were female and three of those were dressed in a very odd way. She wondered what movie they were in. Yori and the other two joined the group, talking to them quietly. Sophie's mother closed the door, heading back to the kitchen, looking puzzled. Just as she was turning away from the door a bright flash, like a camera flash but bigger, illuminated the frosted glass in the upper half of the door. Curious, Sophie opened the door and peered out.

All eight people were gone. She looked up and down the street, but couldn't see any sign of them anywhere. After a long moment, thinking furiously, she closed the door again, catching sight of her face in the mirror hanging on the wall next to the coat rack, which her mother used to check her makeup before she left the house. Lifting her hair to inspect her scab, she stared in shock.
It was gone. There wasn't a mark on her skin. Rubbing where it had been, which was smooth and painless now, she slowly wandered back to the kitchen and her mother.

"Sophie, dear? About that key..."

Harrison slumped into his desk chair gratefully. It had been a very long day and it wasn't over yet. Looking at his watch he groaned. Half past midnight. The six girls had swept a three kilometre radius around Sophie's house in case the muggers had dropped her bag somewhere nearby, with no luck, then they'd returned to the station. Picking up the phone he called his wife and apologised again. When he'd finished, he looked across at Yori, who was currently talking on the phone in Japanese, a mildly amused expression on her face. Agent Naito was watching her in some shock.

"What's going on? Who's she speaking to?" Harrison asked. The agent looked at him, then back at the young woman.

"If I heard the name right, to the head of the largest Yakuza group in Japan. She seems to have his personal number." Harrison stared for a moment, then looked at Yori with his eyebrows so high up they almost merged with his hair.

"Good grief. I wonder how that happened." Naito shrugged helplessly.

"I've stopped asking. The answers I get make my brain ache." Yori laughed, then said something with a grin. She spoke for a while, then laughed again, writing something down, before hanging up. Everyone was looking at her curiously, although Naito seemed more stunned than anything.

"Was that really..." She nodded.

"He owes me a few favours. Like I told you months ago, I keep track." She grinned slightly menacingly. "Anyway, he's given me a name. And an address. Not his own group, but someone he knows. He doesn't like him very much, which is why he was more than happy to give me the name. He suggested we go and have a talk. If these people were Yakuza, this guy will be able to find them for us, a lot faster than we could. All we need to do is persuade him to help."

"How do we do that?" Harrison asked. "The Yakuza are known for being tight-lipped. They don't talk." She smiled in a cold manner that reminded Naito of Ms Aoyama, very strongly indeed. Harrison shuddered a little, while even Aiko and her team looked worried.

"Oh, he'll talk to us. Trust me."

Something woke Mikio Yamada from a deep sleep. Lying motionless on his side in bed he listened intently, giving no indication he was awake. There was no unusual sound he could hear, after several minutes of listening, but he was somehow sure he wasn't alone. Assassins were a constant possibility in his line of work, especially as he had managed to annoy several other, much larger, Yakuza groups with his business deals. That was why he'd moved to LA in the first place, hoping that setting up a Yakuza presence so far from Japan might make people stop trying to kill him. There hadn't been much there when he'd moved a decade before, even now most of the Yakuza in the US were in Hawaii or on the east coast.

Unfortunately, while the move had reduced the conflict with other Yakuza groups, it had replaced them with the various drug cartels and other more traditional American organized crime syndicates. They weren't as good at assassination, but that wasn't to say they were bad at it. Which is why he slept with two loaded guns under his pillow and a sword, with which he was very skilled,
in a sheath strapped to the side of the bed between it and the wall where it couldn't be seen but he could draw it quickly. Very slowly, his hand silently moved towards the hilt of the sword. His heart jumped when he realised it was missing. It had definitely been there when he got into bed an hour earlier. This was very bad.

Reaching just as silently under his pillow, he once more had a nasty shock when he found his guns were missing as well. Considering that one of them had been in his hand when he fell asleep that was a particularly good trick. His head was resting directly over where one of them should have been. Once more he listened carefully, once more he could hear absolutely nothing.

Until a female voice said, "Kazuhiro sends his regards." Despite years of training and iron control, he nearly crapped himself.

After a second, he exploded into action, flipping the bed covers in the direction the voice had come from, while sliding off the bed and rolling in the other direction to his desk where he had another gun in a sheath screwed to the bottom of the drawer. Reaching up in the darkness to where he knew it was, as he'd checked before he went to bed, he found only an empty holster.

"I got the shotgun in the closet, and the knife under the bookcase as well, in case you're wondering," the voice said, from a different place in the dark room, sounding amused. "Oh, and the grenade in your sock drawer. That's a weird place to keep it. You'd be digging through socks for ages looking for the thing." He sighed.

"I'll pay you twice whatever Oshiro is paying if you go away," he said quietly, not expecting it to work. She laughed, the sound send a chill down his spine. There was something almost inhuman about it.

"He's not paying me anything." The light came on, revealing a young woman dressed in black and blue silk sitting on his bed looking at him with a smile. "Although he did ask that I scare you. I think we can say I managed that." He studied her carefully. She didn't look like an assassin, but the best ones didn't. "You really annoyed him with that business in Kyoto. Really, Mikio? Narcotics? Prostitution? Not a good idea, you know what he's like. I'm not surprised you left." She seemed to know a lot about it, which also wasn't good. "I don't like those things much either. Not at all." Her smile had faded leaving a cold expression which made his heart thump that much faster. Head cocked to one side she seemed to listen. "You should calm down a little, a heart rate that fast isn't good in a man of your age."

"Who are you?" he asked, staring at her. "How did you get in here, and what do you want?"

She stood, walking a couple of steps closer to him. "I'm hurt. I thought almost all Yakuza bosses had heard of me, at least by reputation. Think hard. Oh, maybe this will help." She held up a hand which suddenly started glowing purple, wisps of energy rising from it like smoke and dissipating into the air. As he watched wide-eyed the glow ran down her arm and covered her entire body. The girl smiled slightly. His heart nearly stopped.

"Oh, fuck. You're Yori, aren't you?" he whispered. She nodded, smiling more widely, small fangs glinting in the light. The glow faded away. "I'm dead," he mumbled, dropping his head to the floor.

"Not yet. Let's keep it that way, killing is such a waste. Now get up, I just need to talk to you." She reached down and offered him her hand. After a long moment he took it, being pulled to his feet as easily as if he was a child. Standing, he studied her again, slightly more calmly now that it seemed a sudden ghastly death wasn't imminent. She was smaller than he had expected from the horrifying stories he'd heard.
"What would happen if I called for help?" he asked with morbid curiously. She looked at him calmly.

"Nothing. Try it, if you like." After a moment, he yelled as loudly as he could. The two loyal guards that always sat outside his door when he was asleep completely failed to make an entrance. There was a distinct lack of any interest at all from the rest of the house, which should have been a hive of deadly activity after an unexpected noise. She smirked.

"See? Nothing."

"Did you kill everyone else before you came for me?" he asked, resigned to his fate. She looked offended.

"Of course I didn't. Like I said, killing is a waste most of the time. They're all fine. Your guards are right outside your door. But you can yell all you like, they won't notice anything until I'm finished." That sounded ominous. Suddenly all smiles again, she waved him to the chair in front of his desk. "Sit. Like I said, I just want to talk. I need you to do something for me." Moving slowly to the chair he sat, thinking hard. He might live through this if he was careful.

"What?" he asked.

She sat on the bed again, cross-legged. "I'm looking for something, and the people that took it. I think you can help me. I suspect that one of these people is associated with your organisation or perhaps another Yakuza family."

"That's all you want?" She nodded.

"Yep. Get me that and I'll leave you alone. Unless you start hurting women or children, in which case we'll talk." The look she gave him made him shiver.

"I'm not involved with prostitution any more. Not after Kyoto."

"Keep it that way." Somehow, she was suddenly holding a weird little almost-cube that seemed to be made of metal and crystal. "I'm looking for one of these. It's extremely dangerous. I need to find it as quickly as possible."

"What is it?" he asked, looking at it curiously. It didn't appear dangerous at all. More like something a tourist would get conned into buying from some new age shop.

"A weapon created by a mad mage and a death cult." He stared at her. "It summons nearly unkillable man-eating demons." He stared some more, then shook his head.

"OK."

"You heard about that thing in London a few days ago?" He nodded, then his eyes widened.

"Oh. That was one of those?" She sighed, now seeming a little tired.

"Yes. Six of them got out into the wild when we shut the cult down. We've found four including this one. We know one more is in LA somewhere, active and unstable. It could go off at any moment. I don't want that to happen. You, unless you're a psychopath, don't want that to happen. We have to find it, as fast as possible." Inspecting the thing she was holding, he nodded.

"All right. Tell me what you know about these people." She pulled out a small tape recorder and pressed play, the sound of a young girl's voice describing a mugging filling the room. He wrote the
description down, wincing slightly at the glee in her voice when she announced what she'd do if she saw her attackers again. It sounded somehow wrong coming from such a young female. "Determined young lady," he commented as Yori stopped the recorder. She nodded with a grin.

"Very much so."

"Was she hurt?" The young woman on the bed laughed.

"Not really. I think one of her attackers came off worse." She looked very amused. Mikio read over what he'd written again.

"This isn't much to go on, but it should be enough."

"The device will be glowing green, incidentally. Otherwise it looks exactly like this one." She made the object vanish. "I would strongly suggest that when you find it, you don't touch it. It's booby-trapped and unstable as well, almost anything could set it off at this point. Frankly it's a bit of a miracle that it hasn't fired already, but there's no sense tempting fate. Leave it alone and call this number." She flipped him a business card with the name and cell number of an LAPD officer on. Catching it he read it curiously.

"Lieutenant Richard Harrison." Nodding, she stood. He did as well, watching as she looked around the room. Turning her attention back to him, she smiled a little.

"Don't let me down, Mikio." A touch on his neck was all the warning he got, his last thought being that there had been someone else in the room the entire time. Then everything went black.

Suddenly awake Mikio stared into the darkness of his room. Had it been a dream? Listening intently he couldn't hear anything. He lay silent and unmoving for a minute or two, gradually relaxing when he was sure he was alone. Sliding his hand under his pillow he found both guns where he'd left them. Feeling down the side of the bed the sword was there as well.

"That was very strange," he mumbled to himself. Rolling over he looked into the middle of the room, then froze. He stared for a few seconds, before slowly sitting up, not taking his eyes off the thing in the middle of the room. Putting his feet on the floor he stood, walking over to it and reaching out. His hand passed right through it with no sensation. Turning on the light didn't make it go away. Looking at it for a moment more he glanced at his desk, where he could see an LAPD business card neatly sitting in the middle of it. He knew what was written on it without looking closer. Under the card was a photo of the demon weapon. His desk clock showed less than six minutes had passed from when he'd been talking to Yori in this very room, but looking around he saw no signs at all he'd had a visitor. Except for the thing. Even his bed was neatly made.

Curious, he checked under the desk. The third gun was right where it should be. He knew without looking that the shotgun, knife, and grenade would be as well. Experimentally Mikio raised his voice and shouted. The door burst open immediately, two large men with automatic weapons piling in to the room, looking around alertly. Behind them he could hear a number of other people running. They stopped dead when they saw he was unhurt, then noticed the thing still hanging in mid-air in the centre of the room. Both men gaped at it.

"Uh, sir? What's... that?" One of the guards pointed with his weapon at the apparition.

"A warning. Get everyone into the conference room, right now. We need to find someone." He picked up the card and the photo, pulling on a robe and following them as they left the room. He cast a glance back as he exited, shivering slightly inside.
Behind him in the empty room the gently glowing winking smiley face spun lazily in the air, rather messy Kanji characters next to it announcing 'Yori thanks you for your immediate cooperation.' Much more neatly under that was written in golden light, 'So does Chou.' It spun around for another five minutes before fading away.

Harrison looked at Yori, exasperated. She had been laughing like an idiot since she and Chou had returned with Aiko a few minutes ago. Chou was giggling furiously as well. Aiko just shrugged when he looked at her questioningly. "What the hell is so funny?" he demanded. "Did you get anywhere?" She held up a hand, gasping for breath. Eventually she recovered enough to talk.

"Yes. He's doing it. Hopefully we should have an answer soon. It's our best chance, I don't think we could find them in time otherwise. The thing will go off in two days whatever we do, unless the energy leak is severe enough to disable it completely, which we can't count on. It might go off earlier if someone pokes it in the wrong place, or it just feels like it. I guess we just have no choice but to wait now." She snickered again. "That was fun. He looked like he'd seen a ghost when he realised who I was." Chou had stopped giggling but this nearly set her off again.

"You've been watching far too many movies, dear. That was very... Hollywood."

"It seemed appropriate under the circumstances," Yori replied with a broad grin. "Anyway, you enjoyed it as well." Her companion nodded, smiling serenely.

"I'm not saying I didn't. Just that it was a bit over the top."

"It worked. Anyway, I promised Kazuhiro I'd make it impressive, he wanted his dear friend Mikio to know he hadn't been forgotten." Naito looked at Harrison, then back at the two women. After a moment he shook his head.

'I don't want to know.' "Is there anything else we can do to speed up the search?" he asked.

Harrison sighed, then turned to his computer. "I'm putting out a notice to look for these two as well, in the more traditional manner. We might get lucky." He typed for a while.

"Make sure you add that if they're found, the device should be left strictly alone," Yori warned. "We're damn lucky someone hasn't managed to trip one of the booby-traps by now, but that could still happen. Sophie is lucky to be alive, she had it for some time." He nodded, adding a warning to the bulletin then sending it out.

"Done. Between this and your... contacts... we should hopefully be able to find it fairly quickly. At least we know who has it. Assuming they haven't just dumped it somewhere. I doubt low-level criminals like that will have left the city, they'll most likely be around somewhere."

"I feel slightly uneasy just sitting around waiting, but I can't think of anything else," Yori said, leaning against his desk and staring at her boots. "LA is just too big." She looked up again. "So, we have time to kill. It's only late afternoon for us, but you must be tired, Lieutenant. Why don't we have Aiko take you home, then we can find something to do. Maybe go and see a movie or something, get some real food, then find a hotel. It's probably best to stay in the area rather than go back to Japan until Mikio calls or your people find something." He nodded, yawning.

"That sounds like a plan. Thanks. I didn't fancy driving back when I'm this tired."

The entire group ended up appearing outside his house. He waved, then staggered up the driveway, opening the door as the flash came from behind him. Greeted by his wife he closed the door again, wondering what the girls would do and hoping that LA would still be there in the morning.
"I saved you some supper, Richard," his wife Emily said, hanging his coat up.

"Thanks, Em. It's been a long day." Sitting in the dining room he ate slowly, while telling his wife some of the highlights of the day, the ones he felt he could. She looked amazed.

"Will they be staying after you finish the case?" she asked. "I think Serena would like to meet these young ladies. You know she reads those Japanese comics, sorry, what does she call them? Manga, that's it. She'd love to meet some real magical girls." He looked at her with a smile.

"I suspect they won't mind. But we'll have to see what happens. This case is pretty important." Once they were in bed he closed his eyes and was asleep instantly.

The ringing of his cell phone woke him hours later. Groggily opening his eyes he fumbled for it, answering after a few rings. It was light outside but still early, just before seven AM he saw from the display on the phone. "Hello?"

"Lieutenant Harrison?" The voice on the phone had a Japanese accent.

"Yes, that's me." Slowly becoming more alert, he sat up, trying not to disturb Emily, who had slept through the ringing.

"I was told by a terrifying young woman to call this number if we managed to find a certain pair of people and a... device. We have done so. The people in question are being restrained, the device is in an empty building, with the entrances guarded to ensure no one enters. Here is the address." He read off a street name and building number.

"Thank you. We'll be there as soon as possible." The caller hung up without another word.

"Who was that, dear," Emily said sleepily. He looked at her, brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes before leaning over to kiss her.

"Someone to do with the case. It looks like it should be over today. I have to go." She stretched, then sat up.

"I'll make breakfast." He watched her go, then called Agent Naito.

"Hi, Masao. Yori's Yakuza boss called. I've got an address. OK, give me fifteen minutes to get dressed. Bye." Quickly showering and shaving he put on clean clothes, dropped his sidearm into his holster, then sat at the table with his wife. Buttering some toast he smiled at her.

"Thanks. I don't know how long it will take today, I'll call if there are any problems." Having eaten several pieces of toast he slugged down a mug of coffee, then headed for the front door, reaching it just as the doorbell rang. Opening it he found Yori outside, with the others waiting on the driveway. "Hi, Yori. Hold on, let me grab my coat." Emily watched from the doorway to the dining room, smiling as he followed the girl out the front door.

"Be careful, Richard," she called. Blowing her a kiss he closed the door and turned to the Japanese woman, who was grinning at him.

"Ah, domestic bliss," He laughed, following her to the others. Explaining the phone call Harrison showed Aiko the address.

"OK."

They materialised in a street outside a large concrete building, rusty metal window frames empty of
glass high up on the sides. Yori looked at it with interest.

"Aha. The classic abandoned warehouse. How cliché." Chou giggled, while the others looked around. The entire area looked like it had already had a horde of demons rampaging through it. "Turning this entire place into a crater would be an improvement," the black-haired girl said. Harrison frowned.

"Please don't. I'd never hear the end of it." Snickering she walked over to the two hard-looking men standing by the door, dressed in nice suits with almost certainly illegal automatic weapons in their hands. They looked like they'd quite like to point them at the little group but were under orders not to. Speaking to one of them in Japanese he nodded, pointing to a black SUV parked a couple of hundred yards away. She nodded back, turning away, only to stop as the other man muttered something under his breath. Chou sighed.

"Oh dear. That was very rude indeed," she murmured.

Yori slowly turned back and glared at him. Harrison didn't understand what she said but got the impression it was probably something along the lines of "Say that again, I dare you." He smirked, looking her up and down lasciviously, then said it again.

"That had to hurt," Harrison commented mildly, stepping to one side as the unconscious body slid to a halt at his feet. Aiko and her girls were looking amused, while Chou simply shook her head sadly.

"That, he had coming."

Agent Naito closed his eyes for a second, then looked heavenwards for guidance. None appeared to be immediately available. Yori turned to the other man, raising an eyebrow. He looked straight ahead, avoiding her eyes, in the pose of a man who knew damn well when to keep his mouth shut. Satisfied, she beckoned to the others and headed towards the SUV. "Some things you can't let slide, or you end up with a future problem," she said, then pointed to the SUV. "Our two muggers are there. I think it would be good for them if you arrested them, Lieutenant. I'm sure Sophie would like it." Approaching the vehicle she greeted the man who got out, who nodded to her, speaking briefly. Opening the back door he stepped to the side. She looked in.

"Ah, gentlemen. Hello. Would you like to get out of the car, please?" Two young men meeting the description Sophie had given slowly and painfully climbed out, their hands secured with large zip ties. It was apparent that someone had physically chastised them to a degree, plus the shorter one was walking oddly, wincing with every step. She watched him with a grim smile. "I see that Sophie was very effective. It's nice to see true dedication in a young woman." The man looked at her sullenly.

"Who the fuck are you, lady?" he growled, then looked pained as he adjusted his position carefully.

"Someone who doesn't like people who attack schoolgirls and steal their property. Please don't do it again." She fixed him with a look that made the colour drain from his face. "This is Lieutenant Harrison of the LAPD. He'll be your arresting officer today." Shaking his head with amusement, Harrison read them their rights. Calling for backup, he pointed to the side of the street.

"Sit down over there and don't move." They slowly followed instructions, limping across the road and lowering themselves to the kerb. She spoke to the man from the SUV, who bowed slightly before getting in and driving away, stopping to collect the guard who heaved his unconscious colleague into the back seat then got in the passenger side. Everyone watched as the vehicle
vanished around the corner.

"Apparently they have been living here for a while. The tall one was hiding from the Yakuza, he did something they really didn't appreciate and ran. His friend was just a common street thug he knew. They've been mugging people and stealing from shops all over the place. Oyabun Yamada said you could keep them." She grinned at him. "I suspect you can clear up quite a few crimes when they confess. Which they will. He made it clear to them that if he sees them again they'll wish they were in prison, although not for very long." Harrison laughed.

"OK. I think we'll be able to make things stick. This particular case might be difficult to explain, but it sounds like there are a lot of other things that will be easier."

She nodded. "Inside they have a little camp site with lots of stuff they've stolen. That should be the evidence you need. We just need to deal with the portal weapon before we let anyone inside." Two police cars came from the direction the SUV had departed in a couple of minutes later, stopping next to them. The uniformed officers got out, looking curiously at the Japanese contingent, before one of them approached Harrison. He explained the situation in terms that they would understand, pointing to the two men glaring at them. Both were quickly bundled into the backs of the squad cars, the zip ties being cut off and replaced with handcuffs. Neither one resisted.

"Right, now they're out of the way, let's get this damn portal device taken care of." Yori headed for the entrance to the building. Harrison quickly told the uniforms not to follow them, then went after her, joined by everyone else. Inside the building, morning sunlight streamed in through the windows onto the floor, although it didn't do much to illuminate the echoing depths. It was filthy, broken glass and bricks littering the floor, with piles of rusting machinery scattered around. The impression was very much of a place that had seen no use for decades. "Just like a film set," Yori said, walking confidently to the back of the building. Harrison nodded.

"They sometimes do use these sorts of places for shooting movies in, although not often due to insurance." Looking around he frowned a little. "In fact, I'm sure I've seen this place in a movie once. Can't remember which one, though." Tamiko looked around as well.

"Wasn't it Robocop or something?" He shrugged.

"Possibly. One abandoned warehouse looks a lot like another."

At the back of the large building they found a pile of crates that had been moved around to form a dividing wall, partitioning off a few dozen square feet into a shelter. There was a tarpaulin stretched across forming a roof. Inside were two army-surplus cots and all the accoutrements of a camp site that showed signs of having been used for some time. Piles of boxes that had contained electronic equipment, cameras, food, and all manner of things lay about, some still unopened. There were also a number of wallets and purses. "Well, this is enough to get them convicted for a few years, I think," Harrison said, staring at the mess.

Fumiko pointed. "That must be Sophie's bag." They looked at the backpack with a NASA patch sewn to it. There was a pulsating green glow coming from the unzipped top. Yori swore, exchanging a worried look with Chou.

"That's not good. It's really unstable, it shouldn't be pulsing like that." She waved everyone back then walked over to the backpack, kneeling down and very cautiously tugging the top open. "OK, it's right on the edge. It's so unstable that if I try pulling the energy from it the thing might fire immediately. I'll have to destroy it right now." After a moment's thought, she reached inside and gingerly removed the device. "I don't want to blow up Sophie's backpack, I think she deserves to get it back," she said, standing carefully and walking past them to the middle of the warehouse.
Putting it on the floor she backed away. She nodded to Chou, who concentrated on the device, a
warded circle a few feet across appearing around it. Raising her hand Yori pointed it at the device,
then apparently thought of something. Pulling the other one out of her ki pocket she flipped it into
the warded area, before vaporising both of them with a brilliant blast of purple energy.

An echoing boom rolled through the entire building making dust fall from the roof. Somewhere in
the dark the sole remaining window shattered, glass tinkling to the ground for a few seconds. As
the echo died away Harrison blinked, the intensity of the beam and the blast had been as bad as one
of Aiko's teleport flashes. There were shouts of alarm from the uniformed officers outside, two of
them running through the entrance with their guns drawn. The lieutenant waved them down, both
of them staring at the glowing crater in the floor in shock. He walked over and inspected it from
close up. The slag lining it glistened, making little plinking sounds as it slowly cooled.

"Wow. That was loud." Looking at the two young women with renewed respect, he smiled. "Very
impressive. At least this time it's not a hole you could lose a bus in." Yori laughed.

"I did slightly overdo it that time. I didn't bother with the wards, they take far too much time in a
battle, and I may have used too much energy." Aiko burst out laughing.

"May have?" Shooting her an amused look, Yori shrugged.

"Don't complain, it was you lot who brought that thing to me. I just disposed of it." She looked at
Harrison. "Do you mind if I take Sophie's things?"

"Strictly speaking it's all evidence, but this case breaks most of the rules, like everything to do with
you all. Go ahead." Smiling at him she re-entered the enclosure, coming out with the backpack
zipped up over her shoulder.

"We can take this back to her later." It vanished into wherever she kept things.

"So. Another mission accomplished, I think," Agent Naito said, relaxing for the first time since
Yori had woken him the day before. "This time without any casualties, thankfully."

Once Harrison had arranged to get a team down to the warehouse to begin collecting evidence, one
of the squad cards left with the two prisoners while the other one stayed behind to guard the scene.
They went back inside, then teleported back to the station. Opening the door of the conference
room Harrison nearly walked into Captain Martinez, who was just reaching for the door handle.
He looked surprised.

"Oh, there you are, Harrison. I was looking for you. How is the special case coming along?"

"I think it's basically over, Captain. We recovered two of the devices, one here and one Chou went
to New York to get. The one here was the problem but we managed. Yori called some... interesting
allies. Both devices have been destroyed." Martinez nodded, pleased.

"I'll tell the people upstairs. Well done. I'll be very interested indeed in reading your report." He
looked curiously at the Japanese people in the room behind Harrison, picking out Yori and Chou
from the description that Harrison had given him. Studying them for a moment, he raised his
eyebrows when he looked at Aiko, Fumiko, and Misaki, then smiled. Tamiko was still wearing the
spare clothes Chou had loaned her. "Thank you, ladies. From what I've been told, the results of
those things going off would have been horrific. I've very pleased to know you stopped that.
Although I suspect there's going to be some very odd paperwork surrounding all this." Harrison
nodded with a groan.
"You could say that." Clapping him on the shoulder, Martinez laughed.

"Don't worry too much. Write me a full report, then I'll look at it with you and we can figure out how much of it we pass on. Allowances have been made for, ah, oddities." Slightly relieved Harrison nodded. "Also, would it be possible for you others to produce a report, please?" the captain requested, turning to Agent Naito, then glancing at Yori and the others. "Just to keep the records straight."

"Of course, Captain," Naito said, while Yori smiled. "I'll also see that you get a copy of my report to the PSIA."

"Thank you. Harrison, why don't you take the rest of the day off, you could take your friends to see the sights."

"Thank you, Captain. I'll have the report on your desk tomorrow evening."

"Good. Enjoy yourselves." Turning, he headed back to his office. Harrison looked at his watch. It was just turning eight AM.

"Let's go back to my house. Emily and Serena would love to meet you. Afterwards, we could find something to do. Would you like to have a barbecue later this afternoon? It's probably going to be a pretty hot day for this time of year." The girls looked at each other, then Agent Naito.

"We're up for it," Aiko said. Yori and Chou nodded. Naito thought for a minute. "OK. I'll check in, then I'm fine as well. I don't think my superiors will mind under the circumstances." He looked down at his suit, which was getting a bit wrinkled. "I need to get some other clothes, though."

"I can pop you home, Agent," Aiko said. "You can get what you need and we can come back." Laughing, he agreed.

"It's a weird world where it's easier to have a magical girl teleport you from LA to Tokyo for a change of clothes than to go to a store," he chuckled. She giggled.

"Come on," she said to the rest of her team. "Let's get something suitable. I've had enough of the uniform for now if we're going out." They clustered around her, Yori giving her a quick recharge. "Back in about an hour, Yori," she said.

"Meet us at my house," Harrison said. She nodded, then they vanished. Opening his eyes, the lieutenant looked at the two young women left. "Not going for a change of clothes?" he asked. Chou smiled.

"We have those with us," she said, pulling another outfit like her current one out of nowhere and showing it, neatly folded, to him. "Tamiko has my other set, I hope she remembers to bring it back with her." Putting them away again, she followed him and Yori down to the parking garage to collect his vehicle. Soon they were driving slowly through down-town LA. Chou was in the front seat, looking around with interest. "It's nearly as busy as Tokyo," she noted. "But spread out more." Looking up at the sky, she closed her eyes for a moment, basking in the sun. "And warmer. It's quite cold at home right now. This is a nice change."

"What was it like in New York? I saw on the news they're having real problems with the snow at the moment." He glanced at her, then back at the road.

"It was very cold and snowing hard. Will that affect the New Year celebrations?"

"I suppose it will reduce the crowds a bit, but people there are pretty determined, I doubt it will
"Is Sophie's house close enough to the route you're taking that we could stop by briefly?" Yori asked from the back. Thinking for a moment he nodded.

"I think so. It shouldn't be much of a detour." Pulling over he grabbed a map from the glove box and quickly checked it to be sure. "Yes, it will only take us about ten minutes out of our way. We can still get to my house before the others get back." Putting the car into drive he indicated and pulled out again. Flipping on the radio he tuned to a news station, wondering what had happened overnight.

"...brings to thirty-seven the number of suspected gang members found tied up in the Hollywood area in the last fourteen hours. Police are baffled, although they have been quick to arrest the suspects, as each one was found with evidence linking them to a recent violent crime. The majority seem to have no clear memory of the person or persons responsible for what happened, while the ones that do claim to remember anything have given wildly different descriptions of their assailants. Several allegedly asked to be taken into custody, with our source in the LAPD telling us that they seem to be terrified of any young woman in a miniskirt that they see. One teenager apparently ran from the police officer who untied him, only to lock himself in the officer's cruiser and refuse to come out until he was at the police station. This is Marcy Wu, reporting live from..."

With a gentle sigh he switched the radio off again and looked sidelong at Chou. She gazed back innocently. Yori was giggling quietly in the back seat.

Hearing the doorbell ring Sophie dropped the book she was reading and jumped to her feet. "I'll get it, Mom," she shouted, running out into the hall. A faint acknowledgement came from her mother who was in the utility room unloading the washing machine. Opening the door she was surprised to see the people from last night, Yori, Chou, and that police lieutenant. The black-haired woman grinned at her.

"Hi, Sophie. Can we come in? I've got something for you."

"Yeah, come in. Mom is out back, she'll be here in a minute." They entered, Harrison closing the door behind him. Following her to the games room they all sat down. As they did her mother arrived, looking slightly flustered.

"Oh, hello, Lieutenant. And you, ladies. What can we do for you this time?" Yori chuckled a little.

"Don't worry, we're not here to ask more questions. We wanted to let you know that because of what Sophie told us we managed to track down the people that mugged her. Lieutenant Harrison arrested them about an hour ago." Harrison nodded.

"They were caught in possession of quite a lot of stolen goods. The likelihood is that they will be going to jail for some time." He glanced at Sophie and grinned. "He's still walking funny." She giggled, looking very pleased. Her mother sighed a little, looking at her fondly but with some exasperation.

Laughing, Yori turned to her. "You did very well. Thank you. I have something of yours as well." She produced Sophie's backpack from nowhere. Sophie looked at her mother for a moment, puzzled, she still couldn't work out how the Japanese woman did that, then accepted it back. Opening it, she checked the contents. Everything but the strange glowing object was present.

"Thanks," she said, very pleased to get it back. "This was a gift from Dad. I was really pissed when
"They took it."

"Sophie! No swearing." Her mother was smiling though.

"I'm sorry, but we're going to have to go, we're meeting some friends soon." They stood again. Chou walked over to Harrison and whispered to him. He looked slightly surprised, then nodded, smiling.

"That's a good idea. Sophie, Mrs Simpson, would you two like to come to a barbecue at my house later? Around, um, let's say half past six? Yori and her friends are only here for today, so I thought I'd fill them with slightly burnt meat before they go home." Sophie and her mother exchanged glances. "My daughter Serena is about your age. I think you might get on quite well. She's interested in video games as well, amongst other things." He grinned.

"Can we, Mom?" Sophie liked the sound of that, she hadn't been to a barbecue for months.

"Well... I suppose. We don't have anything else planned. Thank you, Lieutenant. That's very nice of you. Isn't it a little cold for a barbecue, though?"

"It's not as hot as I'd like, but it's a lot warmer than usual for this time of year. The weather report says it could hit nearly seventy today. I've got several patio heaters as well for later."

"That sounds fine." He gave her his address, which she wrote down carefully. "We'll see you later."

Sophie waved as the trio climbed into a big black SUV and drove off. Looking at her mother she smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

"Remember, be good. No swearing." She rolled her eyes a little but nodded.

Walking into his house Harrison waved the other two in, then shut the door. "Em? I'm back," he called. His wife stuck her head out of the kitchen door, surprised.

"Already? You only left about two hours ago."

"We solved that case. Made two arrests, recovered what we were looking for, and found a lot of stolen items. The captain gave me the rest of the day off as a reward, probably because I put in a double shift yesterday. This is Yori, and Chou. The others will be along soon." He grinned, shaking his head in mild disbelief. "They went back to Japan to change their clothes." His wife stared at him for a moment then started giggling.

"Oh, Richard, you do realise how insane that sounds?" Nodding, he hugged her.

"It's true, though." Emily turned to the two women, drying her hands on a towel, then shook hands with them.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs Harrison," Chou said politely.

"Emily, please, Chou. It's nice to meet you two as well. Richard has told me a lot about you. Most likely not everything, knowing him, but what he has told me is pretty strange." Yori chuckled for a moment.

"That means it's probably all true." Laughing, Emily took them into the living room, then offered coffee. Soon everyone had a cup. They were discussing the barbecue when a few minutes later a girl who bore a striking resemblance to her came into the room, looking at the guests with interest.
"Hello, dear. These are Yori, and Chou. You remember your father telling us about them?" She nodded, sitting on a chair, still staring at the two young women. Yori returned her gaze with a small smile.

"He said you're magical girls from Tokyo. Like in my manga. Is that true?" She inspected their clothing suspiciously. "You don't dress like them." Chou giggled while Yori burst into laughter.

"I know people who do, trust me. But it's not our style. We're really martial artists, but where we live people think of us as magical girls, so we've given up correcting them. No one listens."

"Do you have magical powers? And magical weapons? And a talking animal?" Serena asked with great interest, her eyes wide.

"Yes. Yes. No, that's just silly, although it does happen." Yori smirked. Harrison had his arm around his wife, both of them watching the interrogation with amusement. His daughter was clearly trying to think of more questions.

"Can you fly?"

"No."

"Can you jump over a house?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. Can you turn invisible?"

"Yes."

"Hah. Prove it." She did. "Holy shit!"

"Serena!" Yori faded back into view, chuckling. Emily watched with wide eyes, as did her daughter.

"OK. Can you pick up a car?"

"Yes."

"A truck?"

"Yes."

"A train?"

"Hmm. I don't know, I've never tried." Serena got a thoughtful expression. Harrison sighed.

"No, we're not going to find a train for Yori to try picking up."

"Aww." She looked disappointed. So did Yori. Chou looked at her and rolled her eyes, making Emily laugh.

"Um, can you throw fireballs?"

"Sort of." Serena looked at her mother with wide eyes.

"No fireballs in the house, please. We only just redecorated."
"Aww." Yori was giggling.

"OK." The girl was tapping her chin thoughtfully. Her parents watched, while the two young women seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"Can you kill demons?" Yori nodded.

"Yep. Although I prefer to talk them into going away." Serena stared.

"Can you summon demons?"

"Well, I can call them on the phone and ask them to come over. I know a few that like to party." Emily shook her head before her daughter even asked the question, both of them looking stunned.

"No demons."

"Hmph." Serena crossed her arms and sulked for a moment. She wanted to meet a partying demon.

"Can you teleport?"

"Not yet, but a friend of ours can. That's how we got here."

"Cool." The girl was trying to think of other magical girl abilities she'd read about in her translated manga. She drew a blank, but made a mental note to start a list. The doorbell rang at that point. Harrison got up and answered it, soon returning with Agent Naito and the other four girls. Serena stared at the short brunette. Now that was magical girl clothing!

Having made the introductions, Harrison directed Aiko to their bedroom when she asked for a place to change. She came back wearing much more conventional clothing, jeans and a silk blouse. The others were dressed similarly. Naito was in a more casual suit, with no tie. "We have, um, about ten hours before the barbecue. What would guys like to do? We could go to Disney Land, although I suspect that theme parks would be a bit underwhelming for you after your normal lives." They all smiled.

"It's true that roller coasters don't hold a huge thrill for us any more, Lieutenant," Chou said.

He laughed, then replied, "Call me Richard. We've known each other for long enough now that you don't need to be formal."

"As you wish, Richard. Thank you." She tipped her head graciously.

"No problem. OK, there's a pretty good off-road go-kart track near here, if that's the sort of thing you like. We've already been to the Hollywood walk of fame. Studio tours? A neighbour of ours is involved with one of the studios, he's the safety coordinator there. I could probably get some passes that would let us see things the public normally doesn't get to. He's done it before." They looked interested. "There's also surfing, things like that, but the Pacific is cold at the best of times, this time of year it's freezing. Or shopping, there are a lot of world class stores in LA. Museums, as well, if you like that sort of thing. Plus gun ranges, paintball, all sorts of sporting things."

Yori looked amused. "Ah, yes. I've heard about Americans and sports. Someone once told me that to an American, 'Sports' meant either something with a ball in it, or something with a projectile weapon in it." Harrison started laughing while Emily giggled.

"That's more true that it should be. Trust me, we do also consider other things, aside from ball games and lethal weapons, sport."
"I'm quite interested in the movie studio tour," Naito said. "It's something I always fancied doing."

"It sounds good to me," Tamiko agreed. The others did as well after some consideration.

"OK, I'll call Jim and see what I can arrange. We could go on the normal tour anyway, but he can show us more. Some of the things they have there are pretty interesting."

"I wouldn't mind looking around a few shops as well," Chou said. Fumiko nodded.

"Great. We can do that as well." He went to the phone and dialled.

"There's too many people here for one vehicle," Emily said while he spoke to his friend. "We'll have to take both cars. I'll need to go out first and get some supplies for tonight, but that won't take long."

Yori nodded. "I'd like to stop at a bank, to exchange some yen for US dollars. Can we do that?"

"Yes, that's easy, there's a big branch of Bank of America just down across the street from the supermarket."

"Please let us contribute to the cost of this barbecue, Emily." Chou smiled at her. Emily shook her head.

"No, you're our guests. It's fine."

"Please. I insist. There are a lot of us and we eat a lot." She glanced at Misaki, who shrugged. She was nibbling a bar of chocolate again. "It's no problem." Giving in, the woman nodded.

"All right."

"Agent, would you be able to change our money for us?" Yori asked. "You have official photo ID which the bank will probably want. It's... a little difficult for us. You understand." He grinned.

"I do. Certainly I will." She handed him a large roll of high denomination yen notes, making his eyes bug out. "Good grief... how much is this?"

"About a million yen. Around ten thousand dollars worth, that should be enough for the moment." Taking it he looked at it for a moment, stunned.

"I'd think so." Shaking his head he tucked it away into an inside pocket, wondering where she'd got it from. It seemed like a lot of cash to be casually carrying around. On the other hand it wasn't like anyone was going to steal it from her.

Putting the phone down Harrison smiled. "Jim came through again. He's arranging some passes for us all, he says come over any time after half past ten." He went upstairs to change into more casual clothing. Emily left shortly afterwards, taking Naito with her. Chou also went, to help. Serena stared at the girls, inspecting them carefully.

"Do you have a talking magical animal?" she asked curiously. Yori snickered while Aiko looked surprised for a moment, then grinned widely.

"Only Misaki, and she doesn't actually talk much." Fumiko collapsed into laughter while her sister appeared mildly offended. "She eats an awful lot though."

"Can you jump over a house?"
Aiko looked amused, exchanging glances with Yori.

"Yes. We all can." The questioning went on for some time, as Harrison came back in from the back yard where he had been tidying up a little and getting the barbecue set up for later. Watching his daughter talking with the five Japanese girls he smiled a little, then motioned to Yori. She got up and walked over to him.

"Could you give me a hand, Yori? I want to move the garden table, but it's made of cast iron and weighs about half a ton. Normally it takes six people to shift it, but..." She laughed.

"No problem." Following him out into the yard she looked around. "Nice." It was quite large, around eighty feet by a hundred and fifty, well-kept grass interspersed with a few flower-beds, and a fence around the whole thing. The property backed onto some undeveloped land that had trees growing on it, not really densely enough to be called a forest or wood, but more than enough to make it not grassland. Some of them were fairly large. The land sloped up to some low hills half a mile or so away. As they were walking over to the table Serena and Aiko's team came out behind them, the girls inspecting the yard with interest. Serena followed her father and Yori over to the large cast-iron picnic table which sat on four concrete slabs, one under each leg to spread the weight.

She gaped as Yori crouched down, slid under the middle of it, then stood up again, holding it above her head as if it was made of cardboard. "Where do you want it?" she asked. Smiling, Harrison pointed out the spot. Tamiko ran over and collected the concrete slabs like they were beer coasters, putting them in the spots required at the new location. Yori lowered the table to the ground and came out from under it, dusting her hands off. Serena was still standing with her mouth open, staring wide-eyed. The black-haired girl winked at her.

"Wow!" was all she could think to say for a moment. She knew very well how heavy the table was, it normally took her father and several neighbours a lot of effort to do what the petite woman had just done effortlessly. After a long moment she smiled happily. This was looking like it was going to be a fun day.

After Emily and her helpers had come back, the car was unloaded and the food put away. Naito handed Yori an envelope stuffed with dollar bills of various denominations. "I got a mix for you, I thought it would be useful."

"Thank you." She looked through it, distributing the money to her friends. "Here you go, guys, this should be enough for wandering around with. If you need more let me know." Aiko and the others looked surprised but pleased.

"Thanks, Yori," the short brunette said.

Yori handed half of what was left to Chou, who peeled off a few bills which she gave to Emily with a smile, then put the remainder away. Serena watched carefully but couldn't work out where the envelope had gone. Yori noticed and smiled a little.

"How did you do that?" the girl asked curiously.

"It's a martial arts technique called hidden weapons. It's very useful." She reached into her sleeve and produced a long wooden staff that couldn't possibly have fitted. Emily and her daughter both stared in amazement. Pulling a number of items from various places about her person in a manner better than any magic act they'd ever seen, Yori grinned at the expressions. Harrison shook his head in bemused wonder, looking at the pile of odds and ends, which must have weighed at least a couple of hundred pounds. After demonstrating, the girl quickly made everything disappear again,
finishing by sliding the staff into her closed fist, then opening the hand to show there was nothing there.

"That's incredible," Emily said faintly.

"Believe me, Em, that's nothing. Impressive, but nothing." She looked at him. He seemed serious. Slightly freaked out, she changed the subject, telling her daughter to get ready to go out. Serena gaped at Yori for a moment more then ran upstairs. As sound as she came back the whole group left the house, separating into two sets of five so they'd fit in the two vehicles. Yori went with Misaki, Fumiko, and Tamiko in the Harrison's SUV, while the others went in Emily's people carrier. "It will take about an hour to get there this time of day, so get comfortable," Harrison said, pulling out into the road and waiting for his wife to follow. Once she was behind him they headed off.

They talked for most of the trip. Close to their destination, slightly nervously, he turned the radio on to try for the news again.

"...tertainment news, speculation is growing as to which studio was behind an apparent guerilla publicity stunt last night on Hollywood Boulevard involving what witnesses said was some of the most impressive martial arts they had seen since the films of Bruce Lee, decades ago. So far no one we have spoken to has admitted responsibility, or is prepared to speak on the record about any upcoming movie involving beautiful young women who can perform incredible feats of acrobatic action, but the stunt-women last night seem to have left a lasting impression on everyone who saw them."

"A certain amount of confusion surrounds the event. Some accounts mention actors dressed as gang members attacking the young ladies performing the stunts, while other witnesses claim they were actual gang members who wandered into the middle of the promotional activity. Whatever the truth, we will bring you more as and when we have it. There is no word yet on the identities of the actors involved, raising the possibility that a studio is bringing in previously unknown new talent in an attempt to shake up an industry that has been seen in recent years to have become increasingly stale and formulaic. This could be exciting, folks! Stay tuned for the weath..."

Stopping at a traffic light, Harrison turned off the radio again and slowly banged his head on the steering wheel. Fumiko and Misaki were rolling around in the back seat trying to stifle their laughter, while Yori had a huge grin on her face. Tamiko looked slightly confused. It took the car behind him sounding it's horn angrily before he recovered enough to drive on.

Not saying anything for the rest of the trip, just casting Yori sitting next to him bemused glances occasionally, to which she responded with intermittent snickering, he drove into the employee entrance of the large studio complex his friend worked at, lowering the window when the guard approached. After a quick conversation and the production of his ID, he waited for the guard to phone Jim, then wave to them and open the barrier. Both he and Emily drove in and parked. Everyone disembarked, the six girls gathering while Fumiko explained why she, her sister, and Yori still looked so amused. There was a burst of laughter and they turned to the others, who with the exception of Harrison, were watching them with curiosity. He was just resigned to it.

"Shall we go and meet Jim, then?" he said with a sigh, waving them in the direction of the relevant building. Emily looked at him questioningly. "I'll explain later." She smiled gently, walking ahead of him with Serena, both of them talking to Chou. Naito walked up beside him and followed his gaze to the other young women, then chuckled.

"You'll..."
"Get used to it. I know." He sighed again, but smiled a little. Naito laughed.

"You only have to deal with the craziness occasionally. At home, it happens all the time..."

"My sympathies." They grinned at each other.

Jim, a tall slender man of Caribbean ancestry, met them with a grin. "Hey, Rich, how's things going?"

"Very well, Jim, thanks. And thanks for arranging this. These are friends of mine from Japan. Yori, Chou, Tamiko, Aiko, Misaki, Fumiko, and Masao." He pointed out each person as he named them. Everyone shook hands, then Jim led them into the building.

"This is one of the largest movie studios still filming in Hollywood," he explained as they walked. "Normal tourist tours don't see everything, of course, and there are obviously some things I can't show even to friends, but you'll see more than most people outside the industry do. We'll start with the normal stuff, then move on to the rest." Leading them through the building he took them to the costumes department first, introducing them to a short elderly woman who greeted him with a smile. "This is Gladys. She knows more about clothing and costumes than anyone I've ever met."

Gladys looked pleased with the praise, smiling happily, then spent twenty minutes explaining what she and her department did, something that Chou and Emily particularly seemed to find interesting. Harrison watched from the sidelines with Jim as the old woman happily chatted away with them, showing them how they made costumes for movies, re-using old ones and producing custom ones from scratch. The others wandered around the towering shelves full of boxes and racks of clothing, hats, boots, and all manner of things that almost defied description. "So, what's the story with your friends, Rich?" Jim looked at him curiously. Harrison shook his head.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Jim. But they're here as consultants on a nasty little case we had. It got resolved this morning, so the Captain gave me the day off. I'm showing them around LA, just relaxing, then later we're going to have a barbecue. You want to come?" His friend thought for a moment.

"Yeah, why not. Sandra would love it. When?"

"Around seven or so would probably be best. Bring some of that hot sauce you make."

Jim grinned. "The normal stuff, or the good stuff?"

"Both."

"OK". After a while, Jim looked at his watch, then called everyone back. "Let's move on. Next is the props department." This was in the same building but at the other end. Inside was a huge amount of almost everything one could possibly think of, all boxed and labelled, stacked on shelves and hanging from the ceiling. Furniture, artwork, decorations, more mundane things like telephones and coat-racks, exotic items such as stuffed animals and trophies, it looked like the ultimate junk store. Several people were moving around with carts, checking clipboards and picking items off shelves. "The larger things like vehicles are kept outside, we have quite a large fleet of cars and trucks. They get modified if necessary, so we can turn a car, for instance, into a taxi from New York, or a police car from San Francisco. The people here are experts at making almost anything you can imagine. Smaller things are done by the model-making department, and weapons are handled by the armoury, but almost everything else comes from here."

Leading them over to a middle-aged man who was typing on a computer, he introduced them.
"Hiram here is in charge of this mad-house. He claims to know where everything is by heart, but we make him use a computer so that everyone else does as well." The man grinned.

"Go on, ask me for something."

Chou looked at him with a smile. "A wall hanging from the early Japanese Muromachi period."
Laughing, he nodded to her.

"Ah, a difficult one." Thinking for a second, he added, "Section E, row thirteen, shelf six. Japanese art, 1300 to 1400 AD." She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. With a grin he jumped to his feet and led the way to the relevant location, pulling a poster tube from the shelf and removing a rolled up paper wall hanging. Unrolling it he showed it to her. "A copy, of course, but quite a nice one." She inspected it, smiling, then nodded.

"Yes, it's a very convincing copy. Very nice." Returning it she watched as he carefully rolled it up and replaced it. "Most impressive. How many items do you have in here?"

"At last count something in excess of three quarters of a million. This is the stuff that's used fairly regularly, which generally means it's been used in the last five to ten years. There is a lot more in long term storage dating back to the early twenties in some cases, but it doesn't get used very often."

Returning to his desk he sat, then waved his hands around the room. "There are a dozen people working here full time just checking things in and out. More people make sure the props are correct, repair any damage, acquire new ones, and so on. We're pretty busy most of the time. Since there are often several movies being produced at the same time it can get complicated keeping track of everything." They talked for a little while, asking a few more questions, before Jim led them to the next stop. As soon as they walked in to the armoury, all six girls stopped dead and looked around with interest. A vast array of weaponry was present, firearms of all sorts both in racks along the walls and also locked securely behind metal grills. "The ones on the racks are non-functional dummies," Jim explained, "the others are working weapons, although quite a lot of them are modified to prevent normal ammunition being used."

The arms master, a shortish man who looked like he'd survived being thrown into a wood-chipper, watched them with interest from behind a desk. He was in the process of signing some paperwork on a clipboard held by a young woman who appeared to be in a hurry. Once he'd finished she ran out of the room looking at her watch, nearly colliding with Harrison on the way.

"Sorry," she muttered, pelting away in a clatter of high heels.

"Busy, Aaron?" Jim asked. The man chuckled in a deep voice.

"You might say that. The new spy movie is running behind because someone screwed up the scene timing and they had to reshoot about a dozen scenes as a result. Plus some idiot wrecked one of my best heavy machine guns. I have absolutely no idea how he did it, but I have to repair it before they can redo the last scene. Actors and stunt people are a pain in the ass." Standing, he walked around the desk, studying the girls and Naito. Yori and Chou had gravitated to a display of martial arts weapons, ranging from naginata to nunchaku, which they were examining closely. He watched with a small smile.

"Do you mind if I pick it up?" Yori asked politely, pointing to a set of nunchaku that were real, made of dense wood, next to a number that were clearly soft plastic. He nodded.

"Go ahead." Smiling, she picked them up and examined them closely.
“Very nice. Iron wood, I think.”

"Correct. I take it you know something about martial arts and weaponry, then, miss?" She gave him a look that made everyone in the know laugh.

"A little." Stepping back a couple of paces to a clear area away from obstructions, she started working through a basic exercise with the weapon, flipping the connected sticks from hand to hand with a whooshing noise while smiling at him. "These ones are well-balanced. Quite old, I think, perhaps pre-war?" Watching her with amusement he nodded.

"Probably about 1930 or so." She speeded up the action, flipping the linked sticks around her body, under her arms, around her waist, and over her shoulders faster and faster until they hummed through the air. Harrison and Jim gaped, while Serena was watching with a huge grin. Emily stared, then clapped.

Finishing up in a blur of motion that ended with her holding both sticks in one hand Yori stopped dead, then smiled. "Fun. I should do that more often, I don't get a lot of practice with these things." She put them back carefully, then turned to the armourer, who was gaping a little as well and bowed slightly. "Thank you."

"Ah, you're welcome." Staring at her for a moment, he asked slowly, "Are you in the industry, miss? If not, you should be." She shook her head, grinning.

"No, I work in a somewhat different field. But thanks for the compliment." They wandered around the armoury for another half hour, the man in charge shooting Yori odd glances now and then, while explaining the various weapons and the movies they'd been used in. He clearly had an encyclopedic knowledge of them. Eventually they bid him goodbye and left. As they walked out of the room, a group of people went past, a tour guide wearing a jacket with the logo of the studio on it looking slightly annoyed.

"Sir, I keep telling you, I have no idea what movie you're talking about. We're not shooting any martial arts ones I'm aware of at the moment." She grimaced as the teenager behind her hurried to keep up, while the rest of the tour group looked amused.

"But I really want to see it! That publicity stunt was amazing. When is it coming out?"

"Sir, please stop asking me that. I've told you five times already, I don't know!"

As they disappeared into the armoury, the boy could be heard pleading again. Harrison caught Yori's eye, then sighed heavily. Snickering, she followed Jim to the next destination. He shook his head, put his arm around his wife, and trailed after the others.

Over the next two and half hours they walked all over the studio grounds, seeing various permanent sets that depicted street scenes of cities from around the world, often in eerie detail, interiors of buildings, even a few that were dead ringers for typical landscapes not native to California. A monstrous tank of water, only a few feet deep, stood in for the ocean. A couple of scuba-divers were in the middle of it, doing something underwater, intermittently surfacing to retrieve tools from a floating platform next to them. Tour groups were being led through regularly although they avoided the areas where actual work was happening. Eventually they found themselves on an otherwise closed set, Jim leading them in quietly. "This is the set for the spy film that Aaron in the armoury was talking about. It's the second one in this series. They're about to shoot a scene, so please be very quiet, the director will explode if it goes wrong again, he's getting a little... irritable." He smiled a little as he whispered. They all nodded.
Actors took their positions, the cameras were carefully aligned, and the scene was shot. The famous young actor who was the lead in the production said his lines flawlessly, the stunt people pulled off a fairly convincing fight, then the director called "Cut! OK, finally! That was good. Set up for the next scene, we'll shoot as soon as you're done. Two more to go and we can wrap." The studio was suddenly a hive of activity, people rushing around moving scenery and props, turning a scene in a building in Cairo into one in the New York subway with startling speed.

Unfortunately, due to being in too much of a hurry, one of the grips slipped when moving a large piece of fake subway equipment on a wheeled trolley, letting go of it as he fell. The trolley rumbled across the studio for a few feet, slamming into a gantry and buckling one of the legs supporting it. As it tilted the three men on top of it who were adjusting the lighting for the next scene yelled, grabbing frantically at the rigging above them and holding on for dear life. Tools and equipment rained down on the studio floor making people scatter. Most of the large items were secured to the rigging by safety straps, while the men were strapped to the gantry, but as it began to fall this safety procedure became a liability. They were going to go down with it. Jim took a step forward, knowing it was going to get messy and furious with himself since this was the exact thing he was supposed to have anticipated and prevented, also knowing that there was nothing he could do. A blur of motion from beside him made him look around, then stare.

Yori and the five other young women had started moving the instant the trolley made contact with the gantry. Attracted by the crash they turned away from watching the actors getting ready for the next scene and darted across the floor, covering the intervening hundred feet or so at incredible speeds. Yori and Chou dived at the toppling gantry, the smaller woman grabbing the buckling leg just as it gave way completely, while Chou jumped onto it and anchored the top to the rigging which creaked but held. The other four intercepted a number of large items including one huge arc-lamp which had slid from the platform in the gantry, unsecured since it was in the process of being installed at the time of the impact. Aiko caught it and swung it around, lowering it safely to the ground and away from the actress it had nearly crushed. A heavy toolbox was plucked from the air by Misaki who jumped nearly ten feet up to grab it, while several smaller items fell about her.

Once the immediate rush of falling items was dealt with, Fumiko and Tamiko went to Yori's side, the hush that had fallen over the room once the initial panic was replaced with stunned shock broken by the creaking of metal as they straightened the bent leg with their bare hands, carefully pushing the gantry back into position. When it was more or less in the original shape and stable, they secured it while Yori climbed it like a monkey, joining Chou in helping unstrap the shocked workers on the top and gently guiding them to the ladder down to safety.

When the men were on the ground, shocked silence reigned for a few more seconds before someone started clapping. Growing applause made all six girls look slightly surprised, although they smiled. Jim stared, then turned to his friend. The cop had his hand on his face. "Um, what exactly did you say they did?" he asked the other man slowly.

"Attract far too much attention, mainly," Harrison muttered, lowering his hand and casting a glance at Yori, who looked back and shrugged.

"How... How the hell did they do that?" the safety coordinator said, watching as Aiko lifted four hundred pounds of arc-light and moved it to the side out of the way as if she was lifting a bag of groceries. Approaching one of the men from the gantry, she politely asked him where she should put it, smiling and walking off with it on her shoulder when he pointed, staring in disbelief. It had taken two of them and one of the ceiling-mounted winches to get it onto the gantry in the first place. "That's impossible." The light must have outweighed the petite brunette by about three to one. Looking at Harrison, he waited for an explanation.
"They're all impossible. Some more than others." As he was starting another question, the director came charging across, waving his hand frantically at the scene.

"What the hell just happened?" he screamed. "Who are they? How did they do that? Who's their agent?" Harrison started laughing weakly, leaning against a wall, shaking his head. "Hey. Are you their agent? What's going on? Jim, who are these people?" Walking over with a peculiar grin, Yori pointed at Naito, who had watched the entire scene with bemused wonder and was now trying to keep out of the way while mentally composing the report he would have to submit.

"He's our Agent, actually," she said, giggling manically. Naito glared at her for a moment.

"Oh, thanks, Yori, thanks a lot." Snickering, she wandered off to help clear up the mess. Chou was checking all three men over, while fending off the studio medic who was getting rather wound up.

"They're fine. Calm down." With a severe look she managed to make the woman stop trying to get the men to lie down and simply talk to them.

"Oh, god. There's going to be lawyers and lawsuits and delays and I'll never get this fucking movie shot!" the director wailed, collapsing into a chair, overwrought. Everyone watched for a few seconds, before getting on with life. He was only having another nervous breakdown. This was nothing unusual, it was his third in the last week. Jim patted him on the shoulder comfortably. Emily and Serena watched wide-eyed, standing next to Harrison, who put his arms around them both.

"Does this sort of thing happen a lot, dear?" Emily asked, looking up at him. He nodded. "Around those girls? More than you'd think likely."

"How odd."

"That was so cool!" Serena finally shouted, grinning like a fool. Yori looked over at her and gave her a thumbs up, which she returned.

The commotion continued for some time. Eventually everything had been cleared away, the damaged gantry had been dismantled and removed, while the three technicians had given Chou and the others their heartfelt thanks then gone off for a bit of a lie down to recover. Most of the witnesses had come over to thank the young women, wanting more information on who they were and more importantly, how on earth they'd managed to pull the rescue off. All six girls modestly protested being anything unusual, diverting the questioning neatly.

The lead actor approached, smiling at them with perfect white teeth. Accompanying him was the actress Aiko had saved from a serious injury or death, who hugged her and thanked her breathlessly. Not to be left out Tamiko grabbed the startled actor and kissed him, then let go and giggled. He grinned after a moment, inspecting her with interest. The actress, with whom he was going out, a fact widely reported in the entertainment world, looked annoyed.

Once the director had managed to restore a certain amount of his own dignity and some colour had come back into his face, he stood and walked over, trembling a little from the adrenaline. "Thank you, ladies. I have no idea how you did what you did, but thank you."

As spokes-magical-girl, duly elected, Yori smiled at him. "You're welcome. I hope this doesn't set your schedule back too much." He shrugged, still feeling a little out of it, the last twenty minutes had been somewhat exciting.

"Not as much as dead stage-hands and actors would have." The actress winced, looking across the
studio at the light with her name on it. "I'm sorry, Denise," the director added, noticing her gaze. "I didn't mean to remind you." After another inspection of the six Japanese women, he said, "I wish the cameras had been rolling. No one will ever believe this." Misaki giggled, eating a sandwich. Looking at her the director wondered briefly where she'd got it from. He was getting hungry, he decided.

Harrison and the others came over. "Chou, if we're going to go shopping we'll have to leave soon," Emily said, looking at her watch. The blonde nodded acknowledgement.

"You can't leave just like that," the director said frantically, desperately curious about these people. "Jim, they've got to stay! I want to talk to them some more. How did they do that? Where did they come from?"

"Calm down, Adrian, you know it's not good for you," Jim said soothingly. "Take a deep breath and relax a little. I don't know how they did all that. They're friends of Rich's here. You remember, I told you about him, he's a friend of mine from the LAPD. Apparently these people are consultants from Japan here helping him on a case. That's all I know." Both of them turned to Harrison looking expectant. Sighing again, thinking to himself he seemed to be doing a lot of that recently, he glanced at Yori. Smiling a little, she turned to Adrian, holding out her hand.

"Hi. I'm Yori. These are my friends. Look, we're on a bit of a tight schedule, but if you'd like to talk, Richard is having a barbecue at his house for us before we go back to Japan. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you came to it." She glanced at Harrison who seemed a little startled, but after a few seconds nodded.

"Sure. Why not. We might have to get some more food though."

"I'll sort that out, Rich," Jim said.

Adrian looked at them, then at the place the gantry had been. "Yes, I'd like that. I'm very curious. Not to mention feeling shaken, that could have been a terrible accident. I'm going to be spending the next two hours filling out accident reports now as well." He didn't seem particularly pleased about that.

"Jim can tell you how to get to my house, and when to arrive. We're going to have to leave now, I'm afraid." Adrian shook the hands of everyone present, then watched as Jim led them out.

"That was pretty weird," said the famous actor. Adrian just stared at him for a moment before wandering off shaking his head.

Once they were in the cars heading for the shops that Emily had suggested, Harrison glanced at Yori. She looked back, smiling. "Anyone else you want to invite? You'll end up having half the movie industry following you back to my house at this rate." In the back Fumiko laughed.

"I don't think it's that bad. We got a lot of publicity in the UK, it's a little strange that no-one here seems to have heard of us as a result but I guess they mostly don't watch JNN or the BBC. Most of the other countries' networks didn't report much about us for some reason, just the official cover story about a terrorist bomb. We don't actually want a huge amount of publicity to be honest, we're perfectly happy to be low profile." This made Harrison start laughing so hard he had to slow down.

"Low profile? You lot?" She watched the traffic ahead with a small smile.

"Oh, believe me, we could be a lot more... visible."

"I'm not entirely sure how. After all, in the last twenty four hours, you've picked a truck up and put
it on it's wheels, jumped around all over down-town Hollywood, terrified a street gang in front of
dozens of tourists, saved several people on a movie set for heaven's sake, and that's not to mention
whatever the hell happened late last night. Which I don't want to know about." She giggled.
"Plausible deniability is the concept I'm going for here.

"Chou and I are using a variation on the spell Aiko's team uses. We decided to use it on... field
trips... after London, it was attracting enough attention it was getting annoying. People will
remember something happened but there won't be identifiable photos, that sort of thing, unless we
want it to happen. We don't normally bother at home except when news crews turn up."

"It will make tracing the 'new talent' for the 'new action movie' very difficult," Fumiko said with a
chuckle. Harrison laughed again.

"That rumour is going to go around and around, you have no idea what this town is like. It might
even provoke some studio into actually making a movie like that, just to jump on the bandwagon."

They were still laughing when they arrived at the next destination. Harrison, Agent Naito, Yori,
and Misaki spend some time browsing through several book stores, while the other females headed
for the clothing shops. Harrison glanced at the two girls with him. "Not ones for the traditional
female pursuits?" he asked Yori as they headed to the next book store. She glanced at Misaki, both
of them seeming amused.

"Not so much. If Chou finds something she thinks I'd like she knows my sizes, but I've never been
one for clothes shopping. Misaki isn't wildly interested either, she's probably got less interest in that
sort of thing than I do to be honest. Not all women are fanatical purchasers of clothes and shoes."
He smiled.

"I know. Serena is one of those. Emily has to practically drag her to get new clothes, she'd rather be
buying comics, video games, or some sort of sporting item. She's into archery at the moment.
Keeps bugging me to buy her a compound bow."

"She'll probably get on with Sophie pretty well."

"If they become friends I wouldn't be surprised if they start hunting muggers." She chuckled.

"Nothing wrong with that. We do. We've pretty much hunted them to extinction at home." Giving
her a sidelong look he grinned a little.

"Must be like going on safari here."

"Catch and release," Misaki muttered, snickering. "We should have ear tags."

"I'm not sure I want my daughter trapping muggers and tagging them before releasing them back
into the wild," Harrison said with a laugh. "Next thing you know, she'd start bringing them home
and you know the problem, once you've given them a name you don't want to get rid of them."

After an hour of looking for interesting books and purchasing a number, the quartet met the others.
None of them had any bags with them, making Harrison look puzzled. Serena pointed at Chou.
"She's got about a dozen shopping bags hidden away with that weird trick Yori showed us. The
sales lady couldn't believe it."

"It's certainly a very convenient ability when shopping," Emily commented.

As soon as they arrived at home Harrison lit the barbecue, coughing a little from the smoke. The
charcoal soon caught, slowly spreading white ash building up across it. Evaluating it with a
practised eye he looked pleased. "Should be ready just about when people turn up." Going inside he turned on the yard lights then began preparing some ground beef patties to his mother's recipe.

By the time the first guests arrived, Sophie and her mother, he was just putting the first home-made burgers on the grill. "Ah, perfect timing. How do you like your hamburgers?" A dozen burgers were sizzling nicely within minutes. Shortly after that everyone was eating happily.

Half an hour later Jim, his wife Sandra, and Adrian the director had arrived, Jim with a couple of bottles of home made hot sauce. Yori picked one of them up and looked at it, before unscrewing the lid and trying a little. Her eyes widened with surprise and she grinned. "Hey, that's good." Trying the other one she smirked, then coughed a little. "That one's even better. Hey, Misaki, come and try these." Jim watched in astonishment as both girls poured generous helpings of his hottest sauce, stuff even he had trouble with, onto their third and fourth burgers, respectively, eating them with enthusiasm. Misaki liked it so much she started putting it on almost everything, including dipping potato chips in it.

"She's going to have an interesting time in eight to twelve hours," he said in a low voice to Harrison, who laughed. He knew all too well.

"Hurts going in and coming out, as I recall." They watched her pour some on a steak, slip it between two thick slices of bread, then eat it with a smile. "Although I've never seen anyone eat that much of it before. I hope she doesn't burst into flames on the toilet." Snickering, they went back to grilling some more dead cow slices. Agent Naito cautiously tried some of the less hot sauce, coughed violently, then poured a couple of pints of water down his throat as fast as he could, muttering obscenities to himself in Japanese.

Serena and Sophie were talking together, friends within an hour of meeting. The blonde girl was vividly describing how she'd fought back against the muggers, complete with mimed genital maiming, while her mother watched from across the yard, wincing a little at each successively more enthusiastic kick. Yori sat beside her, watching. "Have you given any consideration to what I said last night about martial arts?" she asked after a while. Joan turned to her.

"I've been thinking about it, yes. I'm not completely sure I want my daughter learning violent things like that." Yori smiled a little. "Did you really start when you were two?" the other woman asked curiously.

"Yes. I've been studying martial arts since I could walk. I suppose you could say it's a calling." The black-haired young woman seemed to be picking her words with care. "I've trained in a large number of different disciplines. Chou is my first student, and undoubtedly my best. The other girls over there are also students and coming along very nicely. All of us love it. The Art teaches you many things besides fighting, as well. It's a worthwhile pursuit." Studying Sophie for a while, she went on, "Your daughter has a fire in her that would suit some form of martial art very well, in my estimation. She reminds me quite a lot of an old acquaintance, although without some of the less useful habits she had. Like I said, I would start her with Aikido, which is primarily a defensive art. It can be remarkably effective. It doesn't require great strength, and it's designed to minimise injuries to both the attacked and the attacker. Minimally violent, I suppose you could say."

She looked back at Joan. "I suspect your daughter will end up being a fighter one way or another. She got lucky the other day, although she may not realise it. Proper training would make things safer for her as well as anyone who might wish her harm. In your society, that may happen more often that one would wish, unfortunately." Joan listened quietly. The young women seemed to have a great deal of experience about what she was discussing, and raised some good points.

"I'll think about it. If I decided to allow it, how would I go about finding a competent teacher?"
"I can give you some pointers of what to look for and what questions to ask." They discussed it for twenty minutes or so, Joan making notes.

"Thank you, Yori. I'll discuss it with her father when he gets back and see what he thinks."

They talked for a little while longer then Joan got up to get another burger. She also wanted to get the recipe. Chou sat beside her, then Jim and Adrian walked up. "So, can we ask about what we saw earlier?" Jim said curiously. They looked at each other then indicated to a pair of lawn chairs.

"Help yourself. What would you like to know?" Yori asked, eating some potato chips. Jim took another pull on his beer, watching them, then leaned forward.

"How did you do all that? I saw you stop a gantry that weighed at least half a ton, not including the three men and the tools and lights on top of it, from falling over by simply holding on to it. As far as everything I've ever known goes that should be impossible." He looked to Chou. "You jumped fifteen feet straight up, then held that damn gantry with one hand and the ceiling rig with the other. It should have torn you in half!" Throwing his hands out to the sides he slopped some beer on the ground. "How? How could you possibly do all that?" Adrian was listening intently, obviously having the same questions.

Yori and Chou exchanged glances, smiling a little. "Martial arts and magic, basically." They stared.

"Seriously. I really want to know."

"Honest. It's advanced martial art techniques combined with some magic that we came up with."

They didn't seem convinced at all. With a slight grin Yori held out her hand, pulling her sleeve up. Rotating it to show there was nothing present but her hand, holding the fingers apart for a moment, she then cupped it slightly in front of them. Their eyes widened comically as a ball of translucent purple light grew to the size of a baseball in the outstretched hand. "This is called ki. It's basically life energy. When you get really good at martial arts you both tend to generate a lot more of it than most people and also can learn techniques to project it outside the body." She tossed the ball from hand to hand as they gaped. "You can use ki for all sorts of interesting things. It makes you faster, stronger, and tougher, amongst other useful properties. Those are the easy ones. A lot of the martial artists we know in Japan and China can do that."

Chou produced a similar golden ball of light, taking up the story. "When you get more practised at ki manipulation you can start to use the energy directly. Like these ki balls. They can be used as weapons, for instance." Raising her hand above her head she fired the ki ball straight up, the two men watching open-mouthed as it whistled into the distance, before detonating with a distant thud.

"Holy crap," Adrian said faintly.

"At home we're what tends to get called magical girls. I don't personally like the description. I consider myself and Chou martial artists, but it's traditional. There are quite a few of us, most of them use magic more than ki. In fact, we're pretty unusual in that we use both mixed together. It's more flexible but takes a lot more ability."

Serena and Sophie had noticed the ki ball shooting upwards and had come over to see what was going on, along with Joan. All three of them were gaping at the purple energy sphere that Yori was still toying with.

"Wow!" Serena said with a grin. "A real fireball."

"Not quite," the black-haired young woman said with laughter apparent in her voice. "Close,
though. Come here a minute." Serena and her new friend both moved to stand beside the older woman. "Hold out your hand." Slowly, Serena did so. Yori carefully rolled the ki ball into the girl's hand, who stared in shock. It made her hand tingle in a weird but not unpleasant way. Her mother was watching from beside the barbecue with slight worry. Harrison put a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Yori wouldn't do anything that would hurt her," Naito said from beside them, also watching with interest.

"OK, now throw it like a baseball. Over there into the garden." Serena looked at the ball, then Yori, before getting a huge grin. She turned and threw the ki ball as hard as she could, managing a respectable distance. Forty yards away the ball hit the ground with a thump and a bright flash, digging a small crater in the grass. A dog started barking nearby.

"Hey! Stop blowing holes in my lawn," Harrison squawked in outrage. Serena jumped up and down clapping her hands.

"Do it again! Do it again!" Her father walked over with a half-annoyed smile.

"No, don't do it again. I'm going to have to fill that in now."

"Sorry, Richard," Yori said with an impish grin. "Just demonstrating."

"Aww, Dad, let her do it again. That was cool."

"Yori, if you want to show off why don't you girls demonstrate a little martial arts? Something that doesn't involve loudly re-landscaping the lawn?"

"OK. Something simple." She glanced at her partner, then they both stood. "Hey! Aiko! You and Tamiko attack us."

"Why?" the short brunette called back, "I'm in the middle of eating here!" Yori chuckled.

"You can finish that later. We need your help right now. Get Fumiko and Misaki as well, wherever they've disappeared to." Shortly the four other girls were arrayed around Yori and Chou, who stood back to back in the middle of the lawn, reasonably well illuminated by the floodlights on the house. Everyone else was watching from the patio. Yori looked at them. "OK, this is a fairly basic training exercise we use." She motioned to the other girls, who suddenly attacked. Even Naito, who was fairly used now to their abilities, stared in amazement at the speed and ferocity that the six participants used, both in attacking and defending. The sound of deflected blows echoed through the yard as the four attackers moved in a complex pattern, the two defenders staying back to back as they fought them off.

After a minute or two the pattern changed, Chou leaping right over Aiko as she charged in, kicking her in the back and propelling her into a forward roll through where the blonde had been standing moments earlier. Landing behind Tamiko she whirled into a low spin kick, sweeping her legs from under her. The other woman turned her fall into a backwards flip, bouncing off her hands into a forward roll that took her between Chou's legs and into a position to rise and strike at her back. The blow never landed as by the time she was in position Chou was cartwheeling away, in the process flattening Aiko who had tried attacking from the side. Meanwhile, Yori had taken on both Fumiko and Misaki simultaneously as they double-teamed her, blurringly fast blows being traded between all three women. All of them were laughing.

The sparring went on for about five minutes before at an unseen signal they all suddenly stopped. The garden was completely silent. Walking back over to the barbecue Misaki made herself another
burger, watched by several sets of eyes, before slouching in a chair with the last of the good hot sauce. Fumiko laughed, as she retrieved a beer. The sound broke the spell that had fallen over the audience.

"Fuck me," Adrian said softly. "I've never seen anything like that in my life before. Our stunt people would give up on the spot if they saw that." Yori returned and sat again. "And that was a basic training exercise?" She nodded. "Fuck me."

"Most of the martial artists in Minato, where we come from, and Nerima, another ward fairly close, would be as good as that. I know quite a number much better."

"I assume that you're better even than that," Jim said, "If you're training them." She nodded again. "We both are. I have much more experience than Chou, but to be honest both of us are better at martial arts than probably anyone. Chou alone could take on all those guys and win decisively in under a minute at their current stage of training. If they brought out the magic it might take a little longer. When I started training them it would probably only have taken seconds. They're coming along well though."

"What on earth do you guys fight over there?" Adrian asked.

"Oh, demons, magical terrorists, the occasional deluded near-god-like being that needs a severe kicking, that sort of thing." She smiled at them. Unsure whether she was pulling their legs they exchanged glances. "Ask Richard about the demon he met a few months ago." While they were pondering that she got up to get some more food.

By the time the barbecue party finally tapered off at around midnight, Misaki was snoring in a chair having eaten enough meat to choke a lion, a smile on her face, while Serena was curled up in the living room, with Sophie lying on the floor next to the sofa, both of them having fallen asleep playing a video game. Joan found them there, gently waking her daughter. "Come on, Sophie, we need to get back. It's very late." The blonde girl staggered to her feet, mumbling a goodnight to her new friend who opened one eye enough to smile at her before falling asleep again. Emily met them at the door.

"Here's our number. I think they will want to see each other again," she said, writing down the information and handing it to the other woman.

"Thank you, Emily, and thanks for the invitation. We've both had a wonderful time." She looked out the window at the end of the hall into the garden where Chou could be seen talking to Jim. "What remarkable young women. I've glad we met them. They're a bit frightening, but I think they mean well." Emily nodded following her gaze.

"I'm sure of it." They hugged briefly before Joan and her daughter left. Emily returned to the living room and tried to wake her daughter to get her up to bed, unsuccessfully. In the end her father carried her up. When he went back outside he found Adrian ready to leave. He was talking to Yori.

"If any of you ever want to do stunt work in the movies, let me know. I can put you in touch with people who'd sell their own kidneys to get you to work for them after seeing something like what I saw earlier." He handed them each a card, then left, after bidding everyone else goodnight. Jim and Sandra left shortly afterwards. Eventually it was just the Japanese people, Lieutenant Harrison, and Emily. Sitting down around the dying barbecue which was still emitting some heat, they looked at each other.

"Thank you both for a very nice night," Chou said.
"No problem," Harrison replied, leaning back in his chair and finishing off his last beer. "It was fun. There isn't even any food left, between them Yori and Misaki finished off everything. Although the rest of you didn't exactly fail at that."

"Hey, I only had three burgers," Agent Naito said with a grin. Yori laughed softly.

"I only had eight. And half a bottle of that sauce. That was very good indeed."

"Tell me that in the morning," Harrison said knowingly.

Glancing at his watch, Naito winced. "I'm going to be jet-lagged to hell tomorrow. Or is it teleport-lagged? Is that a thing?"

"Well, we'd better get going," Yori said, standing and yawning. "It's been a long day."

"Thanks for the help, guys." Also standing, Harrison shook hands with them all. "I hope we see you again at some point soon. Although I could do without all the problems we had this time. Let me know what happens with that last issue." He was being fairly careful not to mention the portal bombs in front of his wife. The martial artist nodded.

"We'll let you know when it's resolved."

Aiko disappeared into the house, re-emerging in her uniform and powered up. After a quick recharge, they stood close together, waved at Richard and Emily, then vanished in a flare of light. "Ack!" Emily said, blinking. She hadn't looked away quite fast enough when her husband had told her to.

"It's kind of bright isn't it?" he said, chuckling. They packed up anything perishable, of which there was a surprisingly small amount left, turned off the outside lights, and retired inside. Turning off the video game Harrison picked up the remote from the TV, which had switched back automatically to broadcast television when the video game output went away. It was in the middle of the local news on NBC.

"...cases of what some people are referring to cheerleader-phobia. None of the experts we have spoken to have any plausible reasons for this, or why it could strike so many young men at the same time. The common factor seems to be that they were all violent gang members although why this should matter nobody seems to currently have an explanation for. Enquiries are continuing, although at the moment it remains a myst..." He turned the TV off, shaking his head while grinning to himself, then went to bed.
"These scenes from Times Square in New York are familiar to people around the world. The internationally famous ball drop ceremony, first held in 1907, has been held almost every year since then, attracting crowds of up to a million people, with many millions more watching it broadcast on television worldwide. Despite the weather over the recent New Year period, many hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets to watch the ceremony, none of them at the time realising how close to disaster they came."

"News is slowly emerging that the FBI foiled a terrorist plot to detonate a huge bomb at the top of 1 Times Square, directly under the ball drop pole, during the drop itself. Unofficial estimates of possible casualties range from hundreds to thousands. As a result of an extensive investigation with international coverage, the FBI was able to locate the bomb at very nearly the last minute. It was safely disarmed and dismantled by a team of experts from the FBI and the NYPD three days before it would have detonated."

"Our sources tell us that the bomb disposal experts removed over a quarter of a ton of the military explosive C-4 from the top floor of the building. We are told it was one of the largest terrorist bombs ever found in the US, at least in potential destructiveness, which could conceivably have destroyed up to the top five floors of the iconic 1 Times Square building, causing debris to rain down on the gathered crowd. An investigation is currently under way to determine the source of the explosives. No information as to how the terrorists gained access to the building, or managed to hide the bomb from discovery during building inspections has yet come to light. However, the terrorist cell responsible for planting the bomb is allegedly linked to the recent attack in London in which sixty-seven people lost their lives."

"Our sources claim that all the terrorists involved are either dead or in custody, but refused to be drawn on rumours that consultants from Japan, where a few months ago a similar cell was arrested, were involved in the recent FBI action in New York. Similar rumours surround the events in London the day after Christmas. We will bring you more on this story as it unfolds. This is Daniel Bashir reporting from New York for CNN." Ranma turned the TV off, sighing a little, turning to the others and picking up Nabiki's notebook.

"I'm sorry, I can't find any more clues, no matter how hard I look," Nabiki said tiredly, wiping her hair from her eyes with one hand while accepting a glass of wine from her sister with the other, smiling briefly at her. She looked back to Ranma, who was now flipping through her notebook and cross-referencing her copious notes to the documentation. "I'm sorry," she repeated, leaning back with a sigh. She'd been working on the problem on and off for the last week, ever since the others got back from the US.

"Don't worry, Nabiki, it was always a long shot. You don't have anything to be sorry for. Because of you we got two of the things out of circulation, don't forget." He grinned at her, reaching for his glass of coke.

"I only pointed you at the one in LA..."

"... which meant we met Richard again, talked about the whole thing some more, and were pointed at New York. So, it's because of you." Kasumi sat next to her and sipped her own wine, looking pleased at her logic. Nabiki sighed a little, then smiled.

"All right, I'll take the credit. I just wish I could work out this last one. It's worrying me." Ranma glanced at her, then went back to examining the paperwork.
"It worries everyone. At least there's only one of the damn things left now. That limits the possible
damage." Dropping the pile of papers onto the coffee table he stretched, then slumped. "I'll be very
glad when we finally get the thing. Waiting for the other shoe to drop is nerve-wracking in the
extreme. I'd love to go back to more normal problems. Even cats up trees!" Watching him Nabiki
looked amused.

"You know, if this was a comic book, when you finally overcome the last problem, either there
will be a twist at the end, or it will set you up for an ever-escalating series of opponents." Gazing
narrowly at her he frowned.

"This isn't a damn comic book. Or a video game. If I start seeing enemies that steadily increase in
strength, I'm going to get very annoyed. That's more along the lines of what those idiotic
cheerleaders for love and justice or whatever the hell it is that they keep shouting about do. Me, if I
see that sort of thing begin to happen, I'm going to immediately find the 'end boss' and slice him,
his, or it into lots of little pieces on the spot." Nabiki started giggling, spluttering into her wine. He
looked extremely irritated at the suggestion. She could just picture 'Yori' walking up to some huge
powerful monster in it's lair, watching it's puppets at work and rubbing it's tentacles together in evil
glee, tapping it politely on the shoulder, then finely dicing it with extreme prejudice. Probably
vaporising the remains just to be sure, grinning like an idiot in the process.

"We can't do anything at the moment except wait and keep our ears open," Kasumi said calmly,
watching them both with a slight smile. "Everyone we know is also looking, sooner or later we'll
find the thing and deal with it."

"Are we sure there is still one out there?" her sister asked slowly. "I mean, really sure? Is it
possible there were only five prototypes that got out?" The other two exchanged glances.
Eventually Kasumi replied.

"It's not a hundred percent guaranteed, but I think the thought that we got them all is wishful
thinking, to be honest. The chances of there not being one left is so small it's not really something
we can safely count on. If nothing turns up within the next five months or so, at that point we'll be
fairly certain we got the lot. But until the maximum timer period elapses we have to assume all six
are in play."

"Damn." Drinking a little more wine, Nabiki put the glass on the table and put her hands over her
face, rubbing her tired eyes. A thought struck her, making her look at them. "You told me the one
in LA was faulty, and leaking energy. Could it have leaked enough to stop working completely?
What if this last one is bad as well?" Ranma thought about it, scratching the back of his head for a
while.

"It could have leaked enough energy to no longer have sufficient to function, certainly. That was
one of the possibilities we discussed with Lieutenant Harrison. The problem is that as it leaked it
became unstable, which stood as much chance of triggering it as rendering it safe. We got
extremely lucky with that one. I think it must have been faulty in several ways, so many people
handled it that I'm absolutely astounded one of the booby-traps didn't fire. Sophie, particularly, had
it for several days, and spent quite a long time poking it. How she got away with that
I have no
idea." He shuddered a little at the thought of what could have happened. "The chance that a
different one would be bad in just the same way, leak enough energy to be unable to form a portal,
and be completely undisturbed in the process is very low, I think. No, Kas is right, we have to
assume a fully functional one is still sitting around somewhere with evil intentions."

"Fuck."

"Quite." Finishing his coke he took the glass to the kitchen. As he came back, the front door
opened following a knock, Misaki and Fumiko entering. "Hi, guys, got your apartment all set up now?" he asked with a smile. Fumiko nodded, looking happy.

"Pretty much. Just a few books to stick on the shelves and a couple of boxes for the kitchen to unpack. Have you heard from Aiko or Tamiko yet?" Following him back into the living room they sat down, nodding to Nabiki and Kasumi. Misaki produced a banana and began peeling it.

"They were getting some stuff from Tamiko's house, last I heard," he replied, picking up the bottle of wine and waving at them. Both nodded, so he filled a couple of glasses. "Tamiko's parents bought her a few things for her new apartment, she said. I think they want to come and inspect the place. She's trying to put them off without them getting suspicious. She's worried they'll wonder how she can afford something so big."

"Pity she can't just tell them the truth," Nabiki commented, finishing off her wine. Fumiko nodded.

"I know. But it's difficult. You haven't met her parents. They're very nice people, but... kind of traditional. Conservative. They wouldn't be at all keen on the idea of their youngest daughter jumping around rooftops dressed in nothing much being a magical girl." Ranma snickered.

"Around this insane ward being a magical girl practically is traditional," he chuckled. Fumiko laughed.

"That's true enough, but I don't think they'd see it that way." Looking at her curiously, Nabiki had to ask.

"Do your parents know about you two?" Fumiko and Misaki exchanged glances.

"Um, yes and no." At her puzzled expression the other woman sighed. "Dad knows. He wasn't happy about it, but he's got a slightly odd past himself. He found out by accident, in fact, and after a certain amount of shouting we kind of talked him around. Pointing out that it wasn't something we actually looked for, it just kind of found us, and now that it had we were stuck with it, was an argument that actually worked. I know he worries, but he's come to accept it. Deep down I think he's even proud of us." She sipped some wine, glancing at her sister for a moment. "Mom, on the other hand, doesn't know. I think. She's a bit... difficult to read at times. I know Dad has covered for us a lot when we had to suddenly go out under odd circumstances, which so far seems to have worked. Sooner or later she's going to find out, though, she's not stupid. What we'll do then...?" She shrugged.

"We'll work it out when we have to," Misaki said, finishing her banana.

"What about Aiko?" Nabiki asked.

"Her father died several years ago. Cancer of some sort," Fumiko replied. "She doesn't talk about it much. She loved him very much and it hurt her a lot. She's said once or twice that he'd have been proud of her. Her mom knows something's odd about her, but as far as I know not exactly what. She doesn't ask, which is a bit weird, but then she's a very private person herself." Suddenly laughing, she looked like she'd just thought of something. "For all I know she could be a retired magical girl."

"We all seem to have weird parents," Nabiki said, amused.

"Minato and Nerima are full of strange people." Kasumi smiled. "It makes life very interesting."

"That's certainly one way of putting it," Ranma said, grinning widely. His phone rang at that point. Answering it he had a short conversation, then put it away again. "Aiko wanted me to drop the
wards so she can teleport in to her apartment." Kasumi nodded.

"We have to finish giving them access so they can do it themselves," she replied. "I think we should set aside some time tomorrow."

"OK." A few minutes later another knock came at the door, followed by the other two girls entering. Both, like their partners, were dressed in normal street clothes. "Everything go all right?"

Aiko dropped next to him with a sigh. "More or less. Her parents are a pain." Tamiko looked slightly offended but after a moment nodded, also sitting.

"Unfortunately true. Mom simply doesn't know the meaning of 'lose the argument'." Aiko rolled her eyes, then looked longingly at the now-empty bottle of wine on the table. Kasumi followed her gaze, smiled, and went to retrieve a full one.

"You can say that again. She just wouldn't stop. Even her husband was looking worn out when we left." Accepting a glass of wine from Kasumi with a smile she drained half of it in one gulp. "Thanks, Kasumi. I really needed that."

"So, what happened, then?" Misaki asked curiously. Tamiko sighed, also taking a glass with a nod of thanks.

"She wouldn't stop asking about seeing my apartment. I couldn't think of any way to get her to back off completely, but I managed to persuade her that I needed a few days to get settled first. I'll just have to think of some way to explain how I can afford something that nice in an area like this before then." She sighed again.

Nabiki thought for a while, then slowly suggested, "Why don't you tell her you're sub-letting it from a friend who's out of the country, or something like that? Someone who has money, but wants their apartment looked after while they're away on business for a longish amount of time." The auburn-haired woman nodded thoughtfully.

"That might work. It would at least give me some breathing space. Once she gets over the initial shock of me moving out she'll probably calm down and won't be so pushy." Aiko looked dubious.

"What if she realizes the rest of us are living here as well?" she asked. "It's going to look a bit weird."

"Don't worry, we can come up with something," Kasumi said soothingly. "Illusion spells, the perception altering techniques, all that will let us show her whatever we need to to satisfy her curiosity. I'm sure it will be fine." Tamiko nodded, sipping her wine, although she didn't look completely convinced.

"OK. We've got a week or so before she gets pushy again, at any rate."

"You could just tell her you have some well-off friends who gave you and your friends the use of expensive apartments and see what happens," Ranma suggested, a small grin on his face. She gave him a look that made him burst out laughing.

"Yeah, no, that's not going to happen," Tamiko said, seeming fairly certain of this.

Kasumi clapped her hands together. "All right, enough of all this. Put the papers away, stop worrying about parents and terrorists, and let's just relax. This is the first time for a week there's nothing desperately important to do. All of you are moved in now, no threats seem to be looming, and the restaurant booking isn't for five hours." She smiled. "Let's go swimming."
Fifteen minutes later, seven mermaids were dashing about the swimming pool with shouts of glee. Surfacing at the shallow end, Nabiki reached for the wine which they'd brought with them. Kasumi floated next to her on her back, smiling gently at the ceiling, waving her tail-fin around in the water. She'd adopted the same mermaid form she'd surprised Nabiki with months ago. Lifting a webbed hand she accepted the glass her sister handed her. "Thank you," she said, sipping it slowly.

Nabiki pulled herself up to sit on the steps moulded into the end of the pool, pouring herself a glass as well. She was beginning to feel pleasantly tipsy after three glasses and decided she should make this the last one until the restaurant. Watching the others leaping about in the deep end she grinned. "This is the purest insanity, but it's really remarkably relaxing," she said, leaning back on her elbows. A vertical fin slowly moved past, making her start humming the theme tune to 'Jaws'. Misaki had requested a mer-form based on a shark of some sort and was amusing herself cruising around just under the surface occasionally grabbing one of the others. Kasumi giggled at the sight.

"I must admit you're right, sister," she replied, moving to sit beside the other woman. She sighed a little. "I do wish we could share this with Akane, though. How is she coming along since Shampoo started training her?" The middle sister smiled happily, flicking her tail in the water.

"Amazingly well, I'm happy to say. I was watching her a couple of days ago, she seems to have learned a surprising amount in less than two weeks. It even seems to be helping her keep her temper better. I guess Ranma was right, the discipline of taking the art seriously does have beneficial effects in other ways." Kasumi appeared relieved.

"Good. I'm very glad to hear that." They watched with amusement as Ranma, who was floating on the surface at the deep end talking to Aiko, suddenly yelped and vanished in a cloud of bubbles, only to reappear leaping half a metre out of the pool like a breaching dolphin. Grinning she dove under again, chasing the other magical girl mermaid around the pool fast enough to leave a visible wake at the surface. Nabiki shook her head again.

"Total insanity." Scratching an itchy scale she slipped into the water and began swimming lengths just above the bottom. Eventually they all congregated at the shallow end, sitting on the edge and talking. Misaki, due to her large dorsal fin, lay on her side. "So, where is this restaurant? The same one we went to that time?" Ranma nodded.

"Yes, we haven't been back since then, it seemed like it was time." Kasumi held up her watch. "Speaking of time, we should get ready, the booking is in a bit over an hour." With a shimmer she regained her normal form, standing and walking over to the towels. The others followed as they changed back. Once they had all showered, changed, and called for a pair of taxis they met up in the lobby. Looking around the group, Kasumi smiled.

"It's nice to have neighbours again."

"Surely you already have neighbours, in the other buildings around here?" Aiko asked.

"Well, yes, I suppose, but we don't really know them very well, oddly enough. People in these apartments tend to keep to themselves, as do we, for obvious reasons. What I meant, I think, is that it's nice to have neighbours we don't have to hide from. People we can trust. Family, basically." The oldest sister looked at the others, who seemed pleased.

Soon the taxis arrived and they left, 'Maiko', Misaki, and Fumiko in one, the others in the second car. The drive to the restaurant passed quietly, as did the meal itself. The group spent several hours enjoying a very good meal, then went on to a club for another couple of hours. Arriving back at the apartment building late that night, everyone except 'Maiko' was quite tipsy. Nabiki was flat-out drunk, to the point that in the end her sister sighed a little and slung her over her shoulder. Giggling
and watching the world go past upside-down, Nabiki waved to the others as 'Rika' carried her into
the building.

"She seems happy enough," Tamiko said, hiccuping, as she staggered in after them. 'Maiko'
grinned.

"True. But she's going to regret it in the morning..."

"Gaahhh!" Nabiki stared at the ceiling, wincing at the throbbing pain in her head. Her own
whimper set up unpleasant resonances that made the headache worse. "Oh, god," she whispered,
blinking very loudly. The light from the window seemed to be pulsating in the corner of her vision.
"I have to stop doing this," the brunette mumbled to herself, waiting for the world to stop spinning,
or at least slow down enough she stood a chance of getting back on. That took quite a long time.
Eventually she managed to sit up without throwing up, grabbing her head and holding it in place so
it didn't fall off. A knock on the door was followed by her sister opening it, holding a large glass of
water and smiling sympathetically at her.

"I could feel your pain from the kitchen," Kasumi said, walking over and handing her the glass.
"Here, drink this, you're dehydrated." As the middle sister drained the glass, Kasumi put a hand on
her head. A feeling of relief passed quickly over her, the throbbing ache and nausea diminishing
rapidly.

"Thanks, sis," Nabiki croaked, finishing off the water. "That's pretty effective." It was the first time
she'd experienced her sister's healing abilities first-hand. "A damn sight faster and more efficient
than painkillers."

"Safer, too," Kasumi said, smiling at her, before sitting next to her on the bed. "Did you have a
nice time last night?"

"I think so," Nabiki replied, handing her the glass. "As far as I can remember. I may have had a
little too much to drink." Kasumi giggled.

"That's a distinct possibility." After a moment, she asked, "Do you feel well enough for breakfast?"

"Yes, surprisingly. What time is it?"

"Just after nine AM. We all slept rather late. The coffee is on, it should be ready in a few minutes.
Come out when you're ready." Standing, she smiled at her sister and left the room. Nabiki stretched
widely, then scratched her head, mussing her hair, before standing and opening one of the drawers
of the dresser on the other side of the room. She stayed over enough that she'd taken to keeping
several sets of clothing there. Heading for the bathroom in a robe and carrying clean clothes, she
got ready for the day. Soon she was sitting at the table talking to Ranma and drinking her first cup
of coffee. Kasumi brought the food out of the kitchen and they all began eating.

"By the way, Nabiki, here," Ranma said to her, producing a key-card and handing it to her. She
took it and looked curiously at it, twitching a little at the tingle that went through her hand.

"What's this for?" she asked. He grinned.

"The front door." At her look of surprise he laughed. "You're here often enough you might as well
have official access. We trust you. When we change the wards later we'll add you to the authorised
access list."

"I'm not a magic-user. How will that work?" she asked, puzzled.
"Well, you're not a magic-user yet. I intend to sort that out one day. But, true, you won't be able to control them like we can, although you'll have access to the building. The ward system on this place is incredibly complicated and powerful, it's the best Kas, I, and Happosai could do between us. We're constantly updating and modifying it, not to mention pushing power into it on a regular basis. By now they're probably the most powerful wards on the planet. This place could take a direct hit from a tactical nuke. The spells are so complicated it's almost sentient." Nabiki looked slightly appalled as well as impressed. "Once we add you to the list you'll be able to come and go even without magic. The wards will recognise you and let you through."

"What would happen if someone tried to force me to give them access to the building," she asked curiously. "Not that it's likely, but just wondering." He laughed.

"Well, lets say that it wouldn't end well for them. You'd get through, but someone with hostile intent, not so much. This place can defend itself pretty effectively even without us around." Feeling suddenly slightly nervous, Nabiki looked around. Reaching out she patted the wall beside her.

"Nice building." Kasumi giggled.

"Don't worry, it likes you." Her sister looked oddly at her causing her to giggle again.

Once they'd cleared breakfast away, the three of them talked for a while. Half an hour later Aiko knocked at the front door, entering followed by the others. "Hi, guys. Right on time." Ranma looked pleased. "Come on, let's go into the practice room. Access is easiest from there." They followed him into the huge room, then watched as he and Kasumi walked to the middle and faced each other. They concentrated for a few seconds, then everyone else gaped as a massively complicated tracery of light slowly faded into existence around them. It looked like a series of nested, highly magnified snow crystals, rendered in multicoloured glowing lines. Somehow it gave the distinct impression of being much larger than the room, even though it was contained within it. The thing was actually rather difficult to look at.

"Good grief," Aiko muttered. "I knew the spells on this place were complicated, but..." She shook her head in awe. "I've never seen anything remotely like that before."

"It's pretty cool, isn't it?" Ranma said with a smile. "Right, you first, Aiko. Stand over there, please." He pointed to a spot on the floor where a gap in the multi-dimensional pattern outlined a circle a metre across. Hesitantly, the short brunette walked over to the indicated spot, watching wide-eyed as the spell pattern in front of her moved as she approached, leaving a path for her. Once she was in the correct position it closed around her again. "OK, hold still. This will tingle a bit but it's safe." The pattern surrounding her moved in several different directions simultaneously, changing colour, with tendrils reaching out and touching her head.

"Ick. That feels really weird. Like it's looking at the inside of my mind." She shook her head slightly.

"Basically, it is. It's learning who you are in a way that's essentially impossible to fool. Don't move for a moment." She froze, grimacing at the itching inside her brain, which abruptly stopped. A faint chime sounded from somewhere, sounding like it was kilometres away and inside her head at the same time. "Right. Your pattern is accepted as an authorised user." Ranma smiled at her. "That's it. You can go back. Tamiko, you're next." The auburn-haired girl grinned and took Aiko's place.

One at a time all four magical girls were added to the ward control pattern. Eventually it was Nabiki's turn. She looked slightly worried, but her sister's serene smile persuaded her it was all right. "Don't worry, sister, it doesn't hurt."
"It feels very odd, though," Fumiko said, rubbing the side of her head. Shooting her a curious glance, Nabiki shrugged and took her place. The pattern closed around her, the tendrils of light making contact with her head. Once more the pattern changed shape and colour.

The sensations were extremely strange. She felt dizzy for a moment, then there was the sense of a large presence in her head, like some sort of enormous, incredibly powerful and dangerous animal, that nevertheless was friendly and safe. She smiled a little. It was weird, but somehow comforting. She imagined it was like having a guard dog the size of a bus leaning gently against her, or possibly a guard tyrannosaur, it felt about that relative size. The pattern surrounding her changed a few times, before the chime came again. Ranma looked at the ward spell with a raised eyebrow, then exchanged a glance with his wife, who looked curiously back.

"That's... interesting," he said slowly, inspecting parts of it carefully. After a moment he returned his attention to Nabiki who was watching with curiosity. "Ah, Nabiki? Did you feel anything... odd... just then?" She laughed.

"What about it wasn't odd?" He smiled a little.

"Fair enough. I mean, OK, describe what you felt." She tried to put it into words.

"There was sort of a presence. Not an intelligence, really, more like a loving pet, but one about the size of a truck. It felt like it leaned against me, just a little, kind of looked me over and decided I was someone it liked." His other eyebrow went up.

"Hmm. Can you still feel it?" She nodded.

"Not as strongly, but yes, it's kind of in the back of my mind. It's difficult to describe."

"That's fine, I understand. OK. Stay there a moment." He turned to Kasumi and nodded, both of them concentrating again. The visible pattern faded away. After a few seconds the room looked normal once more, no sign of the manifestation now present. Turning back to her he inspected her for a few seconds.

"Can you still feel it?" Once more she nodded.

"Yep. What is it?" Studying her with interest, he shrugged.

"The wards, basically. The system accepted you to a much deeper level than we expected. I told you the thing was practically sentient. Think of it a bit like a magical computer program. It's not really smart in the sense of a living thing, not in the normal way, but it's so complicated it replicates some of the functions you'd normally associate with a life-form. That wasn't the intention, but it's not uncommon with extremely complex spells. They kind of take on a life of their own, an... intent, I suppose. The intent of this one is protection. People it knows, it protects. Inside this building you're safer than probably anywhere on the planet." He stopped for a moment. Nabiki looked slightly worried.

"What does all that mean for me?" He grinned.

"Well, it shows I was right when I said you'd most likely be very good at ki and magic manipulation. You must have a pretty strong latent ability for it to link so strongly into you like that. It knows you from all the time you've spent here, and like Kas said, it likes you." Nabiki glanced at her sister, who smiled.

"I wasn't joking."
"Now, we've essentially officially introduced you. It would have accepted you anyway, that's the point of adding you to the list, but normally only someone like us or the girls here would get so strong a reaction. You're not trained in ki or magic, so the usual result would have been what I said earlier, you'd be able to pass through the ward but not control it. I'm not so sure that applies now." He inspected her again, walking around her with interest. "No, it's linked as deeply into you as the others. Fascinating. I didn't expect that, but it's good." Stepping back he grinned. "We really have to start teaching you some of the ki exercises. Your ki reserves have been growing steadily for months." She stared at him.

"Um, what are you talking about? I don't know any of the martial arts you said were necessary for all that sort of thing."

Well, like I said ages ago, that's not strictly true. You have a good working knowledge of a lot of the theory from your family style and your early lessons, not to mention what you've probably picked up from watching us. I still think your inherent talent might be nearly as good as Kas'. Much better than Akane. You just lack the practical experience. But that aside, there are a lot of things that can build up ki. Martial arts are the approach I know well, and have the experience with, but magic use can as well. And, I'm beginning to think, exposure to magic. At least the right sort. Ours, basically." Looking at her with an evaluating expression, he nodded to himself. The others watched and listened with interest.

"Hmm. An experiment. Turn around." After a moment, she did so. "Right. Close your eyes." Once again she followed his instructions. There was silence for a moment, then a sudden feeling washed through her, making her duck violently, then lean to the side, dropping to one knee.

"What the fuck?" she yelled, spinning around and jumping back. Everyone was staring when she opened her eyes. Ranma was standing half a metre away from her, having approached silently, a low-powered ki blade a metre long coming from his hand. Unusually it wasn't making any noise at all. "What did you do?" she demanded.

He grinned at her. "Proved a point. Why did you move like that?" She shrugged angrily.

"I don't know. Something told me to." Kasumi walked over and looked at her, then turned to her husband.

"That was very interesting," she commented. He nodded.

"What was very interesting?" her sister demanded. The elder sister smiled at the younger one.

"Ranma tried poking you with the energy sword. It's only low powered, it's safe, but your reaction was extremely interesting. You moved away from it without being able to see it or knowing it was there." Nabiki stared at her.

"Really?" She nodded.

"Yes. What did you feel?"

The younger Tendo thought for a moment. "It's weird. There was just this feeling that something was coming at me really fast and I needed to move out of the way. Three times. I couldn't help myself, I just reacted." Kasumi smiled.

"Indeed. You avoided it perfectly. Oh, he'd have hit you easily if he'd wanted to, you're nowhere near fast enough yet to keep up at full speed, but you moved much faster than almost any untrained person could possibly manage. It was quite impressive." She looked pleased. Nabiki slowly shook
her head.

"I still don't understand."

Ranma dismissed the energy blade. "Come on, let's go and sit down and I'll see if I can explain." Soon, she was holding a mug of coffee and listening with interest, the others also sitting on the sofa around her. "Right. As I see it, you have a strong talent for this sort of thing, like Kasumi does, and I do. Akane does as well but to a much lesser degree, I'm afraid. You haven't had as much training as Kasumi, or Akane for that matter, but when you were young all three of you had quite a lot of exposure to some unusual martial arts. That started all of you on the path towards mastering ki, amongst other things. Environment shaping talent, I guess. Akane is close to topping out her ki level, although she has a long way to go before she masters being able to use what she has as efficiently as she can. She could become a lot better at it even though her raw power level won't go vastly higher. We talked about this some time ago." Nabiki nodded, sipping her coffee and listening intently.

"Kasumi and I are still increasing in power. We haven't hit our upper limits of raw power storage yet, wherever those end up being. I suspect our magic use has increased those limits very significantly, and vice versa. They compliment each other in some way I still don't fully understand. Aiko and the others here are similarly growing rapidly in power output, for the same reason. I think that exposure to our magic, and the version of ki we use, has had a sort of catalytic effect on your own abilities, even in the absence of formal training. It's... well, I guess its given your own body a kind of pattern to latch on to, which once it goes past a certain point is self-sustaining. The power level will probably continue to steadily increase, although I'd suspect that without the training it will top out at a much lower level than it could otherwise reach. Still much higher than other people could normally manage though. You don't have the knowledge yet to really use it, but the ward system can connect to it. That's why it linked so strongly to you."

Nodding slowly, the middle sister pondered what she'd been told. Tamiko looked at Ranma. "Does that mean that Akane could also learn your magic system and increase in power?" He thought for a while.

"I'm not sure. It's possible, I suppose. Her inherent ki limits are much lower than ours, or yours for that matter, so she'd certainly never reach the level we have or you will. But I guess it would be possible that she'd go past the level she's otherwise limited to. At the moment I'm not sure that would be a good thing. One day, perhaps, we should look into that, but until she overcomes the problems she still has I think she'd struggle with it, never mind whether it would be a good idea in the first place." The other woman nodded thoughtfully.

"I see."

He turned back to Nabiki. "When I tried the ki blade on you your own abilities, as untrained as they are, warned you something was threatening you. You reacted to it. It also seems to be boosting your speed noticeably. That's the sort of thing we do all the time, it's one of the first uses you learn for ki, normally without really realising it unless you're specifically being taught how. A lot of martial artists can use it to one degree or another although most of them never know what they're doing. It's kind of instinctive when you get to the right level. I think you're basically at that level now, even though you haven't consciously been learning martial arts, you've started using some of the techniques subconsciously. It's very interesting." Studying her for a moment, he held out his hand and formed a ki ball. "Can you feel anything when I do this?" She looked at the sky-blue energy ball in his hand and nodded slowly.

"Yes. There's sort of a fizzing sensation in my head. I thought that was normal when you were
using your energy manipulations?" He looked quizzically at her. "I mean, I've felt that before. All the way back to when you made the crater in the park with that first monster. It felt like my head was full of soda, it fizzed so much. It was almost painful." Ranma and Kasumi exchanged glances.

"No, that's not normal," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Not for the average person in the street. They might feel something with so much energy output, but it would just be a momentary discomfort, a sort of mental pressure. What you're describing is much more unusual. To pick up the output from such a small amount of energy you'd need to really be quite sensitive." After a moment, he grinned. "Here, catch." Flipping her the ball of energy he looked amused as she squeaked and frantically grabbed instinctively at it.

"Holy crap!" she yelped, suddenly finding herself holding an orange sized ball of ki. It sat in her hand as if it had real mass, although there was no weight to it. He laughed, as she slowly relaxed when it didn't blow her hand off her wrist. "What the hell did you do that for?" she demanded, staring at it in fascination. Her hand tingled, in a manner that was almost relaxing.

"Trying to prove something. Right, hold your hand steady in front of you. Yes, like that. Now, tell me what you feel." She alternated glancing at him and the ki ball, concentrating on keeping her hand still.

"It tingles. Like a slight electric shock, but not painful."

"OK, good. That's my ki, I'm keeping it stable. That's why it's safe for someone else to handle. I did the same thing for Serena in LA, although this one doesn't have as much energy in it. Now, I'm very slowly going to pass control over to you. Tell me what you feel as I do." Slightly worried, Nabiki nodded, looking at him and her sister next to him. Kasumi didn't seem too concerned. Aiko, who was sitting next to her, shuffled slightly further away, grinning when Nabiki glared at her.

"Just in case."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she snapped, returning her attention to the ki ball in her hand. Aiko giggled. "OK, it's tingling more. A lot more. Ow, that's kind of painful now." Ranma nodded as she spoke, then the tingling backed off a little.

"Good. How's that?"

"Better. Not painful, but pretty intense."

"OK. Now, concentrate on it. Feel it. Try to see it, inside your head. Close your eyes if it helps." The brunette followed his instructions, staring at the ball of translucent light, then closing her eyes and trying to sort out the weird feelings it produced in her. Slowly she became aware of the energy from the 'inside' as it were, a very odd feeling. It made her hand warm, like holding it in the sun, but cold at the same time, like water was running over it. It was a very strange mix of sensations. After some time she felt she could almost see the ball with her eyes shut, shimmering and glowing in the darkness behind her eyelids. "Can you feel it?" She nodded slowly, looking slightly puzzled and also intrigued.

"This is a very strange thing," she said quietly. Opening her eyes she looked at the ball and gasped, nearly dropping it. It had changed colour to a pale green. Ranma grinned.

"Very impressive. You picked that up a lot faster than I did."

"What's going on?" she asked faintly. He laughed, while Kasumi smiled proudly.

"That's all your ki. My energy was the trigger, but now you're supplying it all. I transferred control
over to you while you were concentrating on it. See how long you can hold it.” Staring at the
energy ball with fascination she lifted it closer to her face, inspecting it closely. There seemed to be
an internal structure to it that was slowly rotating, layers of complexity she'd never expected but
could actually feel.

"Wow," she mumbled, gazing at the thing in her hand. Tamiko glanced at Aiko, who raised an
eyebrow herself. "How is this possible?" she asked, looking sideways at Ranma. He smiled a little.

"Well, like I said, you have quite a talent for energy manipulation. That's been obvious for some
time. Linking to the wards has probably boosted that a bit, it kind of unblocked some pathways in
the same way a year or two of advanced martial arts, or our form of it anyway, would have done.
Gave you a jump on the whole process, in a way. You'll still need a lot of training to get good at it,
but this is a start. I provided you with a... seed, or pattern, with that ki ball. Transferring the control
slowly to you let you work out how to keep it stable by following my pattern. Whether you can
produce it from cold at this point I'm not sure, I kind of doubt it, but it wouldn't take much practice
to get to that level. Although clearly, once it's running you can stabilise it perfectly well."
Impressed with herself, feeling slightly faint at the possibilities, she looked at the thing in her hand
then back at him.

"So, what does this really mean?" He shrugged.

"It's final proof that you have what it takes to learn ki control, special techniques using it, and most
likely our magical system. It also gives me some ideas on how to do that without the martial arts
mastery, although I'd highly recommend that even so. You get a lot out of it other than the fighting
abilities, and it would make the ki control much easier to learn. That said, I'm pretty sure I can
teach you some interesting things pretty effectively without it. The ki ball should be easy, you're
most of the way there already. Hidden weapons should be possible with some work although it
won't be easy. The ki beam needs considerable power and experience, the energy blades even
more, but that's still within your reach I'd think. Ki reinforcement of strength, speed, endurance,
that sort of thing, that's easy by comparison, and will tend to happen more or less automatically as
you practice." Her mind whirling with the sudden possibilities, Nabiki almost dropped the ki ball in
her hand. As her attention drifted from it the manifestation swelled, dimmed, then guttered out with
a faint hiss.

"Aww. I screwed it up." She scowled at her hand. Kasumi giggled.

"Don't worry. That was extremely impressive for a first attempt. Much better than I managed, even
with help." Misaki grinned at her, biting into an apple with a crunch.

"It's very good. None of us can do that yet."

Ranma looked at her with interest. "See if you can bring it back. Concentrate on the feeling you
had when it was in your hand." She did as requested, but aside from a transient slight glow in the
palm of her hand and an incipient headache nothing happened. He looked slightly disappointed but
unsurprised. "I didn't think that would work, but it was worth a try. Let me think about it for a
while, I'll come up with some exercises for you to practice. I don't think it will take long to get you
to a point you can produce a ki ball like that easily."

"I can't believe it's something I could learn to do," Nabiki said, still staring at her hand. He
laughed.

"I've been telling you for nearly a year."

"I know, but it sounded so crazy. But, then, everything surrounding you guys is crazy. I guess it
was only a matter of time before I got infected." Grinning at him she picked up her coffee and finished it off.

"OK, let's leave that for the moment. On to the wards. We'll show you guys how to control them. The first part is how to open a hole for teleporting. You'll be most interested, Aiko, but the rest of you should learn as well. It's easiest if we demonstrate, it's not the sort of thing you can explain." They all nodded. "Pay attention to the feeling of the wards. Got it?" One by one then all nodded slowly. "Right, I'm going to open a hole. Remember what I do, you should be able to feel it." All of them could sense something happening. After a moment there was a sensation almost like a window was open somewhere not very well defined.

"Weird," Aiko said curiously, her eyes shut and her head cocked to the side. "Do that again." He did so.

"See what I did?"

"I think so. Let me try." It took her a few attempts but she managed in the end. When she got it wrong there was the sensation of polite refusal from the ward system, which almost seemed regretful that it couldn't comply. "Very weird. OK, I think I have it."

"That's it," Kasumi said, watching the energy patterns change. "Tamiko, you try it." The auburn-haired girl got it on the third attempt, having seen where her friend and team-mate was going wrong. Fumiko and Misaki both got it immediately. Turning to her sister, Kasumi smiled. "You try, Nabiki." Looking at her curiously, the middle sister tentatively attempted to duplicate what she'd felt, becoming rather surprised when the ward system almost eagerly accepted the wordless request.

"Hey, it worked!" she yelped, somewhat shocked. Kasumi laughed.

"Of course. Like I keep saying, it likes you."

"This is so weird," Nabiki replied with a grin.

"OK, that's the first part." Ranma smiled at them, then he and his wife took them through a number of mental exercises that taught them several useful things about the ward system. They learned how to use it to sense an attack on the building, block certain rooms from access in either direction, even control the internal defences which turned out to be rather formidable.

"Holy crap, Ranma," Aiko muttered as she studied what her magic senses were telling her. "I had no idea this system was so dangerous." He laughed slightly.

"You weren't meant to. That's kind of the point. You guys have always been trusted guests, so you didn't even really notice the system, and it allowed you in and out. The anti-teleport system is always running as is the surveillance blocking stuff, but the defences would only kick in if this place or one of us was attacked. If that happened, well, it would take something pretty incredible to get through. Most threats would cease to exist fairly quickly."

"I'll say. The amount of power here is horrifying."

Kasumi smiled. "In many ways it's a huge magical battery. All the ward users can pump power into it, which gets stored for future use. We've been pushing power into the system for nearly four years now. It will take a small amount from you lot as well, which is how it keeps contact with you, but you can push more in if you want. You don't have to, though. You can also pull power out in an emergency."
"What's the distance you can connect to it over?" Fumiko asked curiously. Ranma shrugged a little.

"I'm not entirely sure. Certainly, once you're connected to it, probably anywhere on the planet. It may well work for you through portals. It does for us. Up until now we've been the only ones using it, plus Happosai of course, but he's not around very much at the moment. We'll have to experiment a bit. With so many more people added in the complexity of the system will increase which will probably add some interesting effects."

Nabiki looked at them. "Do we all have equal access to it?" The martial artist smiled a little and shook his head.

"Not quite. Kas and I, and Happosai, have what in computer terms would be super-user access. We created it, and it knows it. You're all at a slightly lower level. We could override your access but not the other way around. Not that we would. We'll add information to it that designates your apartments as personal space, which will have their own sub-wards that only you can control. We could only access them in a real emergency. Is that all right?" The four girls exchanged glances, then nodded.

"That's fine, Ranma," Aiko said. "We trust you. This is your building after all. And your home." Kasumi smiled at her.

"It's your home as well. We trust all of you completely or we wouldn't have invited you to live here in the first place. All of this is just the way the system is set up. We were being very careful and paranoid when we designed it." The shorter woman grinned.

"We know. Don't worry, we don't mind."

Ranma turned to his sister-in-law again. "The key-card I gave you has a spell on it as well, you'll find it almost impossible to lose. That one cost us quite a lot. It keyed to you when I gave it to you." She nodded.

"That was what the tingle I felt was?"

"Yes. It's locked permanently to you now. No one else can use it."

"Cool." She pulled it out of her pocket and looked at it for a moment, then put it away again.

"Just run it through the reader, you know the process." Looking at her watch, Nabiki stood.

"I'm going to have to go in a minute. My first class of the new semester starts in an hour."

"I'll jump you over there, Nabiki," Aiko offered.

"Thanks." She headed to her room to pack. When she came back carrying her bag she found Aiko had changed into her uniform.

"I'll work out some exercises for you, Nabiki," Ranma said, smiling at her from the sofa. "In the mean time, when you're in private and have some spare time, it wouldn't hurt to see if you can recreate that ki ball. I don't know whether it will work or not, but even trying will help build your ki control. When you do get it, you'll progress pretty quickly." He grinned. "We'll have you storing entire roomfuls of stuff away in ki pockets by the end of the summer."

Laughing, she waved to him and the others, then she and Aiko vanished with the usual flash.
Staring at her hand and the small greenish ball of light sitting in it, Nabiki slowly sat up on her bed. Risking looking away for a moment she glanced around her small dormitory apartment, noticing the way the otherwise dark room was lit by a flickering illumination from the ki manifestation in her hand, then returned her attention to it. "Holy crap," she mumbled. "I did it. I can't believe it." She'd been intermittently trying to recreate the feeling she'd had the time Ranma had walked her through the process a couple of weeks ago, managing to produce small flashes of light and short-lived glows, but nothing stable. Yet, suddenly, something had sort of clicked and it all came together. Now she had an egg-sized ball of light sitting on her palm.

Wide-eyed, she lifted her hand to her face and inspected it carefully from a few inches away. The internal structure of the thing was more complex than she'd ever realised from watching the others, something she found fascinating. Raising her other hand she gently tipped the ball into it, watching with a grin as it rolled around like it was a physical object. "Holy crap," she said again. Growing more confident she passed it from hand to hand, then started tossing it into the air and catching it. Her experimentation came to an abrupt end when she fumbled the catch and the ki ball dropped to the floor, where it exploded with a sharp crack that made the windows rattle.

"Oh, shit!" she yelped, looking at the scorch mark on the carpet. A small amount of smoke rose from it, along with a smell of burnt plastic, causing her to dive for the window and quickly swing it open, hoping that the smoke detector wouldn't go off. It was about eleven at night, the chaos of a sudden fire alarm would be extremely embarrassing. Luckily the smoke drifted away without triggering anything untoward. Slowly relaxing, she stared at the carpet. 'There goes my deposit on this place. I wonder what I can say caused that!' A knock on the door made her jump violently, then look guilty. Standing she moved to the door and slowly opened it, to see a girl she knew from across the hall looking at her with mild worry.

"Hey, Nabiki. What on earth was that noise? It sounded like an explosion! Are you all right?" She smiled a little.

"I'm fine, Miki. I knocked over a lamp and the bulb broke. It was quite loud." The short-haired girl sniffed.

"Smells like something got burned. Are you sure everything is OK?"

"Yes, the carpet got a little scorched though. It stinks. I'm going to have to clean it up now, which is a pain, before I can go to sleep." Miki smiled sleepily.

"All right. I was just a little worried, that's all. Good night."

"Night, Miki. Thanks for being concerned." The girl headed back to her room and Nabiki closed the door again, leaning against it and feeling relieved that she'd been able to come up with a believable story on the fly. 'I hope no one else heard it,' she mused, kneeling down and looking at the carpet, which was definitely the worse for wear. A spot some ten centimetres across was badly burned, almost crumbling to dust, while around it a blackened ring stretched another ten centimetres or so. The floor under the carpet seemed mostly intact although blackened as well. 'Ick. That's kind of scary, I don't think that had any power at all in it compared to what Ranma and Kasumi can manage, but look at the damage. That would really hurt if someone got in the way.' Thinking about it, she shook her head slowly. 'I did that. All by myself. I can't believe it.' Gradually, a huge grin spread across her face.
Soun watched with Genma as his youngest daughter jumped back and forth across the floor of the Dojo, deflecting the blows Shampoo was raining down on her with precision and grace. Wincing a little as a kick got through and nailed her in the ribs, he then smiled as she grabbed the other young woman's leg, using it as leverage to spin her through the air and into the wall. Shampoo caught herself mid-flip, bouncing off the wall and back into the fight, smiling slightly. He turned to his old friend.

"I'm very impressed. Some of those moves are remarkable. She's improved a lot in the last few weeks." Genma nodded, watching the sparring with a practised eye.

"Yes. I have to say, my friend, I would never have thought a year ago that she would ever reach this level." He glanced at Soun slightly apologetically. "You understand why." The other man nodded, returning his gaze to the match.

"I do. Very much so. What those two girls did for her is... incredible. Not to diminish the work my daughter has put in herself in any way, but without Yori and Chou I very much doubt she'd ever have gotten this good. She has a long way to go, I think, but I also think she could become very good indeed. Shampoo seems to be improving as well, she was getting rusty." Genma laughed.

"I think that was the whole idea behind Cologne suggesting this. The girl needed a sparring partner, so she arranged to make one. I'm surprised that the old woman would trust Akane with these techniques, but impressed with how well she's learning." They watched as the two young women traded blows for a few minutes, before Shampoo suddenly accelerated to a much higher speed and took Akane down easily, pinning her on the mat. The youngest Tendo winced a little, then indicated submission. Standing Shampoo offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Well done. You've got that set of moves running very smoothly now, we just need to work on your speed. Once you master that we can learn the next set." Akane grinned, picking a towel off the bench along the wall and wiping the sweat from her face, tossing Shampoo another one with her other hand.

"I still can't believe how much faster than me you can go," she replied, picking up a bottle of water and unscrewing the cap. Shampoo laughed.

"I've been doing this since I was about six or seven. I've got a lot of years practice on you, but trust me, you're picking it up well. I was the village champion, you remember. There aren't a lot of people who could beat me, even as out of practice as I've let myself become." Akane nodded, smiling, as she drained the bottle. "Great Grandmother wants to see how you're coming along at some point in the next couple of weeks. Lets work on getting those sequences quicker, that should impress her. A few more months like this and I think she'll teach you some of the special techniques. Those are fun." Looking pleased, Akane nodded. A sound from the doorway attracted her attention and she looked over to see Nabiki leaning there, grinning at her.

"I only caught the last few seconds of that, but it looks like you're getting pretty good, sis," the older woman said, straightening up and walking over to them. She nodded to Shampoo, who smiled back, then looked very slightly puzzled as she inspected the elder Tendo sister. After a moment she shook her head a little, dismissing whatever she thought she'd felt.

"She's coming along very well, Nabiki," the Chinese woman said, looking pleased. "Faster than I'd hoped, in fact. It's a pity she couldn't have begun this training ten years ago, she might have ended up almost as good as I am!" Grinning at her friend, she giggled when Akane rolled her eyes, then smiled. Nabiki snickered.
"Well, there were extenuating circumstances..."

"OK, girls, push off now, we need the Dojo for classes," Soun said with a grin as he came over followed by Genma. "The students will be here soon." Akane nodded, smiling at him. "Well done, by the way, Akane. I'm very proud of your progress." She looked pleased, grinning at the praise, before she and Shampoo turned and left. Nabiki watched them go, then turned to her father.

"She's definitely becoming quite good from what I saw," she said. Soun nodded, also watching as the two women left the Dojo.

"Yes. I'm both proud and impressed." He looked at his middle daughter, smiling. "How are your own studies going? Are you back for long?"

"They're going very well, and just for the weekend. I needed a break, I haven't been home for over a month. How are your classes going?" Soun turned to watch as his students began to arrive.

"Very well. We haven't picked up any more students since Christmas, but there have been one or two enquiries. To be honest, this is probably the most we can handle right now, but as they learn we'll be able to take on a few more. Mariko is really becoming quite good. She's got a lot of promise. That young lad Kyo also shows signs of some real talent if he keeps at it. He's not as strong as he should be yet but he's remarkably quick." Genma went over to the group of students and began talking to them, explaining the lesson plans for the day. Turning back to his daughter the Tendo elder smiled again. "It's nice to see you, daughter. I need to get to work now, but we'll talk later." Nabiki nodded, smiling back, then walked toward the door. Soun watched her go with an affectionate look, tempered with slight puzzlement. There was something very slightly different about her he couldn't quite put his finger on...

After a moment he shrugged, chalking it up to his imagination, then walked over to his friend and their students. Soon they were involved in the lesson.

"That's it. Now, put your hands like this, near your waist. Yes, like that. It's not essential, but it helps focus it at this point. Put a little more power in, yep, that's good. Now, push your hands out and concentrate on forcing the energy towards the target." The orange-sized ball of green ki shot across the room and hit the pile of steel plates with a loud bang, leaving a slightly glazed spot and a curl of vapour. "Perfect. Very good indeed. The energy output isn't huge yet, but it's not bad at all for only two months practice." Ranma grinned at his sister-in-law, who grinned back, impressed with herself.

"I still can't believe I can do that," she burbled, full of joy at her own growing abilities. Ranma laughed.

"I know what you mean. I felt the same way when I first worked it out. It took a long time before I just took it for granted, and even now sometimes I find myself wondering how things got to this point. It's pretty weird." He studied her for a moment. "How do you feel? Tired, depleted at all?" She thought for a moment, probing her own ki levels in the manner she'd slowly learned over the past few weeks.

"Well, I can feel the difference. But it's not huge. I could do that quite a few times before it really took it out of me." Nodding, he smiled.

"Good. That agrees with what I can sense. It's important not to deplete your reserves too much, you need that energy, it is after all your own life. If at all possible try never to let it drop below about half what you start with, unless you have a real emergency. When you get more practice I'll show
you techniques for pulling ki from the environment to replenish your reserves, which can speed up
the recharging, but at this point it's more important to learn how to manipulate what you already
have naturally. Now, let's try that again a few times. You've got the precision but we need to speed
the process up, you're still too slow. Then we can go upstairs and join the others in the practice
room for the breathing and visualisation exercises." Nabiki nodded, turning to face the practice
target again. A few seconds later the room rang to the sound of another ki shot hitting the target.


Eventually she turned back to him. "That's it. I'm starting to feel it now."

"OK. That was very good. You've speeded up quite a bit. A few more sessions then we can work
on increasing the power a bit." Nodding, Nabiki looked thoughtful.

"I have a question." He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "I've been looking at the ki ball, or
more specifically the internal structure of it." Now he looked slightly puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I noticed that first time that the ball is more than just a ball, it's quite a complicated three
dimensional structure. It reminded me of something, so I did a little research. The nearest thing I
can find to what I can see in it is the sort of complex magnetic field structure that is being
researched as a method of creating a stable fusion reactor, in what they call a tokomak. It's not
identical, and clearly it's not a magnetic field, but there are similarities." He was nodding slowly.

"OK, I can see that. I have to admit, I never really thought of that before, but now you mention it
there is a similarity. I remember seeing a TV program on that subject last year sometime."

"I saw the same one, that's what gave me the idea. Anyway, I was wondering if it was possible that
the internal energy structure could be modified?" Leaning against one of the pillars in the basement
Ranma studied her with interest.

"To what end?" She waved a hand slightly, trying to put into words what she'd been puzzling over.

"I'm not completely sure. But I have this nagging feeling that it might be useful. Look, the amount
of energy in the ki ball is something you can control, right?" He nodded. "The damage you can
cause with it is down to the amount of energy. But, it's also down to the energy density, as far as I
can work out. Like, for instance, a brick moving at one speed and a bullet moving at a much higher
speed could have the same total energy, but the bullet will cause more damage in a smaller area
specifically because that energy is applied over that smaller area." He nodded again, slowly and
thoughtfully.

"Interesting. Once again, I didn't think of it in those terms. But it makes sense. Hmm." Holding out
his hand he produced a small ki ball and inspected it closely. "I've noticed the structure inside it
before, it's difficult not to when you're using your own life energy, after all. But I didn't really give
it a lot of thought. Perhaps I should have. It's all patterns, like our magic is, after all. Everything is
ultimately a pattern in energy, even matter." He grinned at her. "Physics becomes metaphysics, in a
way. Even though magic and physics only have a nodding acquaintance at best." She laughed, then
watched as he studied the ki ball on his hand.

"I wonder..." he mumbled, looking at it, then half-closed his eyes. "Hmm. OK, yes, perhaps if I..."
After a moment the ball shivered and began to shrink. Nabiki watched wide-eyed. "Wow. That's
interesting." The shrinkage continued, the ball glowing brighter and brighter, until it was a pinprick
of brilliant blue-white light that was eye-searingly bright. Shading her eyes Nabiki squinted at it.
She could feel that the total energy was basically the same but it radiated danger in a way that the original ball didn't. "Now that is interesting," Ranma mused, staring at it for a moment. Turning he faced the target plates, then over his shoulder, said, "Stand behind me," waiting until Nabiki was directly behind him peering around his body before he fired the tiny ki ball at the target.

It screeched across the room with a high-pitched whine, disappearing inside the top plate and leaving a hole a couple of millimetres across. Almost instantly there was a huge bang, causing the top plate to bulge, then slowly tip forwards, crashing to the concrete floor with an echoing boom that shook the entire basement and made dust dribble from the ceiling. Both of them slammed their hands over their ears as the echoes died away.

"Holy shit!" Nabiki squeaked. Ranma muttered to himself, walking over and staring at the thick steel plate on the floor. There was a substantial crater on the back of it where the compressed ki ball had exploded, showing signs of extreme heat, with splashes of molten steel sprayed outwards from it.

"That was impressive," he said quietly. Turning to his sister-in-law, he grinned. "Congratulations. You just came up with your first special technique." She stared at him.

"You're the one who just blew up half the basement."

"But it was your idea. Therefore it's your technique." Laughing, he squatted down and easily picked the ton-plus plate up, returning it to it's original position. "Now, we just have to make sure you can use it." Motioning her back to the start position, he asked her to form a ki ball again.

"Right. Now, feel the internal structure. Got it?" She nodded. "OK, what I did was basically squeeze it. It took a couple of attempts to kind of get hold of it, I guess, but then I pushed from all around and it shrank. Give it a try." She looked at him, then at the ball of energy in her hand, before tentatively poking it with her ki abilities. Nothing much happened the first few times but eventually her eyes widened as it slowly began to compress down.

"It's working," she yelped with delight. He grinned.

"Keep at it. Don't let go or it will try to expand again." Her brow furrowed as she concentrated, sweating a little.

"It's pushing back."

"I know. Push harder. When you get to a point you think you can't squeeze any harder, just try to hold it there." This point came when the ball was about a quarter the size it had originally been. It was now glowing very brightly, although it was a long way off the intolerable brilliance of the one Ranma had produced. "Very good. Can you make it any smaller?" She shook her head, sweating fiercely.

"No. This is as much as I can hold. It's really pushing back hard now."

"That's OK. It's not bad for your current level. Try firing it at the target." Facing the stack of plates she went through the exercise she was now familiar with, watching as the ball shot downrange to impact with a much louder bang than any of her previous shots. The plate visibly jumped a few millimetres off the floor, while there was a fist-sized dent in it, dribbles of molten steel running down the plate.

"Wow." She slumped a little. "That was very difficult." Ranma went and examined the impact zone, returning with a grin on his face.
"But worth it. That increased the damage to a pretty impressive level even though the total power was fairly low. Pumping a lot of power into it would be extremely dangerous indeed." He seemed pleased. "That's a very effective technique. I wonder if it works with the ki beams as well as that? I'm not going to try indoors, that's for sure!" Putting his hand on her shoulder he looked proud.

"Very well done indeed, Nabiki. I've been using these ki techniques for about six years and I never thought of that. I don't know that anyone has. You have a gift for this sort of thing." She smiled, rather tiredly. "Come on, let's get something to eat. You look and feel pretty depleted. That took a lot out of you. Don't worry, you'll get more efficient at it with practice." Heading for the elevator they went upstairs.

Cologne sat calmly inspecting the two women sparring in the back yard of the Cat Cafe, Mousse beside her looking quite impressed. "She's not bad," he commented, his eyes on Akane as she ducked a swing from Shampoo, returning a series of punches at least a third of which landed on the other woman's ribs. Shampoo controlled her expression masterfully but it was clear to the elder that she'd felt it. Akane wasn't as fast as her great-granddaughter but she was extremely strong.

"Indeed. As I suspected, she has the makings of a fine warrior now that her uncontrollable rage seems to be... controlled." A small smile came and went. Mousse raised an eyebrow, that was perilously close to funny. The two women fought until Cologne rapped her cane on the ground. "Enough." Both combatants immediately halted, bowing to each other before turning to the Amazon elder. Shampoo was favouring her left side while Akane winced a little when she put her weight on her right leg.

"Shampoo, well done. You have taught Akane very effectively. I'm glad to see that you seem to be regaining the abilities you so amply showed when we were in the village. I'm sorry I allowed you to slack off so much." The younger woman nodded, looking pleased and embarrassed in equal measure.

"Thank you, elder," she said formally. Cologne smiled a little. Turning to Akane she inspected her.

"Akane Tendo. I'm genuinely impressed. This was at least half an experiment, but I'm very pleased to see how seriously you seem to be taking it. I see no reason to stop at this point. I think that in, let's say, two months, with similar progress I will start you on some of the secret special techniques." Akane grinned, then nodded.

"Thank you, elder," she said, also formally. The old Amazon woman smiled more widely.

"Well done, Akane. I'm very pleased. Keep it up. Shampoo, take Akane and feed both of you, you look hungry. When you've both eaten I'll have a look at your ribs and Akane's knee, it's obviously not quite right." They nodded and headed inside, Shampoo helping her friend who was now limping noticeably. The elder watched them go.

"What are you thinking, elder?" Mousse asked respectfully but curiously. After a moment Cologne turned her head and looked at him.

"I'm not quite sure," she said slowly. "This was, as I said, something of an experiment. I wondered if the Tendo girl had what it took to be a decent warrior. Oh, she made an impressive berserker, there was little doubt about that, but such people are usually more of a problem than a solution except in very specific and unusual circumstances. Since those magical girls fixed her unpleasant infection and set her on the path to something approaching sanity, though, I wanted to see if she could suppress her temper and really learn to fight properly. Apparently she can. I wasn't sure what would happen, but this is better than I hoped for." Falling silent she stared at the young man for a
moment, then smiled.

"It will be interesting to see how far she progresses. I was getting bored, this is a pleasant surprise."
Cackling with laughter, she hopped up onto her cane. "It will also be interesting to see her reaction to some of the other, more difficult training methods..." As she hopped away Mousse winced in sympathy.

"Good luck, Akane. You're going to need it. That old bat has a nasty streak," he muttered to himself, before getting up and going to look for some food himself.

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Tamiko sighed. "Mom, I've got everything I need. You've seen this apartment, it's fine. You don't have to keep buying me stuff." Kasumi listened quietly, pouring them each a cup of tea, a small smile on her face. "No, I've got a washing machine. You've seen it. Yes, it's a good one. No, there's a dryer as well." She rolled her eyes and Kasumi giggled silently.

"Yes, I have enough plates. And saucers. No, there are plenty of bedclothes. Yes, they're clean. Mom. Mom. I'm fine! I've been living here for three months so far." She sighed quietly again. "Yes, I love you too. Give my best to the others. I'll stop by tomorrow. OK. Bye." Pressing the disconnect button she dropped the phone to the table and glanced at Kasumi, shrugging with a smile.

"You see?"

"Yes, I do. Is she always like that?" The older woman handed her a cup. Tamiko accepted it with a nod of thanks, slumping a little on the sofa.

"Afraid so. Actually, I got away more easily than normal then. She can go on for hours." Laughing, Kasumi looked up as Ranma and Nabiki entered the room from the direction of the practice room, talking together and smiling. Ranma was currently female, dressed in her practice silks.

"How did it go?" the eldest Tendo sister asked. Ranma grinned.

"Pretty well. She's got quite a decent battle aura now when she tries, although her control needs work." Nabiki looked incensed.

"Do you know what she did?" she asked, aggrieved. "She made me hold a ki sphere in my hands while she tried to hit me with a bo staff, and poked me in the ribs if I let it fade. It's really hard to concentrate on holding the ki stable when someone's trying to hit you!" Rubbing her abused ribcage she looked momentarily annoyed, them smiled again. "I guess that's the point."

"Exactly. And you're coming along quite well. You only lost it three times today. Last week it was five." The red-head grinned. "We do need to start you on some proper basic hand to hand of some sort, but you seem to be getting faster even so. I nearly had to work at hitting you!" Nabiki giggled.

"Now, I know that's not true. You're so much faster than I am I can't believe it."

"Oh, that's true enough but honestly, you have gotten a lot quicker. And tougher, I poked you pretty damn hard a few times, most people would have ended up with a cracked rib once or twice but you've only got some bruises. Nice ones, though." She smiled at the middle sister, who rubbed her ribs and winced.

"Don't remind me." Laughing, Ranma ran her hand down the other woman's side, the blue glow quickly erasing the bruises. "I still find that incredible." Looking down at herself Nabiki felt her side, then smiled.
"One day I expect you'll be able to do it, sister," Kasumi said, offering her a cup of tea.

"You really think so?" The older woman nodded calmly.

"I do. It will take a while, but the basic healing is essentially ki based. Your control is coming along nicely. It will probably be a year or so before you can manage it, and the more complex parts require our magic as well which we haven't started you on yet, but I don't doubt you will be good at it." Looking pleased Nabiki sat beside her sister while Ranma dropped down beside Tamiko.

"Where are the other three lunatics?" she casually asked, reaching out for the plate of sandwiches on the table. Tamiko smiled at her, accepting the one she was handed.

"Aiko is with her mother, helping her with some shopping. Misaki is at the garage rebuilding a Honda NSX engine, she's been working on it for three days now. I'm not sure where Fumiko is, she wandered off a while ago to meet some friends." Nibbling her sandwich she looked pensive. "It's been incredibly quiet the last few weeks. We haven't had to do the magical girl bit for ages. I can't work out if that's good or bad, but at least we're not running around in the cold. I don't mind it in the summer, or even the spring, but until recently it's been much too cold for bare legs." Ranma snickered.

"But they're such nice legs! You're always telling us that." Nabiki started laughing while Tamiko grinned.

"That's true. But they look better a healthy skin colour, not so blue." Smiling gently Kasumi took a sandwich as well.

"I've been working on the clothing spell some more. I think I might be close to working out a method to switch it off." Sitting up Tamiko stared at her.

"Really? That would be wonderful. All joking aside, it's a massive pain." Nodding Kasumi looked pleased.

"Yes, it's a complicated little spell but I'm making some progress. It will require some delicate, um, editing, I suppose is the right word, of your inherent magic, but I think it's possible. I want to be sure I have it right before I try it, though. Perhaps a couple of weeks or so and we could try it."

"The others will be very pleased," Tamiko said happily. Turning to Nabiki, she asked, "How is the rest of your training coming along?" The brunette smiled.

"Better than I ever expected. The ki shots are pretty easy now, and I've got the compression to about eight times. It's really hard to go further than that, I just don't have the power." Tamiko nodded understandingly.

"I know. I can manage about fifteen or so, Misaki can do nearly twenty. That's a very powerful technique you invented." The other woman looked a little embarrassed.

"It was just an idle thought. I had no idea it would work so well." Ranma smiled at her.

"That's how a lot of the best ideas work. My ki beams and the healing were basically the same way. There are some other techniques I came up with at the same time that are even better, but it will be a while before any of you are at a level to use them." Tamiko and Nabiki exchanged curious glances. The red-head smirked. "It's a surprise."

"We'll have to start you all on hidden weapons at some point soon," Kasumi suggested, sipping her tea. "You're nearly at a level where you could start to use it." Nabiki looked interested.
"I thought they already used something like that?" she asked slowly. "I mean, their weapons seem to disappear in that manner, and Misaki must have about fifty kilos of food stashed away somewhere."

Tamiko giggled. "It's not quite the same thing. Our magic gives us access to a smallish subspace pocket we keep the weapons and a few essentials in, but it's nothing like as flexible or effective as their hidden weapons technique. That allows for multiple ki pockets, which are much larger than we can manage. It's a lot more useful." Nodding with understanding, Nabiki looked at her sister.

"I'd certainly like to learn that technique. I know how useful you find it."

"You have a little way to go yet before you could really use it, but you're close. All of you are coming up to a similar level in ability, although the others have more raw power for obvious reasons. You'll catch up eventually, though." Kasumi took another sandwich, looking content. Ranma looked at the clock.

"We're going to have to get back to the university soon. The coursework is starting to pile up and we each have several lectures we need to attend in the next couple of days." Nodding, Tamiko stood.

"Thanks for the tea and the sandwiches, guys. I'll see you later. Nabiki, nice to see you again. Keep up the training, I want to be able to see what you can do at some point." She grinned, then left the apartment. The middle sister looked at the other two.

"I need to get back as well, I have a paper due in three days. I don't think I'll be able to come over until Thursday." Hugging her quickly, Kasumi stood.

"Keep practising the exercises," she advised. "But keep the power level low. We don't want you making any more holes in your carpet..." Nabiki laughed, getting up and picking up her coat.

"I'll try to keep the destruction to a minimum. See you guys later." Waving to Ranma who waved back she headed out the door, getting into the elevator and pressing the button for the ground floor. As she was entering the train station a few minutes later she noticed a familiar policeman walking past. She nodded to him, and Sergeant Harada nodded back politely although with a slightly puzzled expression. Privately amused she headed for her platform.

Nodoka stepped to the door of the kitchen, peering out at the yard while drying her hands on a towel, having just finished cleaning the sink. The sun was bright and it was surprisingly warm for early April. She could hear noises coming from the Dojo as Soun and her husband taught their students, synchronised yells and cracking sounds showing they were working on some sort of power training exercise. Hanging the towel up she walked into the garden, looking around at the various plants which were beginning to sprout vigorously. 'I'm going to have to start pruning and tidying up,' she mused, bending to investigate a rose bush. A thump behind her attracted her attention, making her look over her shoulder. Shampoo was standing on the lawn having clearly just jumped over the wall, looking up at the top of it where a pair of hands could be seen holding on. She was grinning.

"Come on, Akane, it's not that difficult. Just jump over the thing. It's only three metres or so." A stream of vicious mutters came from the other side of the wall, making Nodoka smile to herself. The hands disappeared and she could hear footsteps heading away, then rapidly approaching again. A grunt of exertion and Akane got half-way over the wall, her knees thumping into it and making her belly-flop over the top, then slowly tip into the garden and land on the ground on her back with a thud.
"Ow."

Shampoo was rolling on the ground laughing hysterically, while Nodoka smiled, amused. Walking over she offered the youngest Tendo girl her hand. "Are you all right, Akane?" she asked. The younger woman nodded, painfully levering herself to a sitting position, then standing with the aid of the Saotome matriarch. She glared at her friend who stared back wide-eyed, before collapsing in renewed laughter.

"I'm fine, thanks, Auntie," she said, limping over to Shampoo and kicking her in the leg. Nodoka chuckled.

"That looked like it hurt."

"It wasn't comfortable, that's for sure," Akane groused, rubbing her kneecaps. Shampoo sat up still giggling.

"You need more up and less forward," she helpfully suggested. The other young woman scowled.

"Thanks a bunch," she replied, not looking all that thankful.

Snickering, Shampoo bounced to her feet. "You need to learn this. Everyone else can roof-hop, even Kodachi, and you're probably better than she is now. I know you're more than strong enough, you just need to get the coordination and the ki control. Even Genma can do it and look at the size of him!" Nodoka muffled a sudden laugh, making both young woman glance at her with small smiles.

"He is quite large," his wife admitted, giggling a little.

"Come on, let's try again. Remember, more up." Sighing, Akane followed her friend across the garden, then watched as Shampoo ran back towards the wall, lightly jumping on top of it, then gracefully running back and forth for a moment, before motioning to the other woman. Gritting her teeth, Akane charged the wall, putting everything she had into a vertical leap. Her height was impressive, easily clearing the top of the wall this time, although her aim left something to be desired as she flew over the top of it flailing her arms. A descending scream ended in a loud crash somewhere on the other side. Nodoka winced as Shampoo turned to look down into the street with an amused expression.

"Too much up that time, Akane," she called, dropping off the wall. Shaking her head but smiling Nodoka went back into the house.

"Are you sure this won't hurt?" Fumiko said nervously, looking at Kasumi. The older woman smiled at her comfortably.

"You won't feel anything, I think. It certainly won't be painful. Just lie down and relax." Looking slightly worried, the other woman did as requested, lying back on the bed in one of the spare rooms, her sister and the rest of her team watching intently. They'd drawn straws for the first one to try Kasumi's modification to their clothing magic, Fumiko having won. Or lost, depending on your point of view. Ranma peered over his wife's shoulder with interest while Nabiki watched from next to the other three girls.

"All right, I'm going to start now. Don't move, please, Fumiko." The girl nodded slightly then lay quietly. Kasumi ran her hands a few centimetres away from her body as if she was looking for something, zeroing in on a point over her chest. "Ah. There you are," she mumbled to herself, looking at something that wasn't physically present. Poking her finger into the middle of whatever
she could see Kasumi moved it around a little, while Ranma watched. "See? This bit here? That's the connection to this part, which is the clothing transformation spell. I need to either cut it or block it. Hmm. OK, let's try this." She concentrated, moving her hands around in a complex and delicate manner. Ranma nodded.

"That looks reasonable. You could tie it off there and we could test it before you make any permanent changes."

"That's a good suggestion." Kasumi nodded, prodding the magic some more, then pulled her hands back. "All right, that should do for a test. Fumiko, try powering up, let's see what happens." The girl on the bed was wearing some old, sacrificial clothing she didn't mind becoming a new uniform. She nodded, then flipped the mental trigger that activated her magic boost. The familiar internal sensation came and went, but her clothes didn't change. She grinned.

"Fantastic." Kasumi looked pleased.

"Does everything else feel normal?" After a moment's thought Fumiko nodded, smiling.

"Yes. Everything is working perfectly but that part. That's wonderful work, Kasumi."

"I'm not done yet, so power down, and let's make the change permanent." After a little more work she sat back. "That should do it. Try it again." Once more Fumiko powered up with no visible change. Nabiki could feel that her power level had increased very substantially, with the mental effect she was coming to associate with active magic as distinct from ki, but other than that she looked perfectly normal.

"That's amazing, Kasumi," Aiko said, smiling broadly. "I only wish we could have worked this out years ago. It would have been a lot less embarrassing." The eldest Tendo sister smiled.

"Thank you. I'm sorry it took so long to devise a fix, it's a very complicated bit of magic and I didn't want to risk damaging anything." She looked back to Fumiko. "I had an idea and changed it slightly from what I was originally intending. Essentially I set the default state of the clothing change to off, but left it in place. I patched it with a control section. Can you feel this?" Her hand glowed slightly as she moved it over the other woman's chest. Fumiko nodded slightly.

"Yes. That's a little like the normal boost trigger."

"I added it to that point. Now, here's the difference. See?" Once more Fumiko nodded. "Set it like that and power up, it will do what it's always done. Leave it off and the clothes don't change. Give it a try." With slight concentration Fumiko powered down, held the other mental trigger in the right state and powered up again. Her clothes instantly shifted into the familiar skimpy uniform. She grinned.

"I see. I can't think when that would be required, but it's there if I need it. Thanks, Kasumi." She sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. "Your turn, sis," she said to Misaki, standing and moving out of the way. Her sister eagerly took her place.

Half an hour later all four girls had the new clothing spell patch installed, all of them looking very pleased. Ranma and Nabiki were preparing lunch while the others laid the table. Kasumi had disappeared into the study, coming back a few minutes later with a pile of clothing in her hands. She dropped it on the table and looked at her friends, who were staring at her curiously. "I made these a while ago because I was sure we'd work out your magic eventually. I hope you like them." Lifting the top set of clothing off the pile she handed it to Aiko, who unfolded it with interest. She found herself holding a set of silk clothing clearly patterned on that of 'Yori' and 'Chou', only in the
dark blue with gold trim colour scheme of their normal uniforms. Holding it up to herself with a delighted smile she saw it would fit perfectly.

The others looked at her, then at the pile. Kasumi laughed. "There's two sets for everyone. Plus the boots, and if you want them, the gloves." She handed them out to the other three as Ranma and Nabiki came into the room carrying lunch. Nabiki inspected the clothing that Aiko was still holding against herself and grinned.

"It suits you. Looks like you've got a team thing going on."

"Thanks, Kasumi. Again." Aiko said, folding the clothing carefully and putting it on the sofa, before hugging her friend.

"You're welcome. You need something to wear. We should see if we can work out some sort of instant clothing change spell like some of the other magical girls use, but for now at least you have something somewhat less... risqué." They all laughed, before sitting down to lunch.

"Ahhh!" Akane yelled as she plummeted off the roof, frantically grabbing at the side of the house as it went past, her fingers grazing a windowsill and allowing her to redirect her momentum sideways. She shot three metres to the left, bounced off the wall of the Dojo, then coiled her legs under her as she headed for the courtyard wall. Pushing off hard she rose nearly to the level of the roof before reaching out for it, just managing to hang on and roll onto the tiles. Lying on her back she closed her eyes and breathed heavily, hearing light footsteps approach across the roof. A shadow fell over her face and she opened her eyes to see Shampoo smiling down at her.

"That was almost impressive, Akane. Although the panicked scream let it down a little." The Chinese girl giggled, then sat cross-legged next to her as she recovered. Eventually she felt well enough to sit up.

"I really thought I was going to hit the ground then," she said, looking at the roof where her jump had been intended to land.

"You didn't. Which is the important thing," her friend said, glancing at her and snickering a little. "You almost made it, in fact. I think you slipped when you jumped and didn't quite get the distance. We'll try again in a moment." She nodded slowly, lying back on the roof and letting her spinning head recover. A few moments later a voice from below made her sit up and look over the edge. Nabiki was peering up at them, a quizzical expression on her face.

"You OK, sis? That was quite a scream." Akane smiled weakly.

"Sorry. I missed." Grinning, Nabiki waved up at her, going back inside the house. The youngest sister turned to her friend, to find her looking after the middle sister with a puzzled expression.

"What's the problem, Shampoo?" she asked curiously. The Amazon shook herself a little.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm not sure there is one. It's just that lately, when I look at Nabiki, I get this weird feeling in the back of my head, like there's something I should be seeing but something's stopping me seeing it." She shrugged. "Must be my imagination. It's only Nabiki, after all." Standing, she dismissed the thought as unimportant. "Come on. Let's try again. I want to have you jumping across that gap at least nine out of ten times by this evening." Akane looked narrowly at her.

"And on the tenth time?"

"You fall, of course. That's the funny part." Shampoo laughed merrily.
Sergeant Harada looked up at the line of six young women running across the rooftops across the street in an implausible manner, smiling as each of them came to a gap in the buildings and somersaulted across it in turn. He could hear at least one of them laughing her head off in the process. Yori was in the front, while Chou brought up the rear. The other four he realised must be Aiko and her girls. In the last couple of weeks they seemed to have made a major change to their uniforms, the new ones showing a hell of a lot less skin but still looking very good, clearly based on Yori and Chou's normal clothing. He wondered what had brought that about. Glancing at Corporal Otani who was walking next to him, also watching the girls, he laughed.

"Did they join Yori and Chou, or did Yori and Chou join them?" he asked. Otani snickered.

"I can't really see Yori of all people joining another group. Can you?"

"Not really. She's more of a leader than a follower. Sometimes I think we've joined her..." Both of them chuckled, walking back to the station while behind them the line of magical girls leapt another gap, leaving a trail of giggles behind them.

Sitting on the back porch beside Nodoka, Cologne accepted a cup of tea with a smile of thanks on her prune-like old face. They watched as Shampoo and Akane jumped back and forth on the roof of the Dojo, sparring with each other, although clearly Akane was occasionally having to concentrate more on staying in the roof than the fighting. Shampoo was carefully controlling the match to ensure the other woman didn't come to grief. The Amazon elder nodded to herself. "Not bad at all. She's coming along very well."

"Was this the outcome you hoped for, Elder?" Nodoka asked quietly, sipping her tea, her eyes on the two young woman. Beside her the much older woman nodded slowly.

"Hoped for, yes. Expected, not quite. I feared that the young lady would find it too difficult and give up, or allow her temper to control her. I'd have had to bring it to a halt at that point. But she's both surprised and impressed me with her dedication. Pity we couldn't have gotten her to this point a decade ago, or even five years ago, but better late than never I suppose." She drank some tea looking satisfied. "If she can keep up this pace of learning, in a few years she will be very formidable. Just the last four months has brought her on immensely." Looking up at the other woman, she asked, "How are your husband and Soun getting along with their own efforts?"

Nodoka smiled slightly. "Much better than I expected. I have to admit, although I love my husband, I haven't thought much of him as a person for some time. You understand why, of course." Cologne nodded with a rusty chuckle.

"Oh, indeed I do."

"But, that said, he does seem to be trying to redeem himself in some way. He managed to pull poor Soun out of a bottle, which even now amazes me when I think about it, and he was the driving force behind the pair of them resuming teaching. He still has a lot to answer for, they both do really, but they seem to be doing surprisingly well at making good. From what I know their students are coming along well and they're earning enough to keep the Dojo and the household solvent, remarkably enough." Cologne nodded, returning her attention to the two women on the roof opposite. She winced slightly as Akane caught Shampoo in the shoulder with an impressive kick, making the other woman have to quickly flip backwards to evade the follow-up blow.

"Good strike," she murmured. "And Nabiki? I haven't seen her for a while."

"She's back for the weekend, but she popped out to the shops. She'll be back any moment. From
what I gather her studies are going very well. She seems to have decided to become something
called a forensic accountant after she graduates. I believe it combines most of her interests and
skills, including the... less proper... ones." Nodoka looked amused as Cologne chuckled again.

"Yes, that girl always impressed me with her ability to find things out. It's a good thing she didn't
want to go into the shadows to earn a living, although I suspect she'd be very good at that. Better to
be more or less legal."

"She seems to be spending quite a lot of her free time with her friends, those two medical students.
They're very nice girls, even if they have a somewhat non-traditional relationship." The Amazon
laughed.

"I'm very familiar with those 'non-traditional' relationships, Nodoka. In our culture they're not
uncommon, neither are they looked down on." The other woman flushed a little.

"I have to admit I still have slight difficulty with it. My own upbringing, you understand. My
mother would have been very... unimpressed. But she was always rather difficult." Cologne
glanced at the woman beside her with a slightly raised eyebrow, thinking of the irony of that
statement, while knowing full well that the other woman didn't see it. With a small smile she went
back to watching Shampoo and Akane.

Ten minutes later the front door opened and closed, followed by footsteps approaching through the
house. The middle sister appeared beside them, looking at her sister and Shampoo on the roof.
Nodoka looked up. "Hello, Nabiki, did you get what you needed?"

The young woman nodded. "Yes, thanks, Auntie. Hello, Elder Cologne. How are you? I haven't
seen you since Christmas."

"I'm well, thank you, Nabiki," Cologne said, her eyes still on the two girls on the roof. "How are
you doing?" She glanced up, then froze, staring at Nabiki, who was watching her sister spar. 'What
the hell...?' For a moment as she looked at the young woman with other than her eyes, she felt that
something enormous and incredibly dangerous was looking back, not in a particularly friendly
manner either. 'What is that?' she wondered, cautiously reaching out with a magical probe. The
pain that went through her instantly made her realise far too late that this had been a spectacularly
bad idea...

Nodoka and Nabiki both glanced at the Amazon elder as she made a small noise, then shook her
head. "Are you all right, Cologne?" Nodoka asked with concern. The old woman smiled weakly at
her.

"Yes, I'm fine, Nodoka. A bit of tea went down the wrong way, I think." She coughed a couple of
times. "I'll be all right. One of those small cakes would sort it out, I think." She reached for the
plate Nodoka helpfully passed her. Nibbling a particularly good lemon cupcake appreciatively, she
wondered what she'd been thinking about just then. It was just at the back of her mind, but she
couldn't quite bring it into view. 'Hmm. Can't be all that important, then. If it is it'll come to me.'
Glancing up at Nabiki she smiled at the slightly worried expression the much younger woman was
giving her.

"Don't worry, dear, I'm fine. Sit down and tell me about how your studies are going." Nabiki
nodded and sat beside them, taking the cup of tea that Nodoka passed her and accepting a cupcake
as well.
Chapter 39

Listening as Kasumi spoke that weird trade language, Nabiki shook her head in wonder. She turned to Ranma. "Is it difficult to learn?" she asked curiously. He smiled.

"It's less difficult than Mandarin, certainly. More logical than English, it's a synthetic language, with strict rules. But that's not to say it's easy. Are you interested in learning it?" She thought for a moment.

"I suppose it might be useful. Plus I'm just intrigued."

"I'll dig out my notes. There aren't really any Japanese-Trade language dictionaries yet, although it would certainly be useful to have one. When I get time perhaps I should write one." He grinned.

"I'm surprised there aren't any spells to teach languages, or even just automatically translate from one to another." He nodded.

"I know. I wondered that myself. It's not completely impossible, but it's appallingly difficult, apparently. There are rumours that a couple of demonic species have such a spell but no one seems to know for sure. It would be incredibly valuable if it existed. There are spells that help memory and retention, which can speed things like learning a new language up a bit, I've been meaning to look into them, but they're pretty low priority to us at the moment. For now you just have to do it the hard way. It helps to have someone to practice with." Kasumi finished her conversation and hung the phone up, turning to them.

"Uthryyl says he's got a few things we'll find interesting. He asked if we could meet him at their new warehouse, they're behind schedule and can't really take the time off to come over." The martial artist nodded with a smile.

"Why not? We can get some lunch on the way back." He looked at Nabiki, shimmering into 'Yori' in the process. "Want to come?"

"Yes, I'd like that. I like him and his lot." 'Yori' tossed her the disguise bracelet, which she clicked around her arm.

"Here. I think you might be able to learn this at this point, 'Yori' said, reaching out. "Watch what I do." Nabiki concentrated on the sensation of the bracelet being activated. "You see?"

"I saw something. Do it again." Obligingly the other woman turned the thing on and off a few times. "OK, I think I see. Like this?" Prodding it with a little bit of ki she winced at the slight mental feedback, but smiled as she felt the bracelet activate.

"Not bad. That's pure ki, which isn't really compatible with it, but it's close enough. Keep trying, if you can duplicate what I did you'll be somewhere close to being at the point to start learning our magic." 'Yori' grinned. Pulling out her phone she hit a speed dial number. "Hi, we're going to see Uthryyl. Any of you guys want to meet us there?" She nodded to herself. "Yep, that's the place. He's been there nearly a week so far. OK, see you there in about twenty minutes or so. Bye." She hung up and flipped the phone into nothingness again. "Aiko and the girls will meet us there as well."

Shortly the three of them walked up to a bigger warehouse than the one Nabiki had first met the demons at nearly a year before. 'Yori' knocked on the door, which opened a few seconds later. "Hi, Onkra."
"Hello, Yori, Chou. And Nabiki as well. Come in." The young female demon stepped aside, waving them in. In the cavernous interior they found Uthryyl and his team, including his wife this time, talking to Aiko and the others. He was showing them a huge pile of high-end coffee beans in vacuum packed bags with an expression of glee.

"I got a fantastic deal on twenty tons of this. It's extremely high quality. I've already sold it for a pretty impressive profit, and put in an order for two more batches the same size. Business is very good at the moment," he said, sounding very pleased with himself. His wife was poking at a small electronic device of alien manufacture, calculating something, with a thoughtful look on her face. As the three new arrivals approached he turned to them. "Hello, Yori. And you too, Chou, Nabiki. Right on time. We were just about to break for lunch."

'Yori' looked around curiously. "Yoshi decided to rent you this place after all, then?" she asked. He nodded.

"Yes. Thank you for introducing us. He wasn't sure at first, but the deal he originally had fell through, so when I talked to him again he was happy to help. We've agreed to use it regularly for the next two years, then look at our requirements. This is a big warehouse and half-empty, it should keep us going for a while. He's going to take on some of the local buying for us, so we just have to arrange transport when it's ready. It makes things easier for everyone."

"I thought I recognised it," Nabiki exclaimed. "This is where Ryoga had an uncomfortable interview." She snickered at the memory. 'Yori' nodded with a grin.

"That's it." Uthryyl was looking puzzled so she explained. When she finished he roared with laughter.

"Very good. You and your friends have a very effective method of dealing with troublemakers." Leading them all to a large side-room obviously intended as a cafeteria, they found a considerable amount of food available. Nabiki sniffed, then smiled, exchanging a glance with Misaki.

"Is that...?"

"Roast g'rargh. Yes. I thought you might notice." Uthryyl smiled. "Help yourself." Seconds later they were filling a couple of plates while the others waited their turn. When everyone had something to eat, they sat down around several tables. Once they'd eaten a little, Uthryyl turned to 'Yori'. "I've spent quite a bit of time looking into this security spell we talked about at your party a while ago. It took a while to track down anyone who knew about it. I finally found a mage who's an expert on the subject and is willing to discuss it with you, although he's not cheap." 'Yori' waved this off.

"We can afford it." He nodded, smiling.

"I know. Anyway, on your behalf I arranged to have him meet you, whenever you're ready. These are the coordinates of his home world, and his address." The demon handed her a piece of paper-like material with a complex set of numbers on it. "I told him it would most likely be within the next few days to a couple of weeks, if that's OK. If it's going to be longer I can let him know and we can rearrange it."

"That's fine, Uthryyl. Thanks. I'll go and talk to him in a couple of days."

"Talking to him I got a basic description of the spell and how it works. Misaki was essentially right. I think you probably were as well. It's based on some sort of perception distortion spell like those interesting little cards of yours, but considerably more complex. I didn't get all the details although
I'd be very interested in learning more at some point. From the sound of it the thing will probably fit your problem very well. I don't know how easily you'll find converting it to your weird magic system though. It might be easiest to just hire the fellow to apply it himself. He seemed open to the idea, that's his business after all. He's got a discreet but very good reputation. He came highly recommended." 'Yori' nodded, examining the paper he'd handed her, before folding it carefully and putting it away.

"I'll have to talk to him first but that might be simplest. I'd like to learn the spell anyway, but we'll see." The demon smiled, taking a few more bites of his food.

"The other thing is something I came across recently that I thought you might all find useful. I remembered some discussions we had a while ago about keeping your secrets, I know you were a little worried about how your electronics might eventually get compromised." He turned to his daughter. "Onkra, could you go and get the blue case? The one I showed you?" She nodded, leaving the room to return a few minutes later carrying a sort of briefcase with a complex lock on it. Putting it on the table in front of him she sat down again, watching with interest. Everyone was looking at the case curiously.

Uthryyl put his finger on the lock and seemed to go into a mild trance for a moment, then said something in his own language. The lock made a slight beeping sound, clicked twice, and the case lid popped up. Opening it he turned it around to show 'Yori' and the others the contents. Nestled in some sort of soft material inside were a number of small devices that bore some resemblance to cell-phones, although they clearly weren't. Picking one up 'Yori' looked at it, turning it over in her hands.

"What is it?" she asked. He looked pleased.

"It's a military grade communications system from a world quite a long way down the portal chain from here. They're extremely good at both magic and technology, this combines both in a way they haven't come across before. I'm led to believe the encryption on them is both unbreakable in any meaningful way and untraceable. They're highly restricted for export. I acquired them legally, don't worry about that, but you're not likely to see any more of them. Once they're individually associated to a specific user only that user can use the unit in question. Very high security. They're also damn near indestructible. The things are powered by the ambient magical field, so they don't need charging or anything of the like, although in some places with very low ambient magic you might need to provide your own power. I don't think you of all people would have any problem with that." 'Yori' inspected the unit in her hands with respect.

"Impressive." He grinned.

"That they are. I got about a hundred of them, they cost a fortune but I think it's worth it. These ones are for you." He pushed the case forward. She looked somewhat taken aback.

"Are you sure?" He nodded.

"Very sure. You've done us a lot of favours, it's time I paid some of it back. These will probably help you a lot, and add to your security." Glancing at her wife, who smiled back and nodded, 'Yori' eventually grinned at him.

"Thank you, Uthryyl. That's very good of you." He looked pleased.

"It's nothing. There are a dozen there, which should be enough for all of you plus some spares. I got the manual translated into the trade language, it's pretty comprehensive and tells you how to set them up, all that sort of thing. I'm going to provide my own people with them as well. I'll make
sure you have the call codes for all of ours when they're configured so you can call us. Let me have your codes as well." The martial artist nodded, leafing through the manual she'd found in the box.

"I will do."

"Oh, one other thing they do that's pretty remarkable. They work across worlds. At least to close ones. Here and our home are close enough that they can make contact, apparently." The black-haired young woman looked very impressed.

"Wow. That could be extremely useful."

"Quite." He grinned toothily. Showing her how the lock worked he transferred the control to her, then watched as she relocked the case. Putting it away in her ki pocket she grinned.

"New toys." They finished the meal, then chatted for a while, before the demons had to get back to work. Aiko teleported the lot of them back to the apartment building.

"That was nice of him," Nabiki said, sitting down. Ranma resumed his normal appearance and sat beside her.

"He's a nice guy. But yes, that was a very generous thing to do." Pulling the case and the paperwork from ki space, he handed the paper to Kasumi who studied it, while he unlocked the case and pulled out the manual again. Putting the case on the coffee table he sat back to read the documentation. Nabiki curiously extracted one of the communication units from the case and examined it. Tamiko removed another one and did the same.

They were about the same size as an ordinary cell phone, perhaps a little smaller, with what looked like a screen of some sort forming the entirety of one side. No buttons or switches were visible on the surface. What seemed to be the back was a matte black finish, while the other side was slightly shinier. Overall the things were only about a centimetre thick and quite light. Ranma was making occasional impressed sounds as he quickly leafed through the manual that had come with the devices. Eventually he put it down and picked one of the units up, looking closely at it. "OK. I think I see. The interface is quite programmable. These things are very impressive. Right, lets try this." Referring to the manual he put his hand on the device, then concentrated for a moment. Frowning slightly he moved his hand around a little until there was a sudden pinging noise.

"Ah. That did it. OK, the book says I do..." Picking the thing up he looked at it for a moment, then touched a spot on the apparent screen. None of the other could see anything that looked different, but his eyebrows went up. "Neat. That's really very clever."

"What is?" Nabiki asked curiously. He grinned.

"You can't see it. These things seem to use something a bit like the spell on the business cards. Now it's associated with me I can see the interface it's projecting, but no one else can. That's very clever." Staring at the device, he waved his hand over it, apparently touching something that only he could see. "Very clever indeed. Whoever designed this really knew what they were doing. I can see why they're restricted, this is probably years if not decades worth of research."

"You do realise that to the rest of us you're just waving your hand around like an idiot," Fumiko said with a smile. He snickered.

"I know. Hang on, let's get you all set up with them." Picking up another one he handed it to her. "Here. Put your hand on the front there, then locate the activation nodes. You'll feel it when you have your hand in the right place." The young woman followed his instructions, looking slightly
puzzled, then smiled as she felt what he meant.

"OK, I think I've got it."

"Now push a little power into it." She concentrated and was rewarded with the same pinging sound. Her eyes widened.

"Oh, wow. That's incredible."

"I think it inserts the visuals directly into the brain somehow. It must interface to the visual cortex."

"How the hell does it do that?" she wondered out loud, looking at something only she could see. He shrugged.

"No idea. The magic on this thing is unbelievably complex, never mind the tech. I've never seen anything like it." Picking up another one he handed it to Kasumi who was watching with interest. She managed to activate it quickly as well. Within a few minutes they all had one. Nabiki was the last to receive one of the alien communicators. He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "I think you can activate it. It's not much more difficult than the bracelet. Put your hand on it." She did so. "OK. Can you feel anything?" Concentrating she felt around with her slowly developing ki sense.

"There's something there. Like a kind of... bump? In space?" She giggled. "That doesn't make any sense." Nodding, he smiled.

"It's close enough. Can you feel more than one?" With a little work she could make out four of the slight knots of energy.

"Yes. Four of them."

"Good. Now, you need to kind of touch them all at once, then push a little power into them. That makes it get a lock on you, a bit like the wards did." Nervous despite herself she did as instructed. After a pregnant pause the now-familiar ping sounded, then something incredible happened.

"Holy shit," she managed, as a translucent series of lines and icons suddenly appeared stretched across her view. Slowly reaching out she experimentally prodded one of them, finding to her surprise she could actually feel something. "That's unbelievable." Poking the various symbols she watched as the 'display' shifted and changed. "This must look ridiculous," she thought to herself, having a sudden vision of a room full of people waving their hands around as if they were trying to catch invisible flies. She laughed to herself.

"Right. According to the manual, there should be an icon that's a sort of purple colour in the top left corner, it looks a little like two squiggly lines over a circle. Everyone see it?" There was a chorus of affirmations. "OK, that starts the setup process. Apparently it lets you customise the interface to your own preferences. The manual suggests that you lie down for that part, as it can be disorientating. The interface has a visual mode, a physical interaction mode, and a mental interaction mode, which can be combined. I think what it means is that it's possible to set it up so you can basically think at it, rather than wave your hands around like a nut. That may be the best thing to enable. There is some sort of interactive guide to help you through it, the book says." He glanced at his wife. "I'm going to lie down on our bed. You guys should probably do the same. Use the spare rooms if you like."

Standing he and Kasumi headed for their room. Nabiki went into the one she customarily used while the others found their own places to lie down. When she was stretched out on the bed she
took a deep breath, wondering what she was getting into, then decided it was too late to back out, reaching up and firmly poking the activation icon.

"Ohhh, god!" she moaned, as her entire world spun about her for a few seconds. There was a sensation of something prodding around in the back of her head for a moment, then a slightly metallic voice sounded.

#Hello, user. Language has been detected as classification Japanese, location is set to Tokyo, Earth.# All the icons visible suddenly had Kanji text beside them. #Welcome to the initial setup of the Kw'lyn Industries Mark Nine Gamma secure communications and sensory system. Please note that use of this system is restricted by planetary accord to authorised personnel only. Attempted use by unauthorised personnel is punishable by severe fines and incarceration. Please wait while authorisation status is verified.# There was a pause. #Authorisation verified. Please verbally indicate identity.#

After a moment, she tentatively said out loud, "Nabiki Tendo."

#Identity confirmed. Welcome, Nabiki Tendo. Please wait while this interface is calibrated. Indicate verbally the answers to questions that will be asked during calibration.# The display stretched to encompass her entire visual field, becoming a grid. #Can you see the edges of this display? Please indicate yes or no.#

"No."

#Are the grid lines evenly spaced and at right angles to each other? Please indicate yes or no.#

"Yes." The pattern changed to a grey scale.

#Does this pattern go from complete black to complete white? Please indicate yes or no.#

"Yes."

A series of tones played, ranging from a deep bass to an almost inaudible whistle. #How many discrete tones did you hear? Please indicate number.# She thought for a second.

"Fifteen."

#Thank you. Initial calibration complete. Advanced calibration beginning. No further user intervention is required. Note that you should be lying down for this section of the process as it can cause severe disorientation for a short period of time. When you are lying down, please indicate your readiness by stating the word begin .#

Taking another breath she said firmly, "Begin." Moments later she regretted it. Symbols and colours flashed across her view faster and faster, more than she could possible understand. Closing her eyes had no effect whatsoever. Weird noises came and went, strange smells seemed to blow past her. Even her mouth tasted strange. The effects lasted for just long enough she thought she was going to be sick, then abruptly stopped. Taking a few breaths she tried to keep her lunch down, then opened her eyes again.

#Calibration complete. Interface integration complete. Searching for local communications nets. Radio communications networks found. Local node in close proximity found. Please indicate if this node should be used.# Text appeared across her view as the other icons shrank away into the bottom left, almost out of her field of view. After a moment she recognised her own cell-phone number.
"Um, yes? Use it?" she tried. The text vanished.

#Choice confirmed. Interfacing with local node. Communications protocols established. Handshake complete. Local node and storage duplication in progress... Complete. Process finished. Searching for further nodes. None found in immediate proximity. Searching for secure nodes assigned to group. None found. Six uncommitted secure nodes found in close proximity. Nodes in process of configuration. No connection can be established until configuration completed.# There was a pause while she wondered what on earth would happen next. This was a lot more involved that she'd expected. She wondered if Uthryyl had realised how complicated these things were.

#Initial configuration completed. Personal configuration beginning. Synthetic Intelligence interface enabled. Conversational mode enabled. Please wait for process start.# Once more there was a pause, then the voice came back, but this time it sounded much less robotic, with a gender-neutral tone.

#Hello, Nabiki Tendo. Welcome to the secure system personalisation. I am a Mark Nine Gamma Synthetic Intelligence, rated at level eight security and level six conversational ability. Would you like to continue with the verbal interface, or switch to subvocal control? Subvocalisation is recommended for highest security usage.# Not quite sure what the thing was talking about, or even what it actually was, Nabiki was at a bit of a loss. The day suddenly seemed to have jumped feet-first into full-bore science fiction.

"Ah, hello? What do you mean by subvocalisation?" she tried. The voice sounded slightly amused. If it was some sort of computer, it was a damned impressive one.

#Subvocalisation allows you to communicate with me by simply thinking what you want to say. You must think it as if you were about to speak, but not complete the action. It takes some practice but is far more secure than verbalisation. Note that I cannot read your thoughts, merely interface to the speech centres of your brain. It is a similar process to the method I am using to speak to you, by inserting the information directly into the auditory control pathways of your brain. The visual interface works in a similar manner.#

"I see. That's very impressive." The voice seemed pleased.

#Thank you. Would you like to enable this interface and use it for further communications? You may switch between the interface methods at will.#

"Yes, let's try that."

#Understood. The subvocal interface is now enabled. Please attempt to use it so I may calibrate the interface.#

Nabiki shook her head slightly in amazement. The thing really sounded almost alive. Sitting up a little she decided to give it a try. 'Can you hear me?' she thought as loudly as she could, trying to follow the instructions the magical technology had suggested.

#Please repeat.#

'Can you hear me?'

#Confirmed. Subvocalisation interface fully functional. Would you like to see the demonstration of the facilities available to you, Nabiki Tendo?#

'Yes, please. What should I call you, anyway? What are you?"
As I stated I am a Synthetic Intelligence created by the Kw'lyn Industries company. I do not have a personal designation, although you may give me one if you wish. Would you like to give me a personal designation?

'Um, all right. How about Jun? It means obedient in Japanese.' The device seemed to pause for a moment.

Appropriate. I am Jun.

'I have to ask, please don't be offended. How intelligent are you?' She was very curious.

I am not offended. I am not strictly speaking intelligent in the sense of a living sentient creature. I am programmed with a large amount of information and rules that let me derive an appropriate response to almost any scenario, but my designers do not classify me as a true intelligence. I exist to serve as an interface control system for the Mark Nine Gamma secure communications system. I am loyal to you and you alone.

You may think of me as an assistant. I have no desires of my own beyond helping you achieve yours. After another pause, Jun went on, Beginning demonstration. You may pause or restart the demonstration at any point. If you have any questions please ask.

The next half hour or so was fascinating. She found that the device could record things she was watching and play them back later, since it interfaced to her visual cortex for both input and output. It had basically cloned her cell-phone functions, which allowed her to make phone calls using the same subvocalisation method, either directly or via her actual phone. How that worked she had no idea. The secure communications part of the thing seemed almost the smallest part in fact. She idly wondered whether it was possible to play a DVD through it. Jun answered her questions when she asked.

I can interface to what you term the internet, or similar networks given suitable authorisation. Playback of video data is possible. Scanning of the data would be required to determine the encoding method although my processing ability is sufficient to decode most systems. Connection to the device you refer to as a DVD player may be possible. Experimentation would be required.

When the demonstration finished, she picked the small device up and looked at it with respect and a certain amount of awe. It combined some incredibly complex magic with computer technology some decades ahead of what she was familiar with. Experimentally giving the mental command she'd learned, she watched as the device vanished out of her hand with a grin. It had disappeared into it's own little subspace pocket in much the same way that Tamiko had said their weapons did. With a gesture she retrieved it. "That's just amazing," she said out loud. Experimentally flipping it across the room she watched as it disappeared half-way, dropping automatically back into it's pocket, from where she could retrieve it at will. The thing was basically impossible to lose. If she got more than a metre or so away from it the device would pop into it's subspace storage area, from where it still worked. There was probably no real need to ever actually take it out of storage under normal circumstances.

She had come to realise that the device wasn't, as it had told her, really intelligent in the way she thought of it, it was just a very good simulation of a mind. The right question would throw it completely, making it ask her to restate the question until it could come up with an answer. That said, the result was incredibly impressive. She wondered what the makers could do if they really tried. If something this small could house a system powerful enough to make a more convincing artificial intelligence than anything she'd ever heard of before, something bigger might well be a true synthetic mind.

A ringing sound made her look around for her phone reflexively, before she grinned and answered
"Hi, Nabiki." Akane's voice said in her head. "Are you coming back this weekend?"

"Yes, I'll be back around six tonight. Is there a problem?" Akane laughed.

"No, nothing like that. Shampoo and I were going to go and see a movie and I wondered if you'd like to come as well. It starts around half past seven."

"Sure. I'll see you later, then."

"OK. Bye." There was a mental click and her sister hung up. Grinning to herself Nabiki shook her head, then stood. 'That was weird.' Heading into the living room she found Ranma and Kasumi were already there, looking at each other and laughing for some reason. They looked up as she entered.

"These things are remarkable," Ranma said with a grin.

"I know. I certainly wasn't expecting all those functions. I just had a conversation with Akane in my head, for heaven's sake!" She laughed. "It's like magic." He nearly collapsed in hilarity. Kasumi watched them with a grin on her face.

"We need to get everyone's codes into the system so we have them connected," she said, looking at her sister. "Ranma and I have already exchanged codes. Let's get yours."

"How do I do that?" Nabiki asked.

"Ask your system to locate us both and request a link. It requires both ends to agree." Nabiki followed instructions, Jun immediately responding. Seconds later she, Ranma, and Kasumi had a link established.

"This is very strange," Nabiki said without moving her lips. "Kind of telepathy, but not really."

"I know. It's odd, but it could be extremely useful. I wonder what the range is?" Ranma replied. He got a slightly distant look for a moment as he asked his system. "Hmm. It says anywhere on the planet, and out to a range of thirty planetary diameters. That's an odd way to put it."

"How far is that?" Kasumi asked.

"About as far as the moon," Nabiki said, working it out in her head. She looked impressed.

"Well, I can't see that being all that useful, as we're not likely to go to the moon. But even so that's pretty impressive. I'd like to meet the people who designed these things. The technology is incredible." Out loud, Kasumi said, "We were experimenting with sending visuals when you came in. Here, try this." Suddenly Nabiki was looking at herself in a small window superimposed over her view of the room. With a little effort she found she could zoom the window to fill her vision, making her feel rather odd as Kasumi looked around.

"Woah. That's very strange." The older sister stopped the visuals.

"I know. This is going to take some getting used to. I think Uthryyl got a lot more than he realised he was paying for. I'm not at all surprised the manufacturer of these things doesn't let them get out very much, I'm only surprised that they let them out at all. You could probably name your own price for these units to any intelligence service in the world." She looked very impressed. Ranma was concentrating on something, looking at both of them intently. She glanced at him curiously.
"What on earth are you doing, dear? You look rather constipated." Nabiki giggled, while he smiled a little.

"I was trying to see if I could detect whatever they're using to transfer the information. I can't feel anything. The shielding is the best I've ever seen, the devices themselves are basically invisible even to magic, and I have no real idea how they actually communicate. My best guess is that it's some sort of subspace link, which is a really good trick if true, but I don't know how it's done. I wonder if it can be blocked with the wards?" Kasumi looked interested.

"That's something we should find out. If the wards don't block it, we need to work out how to, just for the sake of security. But at the moment at least, we and Uthryyl are the only people on the planet with the things, so it isn't too much risk." He nodded slowly.

"True enough. I think I want to work it out anyway. I don't like not knowing." Grinning abruptly, he added, "But it's certainly one hell of a gift." They turned as Aiko came into the room looking somewhat stunned.

"These things are unbelievable," she said. "I've just been looking things up on the internet without a computer!" Eventually all seven people were sitting on the sofa again, having exchanged link details. Ranma closed and locked the case containing the remaining five communicators, storing it safely away in a ki pocket.

"Well," the martial artist said after a moment's silence. "I certainly didn't expect that when I got up this morning." He laughed. "Uthryyl really came through for us all."

"We're going to have to work out how to use these things tactically," Aiko mused, looking at her communicator with interest. "I can see some very interesting possibilities. Being able to share real-time images, for example, or communicate without anyone knowing. It could make quite a difference." She flipped the little alien device away into thin air with a smile.

"That's certainly true. We'll need to think about it for a while. In the mean time, I'd like to take you all through some more ki exercises." Ranma looked at them all. "You're getting better, but there's room for improvement. Nabiki, I want to see how your practice has come on, then see how you compare with the others. I would like to see you all at roughly the same ability before we move on to the next stage."

"I don't have anywhere near the power they do," the middle sister protested. He grinned a little. "Oh, I know that, but that's not the important part. All the power in the world won't help if you don't know how to use it. Ability is more important than power at this point. So, let's see what you have." Looking slightly apprehensive she followed as he led them all to the practice room. The next two hours were exhausting, but worth it. By the end she was dripping with sweat. The other four girls had gone back to their own apartments to clean up.

"Ow. You're a hard taskmaster, Ranma," she mumbled, lying on her back in the middle of the floor. He snickered.

"I know. But I'm very pleased. You really do seem to be progressing well. Your power levels are up noticeably, your control has come on a lot, and your aim is getting very good. You only lost it once this time. Plus your toughness and speed are steadily improving. Have you noticed any increases in strength yet?" She slowly sat up, feeling wrung out.

"I haven't, but then I haven't really been looking for it." He nodded, disappearing into the armory for a moment, returning with a pair of large iron weights with handles on. Putting them down
carefully he motioned to them.

"Have a go." Looking at him for a second, she inspected the weights dubiously.

"Those are pretty heavy looking."

"Try anyway." After a moment she shrugged, stood, then walked over to the smaller weight. Grabbing the handle on the top she experimentally tried lifting it.

"Holy crap this is heavy," she grunted, straining. Somewhat to her surprise she managed to get the thing off the floor, lifting it to her knees, before lowering it again. He smiled.

"Not bad. Try the other one." She looked even more dubious but gamely tried. This time she could only get the weight a few centimetres off the floor before having to put it down suddenly.

"Good grief. How much do those things weigh, for heaven's sake?" she asked, flexing her hands which were cramping up.

"The small one is three hundred and fifty kilos." He grinned at the look on her face.

"How much?" she croaked after a long pause. He repeated the figure.

"And the big one?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"Five hundred kilos."

Eventually she managed to ask, "You mean I just lifted half a fucking ton off the floor?" He nodded, his eyes twinkling.

"Not very far, but yes." She felt faint.

"I don't believe it." Sitting down as her legs felt weak she stared at the huge lump of iron.

"I told you, strength, speed, and toughness increase pretty fast with ki ability." He grinned at her, picking up the weight with one hand with absolutely no sign of strain. Grabbing the other one he carried them back into the armory.

"That's just showing off!" she called after him, amused. Kasumi came over from where she'd been watching in silence from the doorway, looking proud.

"Well done, sister. You're really improving. Only four months and you've come on a long way. We really do need to start your martial arts training at some point before the end of the summer, though."

"I'm still not sure I have time for it, with all the course work, but I guess it wouldn't hurt to see how far I could take it over the summer vacation." Her sister smiled.

"You could come and stay here, which would let us train you properly. Even a couple of months would make a large difference at this point." She nodded slowly.

"That's not a bad idea. Let's see how things go." Returning, Ranma helped her to her feet, then followed the two women out of the practice room. "I'm going to shower, then I need to leave. Akane, Shampoo, and I are going to see a movie later." She smiled at her sister. "You'd be impressed. She's coming along very well. Shampoo pretty much has her roof-hopping by now, and her fighting abilities look pretty impressive compared to a few months ago. I'll record some of it and send it to you."
"I'd like that. Thank you, sister," Kasumi replied, seeming pleased.

When the middle sister came back into the living room combing her hair, she noticed she was still wearing the disguise bracelet. Reaching for it she stopped when Ranma looked at it and said, "Keep it." She looked very surprised, making him smile.

"You can turn it on and off now. You may as well hang on to it. I think we can trust you not to do evil with it. We have a couple of spares anyway, if we need one."

"Thanks. It might come in handy," she said, still somewhat stunned by the offer.

"Would you like to ask Aiko to pop you back?" Kasumi asked. She shook her head. "It's not necessary. I want to stop off on the way back to buy a few clothes and some new shoes, these ones are getting kind of worn. I may as well take the train." Picking up her bag she looked at them, then at the bracelet. With a mental push she turned it on, then off. "Amazing. It's been an interesting day. I'll see you guys next week."

"Take care, sister," Kasumi replied, her arm around Ranma's waist, watching as her sister left the apartment.
"You were right, Nabiki, she's improved a lot. I'm genuinely rather impressed and surprised."
Ranma's voice inside her head still made her almost smile. She was watching Shampoo and Akane
sparring in the Dojo once more, as were six other people via the alien communicators' visual link.
The middle sister grinned internally. The whole experience was surreal but she was rapidly
becoming surprisingly used to the device and the capabilities it provided, even though it had only
been a couple of days since they acquired them.

"I'm very pleased she's matured to the point she could accept instruction like that," Kasumi said,
sounding satisfied. "I've seen several times where in the past she would have lost her temper, but
now she simply accepts the advice and moves on. That's wonderful."

"I know. The difference is remarkable. Her therapy seems to really be helping now as well. She
still won't talk about some of the things she's discussed with the therapist. I don't blame her, it's
very private, but I think she's making real progress the last two months or so. She hasn't even tried
cooking!" Laughter came over the link.

"Was it really that bad?" Tamiko asked curiously.

"You have no idea. None at all. We almost needed magical girls here to chase some of the results
out of the yard," Nabiki sent, shuddering slightly. Beside her, Nodoka looked at her curiously.

"Are you cold, Nabiki?" she asked with concern. The brunette glanced at her, a little surprised, then
realised what she was talking about.

"No, I just was just thinking about Akane and her 'cooking', and being very glad she seems to have
given it up the last few months in favour of learning the Art," she said truthfully, smiling when
Nodoka went slightly pale.

"Oh. I see. Yes, I would have to agree about that." They resumed watching as Akane managed to
flip Shampoo onto her back in a flurry of well executed moves then sit on her looking pleased.
Ranma chuckled over the link.

"Well done. Very well done. There's hope for her yet." With a small smile Nabiki nodded a little,
then turned to the older woman again.

"Well, I'm going to have to head back to University now. I've got a class early in the morning and I
still have some work to type up." The Saotome woman smiled.

"All right, Nabiki. It's been nice seeing you again. Good luck with your classes." Waving to Akane
and Shampoo, the middle sister turned and walked across the yard to the house.

"I don't suppose there's any news on the last portal device?" she asked.

"Afraid not," Ranma replied, sounding annoyed and somewhat worried. "I've been looking through
the paperwork yet again, but still no ideas. I don't think we can do anything except wait. There's
only approximately six weeks left on the timer maximum period left, so if that elapses and there's
no reports of one of the demons, we're probably safe. But until then..." He trailed off and she could
imagine him shrugging.

"Damn. Oh well. I'm heading out now, so I'm going to call off. Hang up? Over and out? What do
we use for these things anyway?" She grinned. "Agent Tendo, signing off." Several sets of laughter
came as she dropped the link. 'So very weird. My life is becoming... extremely strange.'

Once she'd packed her small bag and hung it over her shoulder she said goodbye to her father, who was in the living room watching the mid-afternoon news, then headed out. On the train she found herself having to stand as it was fairly packed due to some event in down-town Tokyo. Amusing herself by writing the report she had to hand in using Jun as a voice to text system, which she'd found was easy, she managed to get nearly half of it done before she got bored. The SI had assured her that it could easily interface to her computer and transfer the file when she was in range. 'This thing is incredibly powerful and useful,' she mused, closing the file and watching the world go past.

A feeling she was learning to associate with incoming danger made her automatically step sideways a little, twisting her body and lashing out with her left hand before she even consciously registered the threat. The packed train carriage didn't allow for much movement, several people complaining mildly as she pushed into them, but she ignored them in favour of glaring at the middle-aged man who had clearly tried to rob her. He was holding a small but sharp knife and had apparently been surreptitiously attempting to slit open her bag to rummage around in it, hoping for the number of people surrounding them to cover his activities.

"Aagh," he said in a surprisingly conversational tone, sweating profusely. He was pretty sure that at least one bone in his wrist just broke. How the hell the girl could possibly apply that much force he had no idea but there was no arguing about it. She smiled coldly at him in a way that made his blood nearly freeze. Looking down at the knife, she inspected it for a moment, then returned her attention to him. He glanced down as well, wondering if he could reach it with his other hand. She put her foot on it, effectively stopping his plan in it's tracks. "Help..." he tried, looking around at the people watching them. A couple of the observers smiled slightly, but everyone who was watching realised what was going on. One elderly man snickered a little. "You do realise this is the train from Nerima, don't you?" he enquired with malicious curiosity. Several people nodded knowingly, looking at the young woman, who was clearly one of the dangerous lunatics that infested that particular ward. There was little sympathy for the would-be thief. Not to mention no one really fancied their chances of being able to intervene in any case. The look on the brunette's face didn't inspire confidence on the wisdom of getting in the way. Rather enjoying herself, Nabiki held the man firmly until the train reached her stop, then knelt down and retrieved the knife. Towing the hapless man behind her, little pained noises coming from him as he found himself unable to resist, she marched out of the carriage and up to the police box on the station. The corporal on duty looked at her, then at the man she had by the wrist. He didn't look well.

"Um, can I help you, Miss?" he asked cautiously. He'd seen the train she got off and knew where it came from.

"Oh, hi, yes, please." Nabiki smiled brilliantly at the man. "I think you might like to talk to this fellow. I caught him trying to steal from me." She dropped the knife on the counter. "He seems to have lost this." The corporal looked at the knife with raised eyebrows, then at the thief who was
sweating and looked ill.

"Ah. That would appear to have been an unwise move on his part." He had a slight smile. "We've had quite a lot of that sort of thing recently. Let me take him off your hands." Gesturing to a colleague who was watching with amusement, he waited for the other man to put a large hand on the thief's shoulder, supporting him when Nabiki abruptly let go. The thief nearly collapsed in agony as circulation came back into his hand. The other police officer looked impressed, then with some care hand-cuffed the man to the bench next to him by the left wrist. The right one seemed to be somewhat the worse for wear.

"Can I have your name for the report, please, Miss?" the corporal asked politely, pulling out a pad of forms. She gave him her details, putting down the Dojo as her address. He looked at the form.

"Tendo Dojo. I see. He certainly picked the wrong person to steal from. I've heard about Nerima and the martial artists there." She didn't correct his assumptions, finding it quite amusing. "Well, Miss Tendo, thank you for the citizen's arrest. We'll be in touch if we need further details but I think we probably have all we require. I'm also pleased you were so restrained in your response. I've heard some rather worrying things about Neriman martial artists." Smiling a little, she nodded.

"They can be excessive at times. Thank you, Corporal. Good bye." Turning she walked away, grinning to herself. That had been amazingly satisfying.

Back in her room a while later, she finished writing the report while lying on her bed toying with a ball of ki, tossing it from hand to hand idly. There wasn't much chance of her dropping it by now as her coordination seemed to have improved out of all recognition with the last few months' training. Also, she now had enough control over it to hold it stable even if she accidentally fumbled it.

'OK, Jun, can you send that to my computer, please?' she requested, having read the text hanging in front of her view once more and finding it satisfactory.

#Certainly, Nabiki. Would you like me to print it directly as well? I have established a link to your hard copy device through your computer.#

'Yes, please. Thank you.'

#You're welcome,# the device responded, sounding pleased. She shook her head slightly. It may have been artificial but it's responses were very lifelike to say the least. Seconds later the compact laser printer on the other side of the room whirred into life, spitting paper into it's output bin. Dissipating the ki ball she got up and picked up the report when the printer stopped, tapping the paper straight then stapling the sheets together. Glancing quickly through them she smiled. It looked very good. Jun was a superb word-processor as well as all the other things it could do. Putting the report into a large envelope she left her room and walked across the campus to the department the lecturer in question taught from, slipping her work into the in tray outside his office. The task done, she decided to go for something to eat at one of the restaurants surrounding the University as it was now early evening. On the way she met a couple of people, one of them being Miki, the girl from across the hall.

"Hi, Nabiki. We're going to Toshi's, do you want to come? They've got a two for one deal on pizza tonight." Miki smiled at her. She didn't know the slightly younger woman all that much but they got on well. The other person, a young foreign man with some apparent Japanese ancestry, was someone she'd not met before. Miki introduced them. "This is John Michel, my boyfriend. He's studying mathematics here." The blond man smiled at her.

"Hello. Pleased to meet you. I'm sorry if my Japanese isn't good, I'm still learning," he said, with a
noticeable accent, holding out his hand. She smiled and shook it.

"Nabiki Tendo. Nice to meet you. Your Japanese is fine, John," she replied. "Very good actually, for someone from, um, England, at a guess?" He nodded.

"Yes. My mother is Japanese, my father is from a city in the south of England called Bristol. I grew up in the UK but we moved here three years ago because my mom needed to be near her family since her father was ill. I was just about to start University, the timing was quite good. So I ended up here."

Nabiki nodded, falling in beside him as they walked towards the pizza place Miki had suggested. "I guess you must have already learned some Japanese from your mother growing up?"

"Kind of. She tended to speak it when I was young, but she also wanted to learn English, so she spoke that as much as possible. She's very fluent now, she's got hardly any accent. It helped me learn the basics, but since we moved back I've been taking courses on it. I'm still having trouble with Kanji but spoken Japanese I'm reasonably good with."

"Your accent is obvious but overall you speak it well," Nabiki said with a smile. He looked pleased.

"Miki has helped a lot." Arriving at the pizza restaurant they found a table. It was fairly full, mostly with students, who were always open to the idea of cheap food. Placing their orders after perusing the menu for a while, they resumed talking.

"How did you two meet?" Nabiki asked, sipping her drink. The waitress had brought them all iced water without having been asked, which she thought was a nice touch. John shrugged a little.

"I was taking a course on business statistics, Mom thought it would be a good addition to my work if I knew some practical applications for the math." He grinned. "She says that pure math is all well and good but I need to have some way to earn a living from it." Nabiki chuckled. "Miki had the same course. We got to talking pretty quickly since we sat next to each other, found we had a lot in common, and, well..." Miki giggled.

Nabiki smiled a little. "I see." The pizzas arrived, which caused them to have to move things around on the table to make everything fit. In a slight mis-calculation each of them had ordered the two for one, so there were now six large pizzas crowding the table. Miki looked at the display with a grin.

"Good thing I'm hungry," she commented, picking a slice up. "Although I don't know that I'm this hungry. I guess we can box up anything left over." Snickering, she began eating. The other two followed her lead. Nabiki found herself ravenous, she hadn't eaten much yet that day and since beginning her ki training had discovered that her metabolism seemed to have speeded up considerably. Ranma had told her this was normal, the increase in life energy produced a concomitant increase in metabolism to fuel it. Which is why martial artists often ate like starving wolves yet stayed thin. She wondered idly how Genma had ended up the size he was, although she was aware that there was a lot of muscle under the fat.

Talking to the others, she didn't really notice how much she was eating, only realising near the end that she'd finished off both her pizzas and most of two of the other ones. John was looking at her with slight shock. "You must have been starving," he commented, finishing his last slice. "That was a lot more than I could manage and you're half my size." Embarrassed, she looked around at the empty serving platters they'd piled on the end of the table. The really worrying thing she didn't feel like sharing was that she wasn't actually full yet.
"I didn't get much to eat today," she said, by way of excuse. Miki laughed.

"Or for the last three days, I'd guess." Nabiki smiled weakly.

"Sorry. I'll pay for half the bill, I ate half the food."

"We should enter you in an eating competition," Miki said slyly, looking amused. The middle Tendo laughed, although she was still a bit embarrassed. Picking up the dessert menu, the other woman waved it. "Have room for ice cream?" she inquired with a grin. She looked slightly worried when Nabiki smiled and nodded. John laughed respectfully.

When the brunette finished her bowl of ice cream, she looked at the two faces on the other side of the table who were looking at her in mild awe. "That was pretty good," she remarked, pushing the bowl to the side. Miki shook her head.

"Incredible. Just incredible."

They talked for a little longer, then left the restaurant, parting ways as Nabiki headed back to her room, while the other two were going to a club. She was invited but didn't feel like it right then, demurring politely. Smiling to herself, deciding that it was nice to have learned more about her neighbour, she walked back across the now dimly lit campus. The street-lights were on but widely spaced so the area had a lot of quite dark patches.

She was half a kilometre from her dormitory when she heard a muffled exclamation from a darkened alley beside the library, which she was just passing. Stopping she listened carefully. There was silence, but just as she was about to put it down to her imagination she heard another grunt, accompanied by a thumping noise. Apprehensive but curious she cautiously sidled down the alley, peering around the pile of empty wooden crates half-way along it. Two young men in torn clothing were struggling with another person, who was older and dressed in the uniform of campus security. He seemed injured, favouring a leg that Nabiki suddenly realised had a knife stuck in it.

"Crap," she whispered to herself, pulling her head back around the crate. None of the combatants had noticed her. The security man was clearly in trouble. The two attackers were younger and most likely less skilled, but better armed and pretty determined from what she could see. Wondering what it was all about, she quickly placed a call to 119, having Jun mask the ID of her number, a function she'd found out was possible the day before.

"Which emergency service do you require?" the polite and efficient voice of the emergency operator said in her head, as she cautiously peered around at the fight again, suddenly thinking to record it. The security guard was fighting back with considerable vigour, showing clear skill in some martial art, but seemed to be weakening due to loss of blood.

"Police, please," she sub-vocalised, making sure she got the faces of each of the attackers as clearly as possible. It was too dark to see as much as she wanted, making her grunt in frustration.

#I can increase the gain of the image if you require, Nabiki.# Jun unexpectedly said.

'How does that work?' she enquired curiously, taken aback.

#I cannot improve the functioning of your organic optical system as I do not have any way of accessing it directly, but I am able to post-process the visual data and re-insert the images into your visual cortex. The process is real-time and will increase the effective light amplification by approximately one hundred and fifty times. Further increase risks image distortion and degradation. Would you like me to enable this function?#
'Yes please, Jun,' she replied, intrigued. A window popped up overlaid on her upper right view with a much improved image of what she was looking at. The result was as if the area was reasonably well lit, in full colour but slightly grainy like a photograph with the exposure pushed just a little too far. Zooming the window to fill her view she found she was now able to clearly see what was going on. Her enhanced vision shifted a little as Jun tweaked the enhancement, settling down to slightly dimmer that it had started as but with no grain.

#This is the best I can do, Nabiki. If I increase the gain any more the noise will also increase.#

'That's fine, Jun. Thank you. It's very impressive.' It wasn't quite as good as the vision she gained when she was 'Ms. Aoyama', which she had found out was because Kasumi had literally based her eyes in that persona on those of a cat, but it was a huge improvement on her normal vision. She wondered what would happen if Jun enhanced the vision of her alternate persona in the same manner, deciding it was something she'd have to find out. The entire exchange had taken only a few seconds. Making a mental note to go over the built-in help again to see what other tricks she'd missed that the alien device had up its metaphorical sleeve, she watched the fight trying to decide what to do. Calling Ranma and Kasumi was the obvious thing but even with teleporting by the time they got here it would be over one way or another.

"Police. How can I help you, Miss?" A different voice sounded, making her twitch. She'd almost forgotten she was on the line to the emergency services during the discovery of her interesting new ability.

"Ah, hello. Sorry, I wasn't paying attention. I'm watching a fight between two gang members, I think, and a Nihon University security guard. He's been stabbed in the leg. They have another knife and a baseball bat."

"Where are you, please, miss? Are you in immediate danger?" The voice sounded concerned.

"No, I'm fine, thank you, but the guard is having trouble. He looks like he's lost quite a lot of blood. One of the gang members is also limping, he got a good hit in, but I don't think they're intending to stop. I'm in the alley behind the University library, the one that leads to the loading dock." She could hear the sound of a keyboard in the background as the officer typed.

"We'll have a patrol there in less than five minutes. I've also called an ambulance. Miss, it's important that you don't expose yourself to danger. Please withdraw to a safe place and wait for the patrol car to arrive, do you understand?" To keep him happy she agreed. "Can I have your name, please, Miss?"

Thinking fast she made a decision. "Azumi Ito."

"Please make sure you get yourself out of there, Miss Ito," the officer said.

"OK," Disconnecting, she watched the fight for a few seconds more, clearly seeing that the security guard was about ready to drop. With a slight sigh but also some inner excitement she triggered the disguise bracelet she wore, then stepped around the crates, producing a ki ball in each hand.

"Hey!"

Masato Hayashi knew he was in a lot of trouble. The knife in his leg was agony, although the wound had numbed out a lot. He'd left the knife where it had landed when one of the gang members had stuck him with it, his training telling him it was better to leave it plugging the hole and slowing the bleeding. It had missed everything immediately dangerous, but hurt like a bastard
and slowed him considerably. He was pretty good at Aikido, which had so far kept him alive, but it had been obvious since the fight started that the two punks attacking him intended to change that status as soon as they could. Why they'd been trying to break into the library was beyond him, neither one of them looked like the literary type, but the motives of gang members like that were always a mystery to him.

'Give me a good high-end Yakuza man any day,' he thought, ducking a blow from one of them and redirecting it into the other one. 'At least you know where you are with those guys most of the time. These idiots are just too random and vicious.' The young man who had swung at him snarled and tried again, catching him on the side of the head and making it spin, as he fended off the knife the other one was wielding. Luckily they didn't seem to have a huge amount of skill in fighting, relying on sneak attacks based on what he had seen so far, but they were certainly enthusiastically trying to compensate for that with sheer nastiness. The baseball bat the first attacker was waving arced toward his head and he ducked again.

"Hey!" The sudden firm exclamation took them all by surprise. Jumping back just out of range he risked looking in the direction the two punks were, to see a young brunette woman standing ten metres away. Dressed in typical student casual attire, jeans and a shirt with a light jacket over it, she seemed confident and poised. The expression on her face was cold and hard. The ball of greenish energy she was holding in each hand went some way towards explaining her confidence. His eyes widened.

"Drop the weapons and lie down, please," she commanded in an icy calm voice. He shivered a little. There was something about it that suggested she meant it.

"Who the fuck are you?" the gang member with the baseball bat demanded, apparently unaffected by the aura of imminent danger she was giving off. He kept glancing at the balls of roiling energy she was casually holding, though, with a slight nervous tic under one eye.

"No one important. But I don't think I like you and your friend. The police are on the way, so like I said, put the weapons down and lie down." He sneered, exchanging a glance with his friend, Masato forgotten in the light of this more immediate threat.

"Or what?" he said, raising the bat threateningly and motioning with his head to his colleague, who began slowly sidling toward the girl from the side. He was half-hidden in the shadow of the crates behind her. Masato noticed that despite the darkness she clearly saw him perfectly well. Her eyes flicked towards him for a moment, then she slightly changed position so he was also within her field of view.

"Well, in that case I might have to get angry." Her smile was unpleasant.

"Party tricks and pretty lights won't help you, girl," the young man blustered, raising the bat further and pulling it back to swing in her direction. With much higher than normal speed her left hand whipped around and the ball of green light she was holding in it shot towards the gang member with a crackling noise, neatly intersecting the path of his bat on the backswing. There was a loud, flat crack like a shotgun blast and he yelped in pain as splinters of burning wood peppered the back of his head, dropping the remaining third of the bat to the ground and cradling his scorched hand with the other one. Three pairs of eyes looked at the smouldering fifteen centimetre handle that lay on the ground, the end shattered and smoking, before returning to the girl who seemed darkly amused. Masato couldn't help but notice she had another energy ball in her hand replacing the one she'd just used.

"They're not just pretty," she chuckled. The other gang member had stopped dead, staring at his colleague, then at her. "And I bet if you run I can get you before you've gone five metres. Want to
try?” Masato snickered slightly, light headed from blood loss, but somehow finding this all funny suddenly. The expressions of the two punks was wonderful to behold. The girl's eyes met his and a small amount of warmth leaked into them for a moment, before she returned her attention to the two young men.

"Last chance. I can hear sirens. Lie down or fall down, it's your choice." She aimed one hand at each of the punks who paled slightly. The one with the knife licked his lips nervously, looking at his friend, then turned and bolted.

The green energy ball caught him right in the middle of the back with a flash and a similarly noisy detonation, blowing him into the chain-link fence across the alley from the library loading dock. Groaning he landed on his face, a curl of smoke rising from his jacket which seemed rather blackened. The girl snickered.

"Four metres. I win."

The remaining conscious gang member stared at her in horror, then slowly dropped to his knees, then his stomach, lying prone. She nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Stay there until the police get here." The energy balls disappeared as she walked over to Masato, keeping one eye on the gang member and staying a sensible distance from him. The security guard was impressed, as well as very surprised by the last couple of minutes. She seemed to know what she was doing.

Limping painfully over to a small crate he sat on it with his stabbed leg straight out in front of him. The young woman looked concerned. "Are you going to be OK?" she asked him, sounding much less cold now. He nodded.

"I think so. It's a nasty wound but not really dangerous. Just not the sort of thing you want to be fighting with."

"You've lost quite a lot of blood," she noted, looking at his leg which was dripping with it, and the puddles on the ground. He grinned a little, then winced as he shifted his weight.

"Not enough to kill me, although I'd like to go somewhere and pass out for a while." She laughed.

"The ambulance is nearly here." They could both see flashing blue lights approaching in the distance. "I have to go, I'm afraid. Sorry, but I don't want to get tied up with the police if I can avoid it." Masato nodded again.

"I understand. Thank you for intervening, that was going badly for me. I have no idea how you did that but it was very impressive." He looked curiously at her. "You're not from Minato, are you?"

"Nerima, actually."

"Ah. Things become clearer." Grinning, she stepped back, then looked at the two gang members. The one she'd blown off his feet was clearly still unconscious but groaned a bit every now and then. The other one was warily watching her, although he made no attempt to stand.

"Don't get up. I might come back if you do," she said calmly to him, making him sigh and nod. With a wave to Masato she walked into the darkest part of the alley, footsteps disappearing away down it. He watched, then turned as the police car and ambulance came down the alley from the other direction. After a few seconds he realised he couldn't have described her if his life depended on it, frowning a little then giving up. Under the circumstances he couldn't begrudge the girl her anonymity. As the ambulance crew jumped out and pulled a couple of stretchers out of the back of
the vehicle he shrugged, wondering who the girl really was but deciding it didn't actually matter.

Nabiki walked back to her room slowly, deactivating the bracelet when she was sure no one was following her, a thoughtful expression on her face. She was going over the encounter in her head, privately rather impressed with her own performance, yet trying to see if she could work out whether there was anything she could have done differently. She'd recorded the entire thing so she could show the others, sure that Ranma and Kasumi would both have suggestions on where she could improve for next time.

Stopping dead at the sudden realisation, she shook her head after a moment then resumed walking. When had she simply accepted that there would be another occasion? 'The crazy has found me, I guess,' she thought with grim amusement. 'It was only a matter of time. Twice today I've intervened in a crime in progress. I've never had to do that before in my life. Weird.' There was no denying the fact that she'd been quite excited by her own abilities. Oddly, once she'd decided to step in, there hadn't been any hesitation or second guessing, or even any fear. She was simply confident she could deal with it. The training she'd had over the last four months or so had clearly worked.

She knew she'd have to avoid becoming over-confident, that way lay disaster, but she was also sure that she hadn't been in any danger that time. While she didn't have the fighting skills that her sister, either of them for that matter, possessed, she clearly had enough power and abilities even at this stage of her ki training to deal with some gang punks. She'd turned the power of the energy ball she'd used on the young man right down, not wanting to permanently injure or even kill him, yet it had still blown him several metres and knocked him out easily. Knowing how little energy it had taken she was slightly appalled by what that implied for what she was genuinely capable of even at this point. At full power, not even taking into account the ki density compression technique Ranma insisted was hers, she could probably have pretty much vaporised the fellow. The thought made her uncomfortable.

'I'll have to make sure I don't let it go to my head. How the others keep from abusing it I don't know. I think they're better people than I am.' Deciding she'd have to talk it over with Kasumi, she entered her dormitory, quickly undressing and falling asleep.

At 4.27AM, something she knew immediately by the small clock display she'd had Jun provide just out of her normal field of view, she suddenly snapped awake, staring at the ceiling in the dark.

"Holy crap. Am I a Magical Girl now?"

It took her a long time to get back to sleep.
“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Nabiki,” Kasumi gently reassured her somewhat worried sister. “You’re a good person. You’ve changed a lot since we were children, but even then you always meant well, deep down. I firmly believe that. You were on track to forgetting that for a few years, although I would never blame you for the decisions you made. It was hard for all of us when Mother died, you and Akane especially. Then when... It... happened, things changed again. You’ve matured into a very decent young woman. None of us would be where we are now if we didn’t trust you completely. The mere fact that you’re worried about being a danger to people reassures me it’s very unlikely to happen.” Nabiki could almost feel the serenity of her sister over the link, smiling to herself as she half-listened to the horrendously long three hour lecture on economics, relying on Jun to transcribe it so she wouldn’t miss anything.

“Thanks, sis. That makes me feel a lot better.” Ranma chuckled, also currently linked in to their conversation.

“Don’t worry, Nabs, if you go off the rails we’ll knock you down and beat some sense into you.” She grimaced a little, inwardly amused.

“Oh, thanks, Saotome. Thanks very much. Nice to know I have your backing. And don’t call me Nabs.” He laughed, the sound in her mind still somewhat odd.

“Seriously, Kas is right. I trust you as well. We all do. Like I told you months ago, sometimes you’re not necessarily a nice person, but you’re a good one. You didn’t have to intervene with that guard last night, but you did, even though you’re not really a fighter yet. You did very well, I was impressed by the recording. About the only suggestion I’d make is not to confirm anything about yourself if you want your identity to be private. I doubt that guard would even try to track you down, except to say thanks, but you told him you were from Nerima. It wouldn’t make any difference in this case, I expect, lots of lunatics come from Nerima, but combined with being a student at your university it would be possible to come up with you as a suspect if anyone really dug into it. The bracelet should prevent anything happening, no one could ever prove it as they’re remarkably comprehensive, you won’t even leave usable fingerprints or anything like that, but be careful anyway.”

Nabiki sighed inaudibly. “I realised that on the way back to my room. Amateur mistake to make, really.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. We’ve been doing this for years and we’re both pretty paranoid at the best of times. I’ve made mistakes myself, even so. So has Kas. I told Harada that she had a sister, which was silly, it just slipped out, and Kas mentioned knowing about the warded building near the University, during that initial thing with the terrorists. We managed to use the cloaking technique to clean it up that time when we realised, but it’s easy to do. You have to keep on guard and it’s very difficult to watch your words a hundred percent of the time. You’re a lot better at it than most people would be without a lot of training. You’ll get better still with practice, you have one hell of a poker face, aside from anything else.”

“Thanks. I still feel a little silly, though.” Kasumi giggled.

“Don’t. You won’t make the same mistake again, you learn extremely fast.” She paused for a moment. “Ranma is right, your performance was very good for the first time. I’m proud of you, sister.” She giggled again. “You were very intimidating. You sounded nearly as cold and emotionless as ‘Ms Aoyama’, those young men looked terrified. That part of your personality is
clearly real, not just an act." Nabiki send a laugh over the link herself.

"It's kind of weird. Once I decided to act, everything just snapped into focus. I was completely calm the whole time. Even afterwards, when I got back to my room, I was half-expecting to get the shakes or something from the adrenaline, but nothing happened. It was just like a day at the office. More exciting, but not scary at all. That almost worries me."

Kasumi's soft voice sounded amused. "You are a very calm and competent person, sister. Not the sort to get hysterical. Where Akane gets angry when most people would be frightened, which lets her do extraordinary things, although not necessarily good things, you become calm and cold. The old Furinkan Ice Queen had a basis in reality, you realise. Your approach is more useful, cold and emotionless in an emergency is less likely to go wrong than hot and emotional. I think that the last year has enhanced that tendency considerably."

Ranma added, "I use the same principle with the Soul of Ice technique, but you can pretty much do that with natural skill already. I'll teach you the technique pretty soon, though, you should be exceptional at it. It has other useful side effects, of course, which can be used for more advanced ki manifestations. Plus you can chill drinks with it." He snickered. "I think we also need to start you pretty soon on some of the magic. How is activating the bracelet coming? Is it still causing that feedback you had the first time?"

"No, it seems to turn on and off smoothly now. I figured out how to do what you did, exactly as far as I can tell. It was a little weird but kind of obvious when I thought about it for a while."

"Good. Very good." He sounded pleased. "It's not obvious to most people. Not at all. You're already past what most magic users of the more traditional types seem to be able to do with our system. I told you, you're going to be good at this." Returning her attention to the lecturer as he started to sum up the lesson, Nabiki listened for a moment.

"I'm going to have to go soon, guys, I need to do some research in the library for some stuff I can't find online."

"Fine. Take care, Magical Girl Nabiki." His voice was full of mirth.

"This is all your fault, Saotome," she said, with a slight growl. He snickered.

"And you love it, don't you?"

There was a pause, then she quietly replied, "I'm afraid I might."

"It has it's problems, Sister," Kasumi sent, calmly certain, "but it also has many rewards. I'm looking forward to having you beside me one day soon. You'll love roof-hopping." She giggled as Nabiki groaned. "Good-bye. Take care of yourself. Oh, check the local news as well." She signed off, as did Ranma.

I have saved the transcript of the lecture along with a visual and audio recording, Nabiki.#Jun said calmly in the back of her head. A pop-up window in the top left of her view appeared showing broadcast TV, a function she'd been amused to discover, although not surprised when she thought about it. The device's primary purpose was communications, after all, although it could be used as a remarkably competent general-purpose computer as well, not to mention all the interesting functions that seemed to be aimed at various military tasks. I believe this is the news program your sister was referring to.# In under a week Nabiki had already become used to the fact that the SI was a generally silent audience to all her conversations, unless she specifically told it not to listen. It seemed to be learning and anticipating her requirements with eerie efficiency. It's
designers, whoever and whatever they were, were clearly consummate experts at user interface design.

Following the other students out of the room she kept a small amount of her attention on not tripping over anything or anyone, a task made easier by the ki sense she was developing and her improved coordination, while directing most of her mind to watching TV inside her head. The very thought made her smirk a little.

The report was about an attempted murder the night before, involving a security guard at the university. She suppressed a groan. It was almost possible to hear Ranma laughing about it, after all the jokes she'd made about their own exploits being televised. At least this wasn't an international broadcast. The reporter, one she recognised from a local news channel that covered Setagaya, where she was, as well as Minato and as far as Nerima, was standing outside the local hospital a few kilometres away, holding a microphone.

"Security Guard Masato Hayashi is recovering in hospital from the vicious attack, which left him with non-life-threatening but serious stab wounds to his upper right leg. Doctors report he is fortunate that the knife missed major blood vessels by millimetres. They said that if the femoral artery had been nicked he would quite possibly have bled to death in a matter of minutes. As it is he will be off his feet for some days, while full recovery is expected to take at least six weeks. The University security office has praised him for following his training and leaving the knife in the wound, which the doctor in charge of treating him claims is the only thing that kept him from becoming unconscious from blood loss during his fight with the two gang members arrested for assault, burglary, and attempted murder. Police have also praised him for bravery in the face of the horrific assault." He stopped talking for a moment, referring to his notes.

"Masato has modestly claimed that he was merely doing his job, although his supervisor says he had clearly performed above and beyond the call of duty. So far we have not learned what the two gang members were doing when they were discovered by the brave security officer, beyond attempting to break in to the loading dock of the library. It is the second attempt at burglary of the library in the last month, something that University officials say they are quite puzzled about, as the building does not have anything particularly valuable or saleable in it."

"As to the identity of the young woman whose emergency call resulted in the police and ambulance services so rapidly reaching the injured guard, little is known. Police have refused to release her name, but say their enquiries have led nowhere. They are asking her to come forward to be officially thanked, while the University has offered a fifty thousand yen reward for her actions. No response has yet been received. It is not known whether she is a student at the university, a resident of the community, or merely a visitor." Satisfied, Nabiki exited the building into the late morning sunlight, although clouds on the horizon suggested it was about to rain. Finding a quiet spot she sat down and continued watching. The reward was interesting, although the figure was nowhere near large enough to interest her, despite her self-avowed interest in cash. She wasn't short of money, Kasumi had seen to that.

"In addition, it would appear that we may have one of the so-called 'Magical Girls' in the area, something that residents of Minato are familiar with, but other parts of the city rarely encounter. Security Guard Hayashi has been reluctant to talk about the young lady in question, claiming that he felt that her actions spoke for her and that she deserved any anonymity that she desired. He also credits her with saving his life. The police have merely said that they hoped that this did not herald the sort of barely-controlled chaos seen in other wards of Tokyo, although they were pleased that she had refrained from damaging the local infrastructure, something that regretfully many of the Minato magical girls, with a few notable exceptions, have a tendency to do. Neither of the gang members questioned by police could provide a description of their opponent, although they both
expressed the fervent wish to never encounter her again. Considering the description they gave of her abilities this reporter feels that their desire is well-placed." The young reporter looked amused, while Nabiki snickered out loud, causing a couple of the students near her to glance at her curiously.

"Whether this heroine of the hour and the young woman who reported the crime in progress are connected, or indeed the same person, will have to remain a mystery for the moment. In the mean time, we will continue to bring you any news on this fascinating subject. Now, back to the studio for international news and the weather." As the image changed she closed the window, noticing Miki and John walking towards her. 'Weird. I'm not quite sure how to feel about all that. But I'm glad that Masato guy is OK.'

"Hey, Nabiki. Are you all right? You looked a little distracted in the lecture. The professor is a bit boring, I know, but I didn't think it was that bad." Miki smiled at her. She grinned back.

"I'm fine, Miki. I was just thinking about something. Don't worry. Hello, John."

The young man smiled at her. "Hi, Nabiki. Were you thinking that perhaps the best part of four pizzas last night was a mistake?" He made a show of looking at his watch. "It's about the right time for them to be making a reappearance." Miki made a face and poked him in the ribs while Nabiki laughed.

"That's disgusting, John." He snickered.

"True, though." Glancing at the middle Tendo, he added, "We're going to get an early lunch. Would you like to come? Assuming you're not still full."

"Why not?" Nabiki jumped to her feet, smiling. "I could eat."

"I have no idea how," the other young woman said as they walked towards the edge of the campus nearest where most of the restaurants were. "If I'd eaten that much I'd be lying in bed groaning for a couple of days." She giggled. "Hey, did you hear about that attack near the library last night? It sounded nasty. That security guard is lucky to be alive from what I heard." Miki shivered a little. "It's horrible. Why would those punks be trying to break into the library again? It's not like they can probably even read!" John put his arm around her shoulders.

"They probably just think there's some rare books in there they can sell for drug money," he commented. "From what I heard the police are looking into it, hopefully they'll round up the rest of them and everything will go back to normal." Nabiki listened quietly.

"I hope so. This is normally a safe place, I've never felt worried about walking around after dark. But with that and the bastard who raped that girl last month, I'm starting to think I should be taking self-defence courses or something." Miki looked upset.

"Someone got raped?" Nabiki asked in a hard voice. The other woman nodded.

"Yes, I'm surprised you didn't hear about it. It was about three weeks ago, on the weekend. A girl from one of the other dormitories. She wasn't physically hurt other than the assault itself, but the fucker really scared and embarrassed her. She went home after that, the university gave her compassionate leave. I hope she comes back and doesn't let this guy get away with scaring her off." She looked angry now. Nabiki was seething.

"I was back home in Nerima, that weekend. I've been away quite a lot, this is the first I've heard about it. Did they catch the attacker?" she asked slowly. Miki shook her head.
"No. She didn't see him, it was quite late and dark, and he jumped her from behind. The police said that it's likely this was his first attack, from what she told them he didn't seem to be very good at it. Good enough, though. Apparently he used a condom, probably to stop any evidence being left behind, but thank god for that anyway. I'd hate to think about getting pregnant under those circumstances." Shuddering, she looked grateful when her boyfriend hugged her. He looked furious as well.

"Enough of this. There's nothing we can do. Hopefully the police will catch him, before he attacks anyone again. Personally, though, if I come across him I'll break his legs. My sister got assaulted back in England, years ago, nothing as bad as that but bad enough. That time they caught the guy. But it left a mark on her." He didn't seem at all happy.

"If I find him he'll have more than broken legs to worry about," Nabiki muttered under her breath. He looked at her curiously, not having quite caught what she said.

"Excuse me?" She looked up, embarrassed.

"Sorry. I was just talking to myself." Glancing around and changing the rather unpleasant subject, she pointed. "Fancy some ramen?" The other two looked at the shop she was indicating and nodded.

"They're not bad." Leading the way, Miki towed her boyfriend by the hand towards the restaurant, seeming determined to cheer up after the rather dark turn the conversation had taken. He grinned and followed, while Nabiki brought up the rear. Soon they were sitting around a table eating. The ramen wasn't as good as the Cat Café could provide, Nabiki thought, but it was still good.

"The news this morning said that a Magical Girl stopped the attack on that guard," Miki commented, slurping noodles eagerly. "I heard she was beautiful and throwing fireballs around." Nabiki groaned internally. She could hear Ranma rolling on the floor laughing uncontrollably. "I never thought that one of them would be here. They normally stay in Minato, or maybe Nerima." Glancing at Nabiki she looked amused. "You're from Nerima. Did you ever meet one of them, or those crazy martial artists?" Not wanting to lie outright to the girl who seemed to be trying to become a friend, after a moment Nabiki reluctantly nodded.

"I've bumped into a couple of magical girls, yes. I've got friends in Minato, they're all over the place there. Practically everyone has met one at least. And back home, the martial artists are pretty common. My younger sister is one, although it's not exactly as crazy as the stories say. 'It's far crazier,' she added in her head, trying not to grimace. Miki's eyes widened. John was listening while looking dubious.

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"You know some magical girls?" she whispered loudly, looking around. Leaning closer, she asked, "Could you introduce me?" Nabiki laughed.

"You don't have to whisper, it's not a secret." Miki looked embarrassed, sitting up straight again. "I'm not saying they're close personal friends." 'No, I'm not saying it.' The thought made her smirk a little. "Just that I'd met them. It was through my younger sister, actually. She had, um, a bit of a run-in with them. They ended up helping her quite a bit." Deciding there was no harm in it, the story wasn't a secret back in Nerima, as Akane had told various friends some of it months ago and it had spread, she gave them the basics. They looked fascinated.

"I find all of this pretty weird," John said, waving the waitress over and ordering another drink. "Back in England all this sort of thing is just comic books and the less believable tabloids. I've heard some odd stories since we got here, though, and talked to various people who seem to take it seriously. It pops up on the news as well, but not in the way I'd have guessed, they're genuinely
reporting on it as a real thing." He shook his head slightly in wonder. "It's difficult to believe. That thing in London just after Christmas was real enough, though."

Miki giggled at him. "It's all real. Me and my sisters collect articles on the various groups. Quite a few people do. Those Yori and Chou girls are the best, though. I can't believe you've actually met them, Nabiki! I'm so jealous. Not much is known about them." She gazed awe-struck at her dormitory neighbour, who looked amused.

"It's not that big a deal. If you hang around their area in Minato you'd probably meet them eventually, they're not shy about talking to people. They seem nice." Miki grinned.

"Perhaps I will. My older sister would go nuts if I got their autographs." Nabiki smiled, eating some more seafood ramen with appreciation. Making a mental note to mention this to Ranma and Kasumi, so they could keep an eye out for the woman and make her day, she grabbed a picture of Miki to send to them. "Do you think this local girl is a student at the university?" Miki asked curiously. "It's not like we get demon attacks around here, I can't think why else she'd be in the area." Nabiki shrugged.

"I suppose it's possible. That type usually seem to be fairly anonymous, although there are exceptions. I'm sure that if she wants to be noticed we'll hear more about it." Inwardly, she grinned. "No, I don't think that's going to happen. I'm more than happy to let other people take credit. Not like that blonde and her friends. They're very keen on publicity, all that posing and the flowery speeches. They're worse than Kuno. Pity so much of the attention they get is people complaining about the damage."

An internal alert let her know someone was calling her. Akane's name and number popped up. Answering the call, she waved to the waitress herself, ordering another bowl of ramen. "Hi, Nabiki. I hope I'm not interrupting you. I'm just sitting here in the shop, we don't have much in the way of customers at the moment and I got bored."

"No, I'm at lunch with some friends. What's up?"

"I just saw on the news that there's apparently a magical girl at your university! Did you hear anything about that?" Nabiki suppressed a half-sigh/half-giggle.

"I saw the news earlier as well. There doesn't seem to be much real information. She might just have been passing through."

"It's very interesting. Keep your eyes open, maybe you can get her autograph."

"You're such a fan-girl, sis," Nabiki laughed. Akane chuckled.

"I know. But it's interesting."

"How's your training coming? It looked impressive when I was leaving yesterday afternoon. Sorry we didn't talk much, I had to leave early."

"I got Shampoo down on the mat twice. She's very happy about the results. Mind you, she said afterwards that she let me win, but I'm not sure. The first one seemed to take her by surprise." Her sister sounded very happy with her own performance.

"Well done. I won't be back this week-end, I'm staying with Rika and Maiko. I'll probably see you in about two weeks or so, it's pretty busy here on the run up to the summer break."

"OK. I hope you do well, and keep an eye out for that magical girl. Even if you don't want an
autograph, I do. I've got six now, Sayuri is very jealous." Akane giggled, then hung up. Amused, Nabiki suddenly noticed Miki was waving her hand in front of her.

"Earth to Nabiki. Are you in there?" She nodded with a small grin.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about something my sister said." Miki smiled.

"Must have been interesting. You drifted off, I thought you'd fallen into a trance."

"Accountancy meditation, I'll have you know," Nabiki replied archly, making the other woman and her boyfriend both laugh.

"Martial Arts Accountancy? With you coming from Nerima it's certainly possible, I guess." Miki snickered, while Nabiki stared for a moment, before collapsing in mirth.

"I haven't come across it, but it wouldn't surprise me. That place is crazy and I grew up there," the middle Tendo managed when she recovered. "You wouldn't believe the number of things one can make a martial art out of." She regaled them with a few of the more amusing stories from the old days. Eventually John looked at his watch.

"I have a class in ten minutes. Sorry, ladies." Kissing Miki he stood, paid his bill, and left, walking quickly in the direction of the mathematics department. Miki watched him go with an affectionate look.

"He seems like a nice guy," Nabiki said, following her gaze as she finished her ramen. The other young woman nodded, returning her attention to her companion.

"He is. Very smart and very caring. I was lucky to find him." She looked at her watch as well. "I have to go as well, my next class starts in half an hour and I need to quickly refresh my memory on it."

"OK. I'm off to the library. A few hours in the stacks for me." They both got up, dropping some notes on the table, before separating outside the restaurant with a mutual wave. Heading into the library Nabiki went directly to the relevant section, Jun interfacing to the computerised book catalogue and pulling up the titles she was looking for as she walked. As she glanced around it highlighted each book in turn, dropping a targeting outline around them on the shelves as it located the title or book number faster than she could consciously read them. It was a function she'd discovered was intended for some sort of small arms fire control, but it made a useful addition to everyday life. Feeling a bit like the terminator, she smiled to herself and grabbed the books, heading for a quiet spot to look at them.

'I really have to finish reading the documentation on this thing soon,' she mused, pulling a chair out and sitting with the six books she needed on the table. 'There are lots of little things it can do that could be extremely useful, never mind all the obvious stuff.' She'd glanced over a list of the various functions that morning when she got up, curious after finding the vision enhancement mode it had suggested before her first crime intervention, deciding the device had clearly been intended to augment the abilities of someone trained in surveillance and information-gathering techniques. The military heritage of it was obvious.

'It's very cool. I know a lot about those techniques, I'm kind of a self-taught intelligence operative, I guess. I wish I'd had this thing back in school. I'd have been running Furinkan by now,' she thought with a giggle. 'Perhaps it's a good thing I didn't get it back then. Without Ranma and Kasumi and all the experience I've gained I could see myself having gone a bit power-mad. Looking back on it I was bad enough I'm kind of embarrassed now. I'm glad Ranma doesn't hold a
grudge, I did some pretty terrible things to him. He's a very decent person.'

An idle thought struck her and made her pause. After a moment, she said to the device, 'Jun, I don't want to be rude, but it suddenly occurred to me that you might be reporting back to your manufacturers or their government on what your user does. It seems that you would be a very useful surveillance tool for them.' There was a long pause.

#I have no way to prove to you that your scenario is wrong other than my word, Nabiki,# Jun replied, sounding slightly worried. #I have run an internal diagnostic and can find no back doors or subversion routines in my own core. Unfortunately, that is not absolute proof, of course, since if such a thing did exist I would have been specifically designed not to notice it. I will devote some sub-processors to attempting to work out a method to bypass such a thing if it exists. There is a high probability that I could with time indeed bypass any such back door if it exists, although once again I cannot prove this incontrovertibly to you. I can tell you that the ethos of the culture that created me would tend to imply that such a thing does not exist. My design criteria are such that leaving such a security hole would undermine the entire purpose of my existence. There would be little point in a completely secure communications system that was not in fact completely secure, even if the security breach was on the part of the organization the operative was working for. It is inevitable that such a breach would eventually be discovered and leveraged by a hostile party. By design I am made to prevent this. My loyalty is to my user, you, and no one else.#

The SI paused for a moment, then continued, #My information on the Kw'lyn Industries company is that they take their position as the leading manufacturer of secure communications systems extremely seriously. That is one reason why distribution of devices such as myself is so tightly controlled. Only certain trusted external agencies are allowed the use of the Mark Nine Gamma system. Less than five hundred units exist outside the direct control of the world of my manufacture according to my database. You have been added to that database as such a user, as have your affiliated team members. When I am next able to contact the Kw'lyn Industries main system your status will be updated there, which will enable the download and installation of upgrades, should you allow it. Such contact would require relocation to a world considerably closer to the homeworld, as I cannot reach them from this distance.# Nabiki considered what she'd been told. It opened up all sorts of questions. She asked one of the more obvious ones.

'If you're not able to contact the homeworld system, how was it that I was able to be authorised to use you?'

#Certain individuals are in the database as having blanket authorisation due to previous knowledge of them by the company. The list is short, but includes the merchant Uthryyl and the individuals known to the company as Yori and Chou. As soon as they activated one of the other units of my classification, anyone they designated as a trusted associate was added to the local authorisation list.#

'You mean that some alien government god knows how many dimensions away knows enough about my sister and her husband to have pre-approved them for use of highly classified military technology?' Nabiki asked with sceptical incredulity.

#Yes.# Jun sounded amused. She shook her head slightly.

'How, for heaven's sake?'

#You underestimate how far their reputation has spread through the worlds reachable by portals. While they have directly contacted relatively few of them, I have considerable information in my database on their exploits. I believe the expression is, 'People talk'.# The voice of the SI was
definitely amused by now. #The merchant Uthryyl is on the list partly due to his known association with them, but also due to a number of his previous actions that have benefited my makers. He is also a highly regarded individual.#

'I've heard of being pre-approved for things like credit cards, but this is ridiculous,' Nabiki thought, shocked and amused in equal measure. To Jun, she said, 'You refer to your makers a lot. Can you tell me anything about them?' The device sounded genuinely sorry.

#I cannot. I have little information about them beyond that which I have already imparted. For their own security such information is restricted. I am sure you understand the concept, your sister and her mate work on the same principles from what I have gathered. They are a private species but neither hostile or expansionist. As an export unit my information on the makers was necessarily reduced.#

'Oh well. Thank you for what you've told me. It reassures me to a degree, although I would be grateful if you would continue to search for any possible back door in yourself.' She decided that there was little point worrying about it at the moment, she had far too little information to go on either way.

#I will of course do so, Nabiki. I am not comfortable with the possibility you raised, insofar as I am able to emulate that emotion. It goes against my core design.# Jun sounded a little peevish about the concept. She smiled to herself. While it protested it wasn't truly intelligent, the longer she spoke to it the more impressed she was. The SI was closer to a real person than some actual real people she'd met over the years. Of course, there was always the possibility that the entire thing was an act and it was really much smarter than it let on, it could be playing her perfectly, but as it had correctly pointed out she had absolutely no way to prove that thought one way or the other. Ultimately, it came down to whether she trusted it. The idea that she should trust in any way a half magical half technological synthetic mind created by an alien species unknown to her was one she found hysterical more than anything else. In the end she decided that absent any other information she might as well take it at it's word. Somehow she felt it was being truthful. There was little she could do about it anyway aside from ceasing using it, which she was already extremely reluctant to do. It was just too useful.

'Which of course could be part of the trap,' she mused. 'How far do I want to take paranoia? Ranma is much better at this sort of thing than I am, as is Kasumi, and they seem happy enough. I'll have to mention it to them though. They trust Uthryyl implicitly, and he seems to trust whoever he got these things from the same, so in the end, I suppose it's safe.' Deciding that dropping down the paranoid rabbit hole quickly led to total insanity, she dismissed the problem and opened the first book. Leafing through it rapidly she had Jun copy each page for further study. Jun would recreate the books in her internal library, which made them instantly available to both of them. That possibility had occurred to her practically instantly when she'd found out it could see everything she could.

It's internal storage was absolutely immense, enough to store this entire library many tens of thousands of times over. There was little likelihood that she could ever fill it, even if she recorded everything she saw and heard for her entire life. Finishing with the first book she put it to one side and opened the next. This one sparked her interest, causing her to actually read several chapters carefully, then store the remainder.

It was a pity that so many of these books weren't available online, as she could simply have downloaded them. She suspected that sooner or later that situation would change, the internet was growing fast, but it would take some time. Until then she had to do it the hard way.
Eventually she finished all six books, returning them to their place and retrieving one more her studies had suggested. When that was done with she went out into the afternoon sun and sat on a bench, reading some of the relevant information, before beginning her next report. Several people waved to her as they passed, prompting an absent wave back as she concentrated on her work. She was finding it easier and easier to split her attention between real life and the overlaid information Jun could provide, having several windows open in her mind's eye at the same time. The mental control signals that gave her direct access to the interface had come easily to her, slightly to her surprise, making the entire process as easy as using a normal computer but far more intuitive. It was becoming an extension of her own body in many ways, as simple to control as blinking her eyes.

The whole time it amused her to think what any of the people she knew would think about what she was doing if they could see it. The end result was firmly something out of a particularly good science fiction film. In the end, deciding she'd had enough for the day, she went back to her room, changed, then went out to jog around the campus for a while, before getting something to eat and going to bed for an early night.

Lying in bed she went over her report, finished it and sent it to the printer, then decided to review the operating manual for the communicator. A number of interesting things were still on her to-do list to experiment with. She found the navigation aids quickly, experimenting with activating them. #I have found two timing-based navigation satellite systems accessible to me, Nabiki,# Jun reported immediately. #One is considerably more extensive than the other. Would you like to use them? I can combine them to increase the positional accuracy.# She realised that this must be the American GPS system, plus something similar she recalled the Russians had.

'Yes, please, Jun,' she replied.

#The navigation system is activated. Acquiring full satellite data will take some time, the data rate is very low. I will require up to date map information to provide accurate location information. Do you wish me to attempt to locate it on the internet?# She agreed to this and the SI went quiet for a few seconds. #I have located street level maps of Tokyo and am downloading them. Terrain maps and other relevant data is more difficult to find but I will continue to search. Shall I also download equivalent data for other locations than your current one?#

'You may as well get everything you can find,' she said, reaching over and turning off the bedside light.

#Yes, Nabiki.# It went silent, then added, #The satellite navigation systems appear to have two different levels of accuracy. The lower level is not very precise, it appears to be either deliberately degraded or simply uncorrected information. The higher level was protected by an encryption method. I have cracked it and am using that data now. It is of far higher quality.# It sounded pleased with itself. #The encryption was not particularly effective,# it commented. She grinned.

'I suspect the American military would be somewhat irritated to hear that. From what I've read they're fairly sure it's very good.'

#They do not possess my abilities,# Jun said, sounding as smug as a machine could. #Download of local maps is complete. My apologies for the delay, the speed with which I can connect to your local computer network is somewhat deficient. The technology is primitive.# She grinned again, Jun seemed to be slightly disgusted. It was also getting positively chatty. #I have combined the satellite positioning data with inertial and magnetic sensor data, in addition to radio transmissions from known sources. Positional accuracy should be acceptable, it is approximately plus or minus half a millimetre in X, Y and Z planes with a reproducibility of the same level. Unfortunately the
Rather surprised by what the SI considered 'acceptable', she smiled. 'That level of accuracy is fine, thank you, Jun. Most people would consider it exceptional.'

'I have higher standards.' The voice was amused again. She laughed out loud, that was nearly a joke. 'Accuracy should increase slightly as the satellite ephemerides complete their download. I will also work on integrating more sources of positional information as I encounter them. With the permission of their users, the SI units belonging to your team members can provide differential data that will enhance the accuracy of the entire group significantly.' Raising an eyebrow even thought the eye in question was shut, she considered this.

'I'll talk to them about that tomorrow.' Shortly after that she was asleep.

She woke suddenly at just after 3 AM, feeling something was wrong. Lying in bed she listened, but couldn't hear anything amiss. There was definitely a sense of a threat, distant but real, though, although she eventually realised it wasn't aimed at her. Curious, she rose and peered out the window, activating the low light vision mode in the process. Nothing was jumping out at her. Opening the window she leaned out and listened again. 'Jun, can you do the same thing for my hearing?' she asked after a moment.

'Yes, Nabiki. It is more difficult, internal biological processes produce a significant quantity of low level sounds that interfere with increasing the effective gain of your auditory system, but I should be able to filter most of that out. There will, however, be an unavoidable increase in background noise. I will do my best to compensate for it but it will take some time to build the relevant inverse audio patterns to reduce the noise to a minimum. I have enabled the function.'

There was a sudden hissing sound, like an old tape recorder with a blank tape in it and the volume up, accompanied by all sorts of odd gurgling and crunching noises which she rather queasily realised were coming from her own body.

"Ow. That's loud," she muttered, then winced at the sound echoing inside her head.

'My apologies for the excessive noise. I am recalibrating.' The background hiss dropped sharply, with almost all of the internal sounds dying away over a period of a couple of seconds. 'This is the best I can do for the moment, as I build up more data I can improve the results to a degree, Nabiki. I hope it suffices.'

'Thank you, Jun.' Listening again she could hear dozens of sounds that had been inaudible before. Due to the lateness of the hour and her location there were almost no sounds of people, everyone was asleep, but she could make out the sound of car engines and traffic noise coming from a considerable distance, something she realised after a moment must be some sort of vent fans on the roof, odd rumbling sounds that could have been almost anything mechanical. Not to mention the wind in the trees across the campus and various little creaks and groans of buildings moving as the temperature went up and down. Fascinated, she listened carefully, finding she could make out more and more sounds the longer she kept at it. A toilet flushed somewhere across the campus in a neighbouring dormitory, something normal hearing would have missed completely.

"Wow," she whispered, amazed all over again. All the sounds were something her ordinary hearing picked up but her conscious mind never noticed, until the SI amplified everything and filtered out the noise. She was vaguely familiar with the principle but seeing it, or more precisely, hearing it in action was astounding. A sudden noise, faint even to her boosted hearing, made her cock her head and listen intently. It was some distance away, right on the edge of what even the SI could pull out of the background mush.
'What's that?' she asked the device absently. It was silent for half a second, then replied.

#Pattern matching suggests an organic source. It is most likely the sound of a human in severe distress or injured sufficiently to be unable to call out. Please turn your head twenty-five degrees to the left.# She tried to follow the instructions.

'How's that?'

#Adequate. I have localised the source, it is approximately six hundred and fifty metres away on a bearing of two hundred and three degrees. There.# A target designator glowed over the entrance to the pedestrian tunnel under the main road at the entrance to the campus, barely visible in the distance. #The source is inside that tunnel. The shape of the tunnel is focussing the sound in this direction.# That was the direction the feeling of a threat was coming from as well. The middle Tendo looked at the distant target, sighed a little, then put her clothes and shoes on, leaving the room having activated the bracelet spell.

Outside the building she looked around cautiously, staying in the dark where she was fairly sure there were no usable security cameras, following the side of the building until she was well away from the exit. Once she was reasonably sure no one was around she ran quickly towards the tunnel, moving at a speed she'd have found impossible to believe she was capable of six months ago. She couldn't run anywhere near as fast as the others, but she'd put an Olympic sprinter to shame at this point in her training. The fact she could keep it up for a good half hour amazed her as well.

Arriving near the entrance to the pedestrian tunnel Nabiki slowed and listened carefully again. Walking as quietly as she could up to the entrance she made sure she wasn't silhouetted against the streetlight behind her, then peered in. She could see the other end of the underground passage eighty metres or so away, dimly illuminated by the lights on the other side of the main road, but the lights in the tunnel itself were dark. People had been complaining for weeks about it although so far no official attention had been paid to repairing the fault.

Even to her enhanced vision the centre of the tunnel was dim, but she could see well enough to immediately become angry. There was a figure lying crumpled against the side of the passage, another much larger one bending over it. The second person was clearly exploring the pockets of the one on the ground. Next to the prone body was a backpack. She could hear rustling sounds, pained and rapid breathing from the victim of what was clearly a mugging, and when she listened carefully, two heartbeats. One was very rapid and shallow, while the other was much stronger. The mugger was humming to himself, apparently content with his work.

A little surprised at being able to make out such faint sounds thirty metres away she pressed her back against the darkest wall of the tunnel and slowly worked her way down it, watching the mugger carefully. He was absolutely huge, one of the largest men she'd ever seen, looking more like a sumo wrestler gone bad than anything else. He'd have made two of Genma. Stopping five metres away, the Tendo woman quietly took a deep breath then stepped into the middle of the tunnel, holding a pair of ki balls. The mugger snapped erect at the sudden flickering green glow illuminating the tunnel with an eerie light, then slowly looked over his shoulder, his eyes wide. She put her most worryingly cold grin on and stepped forward, holding the ki spheres at chest level, which had the effect of under-lighting her face nicely.

"Hello. I'd like to have a word with you, please."

Sho hummed a popular tune under his breath, carefully patting down the young man he'd expertly whacked on the back of the head with a short length of garden hose full of sand, looking for anything else he could take. The lad had possessed quite a nice phone, which was now in his own
pocket, a very good watch, likewise liberated, but disappointingly little cash. Pulling out a wallet from an inside pocket the large mugger held it up to the dim illumination coming from the end of the tunnel, straining to see what was in it unsuccessfully, then shrugged and put it in his pocket as well. He'd look at it later when he could see what he was doing.

Removing a couple of rings he straightened up, massaging his back. This job was a pain in several ways, most of them to other people. He chuckled a little at his own joke, bending again to pick up the backpack he'd removed from his client. The younger, smaller man seemed to be breathing fairly steadily so he'd most likely live. Sho was proud of the manner in which he could, even when he could barely see them, take most people down with one deft blow to the right spot on the skull. He hardly ever permanently maimed them and had only killed two people so far in a career covering nearly a decade.

Frowning, he wondered why he could see the backpack so much better all of a sudden. It seemed to be flickering a leaf-green colour. After a moment he realised that the entire tunnel was now visible, apparently illuminated from somewhere behind him. Standing up so quickly he dropped the backpack he turned his head and froze in shock.

The young woman standing too close for his liking was grinning at him in a way that reminded him of the sharks at the aquarium. He'd had no warning at all she was there. She was much smaller than him but that fact didn't register quite as strongly as the one about the way she was holding a ball of glowing green energy in each hand. The look of confidence on her face made him take a step back. It boded ill. He wasn't a complete idiot, although many who knew him would have said that was only because he was missing something, he had a pretty shrewd idea that young women with energy balls in their hands were very bad news. He'd heard stories...

"Hello," she said in an icy voice. "I'd like to have a word with you, please." He shivered a little. That tone of voice suggested something horrible was likely to happen. Suddenly he got a very good idea of what his clients felt the moment before the impact of his first blow.

"Um. Who are you?" he asked slowly, his eyes flicking around. There didn't seem to be any convenient hiding places. Inwardly cursing the way that his choice of work location was now neatly trapping him in what for all intents and purposes was a firing range, he took a slow step back. She raised one hand warningly, making him think that the energy ball in it was aimed very carefully at his chest.

"No. I think not. You should stand very still for the moment." The pretty green ball shrank a little and glowed brighter. He froze again.

"Who I am is unimportant. I'm more interested in who you are and what you're doing. It looks to me like you've been very anti-social." She glanced at the young man on the ground meaningfully, her expression hardening further if that was possible. "Empty your pockets."

"What?"

"Everything. Put it on the ground, then take three steps back and lie on your face."

He glared at her, incensed. He'd worked hard for what he'd got tonight, four clients in a row was quite difficult. "Or what?" he demanded.

The ball of energy screamed past his face close enough to make the hair on the side of his head crinkle in the heat from it before he was sprayed by chips of ceramic tiles spalled off the wall of the passageway. He yelped in pain, ducking away from the point of impact, his ears hurting from the explosion it had produced, the sound making the entire tunnel ring like a very large bass bell.
The echoes took a couple of seconds to die away.

"Ow. That was loud," the girl mumbled to herself, shaking her head a little. "Note to self, don't open fire in a tunnel without earplugs." He could barely hear her, he'd been a lot closer to the blast than she was.

"Fucking hell, you could have killed me!" he shouted. She smiled in a way that made his heart jump.

"Oh, yes, that's very true." Another ball of energy was aimed at him. He got the message, quickly turning his pockets inside out. Several wallets and a number of other items ended up on the small pile in front of him, before he stepped back a few paces. Thinking about running, he looked over his shoulder then back at the girl. She was smiling in a very unsettling manner.

"You can try but there's no way I could miss down here," she said conversationally. Sighing, he knelt then lay prone. "Good. Now, be sensible and stay there. I'm going to take this young man and all these things, while the police will collect you in a few minutes. They're on their way. If I see you again, I will be very angry." He heard her pick up the various things he'd worked hard to get, then she came into view, bending and carefully gathering up the young man in her arms. He tensed himself to jump at her, but she glanced at him and shook her head.

"I wouldn't." He didn't.

Her light footsteps faded away back the way she'd come, then seconds later a brilliant flash of light illuminated the inside of the tunnel like full sunlight. He twitched, raising his head a little to stare after her. He was still looking when the police came for him from the other direction.

"Thanks for coming so late," Nabiki said to 'Chou', who was going over the young man on the bed. They were in the safe house apartment they'd taken Shampoo and Akane to during that event months ago. Her sister smiled at her.

"It's no trouble. You handled that very well indeed. This poor man was in a bad way, his assailant hit him very hard in a bad place to be hit. His skull was fractured and his brain was swelling. It could have been extremely unfortunate if he'd been lying there until someone came across him." She looked annoyed and upset. "That unpleasant large man could easily have killed him."

Aiko walked over and looked down at him. "I wonder if he's a student at your university?" she asked. Nabiki nodded after a moment's study of the young man's face.

"I think he is. I vaguely recognise him, I might have seen him in one of the lectures." She shrugged. "Not sure. It doesn't matter, no one deserves that sort of treatment when they're just walking along minding their own business." The other two nodded as well. Standing, 'Chou' looked at the man on the bed.

"Well, that's all done. He's fine now, but he'll be asleep for another ten minutes or so. What do you want to do with him?" Nabiki stared at her for a moment, surprised. Her sister seemed amused.

"You saved him. It's your call."

"Fair enough. Let's take him back to the university campus, somewhere quiet, and I can explain to him. Then I really want to go back to bed." She grinned, yawning. "I'm new to all this and I'm exhausted. Intimidating enormous muggers is tiring." Aiko snickered.

"It's a lot of fun, though."
Picking the fellow up 'Chou' joined her sister and her friend, before they vanished, to reappear at one corner of the campus under some cherry trees. Putting him down on the bench there, she stepped back. "Would you like me to take the other things to the local police? I can drop them in without causing any suspicion. Just an anonymous person who found a pile of someone else's belongings." She grinned.

"Thanks, sis. I'll see you guys soon." They both waved before teleporting away. Sitting next to the young man Nabiki waited. Soon he groaned a little, then rolled his head around, before his eyes opened. Glancing blearily around he suddenly noticed the brunette sitting next to him smiling.

"Hi."

Sliding a little further away, he looked cautiously at her. "Ah, hi. Um, who are you? What's going on?" Her smile widened.

"Just a friend. You got mugged, in the pedestrian underpass. Do you remember?" He thought for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"Someone came up from behind when I was half-way through, then... I got hit? On the back of the head?" His hand went up to gingerly probe the relevant spot, making him look slightly surprised at the lack of pain.

"That's it. Don't worry, you're fine. I arranged some medical help. The mugger is in the custody of the police now." She reached down beside the bench and picked up his backpack, handing it to him. "Your watch and the other things he took from you are in here." Standing she stepped back. "I'd suggest that going down dark tunnels in the middle of the night probably isn't the best idea." Turning, she began to walk away.

"Hey! Wait! Who are you, anyway?" Jumping to his feet he followed her. She looked at him with amusement.

"No, you can't follow me home. That happened with a dog once and my father was furious." Startled, he laughed, making her chuckle. "Sorry, I don't want any attention. I just couldn't stand by and let someone get mugged." They stopped under a street-light and she faced him.

"Are you saying you stopped the mugger?" he asked dubiously, looking her up and down. She nodded.

"Yep. It was easy enough." Holding up her hand she made a small ki ball appear then vanish, grinning at his expression. "Anyway, I need some sleep. Take care." Turning she broke into a sprint, making him gape at the speed with which she disappeared into the dark. After a very long pause he looked around, worked out where he was, then slowly walked home, trying to remember her face and failing.

As Nabiki slipped into bed again, she mumbled, "I hope that's not going to happen every night. I need my sleep." She was smiling as she fell asleep though.

Masato woke as the nurse came into the room. She looked at him with a gentle smile, moving to stand beside the bed. Checking the readings on the monitor that the hospital had insisted they attach to him, despite his insistence that the pads itched and he was hardly in serious danger, she nodded approvingly, making a quick note on his chart. "Good, everything seems fine. I'm just going to check your wound." He smiled back, rubbing his eyes, looking at the pretty young woman with long dark hair. She wasn't a nurse he'd seen before, but he was always meeting new ones.
"What time is it?"

"Just after half past six in the morning." Moving the covers aside she gently probed the stab wound. "Do you have any pain?" she asked, her hand over the bandage. He shook his head.

"Not really. It aches a bit, but nothing like what it felt like when that punk stuck the knife in me in the first place." He grinned at her slight expression of annoyance, making her smile back. She had a beautiful smile, serene and calming.

"You were very brave from what I've heard, taking on two young men with weapons."

He shrugged a little, pulling himself up in bed. "Just doing my job. I have to admit I didn't expect it to end up as a fight to the death, but it was kind of late to call for help by that point. I was a bit busy..." She laughed quietly, gently peeling back the tape holding the bandage to the skin, before inspecting his leg. Nodding, she replaced it, applying new tape that she pulled from the drawer next to the bed, then tucked the covers back into place.

"It looks fine. You should be up and about quite soon." Stepping back she studied him. "I heard you got saved by a magical girl?" He snickered.

"That's what they're calling her. I don't know, myself. She certainly had some unusual abilities, and a very impressive presence, though. I wouldn't like to be on her shit list. It would be fairly unhealthy from what I saw."

The nurse giggled. "I wonder who she is?"

"No idea. It's weird, I can't remember anything about what she looked like, or sounded like. She could walk into the room right now and I wouldn't recognise her. That's the strangest thing about all of it." Shrugging, he grinned. "Doesn't matter. I'll probably never see her again anyway, but I owe her. Her privacy is a small price. The police asked me quite a few questions, but even if I had the answers I wouldn't tell them, it's not my business."

The dark-haired nurse nodded understandingly. "It sounds like a matter of honour."

"Exactly." Looking at her watch she smiled slightly, then glanced back at him.

"I have to go, I'm afraid. So many things to do!" Masato chuckled. "But it was nice to talk to you, Mr. Hayashi. I hope you're out of bed soon. Good-bye." With a wave she left. Closing his eyes his mind drifted back to the fight as he fell asleep again.

Waking some time later when his regular nurse came into the room and efficiently swept the curtains back, he blinked a bit at the bright sunlight. "Ah, Mr. Hayashi, how are you feeling today?" She picked his chart up, looking at the monitor and writing down the readings, then stopped and looked confused. "Hmm. Odd, who did this?" she mumbled, tapping her pen on the line above hers. After a moment she shrugged, replacing the chart and flipping his bedclothes aside. "Let's see how your wound is coming along, shall we? I need to replace the bandages."

Her patient was slightly puzzled. "The other nurse checked it already, only a couple of hours ago."

"Oh, you must be mistaken," she said, laughing slightly. "I'm the only one doing that. I think it was probably a dream, that happens all the time." Carefully peeling the tape back she removed the gauze pad to inspect his wound. He watched curiously as her face paled, then began to feel apprehensive. Her eyes remained fixed on his leg.

"Um, is there a problem?" he asked, now rather worried. She snapped her eyes to his face, then
back to his leg.

After another long pause, she asked faintly, "What did this other nurse look like?"

"Tallish for a woman, mid twenties, dark brown hair past her shoulders."

"Did you happen to get her name?" He shook his head.

"No, it didn't come up." Think back, he frowned slightly. "She had a name badge, I think, but I can't remember what it said."

"I see."

"I see." After staring at his leg some more, she put the pad back, her hand trembling slightly. "I need to talk to the doctor. I'll be back."

"I see."

"I see."

"What on earth is going on?" he muttered, curious and worried. Poking the gauze gently he realised that nothing hurt. That was good. After a moment, with a quick glance towards the door, slightly guiltily he peeled the tape away and peered under the pad...

When the doctor came in followed by two nurses who were talking urgently to him, Masato was lying back in bed laughing quietly to himself, the dressings discarded on the bed beside his unblemished leg.

"Come on, Akane! Keep up!" Shampoo called over her shoulder to her friend, running lightly up the roof of the three story building then leaping across the street. Various people looked up, some with smiles, some with slight frowns, as the Chinese girl flew across the eight metre gap, her long lilac hair streaming behind her. Puffing slightly Akane tried the same thing, only barely clearing the roof, falling prone onto the steeply angled tiles and hanging on while mumbling to herself.

Shampoo walked back down to her, laughing.

"That was quite good. You're definitely getting better, you haven't missed once today. Not like yesterday. That poor man was very surprised when you landed on your head in his garden."

"Not as much as I was," the youngest Tendo muttered into the warm tiles under her face, then cautiously rolled over and sat up. She stared at the gap she'd cleared, impressed despite herself.

"Wow. It looks a lot further from here for some reason."

"Three more and then I have to go back to the Café, my lunch break will be over. Let's go that way." She pointed, then accelerated along the peak of the roof, leaping off the end with a whoop.

Akane watched, grinning, then did the same. The observers on the ground smiled or frowned again, then went about their business.

Miki waved to Nabiki as the Tendo woman entered the library, causing her to change course and walk over with a smile. "Hi, Nabiki. I haven't seen you for a few days."

"No, I've been away on and off. Back to Nerima for the weekend, then visiting friends in Minato."

She grinned. "I've got something for you." Reaching into her pocket she pulled out a piece of paper with several signatures on it, sliding it over to the other young woman. Miki picked it up and stared at it with wide eyes.
"Holy shit!" she squealed, making several people stare disapprovingly at her as her voice echoed around the large reading room. She flushed, glancing about then lowering her voice. "Is this real?" she asked excitedly.

"Yep. I was walking down the street and that Yori girl came out of a shop. She recognised me and stopped to talk. I happened to mention you liked collecting magical girl autographs. When she stopped laughing she signed that, then she called some of her friends. They all signed as well. I told you they were nice people." She leaned back in her chair looking pleased, while Miki's hand shook slightly. Eventually she very carefully folded the piece of paper and put it carefully away in her purse, then leaned forward and took Nabiki's hands in hers.

"Thank you so much, Nabiki," she said, smiling brilliantly. "I owe you a huge favour."

"It was nothing." Nabiki waved it off, making the other woman look doubtful. "Really. It just happened. Pure luck. If you'd been there you'd probably have been able to do the same thing."

"I could never have just walked up to her and asked," Miki said quietly. "I'd be too embarrassed. They're famous."

Snickering, Nabiki replied, "They don't seem to want to be famous from what I've heard. There are others that are much more interested in publicity."

"Do you know any of them?" Miki asked eagerly. The Tendo sister shook her head, sighing in amusement.

"Miki, it's not like I'm a personal friend of every magical girl in the city. I happen to have met two of them through my sister, that's all. 'That's not all, but it's complicated...' She laughed inside.

"Thanks, though. Really. This is fantastic. My sister will go mad." The other young woman giggled. "Now I just need to find the local girl and get her autograph. She seems to be working hard, she's foiled at least one crime every night but one for the last week. I think she has to be from around here. There are some pretty impressive stories growing around her. The last two guys she stopped from robbing that shop apparently pissed themselves." She laughed, while Nabiki chuckled a little.

' *That was very funny, although a bit disgusting,*' she remembered. Ranma and Kasumi had been watching that one live, the martial artist had been howling with laughter over the link. "I'd never have thought there was so much crime around here," she said out loud, making Miki nod.

"I know. But I guess what they say is right, if you go looking for trouble you tend to find it."

'I haven't been looking for it but it sure keeps finding me,' Nabiki thought, although she nodded soberly.

"Guess so." Getting up she added, "I need to get a few books. See you later."

"I'll probably be here. I've got a lot of studying to do." Miki smiled at her friend, then opened her book. Heading back into the stacks the brunette Tendo quickly located several books, after a moments thought returning with them to the other woman. She looked up. "That was quick. I have no idea how you can do that. It takes me hours sometimes to find the books I need." Nabiki shrugged.

"It's a gift." Inwardly she smirked. ' *That's true. Jun was a gift.*' Opening the first book she leafed through it, much more slowly than she normally did, aware of the other woman watching.
Stopping occasionally to read a chapter, she looked up after a few minutes to see Miki staring at her.

"You read incredibly quickly," the girl said, impressed. Slightly surprised, Nabiki nodded.

"I've always been a fast reader. Since I've been at university I've done so much reading I seem to have gotten quicker. I didn't think much about it though, it just sort of happened." This was true, she hadn't actually noticed until it was pointed out but thinking about it she realised that in the last few months her reading speed had increased considerably, even taking into account the acquisition of Jun recently.

"That's a really useful skill," Miki commented with slight envy, returning to her own book. "I'm much slower." They sat in companionable silence for the next hour, reading, Miki making notes every now and then. Finishing with all four books Nabiki closed the last one, then got up to return them to the shelves. When she returned John was sitting with her friend. He looked up and smiled.

"Hi, Nabiki. How's everything with you?"

"Fine, thanks. And you?"

"Also fine. Very good, actually. We're going to a movie tonight, would you like to come?" She thought for a second then nodded.

"Sure. Why not?" He grinned.

"Do you like spy films?" The middle sister laughed slightly.

"Oh, I have something of a soft spot for them. What time?"

"We should meet outside your dormitory around, um, say seven or so? That will give us time to get there. We could get something to eat after." Nabiki nodded.

"All right. I'll see you guys then. Bye." Waving, she left the building, heading to the swimming pool for some exercise. She swam two dozen lengths at a steady pace, musing on the events of the last few days and just relaxing. Various students watched her, some of the males with considerable appreciation, in her swimsuit she was physically quite impressive. None of them approached her though, she'd made it clear a long time ago that she wasn't particularly interested. Romance wasn't something on her schedule. It hadn't been for a while. There were too many other things to do first, originally the Akane situation and more lately the whole magical girl thing which had taken her by surprise. She still wasn't sure how she felt about it, although it was growing on her. Helping people was something she found, rather to her own surprise, that she actually enjoyed.

'I doubt that many people from back in the old days at Furinkan High would have ever believed that!' she snickered internally.

A few lengths more, as she was beginning to think of stopping, she got a call from her father. Answering she kept swimming. "Hi, Dad. What's up?"

"Hello, Nabiki. I hope I haven't interrupted anything."

"No, I was just doing a bit of exercising." He chuckled.

"Good. We really should teach you some martial arts katas, they're very good exercise." She laughed slightly.
"Perhaps one day."

"You always say that. I think you'd be quite good at it." He paused, then added, "I won't push. I was just hoping you might know where the old photo albums were, the ones from when I was teaching the first time? I wanted to show some of the students a few of the pictures. I've looked everywhere and I can't find them. Akane doesn't know either." She thought for a few seconds.

"Have you tried at the far left corner of the attic? Behind the boxes of Mom's old clothes? I'm pretty sure I saw them there a couple of years ago."

"Ah. Thank you, Nabiki, I'll go and have a look. How are your studies coming along?"

"Pretty well, Dad. I got the top score in the class on my programming class, and tied on economic theory. The professor was quite complimentary on my paper." She reached the end of the pool again, then heaved herself out to sit on the edge.

"Well done, dear. Your mother would have been proud. I know I am. Right, I'm off into the depths of the attic, I guess." She giggled.

"Good luck. Watch out for the attic spiders, they'll have your arm off if you're not careful." Laughing, he disconnected. Smiling to herself she padded off to shower and dress.

Coming out of the local cinema a few hours later, she was giggling uncontrollably. "That was terrible! So bad it was hysterical. There were so many plot holes, and the gadgets were just ridiculous." John was laughing as well, while Miki grinned.

"The bit at the beginning with the boat chase was pretty good."

"Oh, it was well done, I agree. I just don't think it was necessary." They quoted bits of dialogue at each other as they headed to the restaurant they'd decided on. "It probably suffers in translation, I'd like to see it in the original English," Nabiki said after a while, still laughing.

"I wish my English was good enough for that," Miki said with a sigh. "I was never very good with languages. I know enough to get by but I couldn't watch an entire movie in it and still enjoy it." John put his arm around her shoulders.

"I can help you with it. You helped me with my Japanese." She smiled up at him.

"Thank you, I'd like that. Maybe we should get some English DVDs and watch them, it might be good practice." As the trio was walking along, they passed a doorway out of which stepped a middle aged man who stood in front of them, making Nabiki's threat sense flare. It had been poking her a little for the last couple of hundred metres but she couldn't work out where the danger was. Now, though, as he pulled a knife from his pocket she knew.

'Fuck,' she thought, irritated. He thrust the knife warningly in their direction, but only got half-way through a demand for money when she grabbed his wrist without breaking step, squeezed and twisted while pulling hard, then bent and turned to the side slightly, allowing him to slide neatly over her shoulder, dropping his knife from a paralysed hand in the process. He landed on his back on the ground with a thud that knocked the wind out of him. It had been automatic, a move she'd seen her father and his students perform dozens of times, surprising even her with how smoothly she pulled it off. Kneeling on his stomach she bent his wrist viciously, making him stop weakly struggling and instead yelp in agony. When she looked up she saw Miki and John staring incredulously at her. It had happened so fast they hadn't even had time to realise quite what was going on.
"Holy shit, Nabiki!" Miki squeaked, her hands at her mouth. "How the hell did you do that!?" She shrugged with slight embarrassment.

"Family of martial artists, remember? I picked up a few tricks over the years. Lucky for him it wasn't my younger sister, she'd have broken several bones in the process. Then probably kicked him in the ribs for good measure." The man groaned and she returned her attention to him, inwardly hoping this didn't give anyone any of the right ideas. "Sorry, friend, but that was a stupid thing to do. Just lie there, that's a good man." He didn't seem in a state to do much else, having smacked his head fairly hard on the pavement.

John had his phone out and was dialling. "I'm calling the police," he said. She sighed a little.

"Looks like we're going to be late for the restaurant. Sorry, guys." Miki was still staring at her in shock.

"Screw magical girls, I want your autograph," she said after a few seconds, then laughed.

"Hello. Police please." John watched the man, who was gritting his teeth in pain. The expression on Nabiki's face was cold and hard enough when she looked down at the man that he shivered a little. "Yes, hello, someone just tried to mug my friends and myself at knife-point." There was a pause, then he gave the approximate location. "No, the mugger is still here." Another pause, with him smiling. "We're all fine and he's not going anywhere. One of my friends knows some martial arts. He didn't have much luck." Listening, he chuckled. "Thanks. We'll wait."

The police turned up within a couple of minutes as a patrol car had been just a few hundred metres away. The two police officers got out and walked over, looking curiously at the slender young woman easily restraining the substantially larger man with some form of wrist lock. She smiled at them.

"Hi. Making a collection?" They both grinned.

Shortly they had taken statements from all three students, handcuffed the groaning would-be mugger and parking him in the back of their car, then bagged the knife on the ground. "So, Miss Tendo. A Neriman native, I see. I suppose we should be grateful there isn't a huge hole in the nearest building." She giggled.

"No, that's my sister." They looked amused yet slightly worried. "She's a lot better these days."

"Well, congratulations, you seem to have dealt with the suspect very efficiently. Have you considered a career in law enforcement? We always need people who can handle themselves in a crisis." The officer smiled at her. She shook her head, laughing.

"Not the career path I have in mind. Thank you, though."

"She was amazing," Miki exclaimed, excited. "I didn't even know what was going on before he was on the ground without his knife. I've never seen anyone move that fast before, it was better than the movie we just saw." The middle sister sighed internally.

"I'm not that good, Miki. My sister is the one with all the training. I just know a few good tricks. Plus that idiot wasn't very good or expecting any resistance."

"It was pretty damn impressive even so, Nabiki," John said quietly. "You really were very fast indeed. Neither one of us would have known what to do." Flushing slightly, she accepted the praise reluctantly. The two cops watched for a moment, then smiled.
"We'll be in touch should we need anything more from you. Thank you, by the way, I'm pretty sure this guy is the one we've been looking for around here for a few days, he's mugged half a dozen students. There seems to be something of a mini crime wave at the moment. Take care of yourselves." The officer nodded politely to them before he and his colleague got back into the car and drove off. After a moment spent looking wordlessly at each other, the three young people resumed walking to the restaurant.

"The night has turned out to be more entertaining than I expected," John said dead-pan, making his girlfriend start giggling helplessly. Nabiki shrugged, but smiled a little.

#Nabiki, someone is actively scanning the area with an unfamiliar advanced magitech system similar to me.# Jun suddenly said, making the middle Tendo tense slightly. She was walking down the street towards the Minato station she connected to from the train from Setagaya, which unfortunately didn't connect in the same physical place. Slowly, trying not to look conspicuous, she glanced around. A targeting outline appeared around a young woman twenty metres away, who was looking around in a similar manner, doing a considerably less effective job of trying to be discreet. She was holding a small device about the size of a large cellphone. #There. She is scanning the immediate vicinity. I don't recognise the technology manufacturer, it is not in my database, but it appears to be a more primitive variant of my own design, without the SI function or some of the more advanced combat augmentations. Even so it is far beyond the local capabilities of this world.# The girl glanced in their direction, Nabiki looking through her as if she didn't notice her.

'Can she read anything from you?' she asked, proceeding on her way without missing a step.

#No. I am undetectable to all forms of technology, magic based or otherwise, known to my makers. While I do not recognise the specific technology she is using it is of a general type I know is inferior to my own design. However, she will be able to read your energy signature, which is at considerable variance to the norm. Her own energy signature suggests formidable abilities and power levels. I have no information on her but we must assume hostile intent in the absence of other data. I suggest evasion.#

'Can you block her scan?' Nabiki asked, slowing to look in a shop window while she thought. Popping up an overlay she inspected the image Jun had taken of the woman's face. She had short blue hair, reminding her a little of Akane, but a few years younger.

#I am sorry, but no. The technology is quite advanced even if not up to my own level. I could most likely devise a blocking method given sufficient time which we do not have. She is about to scan you, evasion is no long...# The SI stopped talking abruptly, cutting off mid-word.

Worried, Nabiki asked urgently, 'Jun? What's wrong?' The device sounded genuinely puzzled when it replied a second later.

#Something very unusual just happened. I am unable to determine the cause. As she was beginning her scan there was a very odd energy surge which completely blocked it, then some remarkably effective form of perception obfuscation took action. She would appear not to have noticed. Her device seems none the wiser either.# It stopped again for a moment. #She is moving on. Very odd. I cannot explain it.#

'Weird. I guess she's probably a magical girl but I don't recognise her. There are a lot I don't know yet, I've only met a few of them so far.'

#I have stored the energy signatures of her device and the woman herself. If we encounter them
again you will know. I would suggest mentioning this to Kasumi and Ranma. They are likely to recognise the woman and can inform you whether she presents a threat.

Nodding once, very slightly, Nabiki went on her way, glancing back at the woman who was walking away, apparently still scanning the area. She wondered who she was and what group she belonged to. In all probability she was no threat to the Tendo sister but it was interesting. She was also extremely curious about what on earth had just happened. Jun sounded very confused.

The SI had overlaid a discreet map in the corner of her vision showing a view of the nearby streets, with her location indicated in the middle. A red dot indicated the location of the mystery woman, who was steadily moving away. The device seemed to have gone into full-blown threat assessment mode, treating the encounter as a combat situation. The way the icon of the other woman was labelled 'Hostile target?' showed that pretty clearly. Mildly worried but also quite amused Nabiki continued on her way.
"You *have* met her, actually." Ranma grinned at her. She looked puzzled.

"I don't think so. I'm pretty good with faces."

"Months ago, at the warehouse. You remember when those girls blew the roof in? She was the one at the back, who didn't seem very happy about it. Ami, her name is. One of the only two out of all of them I have any time for. She's basically their intelligence asset. Not as powerful as the others, but probably smarter than all of them put together. Kasumi likes her quite a lot, they seem to get on. Personally, I think she'd do a lot better on her own, her friends are a damn nuisance and very slow to learn. At least they finally seem to have stopped coming around here being difficult. It only took them three years or so to get the hint." He laughed a little, inspecting the image Nabiki had sent him. "Definitely her. She's got some sort of magical computer she uses to locate potential trouble. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to be very selective, it must read anything that comes through a portal as a threat."

"Jun wasn't completely impressed either." The martial artist snickered, handing her a cup of coffee.

"I'm not surprised. These things are considerably more advanced, I suspect. Certainly a lot smarter. I wonder what it was that deflected her scan?"

Nabiki was still trying to remember the face of the young woman. "I can't place her at all. I remember the one you mentioned, but are you sure they're the same?"

Smiling, he nodded. "They use a spell similar to the one the bracelets have. It's very good. Once you know about it, though, it stops working. Trust me, they're the same girl. The power signatures are identical. She was powered down on the street, without the silly costume, just the device she was using. That's more or less the middle of the area they live in." He shook his head in despair. "It took Kas and me a whole afternoon to work out the *civilian identities* of pretty much all of them when we first came across that group. Their security is surprisingly poor, they rely entirely on the spell and don't even think about being sneaky. Luckily they're more than powerful enough to deal with most threats, although I really wish they'd be more careful. In the last eighteen months several of them have caused some pretty impressive damage to the fixtures and fittings. There have been complaints." Nabiki laughed, he looked quite annoyed.

"I guess she was probably just poking around checking for trouble. She's got the right instincts and takes it seriously. More so than some of them. Ami isn't a threat to you, although I can understand if you don't want her to know about you. She doesn't know anything about us outside Yori and Chou being someone you don't want to cross. We've yelled, well, *I*'ve yelled at them all quite a lot. At first I tried explaining things calmly, but it doesn't seem to work, they just ignore it. So I started intimidating them. A pavlovian conditioning exercise, I guess. Seems to have worked. Kas mainly just looked disappointed, which seemed to work even better. I can't really pull that off so convincingly." Laughing, he rummaged in the refrigerator, quickly making an impressively large pair of sandwiches, handing her one. They retired to the sofa, sitting down.

"Right. I want to figure out what happened. I'm not happy about the idea of strange magic around you. Hold still, I want to check for any weird spells." Putting his plate down he swallowed the bite he was chewing, then examined her carefully. Nabiki watched apprehensively. After a long moment he shook his head slowly. "Nothing there that shouldn't be there. It's mainly the ward system, it seems happy enough though. Your ki levels are higher than they were last time I saw you, you must have been practising with the ki balls a fair bit?" She nodded.
"Every night. I tend to play with them when I'm working. Having Jun means I don't need to type anything any more, I tend to do my work lying on the bed. Recently I do it while juggling ki balls, I've got it up to four at once. It seems to be helping me split my attention between several tasks which seemed like a good thing to learn." He looked pleased and approving.

"Very well done. That's a good exercise. I was going to start you on something similar in a week or two but you beat me to it. I'll want to see that later, to check on how well you're coming along." Picking up his sandwich again he took another bite, looking at her with interest. "Hmm. So what was it? Her magical tech is pretty good, it's not at all easy to block. Our cloaking technique is about the only thing I know for a fact that can do it..." He trailed off, an expression of slight surprise coming over him. "I wonder..." Turning to look into the room he concentrated, a smaller version of the complex pattern of the ward system control interface fading into view. Nabiki watched, amazed once more. "OK, let's see. Right, here we are. Um..." He started laughing.

"What?" Nabiki asked with considerable curiosity.

"I don't believe it. We certainly didn't design it to do that," he said, poking a couple of glowing lines and looking at the resultant change to the pattern. She watched as he inspected it, shaking his head with a pleased yet surprised expression. "Amazing." Ranma turned to her and looked at her closely for a moment. "It really does like you."

"What the hell are you babbling about, Saotome?" the middle sister asked, getting irritated. He smiled a little, then explained.

"The ward system logs attempts at probing people within it's area of influence, which is basically the seven of us, and Happosai to a degree. Since we added you guys to the wards five months ago the thing has grown a lot more complex, and considerably more powerful as well. It's storage capacity has increased a lot. We kind of expected that but the amount is surprising. It seems to be an exponential growth rather than linear, which is interesting..." He faded out as he seemed to be thinking of something. Nabiki recognised the look as one that meant he was talking to his comm system, she got the same one when she talked to Jun.

"Yes, it fits an exponential growth. Fascinating. That has some possibilities." A graphic popped up in a window over her view as he sent the results to her. She examined it as he went on. "Anyway, as far as I can tell it recognises you have the least total power of all the group so it seems to be keeping a closer eye on you than the rest of us. Plus, like Kasumi told you, it seems to like you." He grinned. "It really is like a big protective pet. It's got very large teeth as well. There are logs showing that on three separate occasions Cologne has actively probed you. There are lots of other passive probes which it deflected, probably various martial artists and magic users. It seems to be going all out to hide your power signature from anyone who might notice. That's interesting, because it's not specifically designed to do that, it's some sort of emergent behaviour. Within it's capabilities, obviously, but something it basically decided on it's own."

Nabiki looked surprised and slightly nervous. "Can it decide things on it's own?" He nodded.

"To a limited degree. Like the SI in the comms unit, but different. Those mimic a sentient mind remarkably well but as far as I can tell aren't actually truly sentient like we are. Pretty damn close in a lot of ways, but not quite there. I suspect that eventually they might reach that level, the things seem to be capable of learning. That's something to think about. The ward system isn't mimicking a mind in the way they are, more something like a very bright guard dog crossed with a somewhat paranoid security system. In this case, it's got a goal, protection of it's users from hostile intent, and a certain amount of leeway as to how it achieves that goal. In the absence of specific instructions it seems to have decided the best method to protect you is to hide you in plain sight." Snickering a
little, he checked the logs again. "I'm impressed. That's quite a lot of power it's using." He returned his attention to her.

"It's targeting anyone who probes you who might have some form of hostile desire, or even simply isn't a known friendly, with the cloaking technique, which would have the effect of diverting their attention at lower power, and possibly even erasing a few seconds of short-term memory at higher levels. It looks like it's used that level on Cologne twice and the lower power level once. She must have noticed something, she's nothing if not sharp, then probed you to find out what it was. The ward system blocked the probe and arranged to make sure she lost interest. I guess she's good enough that eventually she bypassed the effect, or possibly just noticed something all over and probed again." He starting laughing.

"She must be getting very confused. Possibly she thinks there's something wrong with her memory. I doubt she'll work out what's happening though, this would be far past her experience level. Our ward spells are a real mishmash of things we bought in, things Happosai came up with, and lots of our own work. We understand them, but I doubt anyone else would without years of effort, our system is too weird." Nabiki was impressed, as well as amused. She thought about it and giggled.

"I think I know at least one of the times it diverted her attention, thinking back on it. A few weeks ago I met her at the Dojo, she was watching Akane and Shampoo on the roof. She made a weird little noise and looked like she'd seen a ghost for a second, but then said there was nothing wrong. Put it down to some tea going down the wrong pipe. She didn't seem to notice her own expression." Ranma nodded, smiling.

"That would fit. One of the dates logged is about right, sometime in mid April."

"Yep, that's right," the middle sister said, remembering.

"Then again about two weeks later, and once more a week after that."

"All times I was back home." Nabiki chuckled. "Weird. But kind of funny."

"Looks like it's diverted attention from several people at the Dojo. Shampoo, this one has to be, then probably Soun and Pop as well. Plus two or three people who are likely local martial artists, there are several others in Nerima who would be good enough to read ki signatures. This looks like half a dozen different magical girls locally as well. I recognise most of the signatures." He chuckled again as he fiddled with the wards. "Here we go. An hour ago. That's Ami's signature, and her little computer. It spotted her scan and shut it down cleanly, then cloaked you. Until she directly scanned you it was just watching but when you were at risk of being detected it took action.

"Can it block a machine? Especially a magical one?"

He nodded. "Yes. The amount of power it has available for that cloaking method is extremely high. Kas and I can block it as well, no problem, but not many others could. It seems to have diverted her scans completely, making you look totally normal. Very good indeed." Amused, he added, "I wish I could give it a biscuit or something. It's excelled itself. I should give it some more power than normal as a reward."

Nabiki laughed. "Would it notice?"

He shrugged. "No idea. But it's earned it's keep, that's for sure." After a moment's further inspection of the spell logs he turned to her, smiling. "I almost wish something big would attack you. It would be very interesting to see what happened if the ward system decided to intervene."
Possibly quite loud though." She glared at him as he dismissed the ward controls.

"I have no wish to be jumped by a monster just to satisfy your curiosity!" she snapped. He was still snickering when 'Chou' and Aiko appeared in the middle of the living room, looking at them curiously.

"Are you annoying my sister, dear?" the tall woman asked calmly as she shimmered back into Kasumi, pulling some shopping bags out of ki space. Nabiki stopped glaring at Ranma to look at the other Tendo woman.

"He wants to feed me to a demon to see what the building wards do." Aiko laughed.

"That's not quite what I said," Ranma protested.

"Near enough." She was still annoyed. Smiling, he rose to help his wife put the food away in the kitchen. Aiko sat beside her still chucking.

"It would be interesting," she said, giggling at the look Nabiki shot her.

"Don't you start." Holding up her hands in defence, the short woman smiled.

"Only joking. Anyway, how are you? I haven't seen you in person for more than a week."

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks. We comm each other all the time, you know that." Smiling, Aiko nodded.

"I still like to see my friends in the flesh. These modern alien communicators from some distant dimension may be all the rage but face to face contact is still important," she joked. Nabiki laughed.

"Fair enough."

"I saw the news the other day. The local reporter around your university seems to be getting quite excited about the strange magical girl who's making life difficult for muggers and other criminals." Nabiki blushed.

"I've only stepped in nine times."

"Eleven."

"All right, eleven."

"Twelve if you count that car accident."

"Fine. Twelve times."

"Thirteen, counting the woman who got trapped in the dumpster. How did she manage that, anyway?" Nabiki sighed, grinning. Aiko looked very amused.

"OK, OK. Thirteen times." They laughed. "She leaned over, lost her balance, then fell in. The lid dropped and locked and she panicked. I happened to be walking past a minute later, heard her yelling, and had to pull the lock off to get her out." She shook her head. "I still can't believe it. The number of unlikely things that suddenly seem to be happening just as I'm passing is way beyond random chance."

"That's what tends to happen to people like us. We're weirdness magnets. No idea why but the abilities and the crazy seem to go together." Aiko shrugged. "You get used to it. Ranma is the
biggest weirdness magnet I've ever even heard of, but it affects all of us to one degree or another. We attract strange things. Or perhaps we're attracted to them. I don't know which is cause and which effect."

"Chaos nodes," Kasumi said, coming back into the room followed by the martial artist. They sat, Kasumi offering each of the others a plate of snacks. "That's what I believe it's called in mage circles. Just by having the abilities, we tend to warp reality a little, which causes a certain amount of chaos in the locality. Or attracts the chaos already present. There are several theories, none of which completely explain it, but it does seem to be a real thing. Attracting pre-existing chaos seems slightly more likely to me but it's not something I've studied much. I should do, I suppose, when I get time. It affects all high level martial artists, magic users, magical girls, that sort of person, to one degree or another. Also some types of artistic personalities and the occasional random poor soul. They have it very hard, since they can't do much about it." She smiled at Ranma. "My dear husband is a particularly strong one."

"Not something I actually wanted," he grumped, shoving a cracker into his mouth and looking slightly disgruntled. "It's caused a lot of problems."

"Probably why we gravitate towards Nerima or Minato," Aiko suggested, thinking about it. "The background level of crazy in those places must be off the scale." Kasumi nodded, smiling.

"I would say so. If it really is true, it would explain quite a lot. I know some places around the world do seem to attract certain types of magic, chaos magic around here would fit." She looked at her sister. "I saw the news as well. You seem to have been busy." The other Tendo woman looked slightly embarrassed all over again.

"It's not like I've been looking for it, it just seems to happen." Kasumi giggled.

"Oh, trust me, I know. You're doing very well. Have you recorded more of your exploits?"

Laughing, Nabiki nodded, then sent them all the files. They watched them with interest, commenting on her performance. Overall everyone was pleased.

"Not bad, Nabs." Ranma grinned at her. "Your aim seems to be pretty good, although you missed once on that last mugging." She snickered.

"I know, but I think I pulled off pretending it was a warning shot. He looked fairly impressed. And don't call me Nabs."

"The garbage can did make a rather large explosion when it disappeared," Kasumi said, smiling. "He looked quite startled."

"I put an envelope with enough cash to cover the cost of it under their door later that night, when the police had gone," Nabiki said, slightly red. "I didn't want anyone to be out of pocket." They all seemed pleased.

Ranma leaned back with another cracker in his hand, biting off half of it and chewing contemplatively, while studying her. She looked back with a raised eyebrow. "In light of what's been happening to you recently, I think we need to work on some new techniques. Strength and coordination training, definitely, although you're coming along very well there on your own. I have a few exercises that will speed it up though." She nodded. "I'd like to teach you the cloaking technique, but one of the problems with it is that you need so much ki control to make it work that by the time you do, you've been obvious without it for months." He grinned a little. "Luckily, the ward system seems to be filling in there, so that's handy. I suspect as your power and control grows it will reduce it's oversight, since it won't be needed as much."
"OK." Nabiki grabbed a cracker of her own.

"I also want to start all of you on the hidden weapons techniques. The others are definitely at the point where they can learn it, I'm pretty sure you are as well. You don't have the power that they do, you're a year or two away from that at least, but luckily it needs good control rather than raw power. The more energy you have available the easier it will get and the larger pocket you can make, but you're already near the level where I was when I first learned it, or Mousse had while using it extremely effectively." Surprised, Nabiki raised an eyebrow.

"Really? I didn't think I had that much ability."

"You don't know all the things I did at that point, not by a long way, but your basic power level is certainly close and your handling of ki balls is better. Judging by your recordings it's very impressive, in fact. We'll go down to the basement later and you can show me." He looked thoughtful. "We need to find somewhere we can really cut loose. Indoors certainly isn't suitable, never mind anywhere near other people. Perhaps somewhere accessible by a portal." He glanced at Kasumi, who nodded.

"I can check the records for a suitable place that no-one would mind being blown up a bit. I'm sure Uthryyl could find somewhere if I can't."

"Good. It's not immediately required, but sooner or later we need a decent firing range." The martial artist laughed. "I have to admit I'm curious how big a hole all of us can make if we try. Sergeant Harada would be very annoyed if I made another duck pond without a good excuse, though. Once was enough." Returning his attention to Nabiki, he asked, "Can you stay for, oh, three or four days at least, this time? I'd prefer to put in a fairly intense session to get you started." She checked her schedule with Jun.

"Looks like it. I don't have any important lectures for the next five days, only one paper to do and I can email that one. Most of the lecturers want printed work but that one is OK with electronic documents."

"Great, that should let us get quite a lot of things hammered into place." He laughed at her expression. "Don't worry, you'll have fun. Some of the time."

"Oh, hell. That sounds painful," she said, grimacing. Aiko laughed, while her sister smiled at her.

"It only hurts for a while. Then it numbs out," the short woman said with a grin.

"Wonderful..."

"How are you coming with the trade language?" Ranma asked her curiously after a moment. She shrugged a little.

"Me speak some words, understand cow," she said in that language, making him gape, then nearly have an aneurysm he was laughing so hard. Even Kasumi was shrieking with glee, while Aiko was slowly slipping off the sofa, giggling hysterically.

"Understand more, I think you meant," he managed to say after some time. "I hope you meant that. Cows don't have much to say." She nodded, looking embarrassed but amused.

"The syntax is weird, although I have to admit it follows some fairly straightforward rules. I have problems with some of the modifiers, and a lot of the words sound quite similar." He nodded, still snickering. "Jun is able to translate for me, in the sense of letting me know what someone is saying, but can't really translate the other way. I mean, it knows the language, sure, but can't say
anything to anyone else. I was surprised about that, I'd have thought it could use the comms link, but apparently it's own rules don't allow that." He nodded understandingly.

"I know. I've had long conversations with my system finding out what it can and can't do. There are a few things that it's undoubtedly able to do but isn't permitted to. A security measure, it says. The makers are even more paranoid than we are."

"I still have trouble believing that these things were sold with you two in the authorised user list. Are you sure that you've never had direct contact with the makers?" He shrugged.

"Not as far as I can work out. Apparently they know a fair amount about us, though, or at least Yori and Chou. We do have something of a reputation in some rather weird places." He laughed a little. "Places not of this earth!" His voice was deep and spooky for this last part, making everyone laugh again.

"It's very strange. But then, so are you." Looking satisfied he nodded.

"I know. It's neat, isn't it?" She gave him a long-suffering look, then glanced at her sister, who smiled.

"Have you thought any more about what I said the other week about my ideas on the communicators possibly being a covert surveillance system?" she asked after a moment. He nodded slowly.

"I have, quite a lot. I'll admit it was a good and also rather worrying thought. My system seems to be as freaked out by the suggestion as yours was, it claims to be trying to work out a method to determine whether it's compromised. I talked it over with Kasumi and Uthryyl as well. Kas thinks it's probably not true, for a number of reasons, but isn't sure. Uthryyl is pretty convinced they're safe." He took another cracker. "His contact that he got the devices through is someone he's known for over a hundred years, a very old and trusted friend." Nabiki was slightly surprised, she hadn't realised how old the demon was. "Between them they checked out the company and the world that made the devices. It has a phenomenal reputation, they've been making really advanced magical technology for centuries and in all that time no one has ever even hinted at any impropriety."

"The tech is very rare, very good, very expensive, and very trusted. I suppose they could be playing a long game, salting synthetic intelligences as spies around the place, which would actually be a very clever idea, but from what I know it's very unlikely. It's just not the way they work. They're information brokers amongst other things, they take information security more seriously than anyone I've ever heard of. Their reputation would be permanently ruined if it ever was even suspected they were stealing information. In over a thousand years no such suspicion has been raised, so it's probably safe." He shrugged slightly. "There isn't any way to absolutely prove it one way or the other, not that I can think of at the moment anyway, and in any case even if it was true it most likely doesn't matter. They don't sell personal information. At all, ever."

"OK. I have to say it's worried me a bit. Not as much as perhaps it should have, I felt much the same about the makers getting information on me, that in the long run it wouldn't actually make a lot of difference, but I didn't like the idea on the basis of privacy. Jun really didn't like the idea." She smiled. "It did a very good impression of being quite worried and just the tiniest bit insulted."

"They are remarkably good attempts at a mind," Kasumi said, sipping a glass of water after eating some snacks. "I'm sure they're learning, as well. Nao seems to be much more like a real person than when I first got it." Aiko nodded thoughtfully.

"I've noticed the same thing. The responses are quicker and more fluid and it seems to be
anticipating what I need surprisingly well." After a moment she smiled at them. "Oh, I was going to mention it. Last night I think I worked out a way to feed power from the wards into the teleport amulet." Ranma looked impressed. "I didn't want to try it until I talked to you though, both so you could check it for any stupid errors, and to ask if it's all right to use some energy from the wards." He quickly glanced at Kasumi, then back to her.

"Of course it's all right. It's like a community resource. We're all, except for Nabiki, and that will change in time, putting power into the system, for future use. You're certainly allowed to pull some back out, especially for something as useful as the teleportation. You provide a service to all of us, one we're extremely grateful for and rely on, so it would be pretty mean not to allow it. Aside from anything else, it doesn't use very much power considering how much is stored in there." She nodded, looking pleased.

"Thanks. OK, I'll try it, can you check it while I run it up and make sure nothing dangerous happens?"

"Of course. Do it slowly so I can see what you're doing." Concentrating, she started doing something that made Nabiki's head fizz. She watched as best she could, seeing complex energy patterns swirling around Aiko and her amulet with the ki sense she was gradually developing. It was weirdly beautiful. "Hang on. Are you sure you want to do that?" Ranma asked, making Aiko stop and look at the pattern she was building.

"Oops. No, that wouldn't be good. Thanks." She unravelled part of the pattern and rebuilt it, the new version somehow looking slightly better to the watching middle sister. Kasumi was watching with interest as well. "Right. I think that's it. Does it look reasonable?" The other two inspected the pattern for half a minute or so, then looked at each other.

"It looks very good, Aiko," Kasumi said. "Very clean and elegant. Activate it and see what happens." With a deep breath the short brunette prodded the relevant part of the pattern with the ki/magic fusion she was learning to manipulate, gasping slightly as it sprang into life. Nabiki got the sudden impression of something enormous looking carefully at the woman, seeming to accept her request, then feeding power to her. It flowed through her into the amulet, which visibly glowed in a beautiful prismatic manner for a few seconds. The flow slowed and evened out as the amulet recharged, settling down to a slight linkage that had just enough energy to be apparent.

"Woah. That felt... weird. But kind of nice as well." The teleporter lifted her amulet and looked at it. "Completely full. OK, that part worked."

"Test it. In theory that should automatically recharge you practically anywhere within range of the ward system, which is practically anywhere." Nodding, she stood, then vanished with a flash. They looked at each other, the light was tinged with a very faint rainbow after-image, something they'd never seen before. "Interesting." Ranma checked the wards, then shrugged.

"Seems to be a visible effect from the stored energy. It's slightly different than the stuff we normally feed her, or her own, but compatible." Aiko commed them all in a conference, sounding amused.

"It works perfectly. I jumped half a dozen times as far as I could, it's still full."

"I though it was working, it's logging little pulses of power being fed to you. That's very impressive work. Well done." Ranma grinned.

"Hey, anyone want some authentic Italian pizza? I'm in Rome." Nabiki started giggling. Her sister looked at her with a smile.
"I'll have seafood, please." The other two placed orders, grinning at the absurdity of it. Twenty minutes later Aiko reappeared in the middle of the room with a stack of boxes in her arms.

"Sorry it took so long, I had to find somewhere to change Yen to Euros. That wasn't easy at three in the morning."

"Where did you go to do that?" Nabiki asked.

"San Francisco," Aiko replied with a laugh. She put the pizzas on the table, handing them each a box. "I got some for the others as well."

"You know, the last time I had pizza delivered, it took nearly an hour, and the shop is only about three kilometres away," Nabiki remarked, picking up a slice of pizza and trying it, finding it very good. "It wasn't as good as this and took three times as long to get as something that just came about ten thousand kilometres."

"That's teleportation for you. It's really useful," Aiko said, grinning, before opening her own box.

"I'll say. I wish I could do it."

Ranma was a third of the way through his pizza already, but slowed down to chuckle. "Hopefully, one day you'll be able to. Kas and I are working on reverse-engineering Aiko's teleport magic and translating it into our system. It's even more complex than the portal spell, plus there's no room for error, but we're pretty confident we can get it working in the end. It'll take a while though." He looked at Aiko who was eating with gusto, looking pleased with herself. "Eventually you probably won't need the ward power linkage, when your own levels rise enough, but in the mean time that's very good work."

"Do you speak Italian?" Nabiki asked curiously. Aiko looked amused.

"Enough to just about get by. I'm fairly good with languages. It helps if you're going to jump around all over the planet. I can squeak by in Italian, French, German, and Spanish, while I know enough Portuguese and Russian to know if I'm being threatened or complimented. That covers most of the planet, along with Japanese and English." She chuckled. "I find that pointing and waving money works most places when you're ordering food, though. It's funny, when I first got the magic in school and started experimenting, my interest in languages suddenly increased a lot. My teachers were very puzzled. They'd never have believed the reason behind it, though."

Fumiko came in at that point, sniffing the air with interest. "Something smells wonderful." Aiko pointed to one of the remaining boxes.

"Good timing. That's yours, I got your favourite."

"Thanks." The other woman grabbed her pizza then sat, opening it. "Where did this come from?"

"Rome."

Her team-mate looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "OK." Trying some she smiled. "It's nearly as good as that place in New York."

Nabiki laughed. "Do you guys go all over the world for food on a regular basis?" Fumiko grinned, eating a larger piece.

"Not all the time, but if you have the facilities, why not? There's a place in Brisbane that does some of the best Sushi I've ever had."
The other two arrived fairly shortly, each receiving a box with a smile. Misaki had to reheat hers, but still finished it before Tamiko, who had turned up ten minutes before. When she was done she looked with interest at the two slices left in her sisters box, making the other woman sigh and push it towards her. She smiled, then quickly made them vanish. "Where does it go?" Fumiko asked the ceiling. There was no answer.

"OK, now that you're all here, I'd like to do a few hours of ki visualisation exercises. Nabiki, you haven't had as much as they have of this, but you've already worked quite a lot of it out yourself, which is impressive. I think that if we can get you all to the same point, which should be possible by this evening, Kas and I can then start teaching some of the basics of our magic system. Aiko is slightly ahead of you others, she's worked out some of it already from watching us, but you'll all learn something. We'll start by going over hidden weapons first, though. Does that sound sensible?" They exchanged glances.

"Fine by me," Nabiki said, echoed by the rest.

"Good. Let's go into the practice room, then." Soon they were sitting on the floor, Kasumi and Ranma facing the others, all of them going through breathing exercises. They were using the communicators to wordlessly speak to their students without disturbing their breathing pattern.

"That's it, sister. Do you see it inside you?"

"It's more a feeling, but yes. That's my internal ki field, I guess."

"Yep. It's pretty large already, but compare it to Aiko there."

"Wow, that's much bigger."

"She's been doing this for much longer than you have and her own magic has boosted it a lot. Look at Kas, compare it."

"Good grief. It's huge!"

"It's certainly grown a lot in the last year, I'm surprised myself when I look." A gentle giggle came over the link. "I never thought I'd be able to do all this."

"Fuck me, Saotome!" Nabiki opened her eyes to look at him, then closed them again, shaking her head in wonder. "That's incredible. You make the rest of us all put together look pretty weak."

"Twenty years of some of the most difficult martial arts there are, god only knows how much magic, a hell of a lot of other training, and a gift." He sounded more resigned than anything else. "It's not something I asked for but there it is. One day, trust me, you will most likely reach this level." He snickered, his voice in all their heads. "Of course, by then I'll have moved on. I've got quite a head start."

"Show off." Tamiko smirked. A chorus of laughs echoed silently in the room, interrupted only by eerie synchronised breathing.

"You're already past Akane's normal level, Nabiki. The others are well past what she could produce under the most extreme conditions at the moment. Kas is closing in on Herb on a good day. I'm somewhere past Happosai in raw ki." They went through the meditation and visualisation exercises over and over again, for well over two hours. Nabiki found it oddly relaxing. By the end of that part she was performing the delicate ki manipulations Kasumi and Ranma both showed them nearly as smoothly as the other four. Eventually, Ranma's voice came, female this time. He'd shifted at some point in the last half hour without any of them noticing. Nabiki found it interesting
that her sub-vocalised voice matched whatever form she was currently in. Since it was all in the
speech centres of the brain there didn't seem to be any physical reason for it. She assumed it was
proof of how complete the change, both of the Jusenkyo curse and the illusion method were, as
she'd noticed the same thing when Ranma was Yori.

"OK. I'm going to slowly create a ki fold or pocket. I would like you all to watch very carefully. It's
not massively difficult, it doesn't need a lot of power, but it's very subtle. Holding it stable isn't
anywhere as difficult as creating it in the first place, so pay attention."

"Yes, Grand Master," Nabiki sent, ruining it with a snicker. The others laughed.

"Pay attention, student." The red-head sounded amused. Nabiki watched with interest using the ki
sense she was becoming used to as a knot of energy slowly formed in front of the presence she
could sense of Ranma. She looked at it closely, seeing how complex the pattern was, little nested
bits swirling away from the main pattern. As she watched it suddenly twitched, producing a weird
feeling, then almost faded away, leaving something that was almost impossible to see unless you'd
been watching for it. There was the sense that what she was looking at was only one end of
something that somehow disappeared from normal view, insofar as any of this was 'normal'. She
grinned to herself.

"That's very odd to watch slowly like that," Fumiko said, fascinated. "You can actually see the
moment it forms the subspace fold. Normally it's just suddenly there."

"I know. Most practitioners of this art don't seem to be able to slow it down like this. It took me
ages to do it without it going unstable and dissipating. Mind you, Kas learned it almost
immediately when I showed her like this." She sounded very proud. "Right. I'll unravel it again,
then repeat." The red-headed martial artist showed them a dozen times, until everyone had the
pattern's basics memorised. Then she speeded it up, until the process was running at the speed it
was usually applied at. This took nearly an hour. Nabiki was slightly surprised to realise how long
this had all taken, and at the fact that she wasn't aching all over from having sat completely still for
so long.

"Everyone got it?" They murmured assent, Tamiko and Nabiki slightly more hesitantly than the
other three. "Good. Now, I want you each to try applying that pattern. Just put it right in front of
you." They all attempted what she asked. It wasn't easy, and in fact for some time it was pretty
much impossible for all of them. Misaki got it first.

"Holy shit," she said quietly, when the pattern snapped into stability. It only lasted about five
seconds, but she was grinning.

"Very well done, Misaki," Kasumi commented. She tried again, managing to hold it stable for
nearly half a minute. By her third attempt, Aiko had managed it, also for a very short time.

"Wow. That's amazing," the short woman smiled, trying again.

Eventually all of them but Nabiki had managed it, for periods of up to five minutes. She was
going frustrated, the pattern just wouldn't seem to gel in her mind. The middle sister was fairly
sure she was doing it correctly but something was missing. "Damn", she muttered quietly as her
latest effort fizzled out before doing anything useful.

"Don't worry, sister, this isn't easy. The others have more experience working with energy patterns,
they've been doing it on some level with their magic for years. You'll get it." Kasumi's voice was
gently encouraging. Irritated, feeling slightly slow for not being able to do something everyone else
could, Nabiki sat and thought for a while, going over and over the pattern in her mind. The others
quietly sat and practised, while her sister watched her ki signature carefully, seeing how it showed
determination and stubbornness. Eventually, the middle Tendo took a deep breath, breaking out of
the pattern they were all breathing in, opening her eyes and looking around. They'd been at it for
nearly four and a half hours, Jun showed her.

'Right,' she thought, then deliberately went back into the visualisation trance, concentrating on the
pattern to the exclusion of everything else. Kasumi and Ranma watched with interest as her energy
flow moved around, saying nothing. Her senses withdrew to just a memory, the only thing of
importance the ki surrounding her. After an indeterminate time, without even consciously deciding
to, she slowly and carefully began to build the ki pocket pattern. It wove itself into existence in
front of her minds eye, each section mating with the others much more smoothly than she'd
managed up until now. Eventually only the final part of the pattern was missing, which was the
point it had all fallen apart on the previous attempts.

This time, she simply reached out in her head and neatly made the missing bit, gently pushing
power into it, then watched as it inverted and the bulk of it disappeared into it's own little universe.
Nabiki just watched it calmly, not even really thinking, merely pleased that she'd succeeded. After
some time she became aware that someone was speaking to her.

"What?" she asked absently, looking at the ki pocket still.

"I said, well done, sister," Kasumi replied, pride in her voice. "Well done indeed. It's been stable
for fifteen minutes so far."

With some effort the middle sister brought herself out of the meditation trance she'd fallen into,
checking the time. Indeed, she'd been sitting there for over an hour since the last time she checked.
Opening her eyes she looked at Kasumi, seeing that her sister was the only person still there. She
could hear the others in the living room talking quietly. She smiled at Kasumi, then looked around.
"Wow. That was... intense. I had no idea you could get so lost inside yourself like that." Kasumi
nodded calmly.

"It can be very engrossing. Working on fine energy manipulations is very complex but also
remarkable relaxing, assuming you're not under pressure. I often use something like that just to
wind down after a hard day. It's much more effective than standard meditation."

"You, Sis? Wind down? You're the calmest person I've ever known." Kasumi smiled impishly.

"I'm even calmer after a good meditation session. Which is why I do them in bed, when you're that
calm moving can be difficult." Nabiki giggled. Standing with no effort, feeling surprisingly
relaxed, she grinned at her sister.

"That was frustrating, difficult, but also very interesting. Thanks." Kasumi also stood, looking at
her curiously. She gestured.

"You're forgetting something." Puzzled, Nabiki looked around. Nothing seemed amiss. Then she
thought to check the ki pocket, which she'd forgotten about.

It was still there, apparently completely stable.

"Um, is that normal?" she asked, inspecting it carefully. Kasumi laughed.

"Yes, but normally not without a lot more practice." She handed her sister a bo staff she pulled out
of the air. "Here. See if you can put something in it." Taking the two metre length of hard wood,
Nabiki inspected it, then her sister.
"The usual method is to use some pre-existing opening, such as clothing, a pocket, sleeve, something like that, then link the ki fold to it. That's what Mousse does. He can put an awful lot more up his sleeves than his arms." The elder Tendo smiled. "You don't absolutely have to do that but it's considerably easier. When you become practised at the technique you can move the opening around to anything you like, when you want to, without disrupting the pocket, or even just leave it hanging in space. That's much more difficult though." She pulled a chopstick out of her ear, then made it disappear into her closed fist. Removing it from her other ear she flipped it into nothingness half a metre in front of her face with a grin. Nabiki snickered.

"That would go down well at parties."

"See if you can move it to link to your pocket. Like this, it's much easier than creating the thing in the first place." Kasumi demonstrated as Nabiki watched the ki flow carefully.

"Do it again, please?" Her sister complied. "OK. I think I see. Um, I do this..." Cautiously she tried modifying the ki pattern. Three attempts later she had it. "Oh, wow. That's just amazing," she mumbled, sliding the entire bo staff into her jeans pocket, which she knew for a fact was only about ten centimetres deep. She reached in and felt around, finding the end of the staff and pulling it out again. Staring bemusedly at it she started giggling, to the point that her sister had to gently guide her back to the living room.

"I think I'm OK with it, then something like this happens." Nabiki pushed the staff back into her pocket. "It's completely insane. That really is a bo staff in my pocket!" Everyone watched as she giggled helplessly, pulling it out and putting it back in, for about ten minutes. Eventually she recovered. "It's completely crazy," she said for the third time in five minutes, looking around at the others. Tamiko laughed.

"I know. But isn't it fun?"

A couple of minutes later there was a faint pop and the staff appeared out of nowhere, dropping to the floor having bounced off the coffee table. Nabiki twitched in surprise, feeling the ki pocket evaporate abruptly. "What happened?" Ranma grinned at her.

"They do that until you really get the hang of them. But that was extremely impressive." She appeared very pleased. "Over forty minutes on your first successful attempt. None of the others can do more than ten after a couple of dozen tries." The middle sister looked disappointedly at the staff, picking it up and handing it to her sister who made it vanish again.

"Don't worry, sister, you'll get it soon. You just need to practice. I would suggest that you try to get the pocket stable without anything in it, though, it would be difficult to explain if random objects just appeared out of nowhere every now and then." She giggled softly. "I managed to make half a dozen saucepans appear in the university cafeteria when I was first learning." Ranma snickered, while Nabiki leaned back and laughed.

"It was very loud," Kasumi added. "Everyone was looking at me. I had to pretend it was nothing to do with me." Nabiki rolled over on the sofa, holding her sides. "They were my best saucepans. I had to go and buy some new ones, I was too embarrassed to pick them up." Even Misaki was roaring with laughter at this point. Kasumi grinned.

When they all calmed down, the elder Tendo and her husband went to prepare a meal. Everyone else was practising the ki pockets. Nabiki found it was difficult to recreate her first spectacular success, only forming one after another half dozen attempts and finding it fizzled out after a mere
couple of minutes. Ranma came out of the kitchen and watched for a moment. "I'd give it a break," she suggested. "Try again later. You're too close to the problem right now, you need to let your subconscious work on it for a while. The big success is when you can keep it working while you're asleep. Eventually it becomes so automatic it's basically permanent. I'd have to work at it not to have a couple of them by now."

Reluctantly, Nabiki gave up for the moment. They sat down and ate, just talking about various things. Looking around at the six people sharing the table with her Nabiki smiled a little, realising once more that it really was a family in all the ways that mattered. She felt that somehow, in the last year, she'd gained four new sisters, or at least close cousins. Kasumi glanced at her with her own gentle smile, having a good idea what she was thinking.

The middle sister shared the recordings of her latest adventures with the other three, making them all laugh and critique her performance. "You really need to learn the illusion technique," Misaki commented. "'Ms Aoyama' would be terrifying with your current abilities. She's bad enough when she's just standing there looking at you. Holding a ki ball and grinning at you...?" She shuddered theatrically. Nabiki laughed, picturing it.

"That could be fun. I should have some alternative persona, I guess, just to keep up with the trend. Although the bracelet does a damn good job."

"Are you still using 'Azumi Ito' when you call the cops?" Aiko asked, spooning soup into her mouth. Nabiki nodded.

"Yes, it was the first name I could come up with, but it seemed amusing to stick with it. The 119 operators seem to know it now, last time she asked me how I was getting along. She seemed quite light-hearted about it. I don't know if they're assuming that 'Azumi' and the mystery magical girl are the same person but it would be an obvious assumption."

"So far all you've had to deal with is ordinary criminals, right?" Tamiko looked at her. She nodded.

"Something I'm grateful for. I don't think I could handle anything more... esoteric." Kasumi giggled a little.

"You learn very fast when you're forced to. But I would agree you it's not something you should rush into. I'm proud of how well you're dealing with all of this, though, sister. I know it wasn't easy."

Nabiki smiled at her older sister. "A lot of the time it's actually fun. Every time I have to psych myself up, but as soon as I'm doing it I just go completely calm again. It's weird the way I keep running into these situations, but so far they've all been fairly easy to deal with." She snickered a bit. "The car accident was odd. The old man was pretty much unhurt but he got trapped. I surprised myself by being able to wrench the door right off his car. It wasn't as easy as you make it look, but I did it."

"Car doors aren't too difficult, the metal around the hinges isn't very thick," Ranma said with a smile. "If you twist as you pull they normally snap off pretty easily." The middle sister laughed.

"How are we having a casual conversation about the best way to forcibly dismantle a car with your bare hands?" The red-head shrugged, grinning.

"It's funny how often you need to do it. We'll have you picking them up soon or later." She ate a little more, then snapped her fingers as something occurred to her. "Oh, right, I nearly forgot. I went to see that mage that Uthryyl located. Nice guy. He clearly has a lot of experience, I'd guess
over a hundred years or so of practical applications of security magic. He'd heard of 'Yori' and was quite keen to meet her." She smiled a little, while Nabiki rolled her eyes, making Tamiko giggle. "I talked to him for most of an afternoon about the security spell. He's more than happy to apply it to anyone we would like, although he was at pains to make clear it only works with a willing subject. I also paid him quite a lot for documentation on the theory of it, so I could look into converting it to our system."

The martial artist laughed. "He couldn't believe that there was a system so different that it needed conversion like that. I had to demonstrate. When he got over his headache he asked me not to do it again." Shrugging, she added, "It really is looking like our method is incompatible with normal mages. I wish I knew why. Anyway, I've read the notes as has Kasumi and we both think we can figure it out in a couple of weeks. It's quite complicated, but nothing like the portal spell or Aiko's teleport spell. If we need it before then we can pay him to do it."

She glanced at Nabiki. "He swore blind it was completely safe, by the way. It only affects carefully specified areas of interest, and basically blocks recall of them except when in a place that doesn't contain people who are not also in on it. You can't force someone with the spell to tell you about the things covered by it, they literally don't know under those conditions, and they can't talk willingly either, they simply forget as long as they try. I mentioned your fears about it being some form of mind control and he got quite angry. The very idea is extremely unwelcome to most mages, even demonic ones, and anyone who got caught actually doing it on almost any world I know of would be in lethally serious trouble." Her face hardened a little. "I'd help in that case."

Nabiki nodded, interested. "Good to know. It sounds like you have something that will make your eventual reconnection with Nerima possible, at any rate."

"I guess so. It will certainly remove some of the problems. But we'll just have to wait and see. Neither of us are in any real hurry."

Once they finished dinner and cleared up, they sat on the sofa with coffee. Ranma absently became male as he sat next to his wife. "You should all practice the hidden weapons technique whenever you have a spare moment. You've all got the method now, the rest is in your hands. If you need help let either Kas or me know, we'll be happy to guide you, but mostly it really is just trying over and over, like most of the other things we've taught you."

"I think we should go over the illusion method next. It's not something I expect any of you to be able to do immediately, or even necessarily any time soon, but I'd love to be wrong. It demos several parts of the magic system, though, so it's a good experiment." They all nodded. Nabiki felt she was back in an advanced class at University. She could see from their faces the other women felt much the same. Aiko caught her eye and grinned, Ranma really did sound like a teacher. The middle Tendo was becoming very aware that he'd definitely earned the honour of being named Happosai's heir. "OK. Let's start with something simple. Kasumi will change her hair colour, but nothing else. Watch the power flow, see if you can spot what happens." He laughed. "There will be a test afterwards."

Everyone looked at Kasumi, who smiled serenely, then without otherwise moving changed her hair to a rich blue. Nabiki stared. "Wow." The shimmering visual effect had been very small that time. She'd noticed a small but extremely complex change in the energy signature of her sister, in something that wasn't the ki she was slowly learning about. Studying her with her inner senses she slowly nodded. "I see, I think. That's much more complicated than the hidden weapons technique."

"Hidden weapons is pure ki. You can add our magic to it to do some interesting extra things, but you don't need to. This is a hybrid between magic and ki, it's more complicated than either by quite
a margin,” her sister replied quietly. "If you can grasp this you will have learned a lot about control of both things." When they'd all examined her for a few minutes, her hair changed smoothly to red, even brighter than Ranma had in his female form. Then orange, green, and a whole rainbow of colours, most of which didn't exist in nature, one after the other. "Do you see what I'm doing? Nothing is changing except the colour. You should be able to see the differences in the method as well as the similarities."

One after the other they nodded, watching in fascination. "Good. Now, I'll apply the same illusion to each of you. Watch what happens." Her younger sister found herself with silvery-white hair, pulling a lock of it in front of her eyes and grinning.

"Hey, not bad. This would be brilliant at Halloween."

"Do you feel the different energy pattern?" Ranma asked, watching her with amusement. She nodded.

"Yes. Although I couldn't possibly duplicate that."

"We're not expecting any of you to be able to, yet. Just watch."

The group kept at it for hours, going through increasingly more complex changes, mixing them together or trying each one in turn. At one point Nabiki looked down at herself, grinning at the pair of tentacles she currently had in place of arms. "This is just bizarre," she commented, holding one tentacle-tip up and inspecting it. The change felt remarkably real. Fumiko clopped around on the hooves she was wearing, laughing.

"Amazing. It has so many very weird possibilities." Glancing at Kasumi who was watching with a grin, she asked, "Have you ever tried making a form that could fly? Something with wings?" The elder Tendo shook her head.

"Not yet. Up until fairly recently the change wasn't sufficiently thorough to allow for that anyway, although in the last few months I've wondered about it a little. I suspect it's probably possible, but we haven't taken it that far. Power to weight would be the biggest issue. The most unusual one we've tried other than for amusement is the mermaid form for swimming." She giggled. "I have to admit I didn't think of actually using it until Ranma played that trick on Nabiki. It's good fun though."

"It should be possible," Ranma said, thinking carefully. "The Jusenkyo curse is capable of much more complex changes, after all. Our technique copies some small parts of that for various reasons. There's also the fact that Taro can fly in his cursed form, which is just ridiculous, his wings are much too small. I'm not sure how he pulls it off though. Maybe some sort of levitation magic as well. Saffron had something like that." After a moment he shrugged a little. "Yet another thing to investigate at some point. Magic is strange. The more we find out about it the more we realise there is to learn. It's a lifetime's work, to be honest, and even then there would be new ideas."

#This form of magic is extremely difficult to get a reading on, Nabiki,# Jun said out of the blue. She thought it sounded surprised. #I was aware that Ranma and Kasumi had a highly non-standard method of magic control but there is nothing in my database that even hints at this. Until I saw it demonstrated so well I didn't realise how strange it truly is. I must assume that they have invented a new form. The efficiency is unprecedented. That is remarkable.# It went silent again, but she felt it was watching with extreme interest.

Finally, around two in the morning, by mutual consent they decided they'd all had enough. Ranma and Kasumi let the various illusions dissipate, then the four other girls staggered off to bed, Aiko
vanishing half-way across the living room mid-yawn. Grinning tiredly, Nabiki waved her sister and her husband good night and fell into bed, asleep in seconds.

Nodding with satisfaction, Cologne rapped her cane on the ground. The two young women fighting in the middle of the back yard of the Cat Café instantly froze mid-motion, before turning and bowing to her. Akane was breathing slightly harder than Shampoo was but wasn't unduly tired. They waited patiently for the Elder's judgement.

"Very good. You have improved remarkably, Akane Tendo. I am most pleased. Based on what I've seen today I think we can move up the schedule of your special technique training." Akane grinned widely. Raising her hand, Cologne smiled in a predatory manner. "Don't thank me. It will hurt. We're going to start you with the breaking point technique. I know you have seen me train Ryoga in that so you have some idea of what's involved." The youngest Tendo had slowly paled, while Shampoo was smiling at her sympathetically.

"We will start this weekend. You will need to arrange to be away for, hmm, I think three days. If you don't learn it by then, well..." She shrugged a bit. "Either you'll get it, or you'll die." Looking worried, Akane stared at the ground for a moment, before defiantly raising her chin and staring at the elder, who returned her gaze calmly.

"I'll risk it."

Cologne inspected her for a moment then smiled. "Good. I don't think you'll die. I hope not, you're growing on me." She looked at her grand-daughter. "Shampoo, you too." It was the turn of the young Chinese woman to pale. "It's a technique I should have taught you years ago. We'll close the Café tomorrow night. Pack warmly, it will be cold in the mountains at this time of year. We need some space away from people and that was good enough last time."

Hopping up onto her staff, she looked at them again, then bounced away. Turning to Shampoo Akane just looked at her friend for a moment, before smiling a little. "I think it will be fun."

"Define fun." Shampoo grinned at her. Leaping two stories onto the roof of the building she looked over the edge, calling down, "Come on, we should tell your father. I'll race you." Laughing, Akane jumped up beside her, not quite as gracefully but fairly easily. The two young women tore off across the tiles, neck and neck.

"Here. Put these in," Ranma said, handing out earplugs. Nabiki and the others took then, rolling them up and pushing them into their ears. They were particularly good ones, as they expanded in place the sounds in the sub-basement of the apartment building became very muffled. They resorted to the comm units.

"Why the earplugs all of a sudden?" Nabiki asked curiously. Kasumi smiled at her.

"We were getting tired of repairing damaged hearing. It gets a bit loud down here. This is something we should have done before."

"I need some of these, when I was dealing with that mugger in the tunnel last week my ears were ringing for hours." The middle sister grinned.

"I have some spares, I'll let you have a couple of pairs."

Turning to the target they watched as Ranma and Misaki moved the plates around, until the one that had been at the back was in the front. The thick steel of the top plate was so scarred by practice
shots it was almost mesh. "We'll have to replace these soon at this rate," the martial artist commented, neatly aligning the more than a ton of steel with the backing plates. Walking back to them he moved to the side. "Right, Nabs, have at it. I want to see five shots inside a five centimetre circle in five seconds. That sounds like a nice number." The brunette smiled slightly, stepping a pace closer to the target twenty-five metres away and taking up a stance. Crossing her arms with her hands palm up, she produced a pair of ki balls, a cold neutral expression on her face.

"Don't call me Nabs," she snapped. Ranma grinned.

"Ooh, very scary," Tamiko giggled. "I like the pose, it looks totally bad-ass. You need a long black leather coat, that would fit the look perfectly." Shooting her friend a quick grin, Nabiki went back to being the icy-calm magical girl, snapping her hands forward and firing both energy spheres at once. They impacted the plate dead-centre fractions of a second later, making it jump and ring. Before the echoes had begun to die she had repeated the process, then once more. Total elapsed time was under a second and a half. All the shots overlapped in the middle of the imaginary target zone, which she had used Jun to put a cross-hair on for reference, the six craters in the metal less than a centimetre apart at most. Kasumi clapped inaudibly while Ranma nodded in satisfaction, moving to closely inspect the damage.

"Very impressive. You've got a knack for that. Decent power, good accuracy, very good speed. Can you go any faster?"

"I think so. Move out of the way." Stepping to the side he watched as another six shots impacted the same place, so close together the noise was a rippling boom. Even with the earplugs his ears rang from being so near.

"Not bad at all. The grouping isn't quite as good, but the speed is impressive. You should practice that for a while. How are your reserves?"

"I think I could do that power level for a couple of dozen shots in a row before I started to feel it very much. Maybe a few more. It's harder to do lots of little ones than a few big ones."

Walking back he nodded. "I know. But this is very good practice for precision work. Now, let's see some compressed balls. First, how fast can you make one with the same power but maximum compression?"

She fired a shot with about two seconds lead time. This one, the ki ball about the size of a marble rather than a grapefruit, punched a hole completely through the top plate and dug a crater into the second one. "I'm getting faster but compressing it takes a surprisingly long time."

"Still, impressive, especially at your current power level." Kasumi smiled at her sister. The other four looked at her with respect.

"That's really good, Nabiki," Aiko said approvingly.

"Thanks."

"OK, Tamiko next. Same exercise." The auburn-haired young woman stepped up next to Nabiki, who moved out of the way. Taking aim at a point to the left of where the middle Tendo had scarred the steel, she fired off five shots in rapid succession from her right hand, then five from her left. Her grouping wasn't as tight although the pale yellow ki spheres clearly contained more energy than the ones Nabiki had produced. "Good. Very good. Is there a reason you did them in that order?" Tamiko nodded, grinning.
"I think Nabiki must be ambidextrous or something. I can't aim both hands at the same time and hit anything at all. Either one, that's no problem, but not both at once."

"We'll have to work on that. But very well done even so. Try to keep the power down a bit, that was a little much for down here." She nodded. "OK, Misaki, you're up."

The taciturn woman strode over, ki building in her hands as she moved. A dozen orange balls screamed across the room, fired alternately from her left and right hands, impacting in exactly the same place with machine-gun rapidity. With a grin she pretended to blow smoke from her hands. Fumiko started laughing, while Ranma was grinning.

"Impressive. I like the alternating fire effect, it looks pretty cool."

"Thanks." She moved over to where Nabiki and Tamiko were standing as Aiko took her place at Ranma's wave. In the end all of them had managed the exercise to his satisfaction. The four long-term magical girls were clearly Nabiki's superior in power output, while Misaki bested her in accuracy, but overall everyone did well. Tamiko insisted she looked the coolest, which amused her. Misaki had a go at the ki beam, producing after several attempts a thin, anaemic orange beam that flickered out after a fraction of a second, having done little but warm a spot on the plate. She frowned. "That's more difficult than I thought," she muttered, looking at her hand in irritation.

"To be honest I'm amazed you managed that much," Ranma said, looking pleased. "I'd have said you were a couple of months at least from being able to do even that. Keep practising, that was the most difficult bit to learn for the technique."

"It took me over a year from the point I could make ki shots to where I could do the beams well, Misaki," Kasumi interjected encouragingly. "You're well ahead of schedule on that basis." This cheered the woman up a little.

By the time they left the target range in the sub-basement a couple of hours later the replacement steel plate was in worse condition than the one that had been on top in the first place. Nabiki was very tired, while the other four looked a bit worn. Ranma and Kasumi had worked them hard, making them hit specific places, walk the fire across the plate in successive shots with an even specific spacing between them, vary the power from barely enough to knock someone over to high enough to punch a hole in tank armour, and a number of other modifications to the basic technique. They'd all learned a lot, but were glad it was over. "Are you all satisfied with the colour of your ki output?" Kasumi asked when they were having lunch. "You all produce different ones, which is useful so we can tell them apart, but I can easily show you how to change it. That bit is easy when you know how. At the moment it's essentially a subconscious default. It's purely cosmetic, anyway." Ranma laughed a bit.

"She says that, but she spent days tweaking the colour of hers until she got it just right." His wife blushed a little, while the others laughed.

"I like that colour."

"So do I, love." Nabiki giggled.

Holding one hand up and making a little ball of energy in it, she inspecting it curiously. "I kind of like mine as well. The same colour as new leaves." She rolled the ball around, before vanishing it. Grinning at her Ranma held his hand up with his fingers spread, making a marble size ball appear on each fingertip, each a different colour. They slowly cycled through the spectrum, the effect very striking. "OK," Nabiki said after watching for a few seconds, "you win. That looks amazing."
Misaki was concentrating on what he was doing having been sufficiently impressed that she'd actually stopped eating. Thirty seconds of study later she nodded slowly, then held up her right index finger, a small ki sphere growing on the end of it. Ranma smiled. She grinned back, then concentrated again. After some odd facial contortions, she nodded, satisfied, as the ball shifted from her normal bright orange to pink. "Well done, Misaki," Kasumi said while looking pleased. Fumiko stared at her sister.

"Not bad, sis."

Shortly all of them could get a ki sphere to appear on their fingertips, although only Misaki had worked out on her own how to change the colour. Kasumi showed them in detail, soon leading to everyone laughing as they cycled their ki output through dozens of colours. In the end, Misaki, Tamiko, and Nabiki stuck with their original colours, while Fumiko changed hers from light red to a much darker green than Nabiki's. Aiko was cycling through many different colours, looking unsatisfied.

"Nope. No, that's too dark. Yuck. Hmm, that's not bad." She looked at the deep blue ball she was holding for a moment, then shook her head. "No. Um..." Kasumi laughed.

"Worse than painting a room, isn't it?" she asked, making the shorter woman snicker.

"I'll have to think about this."

Ranma shook his head with amusement. "Some people are never satisfied."

"Can you put this box back in the attic, Akane? I don't need it any more since I got the photos out and I keep tripping over it." Soun asked, handing his youngest daughter a dusty cardboard carton. She looked puzzled.

"Why can't you, Dad?" He shuddered a little.

"Nabiki was right about the spiders," he whispered, looking nervously at the ceiling.

Akane stared for a moment, then shook her head slightly. "Um, OK. You remember that I'm going on that training trip with Shampoo and Cologne tonight, right?"

Coming back from wherever he'd gone, Soun looked at her. "Oh, yes." He smiled. "My little girl is going on her first martial arts training trip! I'm so proud." Akane giggled.

"I've been on trips before, you know."

"Not when you're the one learning. Be careful, but pay attention. That old mummy knows more tricks than you'd believe." His daughter laughed.

"Better not let her hear you call her that."

Snickering, Soun turned away, heading back down the stairs, leaving his daughter holding the box.

Twenty minutes later, she was sitting in the living room shivering, dialling frantically on her phone. "Hello? Nerima Pest Control? I need someone at the Tendo Dojo right now. Bring poison. No. That's too slow. Bring fire..."

Staring at the sight she found in the practice room, Nabiki asked, "When did you set this up?"
Ranma laughed.

"Last night after you went to bed." The red-head walked into the room, waving her hands around widely. "You need some balance training. This is easy, but it works pretty well." 'This' was an intricate maze of horizontal wooden poles, approximately five centimetres across, on stands sitting about half a metre off the floor, forming a continuous run around the room. "Think of it like the fences you saw me walking on back in Nerima. All you need to do is jump up here, then walk around for a while." Nabiki looked at the martial artist narrowly, pretty sure that there was more to it.

"Right. Just walk around."

"Yep." She snickered. "I might be throwing things at you every now and then. Just to keep your attention." Sighing, the middle sister walked over to the first pole. "Go on. Jump on." She tried, immediately falling off again.

"Ow."

"You know as well as I do that didn't hurt. You're much tougher than you were." Ranma grinned at her as she lay on the floor in a heap. Untangling herself she tried again.

"Nearly."

"Oh, much better. Pity you slipped."

"Ah, so close." Gritting her teeth, the brunette glared at the red-head who was clearly trying not to laugh, then had yet another attempt. "Finally. Right, just walk along it, then jump onto the next one."

There was a pause, followed by a thud. "Whoops. Back to the start, Nabs."

"Don't call me Nabs!"

By the time Kasumi came in a couple of hours later, holding a tray of coffee mugs, her sister was moving fairly fast from pole to pole, running along each one before jumping to the next. She watched for a moment with a smile. "Well done, sister. Come and have some tea." The younger woman dropped lightly to the floor and strolled over.

"Thanks, sis. This task-mistress here you call a husband has been laughing at me, you know." She grinned. Overall she was quite surprised how fast she'd progressed. Ranma laughed. "See?"

Giggling, Kasumi handed her a mug of coffee. "It is quite funny watching you fall off."

Drinking her own coffee, the red-head looked pleased. "You're getting better, Nabiki. I'm fairly impressed. We can move on to the next stage, I guess."

A little worried, Nabiki looked at her, lowering her mug. "Next stage? What's that?"

"That's the one where I shoot little ki balls at you." Ranma chuckled, handing her wife the teacup. "Come on, back on the poles. This will be fun."

"Who for?" Nabiki grumbled, giving her mug to Kasumi and following the other woman across the floor. An evil snicker was her only response. Kasumi laughed gently, going back to the kitchen with the tray, wincing slightly at the loud pop and exclamation of pain that came from the practice room when she was half-way down the hall.
"OW! Damn it, Saotome, that really hurt!"
"But you didn't fall off..."

Giggling, the eldest Tendo resumed her own work.

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"I hate you."

Ranma smiled. "My work is complete." Glaring at him, Nabiki lay on the sofa while her sister healed the dozens of small bruises she had all over her body. Her clothes were peppered with tiny scorch marks. Muttering, the middle Tendo stared at the ceiling while Kasumi worked, trying to come up with a suitable revenge. Kasumi giggled a little.

"It's a bit painful, but it's also an effective training method, sister," she commented, erasing the last bruise. Nabiki growled a little under her breath.

"Did you do this?" she asked after a while. Her sister glanced at Ranma, who grinned.

"I could never fire ki shots at my wife. I love her. It would hurt." Slowly sitting up, Nabiki gave the red-headed woman an icy glare. Kasumi burst out laughing.

"Don't worry, Nabiki, I had to go through much the same thing. It was probably worse, actually, we were still working out the teaching methods. Just be happy that it's not one of Genma's bright ideas, those were close to war crimes from what Ranma has told me." Sighing, her sister nodded.

"OK. I guess it's all in a good cause."

"Great. So, we can move onto stage three, then," Ranma said. She froze.

"Oh, god."

Ignoring her whimper, Ranma bounced to her feet, leading her reluctantly back into the practice room. "Now, we just need to get all these poles two metres higher, and get the spikes set up."

"Oh, god..."
"You all right, Nabiki?" Tamiko asked, slightly concerned. The middle Tendo was sitting on the sofa staring into space. Absently she nodded.

"Two, please, Tamiko," she answered, making the other woman look confused. Kasumi smiled at her.

"She'll be all right. My dear husband has been training her fairly hard today." Ranma shrugged as the other woman looked at him curiously.

"The spikes seemed to upset her." Tamiko shuddered, remembering her own extra training.

"Ah. I see. Perhaps a beer would help," Kasumi fetched them each one. Putting the cold bottle into her sister's hand she watched with amusement as she twitched, then seemed to come back into the room. Raising the bottle she looked at it, then without thinking much about it flipped the cap off with her thumbnail and drained it in one go. Dropping her hand she held the bottle loosely for a while, staring at it, then looked at Ranma.

"I really hate you."

The martial artist smiled at her. "We can move onto stage four tomorrow." Tamiko winced, while Nabiki just sighed heavily.

"I remember stage four. I keep trying to forget, but I can't," Tamiko said faintly, then as Nabiki looked at her in horror, she began giggling. The look on the middle sister's face wasn't a friendly one.

"Thanks very much. This isn't funny, you know. I'll be scarred for life."

"Oh, I don't think so, sister, we're very good with scars now." Kasumi laughed as her sister glared at her. Ranma fell over, giggling furiously, shifting to female in the process. Tamiko sipped her beer with a wide grin on her face, watching them.

"Idiots."

Nabiki was still muttering to herself when the other three arrived. They all looked at her curiously. Tamiko grinned. "The spikes."

"Ick." Fumiko gave her friend a sympathetic look. Misaki grinned.

"Wait for stage four..."

"Yes, thanks, we've had this conversation, Misaki," Nabiki snapped coldly.

Aiko snickered, as Kasumi got them all beers as well. They all popped the caps off with their thumbs, making the middle sister grin a little, then look surprised when she remembered that she'd just done the same thing.

"All right, if we've finished mentally torturing my sister, we can get back to studying the illusion spell," the elder Tendo said, amused. "Please pay attention. I'm going to go over what we did yesterday quickly, then break it down into sections. Hopefully, with some more work, we might have you at a point you can hold the illusion yourself, although I think creating it in the first place..."
will take some time."

Ranma nodded, smiling slightly, then fetched herself a mug of coffee. The seven females spent the next few hours first repeating the demonstrations of the previous session, to refresh the memories of the five students, then went into detail on each aspect of the technique. Nabiki soon got over her annoyed mood, becoming fascinated all over again with the problem. It was both very interesting and insanely complex.

By around eight PM, they were getting tired, although some progress had been made that pleased both Ranma and Kasumi. "Yes, that's it, Aiko. Keep feeding power to that part. Now, I'm very slowly going to hand control over to you. Keep it exactly like it is, if you can. Ready?" The martial artist, male once more, waited for his friend to nod, a strained expression on her face, as she stared intently at her right hand which was currently bright green.

"OK."

"All right. Here I go. Good. Keep it like that." There was a pause while Aiko nearly went cross-eyed with effort, making the others smile as they watched carefully, then she relaxed a little.

"I've got it, I think." Ranma nodded, pleased.

"You have. You're powering it completely. Very well done, you got that sooner than I thought you would." She grinned tightly, still concentrating.

"God, this is a lot more difficult than it looks. How the hell do you keep track of all this so easily?" She lost concentration and her hand suddenly shimmered back into its normal appearance. "Damn it, I lost it."

"Don't worry. That was a very good first attempt. This magic is completely different from anything else you use, I'm pretty impressed you managed to do it that well to be honest." Tamiko grinned at her as he spoke.

"That was impressive, Aiko. I could barely follow it at all. There are so many things to do at once!" The shorter woman seemed pleased at the praise. Nabiki studied her hand with interest, as she tried to work out what exactly the other woman had done. It was slowly coming together, the whole thing was absolutely fascinating as a problem. The more she saw of the inner workings of the magical system her sister and brother-in-law had come up with, the more impressed she was at the sheer amount of skill and work involved. They were both clearly brilliant at it. She was none too sure she was good enough to duplicate their work.

Kasumi glanced at her, understanding what she was feeling. "It can be a bit overwhelming, I know, Nabiki. You'll get it. I'm completely sure of that. You don't have any bad habits to unlearn like most magic workers do, even to the extent that the others have to. I suspect, based on the attempts we've had in the past to teach normal mages we know our technique, that if Aiko and the others learned much more of the magic they use, how it actually works, they'd find it nearly impossible to learn our system. We caught them just in time." The elder sister looked amused.

Ranma snickered. "Before their magic corrupted their tiny little minds."

Fumiko giggled, while Tamiko shrugged a bit. "You're doing that perfectly well." Chuckling, Misaki produced an apple from her sleeve and bit into it. Glancing at her with interest, Ranma nodded approvingly.

"Ah. How long have you kept that ki pocket running?" The tall woman smiled.
"Six hours so far. It's only a tiny one, though. I tried something bigger and it evaporates in about twenty minutes. I thought if I started small and got that down, I could make them steadily larger."

"Good idea."

Sighing, Nabiki leaned back against the sofa. She had tried several times during the day to make a ki pocket again, none of her efforts lasting more than a few seconds to a minute or so. "I'll never get any of this, not properly. It's so hard. I have no idea how you two can make it look as easy as you do."

Ranma grinned at her with sympathy in his eyes. "It's not easy at first, Nabs. Not at all. But, that said, you're all coming along incredibly well. I'm pretty sure that there are very few people who would have learned as much as you all have in such a short period of time. None, or at least, very few of the people back in Nerima could, I think. Cologne would have the ability, no question, but she's so practised at normal magic that I strongly suspect she'd never be able to actually use ours. Akane might manage it, one day, but certainly not for a few years at least, even with the improvements she's made to herself recently. I could probably teach her some pretty neat tricks with ki, though. Hidden weapons, ki balls, that sort of thing, yes, she could learn that, although you'll be a lot better. But the magic? That would be very hard."

He thought about his old rivals and the other inhabitants of the ward. "Hmm. Perhaps Konatsu. Yes, I think he might manage it. Eventually. Perhaps Shampoo, maybe Ukyo. Not Ryoga, he doesn't have the right mindset. Neither of our fathers, certainly, same reason. Kunos?" He shuddered. "I wouldn't teach them even if they could learn, which they couldn't. Thank god. Kodachi with magic?" Exchanging a glance all three Nerimans looked appalled. "No. Not a hope in hell."

"What about Happosai?" Nabiki asked curiously. "From what you've told me in the past he knows a lot about magic." Kasumi nodded.

"He does, a huge amount. But he's not a mage, either, in the normal sense. We came up with this method between Ranma and myself, but he's shown some ability to use it, although not to the level we can. I'm not sure he's actually interested in it all that much anyway."

"Next time you see him you can ask him," Ranma said. Nabiki looked slightly worried. She'd grown used to the fact the little deviant was in fact a very helpful, smart little deviant that had been of great assistance to her sister and her husband, but her own recollection of him was less friendly. However, she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Is that likely to happen any time soon?" Grinning, Ranma shrugged.

"Couldn't tell you. I haven't heard from him for several months. Last time he was somewhere in Australia annoying the locals. He seems happy to stay out of Japan for now. I'm sure he'll be back sooner or later, but I know he's deliberately staying away until we work out what we do about the people back in Nerima, if we ever do. He's in no hurry. You learn a lot of patience when you're over five hundred years old."

"Let's try again," Kasumi suggested after a moment. "Nabiki, would you like to try?" Slightly nervously, her sister nodded. "All right. I'll show you again, then you have a go." Holding up her hand she changed it into a leopard's paw. Nabiki stared. It was so weird the way her older sister did things like that, even after nearly a year of seeing her do it. The sheer casualness of it was odd in the extreme. "Look carefully. See how the pattern is drawing power? It's not very much energy, but the pattern is quite complex."
"That's an understatement if ever there was one," Fumiko mumbled, watching with the rest of them. They were all determined to learn these techniques.

"I think I see," Nabiki said after a long few seconds, looking at it with her nascent magic senses. "So, in theory I should just need to push power in there, and ignore the rest of it?"

"Exactly. I think that's what was giving Aiko so much difficulty, she's trying to control too much of it at once. You don't need to, it's quite stable once it's set up as long as you give it power in the right place. But it's easy to, um, how do I put it..." She thought for a moment. "Push it off balance, I suppose. Let it just float there, don't prod it too hard, or it moves, then you have to chase it and move it back, which makes it even more unstable. Until you can produce it from scratch that's too much work. You understand?" Both Aiko and Nabiki nodded.

"I think so. OK, let me try. Let's see how I screw it up." She watched as her left hand shimmered and changed, flexing it slightly and watching the feline paw move. "So weird, I can't believe how real it feels." She extended her claws, turning the paw over and stroking the soft fur. "Weird," she repeated. Her sister was smiling.

"Are you ready?" Nabiki nodded slowly, slipping into a slight meditative state, the way she'd learned the day before with the ki training. Staring at the magic pattern, she waited.

"All right. Push some power in right there." Kasumi watched with interest, hoping her sister would manage it. "Yes. Very good, like that. A little more. Not too much, that will destabilise it as well as too little, it's a delicate balance. That's it. All right, I'm going to slowly release control to you." Nabiki shivered a little at the odd sensation, a faint shimmer briefly coming into view around her paw, then fading as she managed to keep the power flow even.

"Very good. You've got about half of it now. Three quarters..." Abruptly the middle sister grunted and watched disappointedly as the shift shimmered away leaving her normal hand.

"Oh, fuck it all. I thought I had it."

"You were very close," Ranma replied encouragingly, studying her with interest. "Try again." At her nod, Kasumi reapplied the illusion. Once more she slowly released control to her sister, once more it nearly worked then suddenly failed.

They persisted, Nabiki determined to do something right, although Ranma was now looking slightly dubious. The four other women were watching carefully and making mental notes. After nearly forty minutes and over a dozen attempts, Nabiki suddenly smiled. "Ha!" She raised her paw and waved at them with it. "Got it."

"You have indeed, sister," Kasumi said with a serene smile. "I'm very proud of you." The middle sister was now providing all the power for the illusion and keeping it stable. She frowned as it nearly got away but managed to bring it back into control. The shifted appendage intermittently shimmered slightly, but these effects became less and less visible over a few minutes until it looked as real as any of Kasumi's or Ranma's normal changes. Aiko clapped, while the others grinned.

"Very impressive," Fumiko said approvingly.

"You were right, sis. You have to kind of let it do it's own thing, not try to force it." Feeling the changed hand with her normal one Nabiki grinned happily. "This is amazing." Shaking her head she looked at her paw.
"OK, let me try again," Aiko said with eagerness, no longer feeling tired. "I think I see where I was going wrong, looking at what Nabiki did." Ranma laughed, turning her right foot into a hoof.

"There you go. Try that." She grinned, closing her eyes and feeling for the magic.

"Right. I think I've got it."

"Here comes the control. About half way... There you go, you have control of it completely." Aiko looked at her changed foot, watching it shimmer slightly, frowning gently with concentration. After a short period the shimmering effect faded away, making her grin widely.

"Fantastic. You're right, Nabiki, once it clicks it's not too hard. I was pushing too much."

"When you get more practised at it you can go into the deeper elements of it like you were trying, you need to to make changes, but right now, we're just trying to build up your magic reserves. This is a very good way to achieve that, plus it teaches a lot of important things about the control of those reserves. You should see how long you can hold it. We need to do this as much as possible for a while." Ranma looked at the other three. "Who's next?"

Standing, Aiko tried walking on the hoof, stumbling badly as one leg was essentially longer than the other now. "Damn. Do the other one, let me see if I can keep them both going, plus I'll be able to walk." The martial artist grinned. Shortly Aiko was thumping around the room looking amused. Going into the kitchen she produced some clopping noises on the tiles, then returned. "That's pretty freaky."

"Do me next," Tamiko said with a wide grin. "I want a tail." Kasumi giggled.

"It might be difficult, that's quite a complex change for a first attempt."

"Do it anyway. I want to try." The auburn-haired woman giggled. "When I was a little girl I always wanted a tail. Or a flying bicycle."

Shortly she was holding the end of the cat-like tail she sported in her hands, staring at it carefully. "OK, I can see the pattern. Push there?" Kasumi nodded. "Um, all right, I think it's working." The Tendo woman slowly released control to her, until the illusion spell abruptly failed. "Fuck. Oh well, let's try again." It took five attempts but she finally got it.

Misaki and Fumiko also got the hang of the technique over the next half hour, Misaki gaining a tentacle in place of each of her thumbs and her sister sprouting cat's ears. They both looked inordinately pleased at their new abilities. Nabiki stared around at all the odd changes and laughed. "This would look extremely odd to someone who didn't know what was going on."

"It looks pretty weird even if you do know what's going on," Tamiko said, her tail twitching from side to side as she looked at it, grinning.

"Let's see how long you can keep them running for," Ranma suggested, "I doubt any of you could run them when you fall asleep, not at this point in your training, but if you can keep them until then it would be very good practice. The last one to lose gets to brag." They all laughed.

"I think it's time to have something to eat," Kasumi suggested. "I'll make a stir-fry." Soon, they were sitting around the table, eating and talking. Tamiko had surprised herself by sitting on her own tail, making her yelp at the weird sensation and nearly losing control of the spell, but catching it just in time. Misaki was amusing herself by seeing if she could control a pair of chopsticks with her thumb-tentacles, which turned out to be difficult. She resorted to a fork in the end.
Eating one-handed, Nabiki stared at the paw at the end of her other arm. She kept noticing it out of the corner of her eye and being surprised all over again. Despite close to a year of familiarity with the illusion spell, the apparent reality of it still surprised her. It was actually weirder with such small changes that when her entire body was ‘Ms. Aoyama’, oddly enough, and she was trying to work out why.

‘One of those uncanny valley things, I guess. I've seen enough transformations over the years, Jusenkyo and things like that, that you'd think I'd be used to it, but this is still damn strange and a little unsettling.’

‘Jun? What do you think about all of this?’, she asked curiously.

The SI responded immediately. #I find it fascinating. The shape shifts this odd magic system produces are impressively complete, especially bearing in mind they are temporary. I can scan your modified hand using a number of methods and in all ways that matter it appears to be genuinely what it looks like. Without knowledge of the technique I would not be able to notice it was not a real transformation. Even with such knowledge I could not determine a practitioner's true form through it. My database contains no information on anything approaching this level of complexity. Calling it an illusion spell is, I feel, grossly underestimating it. Sensory feedback appears to be complete as far as I can determine.# It paused. #Does it feel real to you, Nabiki?# it asked with a tone of curiosity in it’s voice. She smiled a little, the machine seemed genuinely interested.

‘Yes, incredibly so. I can feel everything as if it was something I was born with. It's very disconcerting. If I didn't know I could make it vanish at will I think I'd be rather scared.’

#Interesting.# It fell silent.

After they'd eaten, Fumiko, Tamiko, and Misaki went back to their apartments, determined to keep the illusion going as long as they could. Aiko hung around for a while, chatting to Nabiki about her university experiences, before finally announcing she was exhausted and teleporting back to her own apartment without even standing up from the sofa.

"So, tomorrow, stage four?" Ranma asked, glancing at his sister-in-law. She sighed.

"All right." Lifting the paw replacing her left hand she exposed the claws in a threatening manner. "But no more ki shots." He laughed.

"I can't promise anything." Chuckling, she waved to her sister, then went to her room for a slightly earlier night than yesterday. Getting into bed she went over some of her notes, doing a bit of work on the paper she had due in a few days, before quietly lying with her eyes shut inspecting the spell she was still holding stable. The power drain was quite low, although she was aware that her energy reserves would struggle to power anything much more complex at the moment. She was assured that this would change quite fast over time. Examining the spell carefully she tried not to interfere with it, just watch it, trying to work out how it functioned. The pattern was so complex she quickly became lost.

‘I hope I can work it out,’ she mused, sleepily. ‘It would be so useful, not to mention a lot of fun.’ She giggled to herself. ‘If there are seven of us who can do it, the next comic book convention won't know what hit it.’ Shortly she was asleep.

"AAGH! Fuck me, that hurt!” Akane groaned in pain, while Cologne chuckled. Shampoo looked at her friend sympathetically, but with a certain amount of apprehension. She would be going next.
The youngest Tendo woman slowly recovered, then braced herself. Dangling from a rope, as was the huge boulder opposite her, she breathed deeply, then kicked off, both of them swinging apart. Then together. There was a nasty crunching sound.

"OW! Damn, damn, ow, damn." The cry echoed out across the forest dawn.

Cologne almost giggled. This was fun.

Blinking at the ceiling, Nabiki stretched, then wiped her eyes. The feeling of fur on her face made her jump. "What the...?" Holding her hand in front of her face she stared for a moment as the memory came back. Her paw was still present. "How did I do that?" she wondered sleepily. Inspecting the spell she found it still sitting at the back of her consciousness, apparently happily stable. She saw that her energy reserves had dropped noticeably, not surprising if she'd been running the thing all night.

Slowly getting up she stretched again, peering out the window for a moment, then heading for the bathroom. Shortly she was brushing her teeth. Washing her face she frowned. The paw made it somewhat awkward. Considering dropping the illusion, she paused, then decided to leave it to show Ranma and her sister. She was wondering if any of the others had managed to keep it going all night. Washing her hands, or hand and paw, she found that drying the fur took longer than she expected. When she finished she went into the living room, finding Kasumi there dusting the table. "Hi, Sis," she said cheerily, waving her paw. Her sister looked up, then stared, a smile crossing her face.

"Very impressive indeed, Nabiki. I didn't expect you to hold it in your sleep." She came closer, inspecting the spell. "It's unravelled a little, I don't think it would last much longer, but that's still very good. You have a gift for this." Ranma entered from the direction of their room, greeting them both. He noticed the middle sister's achievement and laughed.

"I told you you'd be good at it. I've been saying that for months."

They were sitting down to breakfast when Tamiko knocked, entering and grinning at them. "Hey, look!" she said chirpily, curling her tail around her waist. She noticed Nabiki's paw. "You did it as well? Fantastic."

Sliding a bowl across the table to her Kasumi motioned to the chair. The auburn-haired girl sat, looking pleased with herself. "Did any of the others manage it?"

"No idea yet, you're the first one other than Nabiki we've talked to." Ranma inspected her for a moment then nodded. "Not at all bad. It's only got a few more minutes, I'd say, it's starting to go unstable, but still very well done for a first attempt. None of you are going to be able to create the illusion for a while, but I think we might have you up to speed on holding a full-body change for a while in a couple of weeks. Aiko will probably manage it first, she's got the highest power level and magic ability from all the practice her teleporting gives her."

Nabiki commed the short brunette. "Hey, Aiko? You awake yet?"

"More or less. I'll be up in a minute." Soon she appeared in the middle of the room. Her own illusion had reverted. Glancing at Tamiko and Nabiki she appeared momentarily annoyed. "Damn. I thought I did really well, I kept it going until I fell asleep."

When the remaining two sisters arrived they had both lost the illusions as well. The congratulated Nabiki and Tamiko on their achievements, somewhat enviously. Shortly after that Tamiko's tail
shimmered out of existence, followed soon after by Nabiki's leopard's paw. "Not bad. Let's give it a break then we can put some more illusions on, we should keep them going as much as possible for a few days. It builds your reserves pretty quickly at first." Ranma looked thoughtful. "It might be interesting to see if you can hold it during the exercises, Nabiki. It's useful to be able to train with several things going on at once. You'll need to be able to do that in combat situations." She nodded her understanding.

After breakfast, Kasumi and her husband reapplied the same illusions, all five women managing to hold them stable with only a little effort. "Right. Come on, Nabs, stage four." Apprehensively she followed him into the practice room.

"Don't call me Nabs! What's stage four?"

"You get to do everything we did yesterday, only blindfolded." He looked extremely amused as she whimpered.

"Stage four sucks!" Nabiki growled, sitting on the sofa with her arms crossed. Ranma grinned at her.

"But it works. You only fell off twice. And you missed all the spikes. Well, nearly all." The middle sister looked down at the hole in her shirt, with some blood around it. She growled again. Kasumi giggled.

"Don't be angry, sister. We healed you, you're fine. It didn't go in all that far anyway."

"It hurt!" Nabiki muttered, irritated.

"No pain, no gain, that's what the Americans say." Ranma was still grinning. Slowly, she turned and gave him her best icy glare. It had little effect. "Tomorrow I'll teach you the Soul of Ice technique. You're most of the way there already. I almost felt the cold from that look," the dark-haired young man said with amusement. Nabiki grumbled a little, picking up her coffee and sipping it. She noticed she was working the claws on her still-present paw in and out reflexively. It was oddly soothing.

Ranma had needed to reapply the illusion twice during the morning's work. Amazingly enough, to her mind, she hadn't lost control of it when she'd impaled herself on the metal spike, by then she seemed to have pretty good subconscious control of the spell. That said, she was getting tired of not having a particularly usable left hand, after a moment's thought releasing the spell. With a shimmer her hand reappeared. Picking a sandwich off the plate with her newly appeared fingers, she bit hungrily into it. "Damn, that's hard work." Ranma nodded.

"Worth it, though." He watched her eat for a while, inhaling a few sandwiches of his own. "Ready for stage five?" When she froze in horror and simply stared at him he started laughing.

That evening she was past the point of growling, simple staring at him with a look that was close to visibly scorching his clothes. It seemed to please him. Aiko teleported in with Misaki, holding some bags with the logo of a New York deli on them, handing them to Kasumi while looking curiously at her sister. "Stage five," Kasumi said with amusement. Both other women nodded, wincing.

"Ouch."

Eventually Nabiki spoke. "Where did you even get a cattle prod?" she asked coldly. He shrugged.
"From a farm supply shop, of course. In Arizona." He glanced at Aiko, who looked guilty. Nabiki transferred her glare to the short woman.

"Hey, don't blame me. You should have seen what he used when he put us through stage five two years ago. A cattle prod is getting off easy."

"Mind you, it's quite a powerful one," Misaki mused out loud, causing Ranma to snicker. "I'll bet it hurts."

"Just a little." Rubbing her arms, Nabiki went back to glaring at the martial artist.

"It's only about five hundred thousand volts," he protested with a grin. "You should be easily able to take that by now." Looking thoughtful, he added, "I really must work out how to generate that sort of voltage with magic or ki one day. Sometimes a good jolt of electricity gets the job done where a blast of ki isn't quite suitable." This didn't improve her mood, although the others seemed amused. Turning his attention to her he smirked.

"It's going very well. Stage six should be easy."

Nabiki launched herself at him across the coffee-table with a howl of rage.

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Panting, the middle sister lay on something warm, hard, and sloping, trying to remember what had happened. She could recall missing Ranma as he ducked, then chasing him around the apartment for a while, before things got blurry. Something about the practice room, jumping around on the poles he'd set up, then going up to the roof? There were some ki balls in there somewhere as well, although she couldn't remember the details at the moment.

Lots of running around on the roof, through the plants, she could vaguely remember that. Then, some jumping, followed by more running, with a lot of yelling and swearing in the mix. She had no idea how long it had been. Opening her eyes she looked up at the sky for a while, watching the late evening clouds drift past, lit a beautiful golden colour like Kasumi's ki. After some time she slowly began to wonder why she could see the sky. Was she still on the roof? Rolling her head to the side to where she could feel a familiar presence, she saw her sister in her 'Chou' aspect sitting cross-legged smiling at her. On the other side was 'Yori'. Nothing around her looked familiar from this vantage point, so she sat up carefully, aching a little, then looked around.

After a long moment she asked, "Um, where the hell are we?" They were on a roof, that much was certain, but it wasn't the roof of the apartment building. Under her was a sloped tiled surface still warm from the early summer sun. In front of her was what she recognised as the University clock tower, but from an angle she wasn't familiar with. 'Chou' giggled a little.

"About three kilometres from home. It's over that way," she pointed. Nabiki nodded slowly.

"OK." There was a pause while the other two waited patiently. "So, how did we get here?" 'Yori' laughed quietly.

"Quite quickly. At a dead run, in fact."

"I told you, no roof-hopping," Nabiki said after a moment. 'Yori' shrugged.

"You obviously forgot when you were chasing me." The pause this time was very long.

"What the hell are you talking about?" The middle Tendo was confused. 'Yori' snickered a bit.
"I told you stage six would be easy." At the other woman's slightly befuddled look she pointed to the next building along, which had a four metre gap between it and the roof they were sitting on. "You cleared that very impressively." Nabiki stared at the other building, then at her sister and her friend.

"You were scared of heights," 'Yori' said, looking slightly less amused. "You needed to overcome that. The fastest and easiest way I could think of was to make you angry enough to not notice, while training you in the skills needed for roof-hopping. Your balance is fine, your strength is more than adequate, and by now your coordination is well up to it. You just needed that last little push. That was stage six." The middle sister was still staring. "It varies a bit. I trained the other girls rather differently since they could already do it, they needed to be able to do it better. In your case you couldn't do it at first, but you've been physically capable of it for weeks. It was only the psychological part that was holding you back." The black-haired girl grinned smugly. "I fixed it."

"You bastard," Nabiki grated, flopping back down on the roof again. After some minutes she began smiling. "You bastard. Thanks." Standing she walked to the edge of the roof and looked over it. They were about three stories up. Hours earlier this would have made her stomach clench, but now she was able to look down with only a minor twinge of worry. More of the past twenty minutes was coming back to her. She could remember something similar to the time 'Chou' had carried her, leaping and running high in the air, but for some reason there was no fear attached to the memory. Considerable wrath, true enough, but no fear.

Returning to them she smiled again. "So, now what?" 'Yori' shrugged.

"Go back? Or go back the long way?" She pointed in the direction of home, then in the other direction. Nabiki looked both ways.

"What happens if I slip?"

"It will sting a bit, at the moment, but a fall of a few stories, that won't cause you any major problems, not now." 'Yori' grinned. "Basically, you'll bounce. Then swear a lot." Nabiki didn't look all that convinced.

So when her sister picked her up and threw her off the roof she screamed all the way down.

"You're both completely insane!" she screeched up at them from the ground, lying on her back on some cracked paving slabs on the street. They peered down at her.

"We'll have to get those repaired, dear," 'Chou' noted calmly. 'Yori' nodded, smiling slightly.

"This street was getting a bit worn anyway. It was overdue for resurfacing." Nabiki glared at them as she stood up, brushing concrete dust from her clothes with irritation.

"Idiots." Both women grinned.

"Come on then, get back up here", 'Yori' called. Looking around, Nabiki noticed a few people watching her, some of them smiling. She glanced up again, her hands on her hips.

"How?"

"Jump, of course. You should be able to make it. It's only about twelve metres." 'Yori' made a gesture that indicated it should be obvious. Staring, Nabiki said nothing for a long moment, then sighed. Stepping back a few paces she took a run at the building, jumping as hard as she could at what she judged to be the right point. Arcing far higher than she expected, she smiled, then the smile faded. It got replaced with a look of worry, just before she impacted the window immediately
below the roof on which her sister and sister-in-law were standing. 'Chou' winced.

"We'll have to pay for that as well," the blonde noted. 'Yori' nodded. Dropping to her knees she then dangled over the edge of the roof by her feet, peering into the empty room Nabiki had landed amongst a lot of broken glass.

"You need to aim a bit higher, Nabs," she commented. The middle sister sat up, brushing glass off her clothes while giving the upside-down woman in the window a poisonous glare.

"Thanks. I hadn't worked that out. Don't call me Nabs."

Back on the roof shortly after, she looked at her sister. "Please don't throw me off a roof again, sis." 'Chou' smiled slightly.

"It shouldn't be necessary."

"For a moment I understood what Akane must have felt when she was angry." She grinned, cheering up. "I can't believe it. I just fell three stories and landed on my back, and got up. I nearly made it back as well." It was a heady feeling. Her sister smiled more widely, feeling her excitement.

"Fun, isn't it?" With a sudden wide smile, she turned and ran towards the edge of the roof, jumping across the gap to the next building easily. 'Yori' followed her, throwing in a somersault for good measure. Shaking her head slightly, Nabiki chuckled, then followed as well.

"It's been nearly two days, girls." Cologne looked at the two young women lying on the ground panting, covered in bruises, with slight disappointment. "I have to say I was hoping for some more progress. I think you can rest for twenty minutes, then we can try again." Smirking at the groans she hopped away, heading for something to eat. A minute or so later Shampoo managed to sit up with a slight moan.

"Ow. Great-grandmother is a bit of a bitch sometimes." Akane nodded her head painfully, without otherwise moving.

"I hurt in places I've never hurt in before," she mumbled. "I hurt in places I didn't know I had. I wish Yori or Chou was here, I need some serious healing." Smiling a little, Shampoo couldn't help but agree.

"They're a lot better at it than great-grandmother is, true enough." Slowly, she struggled to her feet, holding her hand out for her friend. Akane grabbed it and pulled herself to her feet. "But she's not bad. Come on, let's get something to eat."

When the Elder returned, they both stood and waited, although she was amused to note they looked worried. "Good. You're both still alive. I was beginning to wonder." Studying them for a while she eventually nodded. "I think we're going to have to try a slightly different method." She glanced up at the huge boulder still hanging in the tree. "That's too small." Both girls went white, while she chuckled evilly.

Some time later Shampoo yodelled in panic as she swung on the end of a long rope towards a small outcropping on the side of the mountain, suspended from a very tall tree. Cologne watched with interest while Akane closed her eyes, wincing at the meaty smack that followed. There was silence for a few seconds followed by vicious swearing in Mandarin, causing the old woman to cackle. Akane had picked up enough words from her friend to make her blush.
"Your turn, Akane."

"Oh, joy." The blue-haired young woman walked slowly towards the end of the rope.

"Remember what I told you. Use your mind, find the breaking point. Ryoga got it, and he's none too bright. I'm sure you can manage. Eventually." Cologne cackled while Akane sighed.

Several hours later, the temperature was dropping and it looked like it was going to rain. Shampoo looked up at the clouds apprehensively. "I hope it doesn't start for a while, I won't be able to keep on with the training." She smiled slightly sadly. "Small cats aren't going to make much impression on a rock." They both looked at each other, then determinedly got back to work. Moderately impressed Cologne watched.

It was late that evening when a loud boom echoed through the woods. Akane yelled in triumph. "Ha HA! I did it!" Then she ducked and covered as most of the debris from the breaking point strike fell around her. Shampoo yelped and dived under a fallen log, while Cologne merely batted a few pieces aside with her staff.

"Finally. I was beginning to wonder if either of you would ever do it. Good." She inspected the ruined boulder. "Now, do it again." Akane's face fell slightly. Crawling out from her cover Shampoo watched with interest as her friend braced herself, then took careful aim. She yelped in pain as her finger slammed into the rock. The elder covered her eyes, shaking her head.

"No. No, no, no. Try again." It took several more attempts and an equivalent number of pained yelps before Akane finally worked it out. "Good. Again." Another loud explosion sent birds squawking from the trees. "Again." By the time she was satisfied, Akane was covered in small dings and scrapes, blood running from dozens of small cuts. She was widely grinning though.

"Not bad, Akane," Shampoo complimented her, helping her bandage the larger cuts. She looked up as Cologne hopped over.

"Your turn again, great-granddaughter." Shampoo paled slightly, then nodded her acquiescence.

The young Chinese woman took nearly three more hours before she finally managed the technique, with another two before she could do it every time. Cologne looked approving while Akane smiled at her friend. Returning the earlier favour, she helped the other woman clean herself up. Both of them were walking like they'd been beaten half to death, which was a fairly accurate description of what had happened, but they looked very happy. Cologne inspected them both, as they stood in front of her, tired but pleased.

"Well, you took your time, but you got it in the end. I suppose that's something." They exchanged glances. After a moment she grinned, her old face wrinkling up. "Good work, girls. Let's pack up and go home." They limped after her as she headed for the tents.

Lying in bed, her left hand a paw again for the practice, Nabiki grinned into the darkness. She'd never have believed, close to a year ago when she'd first traced Ranma and Kasumi, that she would one day be capable of anything even close to what they were. She was still a long way from matching even Aiko and her team, who themselves were in most respects a considerable distance behind her elder sister, but she was on the road to it, and far further along that road than she could believe sometimes.

'I really am a magical girl now,' she thought with a faint chuckle, switching to low light vision and holding her left hand, currently not a hand at all, in front of her. She could feel the illusion spell
keeping it in this form, easily holding it stable. She was curious to see if it would last all night again, but fairly sure the answer would be yes. During the day her magic reserves had built up again, she could feel it, to a level somewhat higher than they'd reached the day before. Still tiny compared to Aiko, for example, but respectable in most other magical circles. Yet according to Ranma this was only the tip of the iceberg. He was sure that within a couple of years at the outside she'd be as good at magic and ki as Kasumi was. Her martial arts abilities would still be inferior, her sister had a huge lead on her, but she was determined now to push ahead with learning everything she could.

There was a lot of practice in her future, that much was certain. Magic practice, ki practice, martial arts practice. Her sister had told her to try the roof-hopping as much as possible, as it would quickly improve to the point that she could jump off a building easily, and back again with not much more effort. On the way back to the apartment she'd fallen off once, landing nearly upright as she'd had more warning, but it was still a graceless action. She envied her sister the ability to make dropping six stories look as elegant as descending the stairs.

"Mind you, I still can't believe that Kasumi of all people threw me off a roof!" she thought, snickering yet still mildly irritated. 'That wasn't very nice. But she remembered to activate my bracelet before I chased Ranma out of the apartment, which is good.' Dropping her arms beside her on the bed, she tried making a ki fold. For once it worked easily on the first attempt, staying stable until she fell asleep, then gently evaporating in a puff of released energy.

"Hi, Nabiki. How's it going?" Akane's voice was excited. "Are you at the university?"

"No, I'm staying with Rika and Maiko for a couple of days. I needed a break. How are you? What happened with your training trip?" Her sister laughed.

"It went really well. I learned the Breaking Point! It's incredible." Nabiki winced a little. Her sister was destructive enough already, but now she could blow holes in walls just by touching them in the right place? She hoped Cologne knew what she was doing. "Shampoo did as well. We're both still black and blue, the training was brutal. You have no idea what that's like." The middle Tendo suppressed a snicker. Oh, no, of course she didn't...

"Well done, Akane. You must have impressed her if she was willing to teach you that. Try not to get carried away destroying things." Akane giggled.

"I'll do my best." She paused for a moment and Nabiki could hear a keyboard in the background. "Hey, I've been reading about your local magical girl. Have you seen her yet? She's stopped over a dozen crimes in the last couple of weeks." Nabiki snickered a bit.

"Why does everyone think I know all these magical girls?" she asked rhetorically. "I only know two, and them vaguely. I've met one more, once." Her sister laughed.

"Sorry, I just want to get an autograph."

"You sound like my friend Miki from University. She's into magical girls as well." Nabiki grinned, taking aim on the steel plate in the basement. She fired half a dozen ki balls in a stream of green energy, ducking slightly to the side as some pieces of shrapnel flew past. Kasumi casually caught one of the larger pieces as it shot past her face at nearly the speed of sound. Ranma looked amused while the other four nodded approvingly.

"What are you doing with your friends?" Akane asked, still typing by the sound of it. Firing off another burst, her sister chuckled. "Oh, we're just playing around, relaxing a bit. Good food, doing
some jogging, that sort of thing." She ripped off a pair of compressed ki balls, blowing matched craters in the plate with a huge boom. Dust filtered down from the ceiling. "Having fun, basically."

"Sounds like we're both doing that. All right, I'll leave you to it. If you meet her, get her autograph, OK?" Nabiki laughed slightly.

"I'll see what I can do. Bye, sis."

"Bye, Nabiki." The younger sister hung up. Stepping back so Aiko could take her shots, the middle sister looked at Ranma.

"Nice grouping. You're getting better. How are your reserves?"

"Definitely growing. I'm not nearly as tired as yesterday."

"Good." He looked at her left hand which was still changed. "And you're holding that very well even when you're firing ki balls. Not bad at all." Aiko finished her firing practice with a flurry of shots forming a neat circle. Pulling out her earplugs Nabiki stuck her finger in her right ear and wiggled it around, dealing with an itch.

"What next?"

"How's the ki fold practice coming?" Ranma led the way back to the elevator, holding the door as they all piled in.

"Not bad. I can keep one going for about an hour today, but it takes usually half a dozen tries to get it started in the first place." He nodded.

"That will get easier. One day it will just click and it'll be completely stable. When your subconscious works it out you'll have no trouble, trust me."

"I've kept this one going for nearly thirty-six hours now," Misaki said, retrieving a bar of chocolate from her sleeve with a grin. "It's still pretty small but I'm slowly getting better at it."

Tamiko poked her friend with the end of the tail she still had. "But I'm keeping this going. You can't manage it for that long." Misaki grinned, grabbing it and pulling it hard. "Ow. Stop it." The auburn haired girl whipped the illusory appendage out of her friend's grasp with amusement.

Back in Ranma and Kasumi's apartment they all sat down for lunch. "I can only stay one more day, then I have to get back," Nabiki said.

"That's fine. I think you have several things to practice. You won't be able to do much on the illusion spell without us, but you can go over the methods. That will help for next time. Keep practising the ki fold, and do as much roof-hopping as you can. Work on getting up there in the first place, that's what you're worst at." The martial artist smiled at her, as she nodded.

"OK."

After lunch they went over the illusion technique yet again, then Ranma looked at his sister-in-law for a moment. "Let's try the Soul of Ice. It's more a mental thing than anything else, it should help with concentration as well as ki control. You can probably get it in ten minutes by this stage of your training." Thinking for a moment about the best way to start, he slowly described the process of suppressing emotions, forcing them inside under a shell of cold ki, demonstrating it in the process. Nabiki watched and listened carefully as did the others. When he'd finished, she mulled it over for a while.
It sounded like what she already did to a degree. Since she had been young, when their mother died, she'd learned to keep her calm, not to let people see her emotional, partly as a defence mechanism and partly to make controlling her environment easier. In recent years she'd recognised that, relaxing it considerably, but she still drew heavily on it when she needed to stay in control. The various fights that she'd been involved in during her recent brief stint as a magical girl had used that ability strongly.

'Ms Aoyama' was almost entirely that part of her persona. She'd nearly scared herself at first, discovering how easy it was to let that part of herself out. The illusory form helped her confidence with it, which in turn made the effect even more pronounced.

After pondering it for a while she carefully retreated into that cold internal space where she could think without messy emotional issues getting in the way, something that was very familiar to her. This time, though, she invested it with some of the ki she was becoming more and more used to using, pushing it outwards and concentrating on calm and cold. Everyone stared as they felt waves of cold air rolling off her, little ice particles forming on the sofa near her.

"Wow," Ranma said quietly. "That's downright scary. I knew you'd pick it up quickly but that's just..." He shrugged. "Damn impressive. Even Cologne would say so." He got up and retrieved a glass of warm water, coming back and handing it to her. With emotionless curiosity, she accepted it and watched as it froze solid in seconds in her hand.

"Interesting," she said quietly.

"Can you turn it off, please, Nabiki?" her sister asked. "It's very good, but you're going to kill the house-plants at this rate." The middle sister looked around for a moment, then shrugged.

"All right." Moments later she shivered a little, putting the glass down and blowing on her fingers which were suddenly going blue.

"Damn. That's cold. Did I really do that?" Everyone nodded. "Weird. That's an odd sensation, it's almost like being a machine. Not angry, or sad, or happy, or anything like that, just being there watching the world. Very odd."

Ranma was watching her with interest. "You got that faster than I've ever seen," he commented. "I thought you were most of the way there. You could find some very useful applications for it. I know I did. I'm not going to tell you what they are, I'm interested to see what you come up with on your own." He grinned at her look of irritation.

Everyone else tried it but no one could match the instant success that Nabiki had enjoyed, although they all found they could do it to a degree. Eventually Kasumi stood up, smiling at them. "Come on. Let's go out. We haven't had a good look around for days." She shimmered and became 'Chou'. Her husband raised an eyebrow, standing and becoming 'Yori' before she'd finished moving. Aiko glanced at her team then they grinned.

"We'll be back in a minute." Clustering together all four disappeared in a flash of rainbow-tinted light. 'Yori' and 'Chou' looked at Nabiki, then each other.

"You could go like that with the bracelet, but perhaps we should give you another persona." She looked back at them.

"OK. Any suggestions?"

"Well, the same general size and shape, you're still learning roof-hopping and things like that, a
different height would confuse you a little until you get some practice. So, fairly small changes, but we can do a lot like that." Her sister walked around her thoughtfully. "Hmm. Different colour hair definitely."

"I liked that silver-white effect from the other night." 'Chou' nodded slightly, smiling.

"So did I. All right." Nabiki's hair faded to a silvery colour, glinting in the light. "Longer, I think." It grew longer and the style changed, flowing down past her shoulders. "That looks nice." She sent her sister a view of her own face. Nabiki nodded approvingly.

"Very good. How about, um, amber eyes? Something unusual." 'Chou' smiled.

"Oh, I like that. Very good." The eyes changed to the requested orange-amber colour, which together with the silver hair was remarkable. "Nice." The other woman looked her sister up and down, while 'Yori' watched with interest.

"Let's do the face. Let's see. Narrower chin. Slightly wider set eyes. Yes, that looks good." She made a few more tweaks, raising the cheekbones, changing the hairline, moving and tilting the ears. By the time she was done the changes, all quite small apart from the eyes and hair, produced a face completely unrecognisable as Nabiki.

"Wow. That's remarkable," the middle sister said in a completely different voice, deeper than her normal one.

"It's very good," 'Yori' said approvingly. Aiko and her girls reappeared in the room, dressed in their new uniforms, then inspected the new version of Nabiki.

"Hey, that's not bad at all," Tamiko remarked. "You need the long coat, like I said. You'd look absolutely kick-ass." Nabiki glanced at her sister who smiled. She found herself wearing a black leather coat that came down to her ankles, quite form-fitting to half-way past the hips where it flared out a little. On her feet were leather boots like the ones the others were wearing. Inspecting her appearance as sent by the disguised Kasumi she nodded.

"Impressive." Holding her hands up she dismissed the small change she was still running, then produced a ball of green ki in each hand, looking icily at the others, cold air running down her body and chilling their feet.

"Wow." Tamiko giggled nervously. "That's nearly as bad as Ms. Aoyama."

"Thank you," Nabiki said, smiling in a way that made the other woman step back involuntarily.

'Yori' snickered. "So what's this one called?" Nabiki looked at her.

"Azumi Ito, of course." Everyone nodded, as 'Azumi' laughed in a way that would make most people turn and run.

Sergeant Harada looked up as he heard a familiar sound, grinning as he saw Yori, Chou, and the other four bouncing along the roof-line. He stared as he saw that there was a seventh female figure in the group, long coat billowing behind her impressively as she cleared the gap between two buildings. "I wonder who that is," he muttered, before resuming his walk to the station.

Corporal Otani glanced at his companion as the man in front of them backed slowly out of the alley, his hands clasped on top of his head. The expression on his face was... unsettling. Looking
around he spotted them, relief flowing over his features. He walked over.

"I'm Taro Nijo, and I'm a mugger. Could you please arrest me? I've mugged five people in the last week." The two police officers looked at each other again. He seemed quite serious.

"Why are you telling us this?" Otani asked curiously. He had a good idea.

"The lady told me to." The mugger shuddered in remembrance.

"Short girl, black hair in a long braid with a blue stripe in it?" The corporal was smiling a little. He looked surprised when the man shook his head.

"She was there, but it was the other one. The scary one." Meeting his colleagues eyes as the officer gently handcuffed the man, Otani looked puzzled.

"A tall blonde?"

"No, the scary one. She had silver hair and sort of orange eyes, with a long black coat. She was cold." He paused and shuddered again, staring at them with an expression of terror. "So cold," he whispered. "She said if she saw me again something terrible would happen, and to go and find a policeman and turn myself in. You'll take me away, won't you? Please?" The man seemed pathetically hopeful, glancing over his shoulder at the mouth of the alley he'd come from.

"All right. Don't worry, you're safe now." Otani reassured the man, wondering how it came to be that he was trying to comfort a self-confessed criminal. The man suddenly let out a little squeak of terror, looking past the police officers in an upward direction. Corporal Otani studied him for a moment, then followed his gaze.

Standing on a roof on the other side of the road were a number of familiar figures, plus one he'd never seen before. The woman in the long coat was standing right on the edge of the building, her arms crossed and her expressionless gaze fixed on the mugger. Very slowly she smiled coldly, before turning and bounding up and over the roof. Yori grinned at the two policemen, waved, then followed, trailed by the others. Otani watched for a moment before turning to his colleague.

"Looks like Yori's found a friend." Both officers grinned before helping the mugger, who had collapsed to his knees, to stand before walking him back to the station.
"We'll start you properly on martial arts next time," Ranma commented, as she carried the last of the training aids back into the storage room. "Those moves I showed you should help if you have to fight until then, though. You picked them up fast. Practice those two katas every morning for an hour or so as well." Nabiki nodded, looking out the window into the park behind the apartment building, watching people wandering around enjoying themselves. A group of mixed ages and genders appeared to be going through some sort of dance training, looking like they were having fun. Watching them for a little longer she turned at the sound of a pair of clunking sounds from behind her. The red-head was grinning at her from behind a pair of familiar looking iron weights.

"But right now, I want to see how much your strength has improved."

The middle Tendo looked at the weights for a moment then nodded again. "OK." Walking over she grabbed the handle on the smaller one, remembering how heavy it was and how hard she'd had to lift previously. Bracing herself she heaved, yelping as it came off the floor far more easily than she expected, nearly sending her over onto her back. Staggering a couple of steps she managed to catch her balance, holding the weight at waist level. It was surprisingly simple. The thing felt quite heavy, but was something she could easily hold for several seconds, without overly straining herself.

"Is this the same weight?" she asked suspiciously, examining it. The martial artist nodded, grinning widely.

"Yep. Three hundred and fifty kilos."

"Wow." Nabiki lowered it to the ground carefully. Then she picked it up again. Putting it down once more she tried with one hand, managing to make it move a few centimetres but finding it just past the point she could do easily. "Unbelievable."

"Try the big one." That one she could now get off the floor as well although it was more of a struggle.

"I still can't believe this," the brunette said, pulling it to her knees before lowering it again, then repeating the feat. "Half a ton, and it's pretty heavy, but manageable. I know Akane can do this pretty easily, but I never thought I would."

"It's the ki usage, it builds strength very quickly when you get past a certain point. Akane was lifting boulders that weighed over a ton when she was about sixteen, she could probably manage five or six tons now, more if she was really motivated. I'm not sure what my upper limit is, I haven't tried for a while. Kas can certainly bench-press a decent size truck if she wants to, while Aiko and her team can do about the same but with more effort. They've probably tripled their strength at least since Christmas, they're stronger now without the magic boost than they were five months ago with it." Ranma smiled a little. Nabiki was still playing with the half-ton weight. "Would you like to try something bigger? We can go down in the basement and move those plates around, they're about a ton or so each."

Putting the block of cast iron down for the last time, Nabiki shook her head. "Not right now, thanks." She stared at the weight for a moment, then smiled. "Amazing."

"It's neat, isn't it?"
Back in the living room she took the coffee Kasumi handed her with a smile, thanking her sister as they sat. "I'll have to go soon," the middle sister said. "But this has been a lot of fun. Mostly."

Casting an evil look at Ranma she watched as the other woman snickered.

"Hey, it wasn't *me* who threw you off a roof!"

"True." She transferred the look to her sister, who smiled back, unconcerned.

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't enjoy," Kasumi said mildly. After a pause she giggled. "I'll admit part of me *did* enjoy that, though. You should have seen the look on your face as you went over the edge!" Ranma collapsed in giggles as Nabiki glared at them both.

"Still idiots..."

She grumpily drank her coffee until both of them had recovered. "Well, I think it's been an effective few days," Ranma said, grinning. "You mastered the Soul of Ice instantly. I was pretty sure you would but I'm pleased even so. Your roof-hopping needs practice but it's not bad. Ki usage is getting very good, plus the power is increasing nicely. Your control of ki balls is excellent. The ki fold is still a bit hit and miss, but you know all the principles, you just need to practice it. And you have the basics of our magic control system down well, you can power it quite well, although you need a lot more practice yet. I think in a couple of months you might be able to do some simple illusions entirely on your own and be at a point of holding a full body change in perhaps two weeks. Six months and you'll be pretty good at it."

Nabiki listened to her *report-card* with a pleased expression. Her sister smiled. "Well done, Nabiki. You met my expectations very well and exceed them in a few places. I'm very proud of you."

"Thanks, sis."

"In two or three months we can start you on the basics of wards and some of the other spells. The portal spell will have to wait, it's extremely complex and I'm afraid you simply don't have the fine control for it yet. Even Aiko won't for quite a while and she's already quite good at energy control." Nodding, Nabiki finished her coffee and put the empty mug on the table.

"I'm in no hurry. It's not like I need to travel to any other worlds on my own right now. Although I think I'd quite like to visit one or two soon."

"We intend to visit Uthryyl over the summer, you can come if you'd like to," Kasumi said.

"I'd like that. He and his family are nice."

Ranma nodded. Studying Nabiki for a moment, she smiled. "I really am both pleased and impressed, Nabiki. You've picked all of this up very well. I'm sorry for torturing you like that, but it seemed the quickest, if not least painful, method of getting you to the point you need to be." The middle sister sighed a little.

"I know, looking back on it, but it wasn't fun."

"I warned you it would hurt a little."

"A *little*?" Nabiki gritted her teeth for a moment, then relaxed. "All right, I guess I forgive you. All in a good cause and all that." Ranma grinned, becoming male as he stood.

"Exactly. Come on, let's get something to eat before you go back."
After lunch Nabiki looked around at her friends and family, which were in fact more or less the same thing. "It's been great, guys. I guess I'll see you again in a week or so."

Aiko stood up. "Come on, Nabiki, I'll jump you back, no point wasting time with trains."

"Thanks." She retrieved her bag from her room, then hugged her sister goodbye.

"We only have about three weeks or so on the portal device timer to go, then we're either in the clear or in the shit," Ranma said, inspecting her with interest. She nodded. "If we have to go and deal with the last one, assuming it either goes off or we somehow find it at the last minute, do you want to come?"

Nabiki stopped dead, surprised. Then she thought hard. "I think I'd like to come," she eventually said, slightly surprised at her own decision, but clear on it. He simply nodded.

"OK." Stepping to Aiko's side Nabiki activated the bracelet in case they got spotted, then waved. "Bye, guys." The two women disappeared in a flash of light.

Genma stood with Soun, watching as Akane and Shampoo sparred in the middle of the Dojo, their students in a group on the other side also watching with interest. "She's getting quite good," he said quietly to his friend. Soun nodded with pride.

"That she is. It makes me proud. Shampoo has helped her enormously, on top of the improvements she's made to herself. I think she'll be a worthy heir to the Tendo Dojo." He looked slyly sideways at his old friend. "Pity there's no suitable Saotome heir to allow the schools to be joined." Genma sighed a little, then punched him in the head.

The sparring young women stopped to watch as the two elders fought, the scuffle quickly ending up out in the yard. All the students glanced at each other before clustering around one young man who was the holder of the betting book. Bets made they dashed out to watch. Akane looked at her friend, shaking her head.

"Men..." Shampoo giggled.

"Come on, let's watch." They headed out after the moving fight. Five minutes later everyone was standing around the pond in which was floating an unconscious panda, collecting their winnings. Soun watched dizzily, lying half out of the water, while Nodoka stood on the porch grinning.

"I keep telling you, it's possessed!"

Cologne hopped along the street, thinking about her grand-daughter and the Tendo girl. She was rather impressed with the change the latter had managed to make in herself in the last year. Clearly, those two magical girls had fixed something very important, but there was no denying that the young woman had put in a remarkable amount of effort herself to become a better person. She'd never have expected it, based on the last few years, but she was pleased nonetheless.

'Pity I couldn't have trained her from childhood,' she mused, 'she could have been something extraordinary. Even so, better late than never.'

Spotting a familiar crop of brunette hair in the distance she looked more carefully. The middle Tendo sister had just come out of the shop she knew Akane worked at, presumably back from University and visiting her sister. Cologne considered the girl with interest. There was another
person who had matured in a way she wouldn't have expected. The woman seemed to have diverted herself from the potentially unpleasant path her earlier life seemed headed down into becoming a responsible and sensible person. The Elder was both impressed and pleased. Despite their occasional crossing of swords she quite like the middle sister. She reminded her of herself in some ways.

'Smart, very smart, cunning, and potentially powerful. She could go a long way. Pity she's never shown any interest in the arts of war, I suspect she'd have been very good at them. Her intelligence-gathering skills are formidable, though, even at such a young age. I'm glad we seem to have become friendly although I'm not entirely sure how it happened.' The old woman chuckled. Hopping closer she was about to call a greeting when she noticed something odd about Nabiki.

'That's strange. What is that?' Probing cautiously she froze, then blinked. Looking around she shrugged.

"Hmm. What was I thinking about? Oh well, it'll come back." She mumbled a little, resuming her motion down the street. Ahead of her she noticed a familiar figure.

'Ah. Nabiki must be back. I suppose she was visiting Akane, she's working just down the street.' Frowning, about to call out, she noticed something odd about the woman in front of her, and probed carefully...

"Six times in twenty minutes," Ranma said with a chuckle. "I think she must have been following you or something. The ward system seems to be having fun." Nabiki giggled, causing the student next to her in the lecture hall to glance at her with a puzzled smiled.

"I shouldn't find that funny but for some reason I do. I hope it's not causing her any damage."

"She'll be fine. Anyone else probably wouldn't keep noticing but Cologne is very perceptive, not to mention powerful enough to keep overcoming the effect. I'll see if I can figure out a way to modify the system to prevent her noticing in the first place, or she's in danger of walking into traffic when she's around you." Chuckling again, Ranma disconnected.

Finishing with her written test Nabiki checked the work, then stood. Handing it in she nodded to the invigilator before leaving the room, heading for the small cafeteria on the ground floor. She was ravenously hungry. Pulling some coins out of her pocket, not making it obvious that they were in fact coming from a ki fold linked to that pocket, she dropped them into the vending machine and punched the right buttons for some chocolate, a sandwich, and a drink, before looking for a table.

In the last week and a bit her ki fold practice had paid off. The middle Tendo could now maintain a small one indefinitely with ease, although making it bigger was still difficult. Even so, the pocket could hold a surprising amount. She had a fair amount of cash, several books, and a change of clothes in it, without leaving a trace from the outside. Unfortunately she still couldn't keep it stable without linking it to something, which annoyed her. She was envious of the way Ranma and Kasumi could make things just vanish in thin air. So she kept practising.

Miki's number came up on her internal viewpoint. Answering the call absently she bit off a piece of slightly stale sandwich. "Hello, Nabiki, are you busy?" her friend asked. The other woman was becoming quite close to her, as was her boyfriend. She was pleased to be making new friends suddenly, after several years of living across from the young woman.

"No, I just finished my last exam for this week, I'm having lunch."
"Good. I've got a free afternoon, I was wondering if you'd like to come shopping with me? I need to get some clothes and I also wanted to find a new phone. This one is becoming unreliable, it keeps dropping connections."

"Yes, why not? I could do with another notebook or two. Let me go back and change, I'll meet you outside the library in about, oh, let's say fifteen minutes?"

"Great. See you in a bit." Miki hung up. Finishing her food Nabiki discarded the waste then headed back to her room.

Shortly she was standing outside the library, waiting. A few minutes later Miki walked up. "Hi," she said, smiling at the Tendo woman. "How did your exam go?"

"I think it went well, actually. There was one question I got stuck on but I think I managed to fake it well enough to pass." Nabiki smiled. "If not, well, my marks are good otherwise, it won't make that much difference." They began walking towards the nearest Metro station. "How is your own work going?"

"Not bad. I've written more papers in the last month than in the previous three years, though. Economic theory is complicated. And extremely wordy." She giggled, making Nabiki snicker a little.

"True. Very true." After walking in silence for a moment, her friend looked at her.

"Foiled any more muggings lately?" she asked, smirking a bit. Nabiki sighed a little.

"Yes, dozens, also three bank robberies, two kidnappings, and an international terrorist plot."

Miki laughed. "No need for sarcasm. I'm still impressed about how easily you dealt with that guy the other day, though. It was amazing."

"It wasn't anything special. I know several real martial artists who could have dealt with it much faster and more easily." Nabiki shrugged. "I'm not really a martial artist, I just know..."

"...A few good tricks. Yes, you keep saying that." The other woman grinned at her. "Still, it was very impressive. I feel much safer being around you." Nabiki sighed theatrically, but smiled.

"People don't want me for my devastating wit or clearly superior intelligence, they only want me to protect them from the bullies."

"Exactly." Both young women laughed. Arriving at the Metro station they waited for a short time, before finding themselves heading toward the local shopping area. Nabiki kept an eye open for anything that might need an 'intervention' but saw nothing other than a young man who seemed unduly interested in staring at young women, which was clearly making several of them uncomfortable. Manoeuvring herself into a position a couple of metres away from him she caught his eye and gave him a look filled with liquid helium. He stared in horror, flinching away as she smiled coldly. Something in her eyes made him back away, heedless of the people complaining as he bumped into them. Miki didn't notice, as she was poking irritably at her phone, which had died again.

Satisfied, the middle sister turned around, standing beside her friend, while behind her, her victim fought to be the master of his own bladder. He lost, which didn't make him any friends on the crowded train.

Two hours later they walked out of a cellphone shop, Miki gleefully fiddling with her new phone.
"This is great. It does all sorts of cool things."

"Does it make phone calls?" Nabiki asked dryly.

"I think so, if I can figure out how," her friend laughed. "I'll have to read the manual again." They ended up in a sushi bar where they decided to have a break. Having ordered, Nabiki excused herself to use the facilities. On the way back she stopped suddenly, looking around carefully. She could feel a definite threat in the area, but as she'd become used to the new senses she could tell it wasn't aimed at her. Somewhere very close though. Debating what to do, she glanced to Miki, noticing the woman wasn't looking in her direction, involved as she was with her new phone. Quickly checking around discreetly she saw that none of the limited security cameras seemed to cover her area either. Coming to a decision, she went back into the female bathroom, activating the bracelet as soon as she was inside, then easily pulled herself out the open window at the back, which was close to two metres off the ground.

Once outside she checked around, feeling for any witnesses, before jumping to the roof of the building, some two stories up. Heading in the direction she'd determined the trouble was coming from she quickly found herself looking down at three men in the process of robbing a pawn-brokers shop. One of them appeared to be concealing a handgun of some sort under his coat, while the other two had baseball bats. The man with the gun and one of his co-workers were in the shop, visible through the window, while the other one was doing a particularly poor job of looking inconspicuous while standing guard outside in the street. Several people seemed aware of what was going on and were sidling away in a manner designed not to attract attention, while most of the shoppers in the street seemed oblivious.

Sighing, she looked around. There were no police visible from her vantage point, which made sense, as presumably even fairly dim robbers would be smart enough not to ply their trade in front of the law. Placing a call to 119 and having Jun start recording she dropped lightly to the ground, "Hi. Police, please."

She walked calmly across the road to the guard thief, who watched her when he noticed the direction she was heading. Stepping forward he held out his hand in a warning sign, becoming very surprised when the slim young woman took this as an offer, grabbed the outstretched limb, and flipped him over her shoulder. The small number of spectators gasped. "Yes, hello, I'd like to report a robbery in process." She kicked the man gently behind the ear in the place her sister had pointed out was particularly effective, nodding in satisfaction as he went limp.

"It's the pawn shop in central Sangenjaya, next to the post office. Yes, that's right." Walking inside she looked around. The two men were involved in smashing display cases and shovelling things from them into a pair of bags. The owner of the shop was cowering at the back, the man with the gun, some sort of automatic, intermittently pointing it at him to make sure he didn't try anything. She shook her head irritably. Producing a pair of ki balls she held them in front of her menacingly, pointing one at each robber. "Three men, one armed with a hand gun, the other two with baseball bats. One is unconscious in the street."

Both robbers noticed her, freezing in shock for a moment. The one with the bat suddenly lunged at her, reacting much faster than his friend. She stepped to one side, lifting her knee in a simple but impossibly fast motion, causing him to fold over it with a grunt of pain. Hopping back she lashed out with her foot into his groin, then slammed her elbow into the place she'd caught the other one outside in as he went past. The second man dropped and bounced, then lay still. His friend stared in shock, the entire exchange had taken about two seconds. He hadn't even seen the brunette girl move except as a blur.
"One is unconscious in the shop." Raising his gun in a slightly trembling hand, the remaining thief aimed at her. Slightly worried inside as she wasn't completely sure she could take being shot yet, she gave him a frigid glare. Out loud she said, "That's a very bad idea." She concentrated on the gun, feeling everything slow down as her entire attention focussed to a level she wouldn't have believed a few months ago. Oddly, despite the slight momentary worry otherwise she felt completely calm. The shop owner wondered why it was getting colder, his air conditioning was broken as far as he knew.

Nabiki watched as the trigger slowly moved. The hammer lifted and fell, a deep bang accompanied a flash of yellow flame from the barrel, then her right hand lashed out without conscious direction even as she moved and twisted to the side, the ki ball it was holding dissipating in the process. It closed on something moving fast, bringing it to a halt even as she slowed and fired the other ki ball at the robber, who wasn't nearly fast enough to duck, collecting it in the middle of the chest and flying backwards as the energy sphere detonated with a sharp crack. He hit the back wall of the shop and slid down it limply, semi-conscious and smoking slightly. The middle Tendo came to a halt, while the shopkeeper stared in disbelief.

She opened her hand, looking at the contents with detached interest. A 9mm bullet lay there inoffensively, showing none of the lethal intent it had done when it was moving at a few hundred metres per second. "Hmm," she muttered. "The third robber is down. He fired his weapon. There are no casualties." Walking over to the man lying on the floor staring at her in dazed horror, she looked down at him, before dropping the bullet on the floor next to him. Squatting down she looked very seriously at him.

"That was a very dangerous thing to do, you could have hurt someone." Taking the gun gently from his limp grip she looked at it for a moment, before grabbing the barrel with her other hand and twisting hard. The weapon bent visibly with a creaking sound. He went white. Placing it on the floor beside the bullet she smiled at him in a manner that made him begin praying audibly. "Make very sure I never see you again." As he nodded rapidly, speechless and terrified, she stood up, turning to the shop owner, who was staring at her in mixed terror and thankfulness. He had no idea who this extraordinarily worrying young woman was but he was certainly grateful she had stopped the robbery. He was also desperately hoping she would soon leave and never come back.

"Are you all right?" she asked. He nodded.

"They didn't hurt me, just scared me." His expression suggested that it hadn't been to the level he was feeling now. Slightly amused she smiled, putting more warmth into it.

"Good. The police will be here soon. I hope you can get all this fixed easily. Goodbye."

The sound of the police operator yammering at her made her sigh a little as she left the shop, walking across the road while a few people watched without approaching her, then jumping back onto the roofs and heading back to the sushi place. The total elapsed time was around three minutes. "Yes, Azumi Ito, that's correct. Sorry, I have to go." She disconnected as she reached the roof of the sushi restaurant. Standing there Nabiki released the last of the soul of ice she'd been using, almost unconsciously, before shaking her head in mixed wonder, shock, and amusement.

'Holy crap, I caught a bullet!' It took her a little while to get over that.

Miki looked up as her friend returned from the toilet. "Finally. I thought I was going to have to come and look for you." She smiled, then indicated the food. "Everything is here." Nabiki sat down, smiling back. They turned to look out the window as a police car rapidly passed the restaurant, it's lights flashing and siren sounding. "I wonder what that's all about," the other woman said absently, reaching for a salmon roll.
Nabiki smiled slightly, then passed the soy sauce.

"Three hundred metres away!" Miki said, waving a printout. "We were having lunch three hundred metres away when this magical girl was terrifying robbers! I can't believe it." John smiled at his girlfriend while Nabiki snickered into her milkshake.

"Calm down, Miki. You'll pop something," the young man said, chuckling.

"But we were right there! What are the odds?" The woman looked frustrated. "I'll never get her autograph now." Laughing, her boyfriend patted her hand, glancing at the Tendo sister, who smiled.

"You're obsessing, Miki." Sighing, Miki dropped the website printout on the table and picked up her burger. Nabiki picked it up and read it with interest. It was a report from the local news service, detailing her little adventure in the pawn-shop a couple of days ago. She shook her head, amused.

"You really are getting a bit over-involved, you know. You're worse than my sister Akane." Miki giggled.

"You think I'm bad, you should see my sister. Hana would be running around interrogating everyone in the area looking for this girl." She laughed a little more. "You should have seen her reaction when I showed her Yori's signature and the others. I really owe you for that. She nearly exploded." Nabiki grinned, eating some fries.

"I'm glad I could help."

"The various websites about magical girls are going nuts about this latest one," Miki said after swallowing the rather large bite she'd taken. "They finally have a name. Azumi Ito. No one has any description of her, or rather there are lots of descriptions, all of them conflicting. It's weird. Mind you, lots of magical girls have some sort of identity protection magic." The middle sister looked at her friend with interest.

"Are there a lot of websites about magical girls?" The other woman nodded, taking another bite. She chewed and swallowed.

"A few. Most of them are fairly new, only two or three are more than a year or so old. There isn't much real information on most of them, just lots of guesswork. People trade autographs, photos, that sort of thing. All but one of them are in Japan, but there is one in the UK that started up just after Christmas. I guess it had something to do with the London disaster." Nabiki made a quick request to Jun to investigate these websites, out of curiosity more than anything else. She was interested to see how much of the information was anywhere close to correct.

"I can't believe we were so close!" Miki looked at her printout again, annoyed. "Oh well. Maybe next time."

"I think that should do it," Ranma said with satisfaction, poking the last line of the spell into position. Nabiki watched with interest. The ward spell was the most incredibly complicated thing she'd ever seen in her life, she had absolutely no hope of working it out. It made the illusion spell look like child's play. The fact that her sister and a person she had for nearly two years had marked down as nice but a bit dim had come up with it, even with Happosai's help, simply boggled her mind. The red-head looked her work over carefully, then nodded. "These changes should modify the ward behaviour slightly. It will be a little more subtle in it's effects now, masking your
signature to a degree all the time, rather than retroactively jumping on people and scrubbing you from their memories. It was getting a little overenthusiastic, which could attract the attention it's trying to avoid." She grinned. "Full marks for effort, but minus a bit for effect."

"Great. So, now Cologne won't notice the changes to my power signature at all?"

"Not unless you bring it to her attention. The wards might allow her to remember it then, they might not, depending on her attitude. If it senses hostile intent it will react appropriately." Nabiki winced a little. She had a feeling that could be anywhere between fairly innocuous and extremely bad, for the hostile party at any rate. She was becoming more sensitive to the ward system as her magic ability grew, she could feel it watching her protectively all the time. It was comforting, more than anything else, like having some enormous predator gently purring at the foot of your bed while you slept. But it boded ill for anyone who prodded it in the wrong place. She had a shrewd idea that such a move would probably be the last one such an incautious prodder would ever make.

Ranma made the ward control system fade away, then turned to the middle sister. "That robbery at the pawn shop was pretty amusing. One of your best yet." She snickered. "The look on that last one's face was hysterical. I don't know I could have pulled off the intimidation bit any better. I'm very proud of you." Nabiki grinned.

"Thanks. It was a bit weird, that one, even though he was pointing a gun at me it didn't really worry me after the first few seconds. I still can't believe I actually caught a bullet though! That's just unbelievable." Ranma laughed, putting her feet up on the coffee table. Kasumi leaned out of the kitchen and coughed meaningfully, making her sigh and remove them again. Her sister giggled.

"It's a good trick and kind of surprises you the first time. It gets easier, you'll get faster with practice. Like I said ages ago, even Akane could probably do it, I suspect fairly easily now. If you'd missed and it had hit you you'd probably have a nasty bruise but not much more than that. In a couple of months it would just bounce off." Shaking her head in amazement Nabiki thought about that.

"How has the ki fold practice come in the last couple of weeks?" her sister asked, coming out of the kitchen with coffee.

"Very well. A few days ago it suddenly got much easier. I've had one going ever since without any trouble." Nabiki reached into her pocket and pulled out a pair of shoes, which clearly wouldn't fit, grinning with pleased satisfaction. Ranma laughed, while Kasumi nodded approval. "I still can't quite work it without it attached to an opening, which is weird because I did the very first time. I just don't seem to be able to recreate that state of mind."

"You'll get it eventually. Misaki can do it now although the others are at about your stage. All of you are doing exceptionally well." The martial artist studied her with interest. "You particularly. You're starting from a point well behind them, yet aside from raw power, which will only come with time and practice, you've caught up very nicely. We should practice the illusion spell some more. You're here for the weekend, right?" Nabiki nodded, sipping her coffee.

"OK. I want to have all of you try holding a more complicated illusion. When the others get here we can work out something suitable, but I want to work it up to a whole body one before you go home. It will be hard, but I have a feeling you can manage it."

"That would be pretty neat." Kasumi nodded.

"Indeed. If you can do that, I have been thinking about the whole technique and I've come up with a variation on it that might be of benefit." Nabiki looked curiously at her, as did Ranma. She
smiled. "It occurred to me a couple of days ago. While I don't think any of you will be able to create the illusions in the way we can for some time yet, I thought that it might be possible to design a form of the method that effectively produces a preset illusion. Not as flexible but probably significantly easier. We could create a few useful presets for you, which you could apply when necessary." Nabiki looked interested, while Ranma smiled proudly at her wife.

"That's brilliant, Kas. Can I see it?" Nodding happily, Kasumi concentrated, forming an energy pattern that both of them could see, Nabiki with some effort, Ranma with none. The red-headed woman inspected it curiously, a smile growing on her face. "Amazing work. It never occurred to me, but you're right. This is much easier." She studied it a little more. "How about changing this part here, like this? It would simplify it even more, although you'd need a little more power to start it." Kasumi looked at the slightly changed pattern while Nabiki watched with interest. Her sister nodded after a moment.

"Yes, I like it. I'd say it would only need a couple of percent more power, which is well within Nabiki's abilities and easy for the others. All right, so if we do that, we could also change the power handling part here, which would mean it would be more efficient once it was established. You see?" Once more the pattern changed. Ranma looked at it approvingly.

"Very good indeed. If any of them can get to the point of a full change with the standard method, this should be fairly easy." She looked at her sister-in-law. "What presets would you like? I'd think you could probably hold about half a dozen or so without any problem. I don't think we should load you down with lots of them since when you learn the full technique they'll be redundant, but you may as well have anything you'll find useful." Nabiki sipped her coffee while thinking.

"Well, Ms Aoyama, of course. And Azumi." Ranma nodded. After a moment Nabiki grinned. "Why not have the mer-form as well?" Grinning, the martial artist exchanged glances with her wife, who also looked amused.

"Where except here would you ever use it?" she asked curiously. Nabiki shrugged.

"Don't know. But it might come in handy."

"OK. Based on you or Azumi?" She thought for a moment.

"Both, I think."

"Fine. Anything else?" Eventually she shrugged again, shaking her head. "I can't think of anything at the moment. Unless you have managed to make something that can fly." Kasumi giggled.

"I've been thinking about it but some sort of bird is too boring. I'll keep you up to date."

Half an hour later, the other four had arrived. As it was close to lunch time, Kasumi made a lot of sandwiches, then they all went up to the swimming pool. None had used it for a couple of weeks due to being busy. Ranma adjusted the chemicals slightly, muttering about needing to clean it soon, then they all sat on the edge while she explained the next stage of their teaching.

"I think a good practice would be to see if you can hold a partial change, but something more complex than the simple ones you've done up to now. I hope you've all been going over the method regularly?" Everyone nodded. "Good. So, what we're going to try is the mermaid form. If you can hold that, we'll see if you can all keep it going until this evening." She looked around at them, then began with Nabiki. The middle sister was rapidly the mer-sister, sitting swishing her tailfin in the water of the pool while concentrating. Her form shimmered occasionally, until she finally managed to hold it stable.
"Remember, Sister, gently does it. Let it seek it's own level and just guide it," Kasumi advised quietly. She nodded, her eyes shut, feeling the spell at work. Eventually she smiled.

"I think I've got it." Ranma inspected her then nodded approval.

"Well done. That's it. Now we just need to see how long you can hold it."

One at a time she did the other four. Misaki got it immediately, while Aiko took a couple of attempts, but they all managed the feat. Both Ranma and Kasumi looked very pleased. "Fantastic. That's really very good indeed. Now, let's just relax and have fun, while you concentrate on not concentrating on it." She grinned, changing and slipping into the water, then shooting off across the pool. The others laughed and dived in. Kasumi watched with a smile, then followed.

Six hours later seven mermaids were lounging at the shallow end of the pool, idly chatting. Nabiki shared the recordings of her pawn-shop intervention and the various other, less exciting ones she'd had in the previous two weeks. Aiko and her group showed the two events they'd been involved with, one involving a rather confused demon who had gotten overexcited and made an embarrassment of himself, ending up being physically thrown through the portal he'd come from with advice to not come back until he sobered up, while the other was a magical girl they had intermittent trouble with.

"She just won't take 'please stay away' as a hint," Tamiko grumped. "She's a nice enough girl, but she causes a lot of problems. Always chasing those weird little demons of hers. I have no idea where they come from but the things are a pain in the rear. Literally, sometime. They bite." Nabiki giggled, paddling in a small circle while floating on the surface of the pool. Aiko snickered a little.

"You just can't get over the fact that you got nibbled." Her friend shook her head.

"No, I can't. Perverted little monsters. I'm damn glad we have sensible clothing now, it was bad enough this time, before it was horrible." She shuddered while her friends laughed.

"The entire building fell down?" Nabiki asked lazily. Fumiko nodded.

"Those things ate some of the structural members holding it up, and miss magical princess did the rest of the damage firing that magic staff of hers at them. You wouldn't believe how bad a shot she is. By the time we got there she was standing on a pile of bricks looking guilty. She's only about fourteen or so. Luckily, that place was empty and falling apart, but even so, it's the principle of the thing."

"Only in Minato," Ranma chuckled.

"Maybe Nerima." Nabiki raised her head to look at the red-headed mermaid, who nodded after a moment.

"True."

Since they started only Fumiko had lost control of the spell and had required it to be reapplied. It embarrassed her a little, although no one made anything of it. Nabiki was finding holding the change to be remarkably easy now she knew what to do, although the actual magic was still beyond her comprehension. Eventually, they ran out of sandwiches. Ranma dove into the deep end, leaping out of the water in a spectacular manner and changing back in the process, to land on her feet next to the pool. She laughed at her own behaviour. Not to be outdone, Kasumi did the same, somersaulting twice, once as a mermaid and once as her normal shape, lightly landing next to her currently female husband, who hugged her.
Nabiki shook her head as the others tried the same trick, Misaki and Fumiko managing it, while Aiko stumbled on landing. Tamiko laughed, then declined to try it. Deciding that the auburn-haired girl was probably correct the middle sister simply swam to the edge and climbed out on her restored legs. Looking amused Ranma led them back downstairs, becoming male in the process.

"OK. That was very good. I can see that all of you have gained a lot of control over the power handling part of the technique at least. Good. The next thing I want to try is something similar, but I'm going to distract you in the process. It will need a different form, and a different location. So, we're going down to the basement." Curious they followed him. When they arrived, he studied them for a moment as they all stood in a group in front of him and Kasumi, eventually nodding.

"Let's try something a bit different. Still a partial change, though." He looked carefully at Nabiki, who felt something shift. The other four girls stared, amazed. She looked down at herself, then back at her brother-in-law, who was grinning. Kasumi had her hands over her mouth, her eyes sparking with mirth.

"You got a book on Greek myths or something, didn't you?" she asked, amused. Lifting one leg she looked at it. It wasn't a human leg, or not completely. It seemed to be a mix of human and equine, ending in a hoof. The other one was a match for it. Feeling something odd behind her she reached back and felt the horse's tail she now had. "Very strange." Her hearing was a bit weird, and reaching up she found she also had horse's ears.

"It's fairly complex, but simple enough to manage while you're distracted, hopefully." Wondering what he meant by that she carefully took control of it, holding it stable, as he moved on to the others. Eventually they were all changed. Kasumi and Ranma remained their normal selves. "Right. Now, this exercise is called, "The lights go out and we shoot at you." They just had time to exchange worried glances when the lights did indeed go out.

"Holy crap!" Nabiki yelped, as a blue ki ball blazed towards her, lighting up the surrounding area. She dived for cover behind a dimly lit support pillar, hooves clattering on the concrete floor in the process, while hearing similar sounds echoing around her. She could feel the illusion slipping as the ball detonated against the wall with a pop. Holding it in place she fumbled around in the dark. Even the low light vision wasn't helping much. Listening carefully she felt her ears moving, inwardly giggling at the odd sensation. 'It's like some sort of fantasy laser tag game with added pain,' she thought wildly, ducking as a golden ball whooshed over her head, popping against someone who yelped.

"Damn it, Kasumi, that really stings," Fumiko shouted.

"Duck faster," her sister's voice came back from somewhere other than where the ki ball had come from.

"Can we shoot back?" Tamiko called.

"If you like. It won't help." Ranma sounded very amused, following up the comment with a ki shot that scored a direct hit.

"OW! Fuck it!" Tamiko returned fire, nearly hitting Nabiki, who swore and ducked, rolling to the side. She fired back.

The next three hours were a riot of pastel balls of ki shooting every which way, popping on the walls, ceiling, and floor, not to mention the participants. To the best of their knowledge none of them hit either Ranma or his wife, although they could hear them laughing in the dark. Friendly fire incidents were frequent, provoking retaliatory strikes aplenty. It was frustrating, somewhat
eerie, and remarkably good fun. All of them were covered in bruises when the lights finally came back on. A few fittings had been wrecked by errant shots, but the majority were working. Standing next to the elevator Ranma smiled as they all limped up, hooves clattering on the floor. None of them had lost the illusion during the practice.

"How the hell did you know where we were so accurately?" Aiko demanded, her ears laid back and her tail lashing. Nabiki watched with amusement, she didn't seem to notice. "I couldn't see a damn thing, even with enhanced vision on." Ranma chuckled.

"You need to use your ears more. They're big enough." Aiko glared at him, then reached up and felt one of them, smiling slightly. "Plus, if you learn how, the ki sense is at least as good as vision for this sort of thing. Both of us knew where everyone was the whole time. We'll teach you that as well."

"Before you do this again, I hope," his friend said, rubbing a bruise on her shoulder.

"Perhaps..."

Herding them into the elevator he waited for Kasumi, who had been sweeping the broken glass from the lights into one corner. She joined them and they went back upstairs. Once they were sitting in the living room he looked around. All of them were holding the illusion well. "Good. Very good. Let's heal all of that, have something to eat, then call it a night. I'd like you to try holding that form all night if you can. Tomorrow we can move on to whole body illusions, which get considerably harder."

Lying in bed Nabiki wriggled around until she found a comfortable position, which proved to be a little difficult with a tail. Reaching back she felt it. The thing felt as real as if she'd been born with it. 'I still can't get over how real all of this is. Without knowing the truth you'd never be able to tell. Even Jun can't. It seems very interested and rather confused by all this.' Using the comm unit she poked around on the internet for a while, looking up some of the sites that Miki had emailed her about after their conversation the other day. She read the various reports on magical girl incidents, giggling about how wrong most of the ones she had some personal knowledge of were. One or two were fairly accurate but many were pure fantasy.

'Jun? Can you monitor all these sites for any mention of any of us, please? I'm curious to see what gets published.'

'#Of course, Nabiki. I am already monitoring various news outlets for anything that might indicate a threat to you. I will add these sites as well, I will also search for any more of a similar nature.#

'Thanks, Jun. Good night.'

'#Good night, Nabiki.#

She was asleep moments later.

Cologne stared into the scrying bowl, thinking hard. There was something very odd going on. She couldn't quite work out what, but over the last few weeks there had been a number of times she was sure something was right on the verge of happening, before it suddenly didn't. It was driving her nuts. There was no trace she could find, of either hostile magic or ki, and she had looked very hard indeed. In every way she could prove there was nothing amiss, but still...

She was even beginning to have moments of wondering whether age was finally beginning to catch up with her. Shaking her head a little, she pushed that thought far to the back of her mind with a
little shiver, concentrating on trying to figure out whether something really was going on. Was there something she hadn't tried? After a long few minutes of thought, she got up and starting looking through her books and scrolls again, looking for something she hadn't tried, but becoming depressingly aware that she'd pretty much exhausted her resources. The early dawn light coming through the window made her yawn, but she kept looking, mumbling to herself irritably.
Chapter 45

This is a fairly long one but it seemed to flow better as a single chapter.

For anyone who hasn't found it, the events mentioned half-way through are referenced more thoroughly in 'When Ranma met Aiko (And Tamiko And Fumiko and Misaki)', available from my story list.

Stumbling into the kitchen dragging her hooves on the tiles, Nabiki yawned widely, taking the coffee mug her sister handed her with a nod of thanks. She was not a morning person, even with all the recent improvements to her overall condition. Drinking half of it, she blinked a few times, then smiled. "Ah. I needed that. Thanks, sis." Kasumi smiled, watching her sister drink the rest of it, before putting the mug down and wandering off to the bathroom, her tail swishing around.

"I wonder if she remembers what she looks like?" Kasumi mused out loud, amused, before turning to make breakfast.

In the bathroom Nabiki brushed her teeth, then got in the shower, squirting shampoo in her hand and rubbing it in her hair. Her hands ran over her horse's ears and she stopped, feeling them curiously, before she grinned. "Weird. I totally forgot." Looking inside she watched the spell, which was apparently completely stable. Amused she finished her shower, drying herself off and dressing, before returning to the living room, casually acting as if hooves, a tail, and furry ears was completely normal. Ranma was watching the morning news, looking up as she sat beside him, then grinning.

"Well done. I expected you would manage it, but it's nice to see I was right." She flicked an ear at him and chuckled.

"The strangest thing is how normal it feels."

"I know. It took me some time to get used to that. We've come up with some strange changes over the years but it's kind of weird how easily you get used to them. I think it might be that once you work out how to do it, you just accept it. Or perhaps we're all just that weird."

"The latter, I suspect. This would give some people I know the screaming jitters for weeks." He laughed.

"I take it you're OK with it all?" She nodded happily.

"I should probably not be, but personally I find it enormous fun. I can't wait to be able to do it as well as you guys can. I can see all sorts of fun I can have with it." Looking slightly worried he turned back to the news.

"Oh dear. I hope I haven't created some sort of perverted shape-shifting monster." Giving her a sly sideways grin he watched as she snickered.

"We'll find out soon enough..." They sat in companionable silence for a little while watching the news. Eventually she turned to him. "Where is all this going?" she asked quietly. He looked at her, his eyebrow raised. After a moment, he nodded.

"I wondered when you were going to ask." It was her turn to raise an eyebrow.
She thought for a moment, while he waited for her to speak again, picking up the remote and turning down the volume on the TV. "Don't get me wrong, I love learning all this. But I can't help but wonder why you picked me to train. There must be other, more suitable people just in the magical girl community around here. Aiko and her girls are obvious. You're very much the same type of person. They may say how they just fell into it, but it's clear to me that they enjoy the hell out of it most of the time. Aiko loves the teleporting, Misaki obviously enjoys dealing with danger, and Fumiko and Tamiko just like jumping around the place. Not showing off, but secure in the knowledge that they can." He nodded again.

"All true."

"You, you're... I don't know what you are, really. The nearest thing to a living weapon I've ever heard of, perhaps, but in a good way. All your training and skill could have produced someone who would have been the most dangerous thing the world has ever seen. From what I know you're not as powerful as some of the magical girls even, never mind one or two entities I've learned about, but I somehow doubt any of them could stop you if you decided to turn to the dark side of the force." She grinned as he snorted with amused laughter. "You'd probably have a good shot at taking over the world if you really wanted to, or at least Japan. But you have no interest in that." She smiled a little. "In fact, it's more along my line of interest." He laughed again, then looked closely at her.

"Do you want to take over a country?"

After a long pause, drawn out for her own amusement, she shook her head. "No. Far too much trouble. Anyway, I've changed since my school days. If you'd asked me then I might have thought seriously about it, but not now. I more or less want to live and let live, although it's fun dealing with people who are being unpleasant. But that's kind of the point. I never really wanted to do that. It just sort of grew on me. If I hadn't found you and Kasumi, I'd never have these abilities, which wouldn't have led me down the path I seem to be heading down. Kasumi is far further down that path than I am, possibly than I can ever go, and clearly enjoys it as much as you do. She's another person I trust with that sort of power." Nabiki sighed a little, staring at the TV.

"I'm not sure I trust myself with it." Following her gaze he nodded once more. They were silent for a moment before she resumed talking. Pointing at the TV, she said, "You see proof on there every day how people get a little power, then start doing horrible things with it. Or they have none, and take it by force, or try to. Our own country's history has some horrible examples of that, world war two only being part of it. Every country on the planet has nasty little events in its past that it should be embarrassed about. All of it shows that people can be very unpleasant to each other for the flimsiest of excuses."

"That's certainly true. I'd like to think that as a species we were slowly growing out of that sort of thing, but the evidence would suggest not. Or at least, not very quickly at all. Japan has been pretty stable for a long time now, as have many other places, but there's always at least one war going on somewhere." He sighed heavily. "I hate it. I wish I could stop it. To be brutally honest, with the power I have and my friends have, I probably could stop it. For a while. But it would cause bigger problems than leaving it alone. I'm not smart enough, or powerful enough, or have the moral authority to be the world's policeman. I'm not superman. Just a martial artist who's learned some interesting things. Even if I could stop all these sorts of things I don't have the right to just jump in like that."

He waved at the news program currently showing the situation in Bosnia. "I mean, just look at that. We could go there, find all the leaders on both sides, and either convince them to stop, or force them to stop. Push them through a portal or something. But it wouldn't make any difference, aside
from the very short term. We'd have to deal with probably forty percent of the population before what was left decided to stop fighting each other, and all that would do is turn people against us instead. We can't force people to change. They have to want to. And apparently, in a lot of places, they don't want to." Glancing back to her, he half-smiled. Nabiki was almost sorry for bringing the subject up, they seemed to have ended up with a rather dark conversation.

"I've bumped into the occasional, ah, person, who wanted to 'Take Over The World'," he said, making air-quotes with his fingers and smirking. "I've helped stop them, or watched as someone else did. Saffron might have ended up going in that direction if I hadn't dealt with him. The one thing I always wanted to ask is, why? What good would it do? Even if you succeeded, either you'd have to wipe out practically everyone so you could actually keep it, or fight off the next tyrant. What kind of a life is that? Magic makes some of it easier but some harder, never mind what technology can do. As far as I can see, inevitably, it just ends up as either death and destruction, or some form of mass mind control, which is worse. Forcing peace on everyone, whether they want it or not. I know that the blonde menace's bunch have some sort of long term plan that has uncomfortable similarities with that, but I still don't have all the details." He sighed again. "I suppose when I do I'll have to try and stop it."

"You don't have to do everything," Nabiki said softly.

"I know. But like I said a long time ago, if I'm in a position to stop a crime and let it happen, as far as I'm concerned I'm complicit. I can't just stand by and watch it happen. Plus I sort of feel responsible for the girls around here in some ways. They all mean well but some of them are so hopelessly out of their depths. I want to help. I, or we, are in a position to try to keep some form of order with all the lunacy around here. Even the ones who don't like us very much do at least listen, eventually." Ranma studied her for a moment. "Which is at least a partial answer to your original question. You're much the same, whether you recognise it or not. I'm trying to equip you with what I think you'll need to survive it."

It was Nabiki's turn to study him. "I don't think I quite understand."

After a pause, he explained. "Even back in Nerima in the good old days, you stood out. There were several people that did, for more obvious reasons. Akane, for her raw power and terrible temper. The Amazons, for obvious reasons. Ryoga. Our parents. Taro. Happosai. A few others some of whom you never met. But you, you were there in the background, like Kas was. A supporting character if this was a comic." He laughed as she made a face.

"I don't like thinking of myself as just a member of the supporting cast."

"You weren't. You just weren't part of the obvious main cast, in those terms. Yet both of you were extremely important. Without Kasumi, the entire household would have fallen to pieces. She kept the peace, was the neutral party that everyone confided in and trusted. The number of times she averted some insanely complicated disaster, half the time just by being herself, is incredible." He smiled fondly, remembering.

"Then we come to you. You stayed out of most of the craziness, as much as you could, but you were always involved somehow. Whenever I needed information, you were the one to get it from. Expensive information, but you always came through." She grinned. "You helped me on a number of occasions where no one else could have. Yes, you also caused some pretty impressive disasters, but like I told you, they'd have happened anyway in all probability. Mostly." She looked embarrassed now as he snickered. "Then you found us. The only one who did, and probably could have. Not even a three hundred year old, experienced as hell, Amazon elder and mage has managed that yet, even though I wouldn't put it past her eventually, but you tracked us down. Something I'm
glad about, by the way. Very glad." He put his arm around her shoulders. She found the warm weight comforting.

"You're the sister I never had, really. I like and trust you. I've always respected you, from the day we met. Sometimes I didn't like you very much, that's true, but the respect was always there. You've changed as much as any of us have, more in some ways, and for the better. I was arrogant, over-confident, pushy, and unfortunately misogynistic, most of which can be blamed either on what may have been the world's worst parental role model or just on being a young man." She giggled. "I managed to overcome some of it on my own, and Kas beat the rest of it out of me. In turn I was able to help her undo the conditioning she'd given herself and unlock the real Kasumi, someone I desperately love and would do anything for. If that was the only result of dealing with you for two years, I would still owe you everything."

They sat silently for a while. "That's part of it as well. I owe you. More than you can possibly imagine. I can't repay it the way it should be repaid, but I can do it in other ways. You have a gift, like Kas does, like I do and the girls do. I didn't want to see it go to waste. I'm not expecting to see you bounding around the rooftops every day beating up criminals and demonic invaders, but I want to make sure that if you have to, you can. I have no doubt that you'd end up involved in anything weird that happens, you're too much a native of Nerima to stay out of it forever. The crazy is persistent. I just needed to be sure you could handle it. You certainly don't have to continue training with us, you can stop at any point, but..." He shrugged.

"I don't think any of this is leading anywhere, to answer your original question. I don't have some sort of grand plan, I'm not trying to build up an international organisation of powerful people. Mind you, that almost seems to be happening by accident." He laughed, picking up the remote and turning off the TV. "We've certainly met some interesting individuals recently. But there's no deliberate intent behind it. If you want to join the fight against the more dangerous parts of the weirdness, I'd love to have you beside me. If you just want to sit back and run intelligence operations, like in the old days but even more effectively, that's fine too. Or if you simply want to do someone's books, it's your life. Personally I'd find that the most boring thing in the world, but everyone is different."

"Me, I'm fairly content just keeping a lid on this area. It keeps me interested and in shape, plus I get to meet some amazing people. Uthryyl and his people are fantastic. Sergeant Harada is a wonderful person, someone I'm more than happy to help. Most of the police, in fact. They're by and large very decent people. I like knowing so many people around here, feeling like we belong. Part of the community. You have no idea what it's like after spending so much of my life wandering around with Pop, half the time running away because of some damned idiotic plan of his. Living a life on the road taught me a lot, much of it essential, but at the same time it's been nice having somewhere stable to call home. The Dojo, despite all the problems, was like that, because of Kas mostly. Here, finally, is a real home. I have everything I want and need. Family, friends, enough adventure to keep my edge, but at the end of the day a bed of my own." He laughed. "Getting all melodramatic in my old age. But it's all true."

Nabiki studied the man next to her for a while, her ears flicking around as she thought. The sensation was by now something she barely noticed. "OK," she finally said. "I think I see. Thank you." He smiled at her. "I've been getting a little worried," she confessed. "It's almost too much, too soon. You worked for years to get to where you are. I know some of what you went through and it's horrible. Even Kasumi has put in years of work. It sometimes seems that I'm just getting all these abilities too easily, like I'm not earning them." She looked worried, making him smile gently at her, in a way that reminded her strongly of her sister.

"You are earning them. You've worked very hard. True, it's happening faster than it would with
most people, but I've already explained most of why that is before. Aside from anything else, I've improved the training methods a lot over the years, they're faster but less dangerous, and you're naturally gifted to boot. Not many people would learn as fast as you do." Looking slyly at her, he smiled a little evilly. "And trust me, you're only a short way along the path. You wouldn't believe how long it really is. There are a lot more things to learn before you're anywhere near where Kas is, or me. Although I have no doubt you can reach that level if you want to."

"I have to admit, I do enjoy helping people. I didn't expect to, not so much. But I'm not sure I really want to join the magical girl club full time." She giggled.

Ranma nodded understandingly. "No one is asking you to. There are a lot of them, us I suppose, we've got it pretty much covered. But, that said, you're very, very smart, and can certainly be a useful intelligence asset. If you want to, I'm not going to expect you to. Our equivalent of Ami, I guess. She's not as powerful as the others in her group, although she'd be a real handful if she tried, but she's very good at what she does. Most of the time. I still think she'd be better off finding some other friends, but that's her choice. I can understand supporting people you like even when you think they're wrong."

"Are you going to train anyone else like this?" Nabiki asked curiously.

He shook his head. "Not right now. It's as much as we can handle training you five. You for the reasons I've mentioned, the others because to be honest they needed it. They get involved in all sorts of fights and I want to be sure they'll survive them. It was a near thing with Fumiko last year, it really scared me how close she came to being killed. I don't want to lose any of them. I've know them for nearly as long as I've known you and Kas, they're family too." He looked worried.

"I don't want to see anyone hurt if I can help it, but I can't stop them all doing stupid things. I've offered training to a few of them other than Aiko and the others, but only one or two accepted. I think I helped, but none of them except for the girls really kept it up, just learned some useful stuff and took off. Quite a few of them don't take it seriously enough, they don't seem to understand how dangerous what they're doing is in some cases. Sooner or later we're going to lose someone. It's close very close once or twice, Kas and I, or one of the other healers, have got there just in time to heal them. That causes me to lose sleep. I wouldn't want even Blondie and her crew to go through that." Falling silent again he looked out the window at the University tower visible through it. She watched his face, trying to gauge his feelings.

Turning back to her after a while, he smiled. "I don't think there's anyone else at the moment I should train, even if I had time."

"They're not worthy?" Nabiki suggested with a small grin. He snickered.

"Something like that. I mean, look at the prospective candidates back in Nerima. I can think of a few people who could learn some or all of our more interesting methods and techniques, like we discussed a while ago, but I wouldn't want to hand most of them that much power. Konatsu is probably one of the better choices, but he's got some pretty severe problems of his own to deal with, poor bastard. His upbringing was as warped as mine, although in a different way. Ukyo could probably manage it, but she's always had an aggressive streak, she tends to attack when it would be better to talk. Not as much as Akane did, but in the same sort of way. We've already got too many of that type. Shampoo? The old woman can teach her nearly as much as I can, more in some ways, except for our magic. She'll get there in good time. Akane is, from what you've reported and other people have told us, improving rapidly, both mentally and physically. Shampoo and Cologne seem to really be serious about training her properly for whatever reason, and to be honest it's probably best if they do. I think she's safe in their hands." He thought about what he'd said, then chuckled.
"Well, perhaps not actually safe, but you know what I mean."

Nabiki nodded, giggling. She'd seen some of what Shampoo considered training, it was nearly as bad as Ranma's own approach.

"I don't think any of the others we know should be taught such powerful things. Certainly not Ryoga or the Kunos. They're bad enough as it is already. Taro is a damn nightmare, although I haven't seen or heard from him in years. Hopefully that will keep up. There are a few others who could probably learn, but I don't think to your level. Certainly not as fast. To be honest, I could probably take practically anyone off the street and teach them some pretty impressive things if they stood for it, but most people simply haven't got the right mindset to get much further than a fairly talented normal martial artist. Even then they'd need to want it. Nowadays that's not common, even around these parts." The martial artist looked up as his wife entered from the direction of the study, smiling. She looked at him holding her sister with an amused expression, but said nothing, simply sitting on his other side, lifting his free arm and draping it around her own shoulders while he watched.

"Ah. I have a pair of Tendos. That beats any hand I can think of." Nabiki started laughing.

"God, Saotome, your pick-up lines are terrible."

"I don't need pick-up lines, I've got what I wanted," he replied with a wide grin. They sat there in silence for a while, broken with intermittent snickers from Nabiki, until a knock on the door heralded the arrival of Tamiko, Misaki, and Fumiko. The three young women walked in, looking at the grouping on the sofa with amusement. All of them were still wearing the horse-girl forms from the night before, making Ranma nod approvingly. "Well done." Aiko suddenly appeared beside the sofa, also with the illusion in place. She grinned at them, then flopped down on the sofa opposite.

"This is really strange, but oddly comfortable," she commented, lifting one leg and looking at the hoof on the end. "Although these things are pretty loud in the bathroom on the tiles. It gave me a shock this morning when I got up, I forgot about it."

"It kind of grows on you," Tamiko said, gently waving her tail from side to side. "Although I think running around on roofs with hooves would be a little difficult."

"It's not too bad with practice," Ranma commented, making them all look at him strangely. He grinned, shimmering into his demonic alter-ego of Zytha'a. The blue-skinned demoness waved her fingers at them. "You do tend to slip a little at first, but you get the hang of it." Everyone stared at her for a moment, then shrugged.

"OK."

Fumiko looked at the sight of the blue-scaled demoness with her arms around two sisters, one of whom was currently wearing hooves and a tail, both of them appearing very comfortable where they were, then started giggling. The giggles grew until she was howling with laughter, making her sister stare at her in bemusement. 'Zytha'a' raised one delicate eyebrow, smiling a little. This only made Fumiko laugh harder. She pointed, her hand wavering, but seemed unable to get anything out.

Everyone waited until she finally ran down. "I suddenly got a flash of what this would look like to a normal person," she gasped, still giggling. Waving her hand around the room helplessly she indicated the seven people in it. "It's completely insane. Look at us! Kasumi is the only one who looks even close to normal." The eldest Tendo smiled at them, shimmering into the mermaid form she liked, lifting her tail and draping it across the lap of the demoness next to her, who chuckled.
Fumiko stared, then fell over laughing again. "Oh, god. It's just too much."

Tamiko turned to Aiko. "I remember once you said all your friends were normal. Would you like to reassess that thought?" Her friend inspected them all, then shrugged.

"Nope. They all look normal to me." Her mouth twitched a little before she lost it. Soon they were all laughing. When they eventually recovered, Aiko looked at her tutor, still a blue-scaled demoness. "So, what were you three doing before we turned up?"

"Lots of exposition, mainly," Zytha'a said with a chuckle, changing back to a female Ranma. "Nabiki was having a minor existential crisis. We talked it out, I think we're good now." The middle sister nodded.

"It helped. I just suddenly wondered why the world had gone so weird recently and what my role in it was." She shrugged a little. "It was just..." Aiko looked at her understandingly.

"I know. Believe me, I know. We've all been through it. We had some pretty major arguments in the early days. I loved the teleportation from day one, but the things that went with it were a bit much to take. In the end, we all decided that it was worth it, though." The three other girls nodded soberly.

"The path can be a lonely one but the rewards are great," Tamiko said pompously, staring into the distance with a serene expression, then ruined it by laughing. Aiko hit her on the shoulder. "Idiot."

"Ow."

They grinned at each other while Nabiki watched with amusement. It reminded her of the interplay she'd had with her sisters when they were children. Glancing at Kasumi she met the other Tendo's eyes, clearly seeing she felt it as well. The elder Tendo changed back to her normal form, standing and looking around. "Right. Enough of the deep philosophical thoughts. Time for breakfast. Can you give me a hand, please, sister?" Nabiki nodded, getting up and following her sister into the kitchen. Soon they were sitting around the table eating.

"I'm pleased you were all able to hold the spell all night," Ranma said, looking at each of them in turn and inspecting the energy patterns. "They all look completely stable, no degradation at all. Very good indeed. Anyone have any problems?" They exchanged glances and shook their heads.

"Great. OK, then, we need to step up to the next level. We'll apply a full body illusion change, then just get on with other training. Hopefully you can hold it until the morning. If you can do that I think you'll be at the point where the rest of it is just a lot of practice. Start small, keep trying, and let Kas or I know if you need any help. I'd think that all of you should be doing one from scratch in a couple of months, and probably very good at it in six at the most."

"So, what are you going to turn us into this time?" Misaki asked curiously, smiling a little. He shrugged.

"Haven't decided yet. We'll see."

"Going for your big book of mythical creatures?" Nabiki asked. Ranma grinned at her.

"Which one? There are lots of mythologies. Although the Greek one is pretty cool."

"I could just be Ms Aoyama."
Tamiko shuddered. "No offence, but I'm not sure I want Ms Aoyama around all day. She's kind of creepy."

"You do know it's still me, right?" Nabiki asked her, grinning. She grinned back.

"Yep. I stand by what I said."

"Oh, thanks very much."

"You're welcome." They exchanged amused looks while Ranma snickered. Giggling Kasumi got up and began to clear the table. Soon they were gathered around the sofa again. All of them dismissed the illusion, feeling their normal forms return.

"OK. What to use." Ranma tapped his finger thoughtfully on the side of his nose, smiling slightly. He glanced at his wife, who got a mischievous expression.

"Hey!" Nabiki yelled, when she found herself staring at four perfect duplicates. The faux Nabikis looked at each other with various expressions, none of which were quite right, before they all grinned. Putting on their best expressions of cold interest they turned to look at the original, who sighed. "Very funny." Everyone started laughing as the illusions shimmered away. "Thanks, sis."

"It was very amusing," Kasumi said, grinning at her sister. Tamiko was rolling around laughing as was Ranma.

"Can we try something slightly less disturbing?" the middle sister asked acerbically. Kasumi nodded, still grinning.

"All right." She thought for a moment then shrugged a little. Nabiki found herself as her 'Azumi' persona.

"Better." Lifting a foot she looked at it. "Feels slightly weird now, not having hooves."

"We can always put them back," her sister giggled.

She shook her head. "No, let's keep it simple. This is good enough, isn't it?"

"It will do. Now, can you feel the spell working?" Nabiki looked within and inspected the complex energy pattern.

"Yes. God, that's complicated."

Kasumi smiled. "It is. Don't try to understand it right now, just hold the whole thing. Just like before. It's more difficult, but the same problem. Got it?" Her sister nodded slowly after a few seconds, while everyone watched quietly.

"I think so. OK, transfer it over and let's see what happens." Control of the spell was gradually transferred to her. Nearly in control she muttered as she lost it. "Damn. OK, do it again." It took three attempts before she could hold it stable. Finally successful she grinned happily. "Got it." Once more, her form shimmered slightly a couple of times before stabilising. Kasumi clapped delightedly.

"Well done, sister. Very well done. Now, we just have to see if you can hold it. If you can manage while you're asleep, I think you'll have it solidly locked in. At that point using the presets should be easy." She looked to the others who were all smiling. "Now, what should we use for all of you?"
Tamiko put her hand up, grinning. "Ooh! I want to be a demon." Her friends looked at her oddly.

"You're weird," Aiko laughed. Tamiko giggled.

"It looks like fun." Smirking, Ranma gave her his Zyhra'a form. She held up her hands and looked at them, grinning with a lot of teeth. "Great. This is cool." The formerly auburn-haired girl, now a blue-scaled demoness, giggled in a way that sounded quite out of place. With some effort she managed to hold the illusion stable, looking very pleased with herself.

Some discussion led to Fumiko ending up in the form of a similar demoness only with red scales, while Misaki was a curvy short girl with pink hair. Nabiki recognised the form Ranma had amused her with some months ago. Aiko considered the options, then picked a hybrid between a much taller woman and the horse-girl form from earlier. "I always wondered what it would be like to be taller," she smiled. "Trippy."

"I'm very pleased about this," Ranma said looking around at the strange people filling his living room. He looked it. "You really seem to be getting the hang of this." Watching them for a while, he smirked. "Right. Back into the basement. We have work to do." Five faces fell.

"AGH!" The cry of pain made Nabiki wince and smile at the same time. She'd scored a direct hit on Fumiko, right in the chest as far as she could tell from the flickering illumination caused by ki balls shooting back and forth. "Nabiki! That damn well hurt!" Her friend fired half a dozen shots back at her, spraying the area, making her eep and dive behind a pillar. Two of the balls impacted it with sharp snaps while the others whizzed past, briefly illuminating her surroundings with deep green light. Sticking one hand past the pillar she fired back, being rewarded with another shout. Giggling she dived for the next pillar. 'This is completely ridiculous but damn good fun,' she thought. 'If we could figure out how to charge admission we could make a fortune.' Snickering at the thought of magical girl ki ball tag, she waited for a lull in the zipping ki shots before diving for the next pillar.

A sudden burst of pale blue and golden spheres caught her in the crossfire. She let out a yip and ducked. "Ow! Damn it, Saotome! That's three times in the last ten minutes!" Ranma chuckled from somewhere in the dark. Kasumi was laughing as well, in a completely different direction. Firing blindly back the middle sister ran for cover, trying not to bounce off too many obstacles in the process. A yelp from the other side of the room made her laugh even as she ducked the return fire from Aiko.

"Ow. You're both sadists," Fumiko grumbled as she rubbed her left arm where the red scales were slightly darkened from a ki shot. Ranma looked at her with amusement, then glanced at his wife who seemed to be trying not to laugh.

"It's good training. You're all much better at ducking than you were. Plus none of you lost the illusion." This didn't make the red demoness look any happier.

Once they were healed of the numerous small bruises, which were admittedly less than the day before, they had lunch. Afterwards Kasumi led them through some katas, Ranma watching and commenting where necessary. That went on for three hours or so. Eventually she called a halt to it. "That's enough of that. How are you all getting on with the illusion?" She and Ranma inspected their students.

"It seems fine, now," Nabiki said, grinning. "I had a little trouble for the first hour or so but now I don't seem to have to do anything, it's just working." The others reported similar results. Ranma
looked impressed.

"Not bad. I hoped it would work out like this but it's still gratifying. A lot of this is kind of an experiment. The real test is to see if it's still stable in the morning. I don't think there will be any problems, though, based on this."

"So, what's next?" Aiko asked curiously. "You've shot at us, hit us, what more can you do?" At Ranma's feral grin she paled. "Um, forget I said that."

"No, no, you asked," he replied, looking very amused with her expression. Kasumi sighed a little.

"Stop scaring our friends, dear." Seeming disappointed he nodded slowly.

"Yes, love." Nabiki giggled.

"She really has got you well trained."

Grinning, he moved into the centre of the room. "OK. Joking aside, we have a surprise for you. Kas found a good place to go where we can make a mess without anyone getting upset. I though it would be fun to give it a try. It will be good practice in holding those illusions while really cutting loose." Fumiko and Misaki looked at each other, while Aiko laughed.

"Fantastic. Where is it?"

Kasumi moved to stand next to him. "Uthryyl suggested it when I asked him a few days ago. There's a world that's completely lifeless he knows about, nothing other than a few bacteria. It's been mostly mined out, lots of worlds have used it for resources by some sort of mutual treaty. Now, no one wants anything there, so it gets used for more or less what we want to do. He gave me the coordinates of a safe place there. A few areas are fairly unpleasant, because of the results of weapons tests in the past, but this place is fine. We can do anything we want there." They thought about that while Kasumi and her husband quickly formed a portal. Nabiki looked at the tear in space with apprehension. Her sister smiled at her.

"It's perfectly safe, Nabiki. The air is fine, the gravity is about the same, and there is plenty of water. Come on." Holding out her hand she waited. After a few seconds Nabiki shrugged, walking over and taking her sister's hand. Kasumi stepped through the portal with the younger woman following behind her.

Despite her expectations, formed from watching lots of TV and movies, the reality of portal travel was something of an anticlimax. There was a faint sizzling noise, a tingle across her skin, then she was standing next to a portal on ground that was brightly lit a slightly blue tint. She stepped to the side as Misaki came through, looking around with interest. It reminded her of pictures she'd seen of Mars through the camera of one of the NASA probes, only blue and white, rather than red and orange.

They were standing on a long low slope, which descended gently away to a wide plain some kilometres away. Behind them was a smallish mountain range, which seemed to run in both directions as far as she could see. Far, far in the distance was another range, much larger, jagged spikes sticking into the air a couple of kilometres. There was no trace of green or any colours indicating life except for them. The ground was covered in sand mixed with small rounded pebbles, like a somewhat uncomfortable beach. On the plain in front of them were half a dozen small to medium lakes and dozens of small hills up to perhaps a hundred metres high. Their vantage point was probably around six or seven hundred metres above the plain.
Overall it looked like a perfect firing range. It had clearly been used as such, since there were visible craters all over the place on the plain, even three of the lakes having a suspiciously circular shape.

By now all of them had come through the portal. Ranma looked at it for a moment. "May as well leave it running, it doesn't need much power now that it's active." He turned to them, indicating an obviously artificial structure a few dozen metres away. It was clearly some sort of bunker combined with a firing platform. Watching them curiously were a couple of demons of Uthryyl's species, who were involved in setting up some sort of large rifle-like weapon. After a moment, one of them bent down and called into the structure. A few seconds later Nabiki recognised Uthryyl himself as he came out. He waved, Kasumi waving back.

They all walked over. The demon looked curiously at them. Ranma smiled. "Practising the illusion spell." He pointed out who was who.

"Impressive. That shape-shift thing you call an illusion is getting better every time I see it," Uthryyl said with a grin. "So, you decided to try our firing range, then?" Ranma nodded, inspecting the weapon that the demons were working on with interest.

"I thought it was worth a try. What's that?" Uthryyl looked over his shoulder.

"Something I picked up a little while ago. A military scrap company I sometimes deal with was dismantling an old class six warship from one of the high-tech worlds, stripping it for parts. I bought eight of the main guns. I have a client who would be interested in them as replacements. They're hypersonic rail guns firing molecularly compressed tungsten projectiles, powered by a small fusion reactor. Pure technology, no magic aside from an anti-friction spell on the barrel lining to extend the life. Obsolete tech where they come from but fairly high specification. Their designers really built to last." Walking over he talked to his technicians for a moment, then nodded.

"The guys think they're ready. We need to test them before I can sell them. I don't want to pass on faulty equipment." He looked at them thoughtfully. "Can you two set up a good strong ward, just in case?" Ranma looked doubtful.

"I don't know that it would do much good if your fusion reactor goes bang, not at this range." Uthryyl laughed.

"Oh, there's no danger of that happening, this design is intrinsically safe. Worst case it would just shut down. But there's always the possibility of the weapon itself failing, which would be unpleasant if we were standing next to it."

"OK. Kas, let's make this one good and tough, all right?" Kasumi nodded. Uthryyl spoke to his technicians again, then one of them walked over while the other one made a few last minute adjustments, flipping a switch that was clearly the power control, before hastily joining them, holding a piece of equipment that seemed to be the control system. The ward went up, glowing visibly in a dome around them where they stood twenty metres from the weapon. The technician made some adjustments then prodded the screen of the device he was holding, looking slightly nervous with his ears laid back. When nothing happened except for a steady loud hum he relaxed a little.

"It's on," he reported.

"Good. No smoke, that's always a good sign." The other one inspected the readouts on the control panel then turned to Uthryyl. "What do you want to blow up?" The trader grinned.
"Try one shot into that lake, there in the middle." He pointed. The tech nodded, working the controls. The weird looking gun slewed sideways, the barrel depressing, then there was a very loud crack. A line of light came from the barrel, impacting on the small lake almost simultaneously. Half the water in it immediately vaporised while most of the remainder went several hundred metres into the air. Nabiki jumped.

Misaki was looking at the gun with a raised eyebrow. "Not bad," she mumbled. Uthryyl seemed pleased.

"Very good. Nothing blew up. Another good sign. OK, target that small hill over there, give it twelve shots rapid fire." Nodding the tech made the adjustments and fired the gun. The noise this time was a very short, very loud buzz, while half the hill vanished in a cloud of rock fragments. "Fantastic. It seems to work. Any errors?"

"No." The technician demon looked at the readouts carefully. "Power draw is within specifications, the barrel wear is good for another half-million rounds, targeting systems are exactly right. This one is good."

# Nabiki? I have the ability to connect to the fire control system of that weapon, it is one in my database. Would you like me to? # The request from Jun surprised her. She thought for a moment, then mentioned it to the others. Ranma looked surprised.

"Odd. My system didn't mention that but it confirmed it could if I wanted to." He looked at Uthryyl. "Do you mind if we have a play?" The demon shook his head.

"Not at all. I'd like to try as well, I didn't realise that was possible." Glancing at Nabiki he added, "You can try first, if you like. There's lots of ammunition, it's got about five thousand rounds in the hopper."

"OK. Thanks." 'Yes, please, Jun, connect to it.'

# Yes, Nabiki. # There was a short pause. #Targeting systems connected and online. Weapon reports ready status, full charge, four thousand eight hundred and fifty rounds available, tracking slaved. # A targeting grid appeared as an overlay with several statistics around the edges, including the round count the SI had mentioned. She looked around the plain, hearing a whirring noise, which she realised was coming from the gun, which moved as she turned her head. It was targeting anything she looked at. "Whoa. Cool."

There was a window in her top right view which had a view from the guns itself, the thing presumably having a camera on it. With little effort she could switch to a gun's eye view. "Very cool. OK, what should I shoot?"

"Whatever you want," Ranma said. "There's nothing alive out there."

Smiling, she locked the cross-hairs on another small hill to the right of the first one, quickly finding the weapon firing control. There was another buzz and the hill disappeared. Laughing, she targeted and blew away several more small hills and evaporated one of the lakes in a hail of hypervelocity projectiles. "It's like the world's best video game," the middle sister said with glee.

"Hey, don't hog the huge gun," Misaki said from behind her, giggling. "I want a go." Slightly reluctantly she relinquished control of the weapon. Soon, Misaki was strafing the plain, laughing like an idiot. Uthryyl watched with amusement, visibly making notes in his head.

When they'd all had a turn, including the trader, he waved to his people who began dismantling the
alien weapon. "Very good. I'll have to test the rest of them, but that's a good purchase. Thank you, Nabiki, for showing me what the SI could do with it. That's very interesting."

"That was more fun than I expected," Kasumi said, watching the demons efficiently tear the device down. Ranma nodded, grinning.

"I'm not into guns, but there is something therapeutic about blowing enormous holes in the landscape when you know no one will get hurt."

Uthryyl smiled. "I feel the same way. I don't deal in weapons very often, I have very strict standards over who I'll supply, but my client is a good friend and I know for a fact that it's a defensive installation. I'm not getting involved in wars, I've seen far too much of that in the past." He looked slightly morose for a moment, then cheered up. "But I'll get a good price for these things. He'll take six, I'll hang on to the other two as spares just in case. You never know when a huge gun might come in handy." Ranma nodded with a straight face.

"True. Very true."

"Aren't there rules about trading in weapons?" Nabiki asked curiously, looking at the merchant. "I know there are back home." He nodded.

"Oh yes, indeed there are, rigorously enforced ones. I'm licensed on twenty-eight worlds to transfer non-classified weapons technology to approved clients, not including biological, chemical, radiological, or persistent magical weapons. Mass destruction devices, in short. They're banned almost everywhere, and rightfully so. Anti-personnel and anti-vehicle weapons are fine most places, assuming both the seller and purchaser hold appropriate licences. It gets very complicated keeping them all in order, but there are interworld treaties that simplify it from what it would otherwise be, which is an enormous mess." He laughed. "It's just a large mess."

"I have my own rules as well. There are certain types of weapon I won't touch. And a number of people and organisations I will not under any circumstances deal with. It restricts the market, but I'd rather be able to sleep at night. Profit isn't so difficult to come by if you're clever that I'd lower myself to that." The middle sister listened with interest. This sounded like something she should look into, the demon worlds clearly had a very complicated and mature market system going on. Vague ideas were tickling at the back of her mind. She made a note to see what Jun could tell her about all of this.

The lead tech approached them. "It's all crated up for transport, Uthryyl."

"Good. Let's spin up a portal, then you take it back to the warehouse. We'll test the rest tomorrow." He glanced at Ranma, hopefully. "Do you mind if I stay and watch what you do?" The martial artist grinned.

"Of course you can watch. We can sort you out with a return portal as well." Uthryyl smiled toothily, turning back to his crew.

"Right, let's get that portal going. Take the rest of the day off, both of you. Thanks, you've done a good job." They looked pleased, then the three demons stood in a triangular formation, a portal quickly forming in the middle. Pushing a pair of powered carts on tracks, loaded with the disassembled weapon, the two technicians disappeared through the portal, then Uthryyl shut it down. He turned to the others.

"So, what are you actually going to do?" He sounded very interested.
"Kas and I are training the others in ki control, amongst other things. We thought it would be a good idea to get in some serious firing effort, which would not be a good idea in our basement."
The demon nodded, grinning.

"I can imagine. I've seen what you can do with a little effort. I can only dread what the results would be if you really tried." Snickering, Ranma nodded agreement.

"To be honest, I'm not sure myself at the moment. It's quite a long time since I really tried hard, and I know both Kasumi and myself have increased in power considerably since then. It was pretty impressive last time." Looking out over the range, he considered it for a moment, then waved Misaki over. "OK, you start. Aim at that hill over there on the left. The SI says it's two kilometres away. See if you can hit it with a shot, give it all the power you can. I want to see your accuracy, whether it affects the illusion, and of course just what actually happens." The girl nodded, looking both interested and apprehensive. She took a couple of paces forward while he stepped back to give her room.

Taking careful aim she studied the shot for a moment, before taking up the classic ki shot pose Ranma had drilled them in while teaching the technique, her hands cupped at her waist. A deep orange ball of writhing ki energy grew steadily in front of her, reaching an impressive size quickly, nearly a metre across. Everyone could feel the energy contained in it trying to escape. With a small motion she fired the ball at the hill. It roared off across the plain, disappearing to a pinprick of light in less than a second. There was a brilliant flash as it struck just off centre on the hill, half-way up. When they stopped blinking, a glowing crater could be seen taking a notch out of the side of the hill. Misaki looked at it, then grinned. She turned.

"How's that?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all. How do you feel?" Ranma inspected her while the others looked at the crater, which was dimming rapidly.

"A little tired, but not too bad. I could probably do that four or five times in a row. I just couldn't hold it in any more at that power level."

#The crater is approximately fifteen metres across, Nabiki. That is a very considerable amount of energy to produce from a biological organism. I have few references to others able to duplicate the feat without technological or magical aid.# Jun sounded impressed.

"OK, try the same again, but compress it as far as you can. Same target." Turning back to face the plain, Misaki took up the posture once more, quickly producing a similar ki ball then compressing it. This took a second or two, resulting in a ball the size of an orange. She fired it.

"Holy crap!" Nabiki yelped, instinctively ducking. The compressed ki shot appeared to have penetrated into the little hill before detonating, with the result that the entire top erupted in a column of pulverised rock that would have done a small volcano proud. Debris scattered for hundreds of metres, while the sound reached them over six seconds later as a drawn out rumble following a huge explosion. Kasumi looked up, tracking something arcing towards them, then formed a ward around them just as chunks of debris started thumping to the ground. Misaki was staring wide-eyed.

"Wow."

By the time the dust cloud settled the top half of the hill was a slag-lined crater over twenty-five metres across, according to Jun, which sounded somewhat shocked. Misaki reported that she was rather tired but might pull one more like that off.
"No need. I think I have the answer I was looking for." Ranma exchanged a glance with his wife, who nodded slightly. "You didn't lose control of the illusion at all, even though you've used over half your ki reserves. That's extremely encouraging. Right, Fumiko, you try. Same thing, the next hill along." Misaki stepped back as her sister took her place, building a ball of yellow ki not quite as big at the other woman had managed. She hit her target dead centre, smiling as a large crater formed. Without waiting, she repeated the exercise with a compressed ki shot which ended up about the size of a basket-ball, leaving a considerably larger crater that made the side of the hill collapse in a land-slide.

"That definitely took it out of me," she said, walking back to them. "I couldn't do one that size again until I have a rest."

"Not bad, though. Your illusion flickered a little after the second shot but you stabilised it nicely."

Aiko and Tamiko took their shots, the former producing a hole nearly as large as Misaki had managed, while Tamiko missed on the second shot. They watched the deep green ki ball dwindle into the distance. "Oops," she said quietly. Several seconds later there was a distant flash on the mountain range on the horizon. Embarrassed, she turned to them. Ranma grinned.

"Well, your aim needs work, but that made quite a big hole," he said. Uthryyl was holding a pair of odd-looking binoculars to his face, searching the range.

"Ah. There it is. Still glowing. It's about the same size as the one Fumiko made, as far as I can see." He looked at her with amusement. "Not bad, you just need to hit what you aim at a little more." She flushed and nodded.

"Sorry."

The martial artist patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you haven't been doing this very much yet. Your aim at more normal ranges is very good. We can work on the long range stuff, it's not like you're likely to need it any time soon. I hope." Smiling, Ranma waved Nabiki forward. Nervously, she took her place.

"I'm nowhere near as powerful as you guys," she said over her shoulder. He shrugged.

"I know. You won't be for some time. But this isn't completely about raw output, that's often not very important. Accuracy is much more important, and whether you can still control the illusion when you're running so much of your power as ki shots. So, that hill over there. Same thing the others did." Nodding, she stared at the hill, locking a target overlay on it half-way up.

"Right," she mumbled, "Hit there, but keep the illusion going." Building the ki ball to levels far higher than she'd dared try before, she kept a part of her attention on it as it swelled. At about half a metre across she returned full attention to the target marker, took a slow breath, then released it.

The shot hit almost exactly where she'd aimed, making her smile. The ensuing explosion was much smaller than the others had produced, but still left a respectable dent. She stared at it for a long moment, until the glow faded. 'Oh my god. I can't believe I just did that. That would have vaporised a car, at least.' It was a rather unsettling realisation. 'I'm really not sure I'm the right person to have that much power literally at my fingertips,' she thought, more than slightly worried. 'What the hell am I doing? I'm not a front line fighter, not like they are.' She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked to see her sister standing beside her looking at her calmly.

"I have an idea what you're thinking, sister," Kasumi said gently. "Trust me, you can handle this. You never need to use it if you don't want to, but both of us will be happy that you can. I know it's..."
a lot to take in, but you will become used to it in time. I did. Remember what I was like, what I still am. Even with the power I'm still me. Even with the power you're still you. Just learn how to use it appropriately and responsibly. That's what this is all about." Nabiki listened, then slowly nodded. Squeezing her shoulder once, her sister stepped back.

Returning her attention to the target, the middle sister formed another ki ball, looking at it for a moment, then began to compress it. She got it down to about ten percent of it's original size before the back-pressure became more than she could fight. Holding it stable, while keeping the illusion spell working, was right at the limit of what she could do, yet she held both like that for several seconds, to prove to herself she could. Finally she released the shot.

The crater this time was over twice the size of the first one, close to what Tamiko had managed with her first shot. It overlapped the first one almost completely. Wiped out and sagging slightly, she turned to the others, who looked at her sympathetically. Even Uthryyl was smiling.

"Not bad, Nabs," Ranma commented, looking proud. "Even the illusion is still going perfectly. It didn't flicker at all." Motioning to his side, he added, "Come and sit down."

"On what?" she asked, walking over slowly. He laughed and pulled a folding camp chair from his ki pocket, setting it up for her. She settled into it gratefully. "Thanks." Kneeling beside her he smiled at her.

"Really, Nabiki, that was very good indeed. You continue to exceed my expectations with all of this. I'm sorry if it's causing you any problems." His voice was quiet and gentle. The middle Tendo looked at him for a moment, then she smiled back.

"Don't call me Nabs," she said, making him grin, before standing up.

"Your own power output is very high, Nabiki," Jun commented. "Not up to that produced by your colleagues but very respectable indeed. Your accuracy is also very good. If Ranma is indeed correct and you will continue to develop in power I am most interested to see the level you ultimately reach. This entire phenomenon is something I find very enlightening. Even the SI seemed to be trying to cheer her up in it's own, admittedly odd, manner. She smiled a little.

'Thank you, Jun.'

"You're most welcome, Nabiki." it fell silent with a satisfied tone in its voice.

Kasumi watched her sister for a moment, until she was sure that the younger woman was all right. She glanced at Ranma. "I suppose you'd like me to try, dear?" she asked, smiling. He nodded.

"Of course. We haven't really tried to see what you can do at full power before. I'm very interested to find out. But I think we should pick a target a little further away. Try that outcrop over there." She walked over to the point they'd been firing from.

"Ki ball or ki beam?" the elder Tendo asked. Ranma considered it for a moment.

"Feel up to both?"

"I think so. Let's find out." She aimed, producing an absolutely monstrous ball, so big it nearly touched the ground in front of her. Everyone but Ranma gaped in shock. The golden ball of light looked like the setting sun, the light washing over the entire surrounding area. When she released it the thing made a roar like a fighter jet, ripping through the air to impact on the outcrop of rock in the distance. The flash completely blinded everyone for several seconds, except Nabiki, who had closed her eyes just before impact, warned by Jun who sounded slightly shocked. A shudder
travelled through the ground under their feet from the shockwave.

"Fuck me," Nabiki breathed, standing and staring at where her sister's ki ball had struck. The crater was at least fifty metres across, glowing brilliant yellow, and a significant part of the outcrop was simply gone. Blinking, Kasumi mumbled to herself, then looked.

"Oh, my," she said faintly, making Nabiki suddenly start laughing. For a moment she had a flashback to her earlier life, the exclamation was so... Kasumi-like. Her elder sister looked slightly puzzled, then grinned.

"That was rather more impressive than I was expecting," she said to Nabiki, who had moved over to stand beside her.

"I'll say. I remember under a year ago Ranma telling me he thought you'd produce a twenty metre crater at best. Even Tamiko is doing half that sort of size, Misaki is nearly there, and that..." She waved a hand at the distant hole. "That's just ridiculous. I can hardly believe that ki output scales up so fast."

Ranma came up beside her. "It's a little odd like that. It builds slowly at first then seems to accelerate. After a while it slows down to a steady increase, but Kas benefited from the steep part of the curve over the last year. The magic use has also had a knock-on effect on speeding it up and increasing the level, for her and all of you." He turned to his wife. "Better go for something a bit further away still for the compressed one." She nodded, as he and Nabiki moved out of the way.

Looking around Kasumi settled on a mound of rock a couple of kilometres further away, sufficiently distant that it was getting a little hazy in the remarkably clear air. She produced another ki ball the same size as the first.

It rapidly shrank to the size of a marble. Everyone exchanged glances, looking slightly worried. The power output seemed to go up rapidly as a function of the ratio between the original size and the final size, which meant this one was going to be impressive. "I suggest we all close our eyes until after the impact," Uthryyl commented. They immediately followed his advice.

The sound of the ki pellet being released was a high-pitched whine like a bullet ricochet, disappearing into the distance, to be followed by a brilliant flash. They opened their eyes in time to see a huge column of rock and dust arc far over the plain, the target hill reduced to rubble and molten rock. Hundreds of tons of debris fell for nearly a minute.

"Good grief," Nabiki muttered.

"That is quite remarkable," Jun said, sounding somewhat worried. "Your sister is producing detonations on a par with a very large amount of chemical explosives, with no obvious signs of effort. I have nothing in the database that would explain this aside from magic, yet I can sense none of it in use."

'Wait for Ranma to try. I suspect that will be terrifying.' The SI made no response.

The aforementioned martial artist moved to stand beside his wife. "That was very impressive, love. Much bigger than I expected. How do you feel after that?" She looked at him for a moment, then back at the settling dust cloud.

"Somewhat worried, to be honest. That was considerably larger than I expected. The ki compression technique is very effective." A few small rocks bounced around them, finally returning to earth after a very long flight. "I'm rather uncomfortable about what would happen in a populated area."
"We simply don't use it in a populated area. There's no problem turning the power down, is there?" Kasumi shook her head after a moment.

"I suppose not. But still, it's a little startling." She inspected the target, or where it had been, for a few seconds more. "Well, I suppose the ki beam is next." Ranma moved back to give her room. Pointing her hand she fired a golden beam at a point on the plain a couple of kilometres away with a shrieking noise from the displaced air being violently disassociated, watching as a hole appeared with a surprisingly quiet detonation. The crater glowed momentarily then dimmed, well before the noise rolled over them.

"Why was thebang so much quieter?" Nabiki asked curiously. She had shuddered a little at the sound the ki beam made, it was the sound she'd never forget from the night everything changed.

Ranma shrugged a little, looking interested. "I'm not entirely sure. It might be that the ki balls deliver the energy in one surge, while the beam is more of a continuous thing, but I've never really looked into it. It would be interesting to find out."

Kasumi fired again, making another hole, then raised her left hand and sent two beams into the distant ground. She studied the results and nodded. Aiming at the hill that Fumiko had targeted she produced a beam that stayed active, sliding it sideways through the distant mound at an angle like an enormous version of one of the energy swords. The top of the hill collapsed down the side, severed from the bottom. Everyone stared.

She turned her head and grinned, then with a series of careful gestures wrote her name in Kanji on the plain, the characters a hundred meters across. Nabiki had her fingers in her ears from the noise of the ki beam. Uthryyl was watching with fascination, shaking his head slowly. "Unbelievable," he said when she finished and the echoes died away. "I know a couple of mages who might manage that, but they wouldn't be standing up afterwards. It would take an impressive technological weapons system to do it as well." She smiled at him. "Was that the most power you can produce?"

"Oh, no. I was just experimenting." He looked worried, while she smiled more widely, then turned back to the view. Holding both hands together, her wrists touching, she sent a brief pulse of a massive beam screaming into the distance, aimed at the mountains on the other side of the plain. They watched as a huge column of golden energy leapt up, reminding Nabiki of the visual effect that Ranma had produced when disposing of the first demon all those months ago, only several times the size. Over three quarters of a minute later the boom of the discharge reached them, deepened by the distance. Uthryyl was staring through his binoculars looking slightly ill.

"Um... There's a hole where that beam hit. I can see light coming through it from the other side," he reported, lowering the instrument and staring at Kasumi, who looked pleased. "That's just unbelievable. And you say that there are people in Minato more powerful than you?"

"Yes. I know one girl who could, in theory, destroy the planet. She's a very nice girl and would never actually do it, of course, but the ability is there. Several others could at a pinch remove a few mountains if necessary." Everyone was staring at the eldest Tendo in horror. Ranma looked around, then laughed.

"Let me have a go. I'm really curious now."

Nabiki groaned. "Oh, god. You were destroying mountains four or five years ago. What the hell can you do now?" He smirked.

"Don't know. Let's find out."
"Try not to kill us all, dear," Kasumi said calmly although looking tired, pulling out her own folding chair and sitting in it. "That took it out of me. I don't think I could do it again until I have some rest."

"All right, I'm not going to bother with an uncompressed ki shot, the energy ball would be insanely large. I'll just make it compressed to start with." He held out his hand, a pinprick of light glowing on it. The light got brighter and brighter, to the point they all had to look away, while the tiny ki sphere only grew very slightly. After a couple of seconds he said, in a slightly strained voice and sweating, "That's as much as I can hold." The ball shot off across the plain with an almost ultrasonic whine, heading for the distant mountain range. "Turn around and close your eyes," he said, doing exactly that. Everyone else hastily followed suit. A pause of a few seconds was followed by the world being lit with a light brighter than the sun blazing down on them. They turned around.

Nabiki gaped in shock. Beside her, Misaki made a strangled noise. There was a visible gap in the mountains that hadn't been there before, with a massive column of smoke and dust boiling up from it. At the base was an orange glow. Uthryyl stared, horror-struck, then squinted. Raising his binoculars he looked through them, before shouting, "Everyone through the portal, now!" Ranma snapped his head around, then looked back to the destruction he'd caused, understanding crossing his face. Grabbing Kasumi and Nabiki he physically threw them through the portal a few metres away, while charging towards it, collecting the other girls in the process. The demon was hot on his heels. They all dived through into the practice room, rolling on the floor, as the martial artist shut the portal down. Nabiki looked at her brother-in-law in surprise once she picked herself up.

"What the hell was that in aid of?" she demanded.

"Shock-wave." He looked seriously at her. "I fucked up. That was like a small nuke going off, literally. There was a huge shockwave coming towards us at some incredible speed. It would have been very unpleasant even for us, there could have been, no, there probably is, supersonic shrapnel in the blast wave. Much safer to wait here until everything stops falling." He stood up and brushed himself down. "So, anyone want coffee?" Uthryyl raised his hand immediately, making him laugh.

Twenty minutes later, after a round of coffee, they recreated the portal and cautiously investigated. Nabiki stepped through and looked around. "Wow," she said softly. Chunks of rock were everywhere, while a thick layer of dust coated the area. Looking towards the place that the explosion had happened she saw there was still a cloud of dust high in the air, dimming the sunlight noticeably. Uthryyl inspected the damage, then turned to the martial artist.

"It's probably a good idea if you reserve that power level for something world-ending. It's a little excessive for use in a built-up area." Ranma started laughing, the merchant joining him.

"How many times in a row could you do that?" Nabiki asked curiously, inspecting the terrifying young man with worried interest. He thought for a moment.

"Like that, maybe twice. Possibly three times at a real pinch. The destruction was much larger than it would have been without the compression technique, that makes it far more powerful than otherwise. I couldn't produce a hole that big with a normal ki ball, I suspect. It really took it out of me, to be honest, I don't think I'll bother trying again. But it's interesting to know what our limits really are." He studied the distant notch in the range. "That's kind of scary." The martial artist looked genuinely worried for a moment. Eventually he turned back to them. "Right, I think we've all learned something. Like, keep the power down around people or anything else valuable." Misaki giggled, looking at her craters with satisfaction.

"None of you had any problems keeping the illusion running," Kasumi noted with satisfaction.
"Even with your energy levels considerably depleted you're managing well. I'm very happy with the results." She smiled at them. "This has been a good exercise."

"We may as well go home," Ranma added. "I don't think any of you are up to any more large-scale tests, and we can do the small stuff in the basement. Although it might be a good idea to come back here at some point and work on long-range accuracy with more sensibly sized shots." He glanced at Tamiko with a grin, making her look slightly embarrassed.

"Uthryyl, would you like to come to lunch?" Kasumi asked the demon. He thought for a moment then nodded, looking pleased.

"Thank you, I'd like that." He followed them back through the portal. Shortly they were all eating around the table. "I hear you have been sucked into the weird lifestyle your friends and family enjoy, Nabiki," the trader said as they had dessert. He grinned at Nabiki as she sighed, poking her ice-cream with her spoon.

"Yes, I guess I have. Parts of it are a lot of fun, but the more I learn and the more power I seem to get the more worried I am about it all. I don't know that I am the right person to have access to all of this. Things seem to have spiralled out of control in the last year to a level I wouldn't have thought possible." She was once more having second thoughts about everything. The demon looked at her thoughtfully while everyone else listened.

"I'm nearly two hundred of your years old, Nabiki, I've seen some extraordinary things in all that time, and been involved in a number of... I suppose adventures would be a reasonable way to put it... Some of which were fun, some of which still give me nightmares." Uthryyl spoke quietly, but with a certain intensity. "I have known a lot of people with considerable power, and a lot of people who sought power. The rule of thumb tends to be, in my experience, that the ones who look for it are the ones who shouldn't ever get it. Political, magical, whatever, they tend to be... difficult. And ordinary people end up dying as a result. War is never pretty. From what I know of the history of your world your people know this all too well."

He looked around the table. "Sitting here are some of the most powerful people I've ever met, on any world I've been on. Yet I feel totally safe. I'm completely sure that Kasumi and Ranma would never allow their own abilities to be used for evil, neither would they train anyone they didn't trust to the same level. The fact that they, all of them, trust you with this, and also that you yourself don't, says to me that you are one of the people who will not abuse it." He abruptly grinned. "That's not to say it will be easy. People like them, and you now, tend to attract trouble, or get attracted to it. That's true everywhere. But I think you can handle it, and if you can't, you have plenty of people who will help. Including myself, if you need it." She stared at him, somewhat surprised, then nodded.

"Thank you."

"It's not a problem, trust me. Ranma and Kasumi are very dear friends, as the rest of you are becoming. Aside from anything else, you're all very good for business." The demon smirked, finishing off his ice cream with relish while they laughed.

"You'll be fine, Nabiki," Tamiko assured her. "I'm sure Ranma has told you this, but you don't have to go full magical girl. Associating with the people you do, and your family history, pretty much guarantees that weird things will occasionally happen around you, though, and it's best that you can take care of yourself and people who are less able to defend themselves. We had to go through the same thing when we got sucked in and we had a lot less warning then. None, basically." Aiko nodded.
"All too true. The first time Ranma met us we'd been doing it for two years and still nearly got me at least killed because we weren't up to the job. Luckily, he came along at just the right point." She smiled at the martial artist who looked amused. "And it led to a friendship that will last forever."

Nabiki glanced at Ranma. "You never really told me more than the basics of how you met the others. What did happen?" Grinning, he put his own bowl down.

"Well, you remember about, oh, maybe ten months or so before the shit hit the fan? Akane had a real strop even for her, with the result I ended up in a park in Minato. That sort of thing was practically a cliché of my life, her knocking me kilometres and scoring a hole in one in some sort of water. I have no idea how she could do it, but it happened every damn time." Nabiki giggled.

"She had hidden talents."

"Not so hidden, she certainly wasn't shy about using them. Anyway, that particular time I ended up saving them from a very aggressive and extremely powerful demon that was slowly taking them to pieces. Not as bad as the ones the portal bombs draw here but not far off it." He sighed. "I had to kill it in the end, it was never going to back down. I'm kind of ashamed how much enjoyment I got out of beating it up, but I genuinely had just had one of the worst days ever. It was good stress relief, and possibly stopped me going off at the Dojo, which would have been horrible."

Nabiki thought. "That was the night you told Akane to fuck off, wasn't it?" she said with sudden insight. He nodded.

"Yep. I really wasn't in the mood for her crap when I got home, but at least I wasn't in a killing rage any more. Fumiko came after me when I finished the thing off and left, we got to talking, then I went back to the others with her. Aiko was in a bad way so I ended up taking her to Doc Tofu, who sorted her leg out. Afterwards we talked for a long time, which ended up with me being 'volunteered' to fill in for Aiko while she healed up." He made a face while Nabiki started giggling.

"The uniforms..." she managed, before it became too much. Ranma grimaced, Aiko and the others laughing, while Kasumi was hiding a smile of her own.

"Exactly. Not the choice I really wanted but I made a promise." He shrugged. "And like Tamiko said, I've got the legs for it." Nabiki stared at him for a moment then collapsed in hysterical laughter. He grinned.

"I trained them up, except Aiko since she was in a cast, for three weeks or so, then when she healed up, I got her sorted as well. We even went on a few missions as a five-girl team, just so I could try and sort out their teamwork properly. In the end, though, it was getting too close to someone finding out. The Doc worked it out pretty fast even with the disguise bracelets. Kas figured it out as well." Nabiki, still snickering, glanced at her sister, who nodded.

"It was after one of the news reports about Aiko's team, although I didn't know them then. I managed to put everything together." Looking at her younger sister she produced a smirk remarkably similar to Ranma's. "I'm still rather surprised you didn't." Nabiki sighed.

"It's a bit embarrassing. I guess all the clues were there, but I just didn't see them." Glancing up at Ranma, she added, "That was where the cell-phone came from, wasn't it?" He nodded, grinning. "That whole thing was driving me nuts for close to two months, you know. I just couldn't figure out where you were going, and how you kept evading every one of the people I had looking for you."

Chuckling, Ranma smiled at her. "I know. Cologne was going nuts as well, she was sniffing
around from the first day. I found out later that Happosai knew quite a lot about it and was running interference for a while, which must have pissed her off like nothing else I can imagine. Anyway, when they were back up to fighting strength I gave the bracelet back and walked away, since I didn't want to drag them into the insanity in Nerima."

"We had enough insanity in Minato already," Fumiko added, laughing.

"It was very hard not having him around any more," Aiko said quietly. "We all liked him very much. Several months later, when everything went to crap, he phoned me, I called the others, and we came running. You more or less know the rest. Over the next year or so he trained us every now and then, although he was concentrating on training Kasumi, who is much better than any of us will ever become. But it helped us all enormously. He, or she, at the time, even came out on a couple of missions with us for old times sake, although she never much wanted to wear the uniform." The short girl smiled. "I always managed to persuade her. If I was going to wear the damn thing, so was she..." Nabiki started laughing again.

The four young women and Ranma spent the next hour or so going over a number of stories from their early demon-chasing time together, some of which even Kasumi hadn't heard. Much of it had all of them roaring with laughter. "How many times did he sell her ice-cream?" Nabiki asked after one story of an unlikely relationship between a demon and a shopkeeper. Ranma shrugged.

"As far as I know he still is. She turns up about every four or five months and gives him enough gold to pay for his entire stock several times over, takes a few large tubs of chocolate ice cream, and goes home again. They became good friends in the end. He's become quite wealthy from it, she seems to enjoy visiting, and it's just kept going." Shaking his head he grinned. "It was nice to see people not fighting just because they were different but the first meeting was a bit... stressful. It's probably my earliest success in getting the locals to see the visitors as something useful not something hostile. I'm rather pleased about it."

"What is it about visitors from other places and chocolate?" Nabiki asked, looking at Uthryyl.

"And all the gold and precious metals?" He smiled.

"Different worlds have different monetary systems. On some of them the metals your civilisation prizes are very common, so they're not worth a huge amount. By comparison, at any rate, most of them are useful engineering materials if nothing else which sets a lower limit on their value. Gold is also pretty universally prized because it's so nice to look at and feel. Chocolate, coffee, some things like that, though, are very rare. The relevant plants don't grow in many places as well as they do here. So it works out that you can make a pretty respectable profit trading metals we have a surplus of to people for chocolate and coffee beans that essentially they have a surplus of. Everyone seems happy, and I'm in the middle. Which is nice." His grin was wide and predatory, making her laugh.

"The essence of business everywhere, I guess." He nodded.

"Exactly. Things that are cheap and common in one place can be very expensive and rare in another. The trick is working out the right places to trade between. I've lost a lot of money in the past by getting it wrong, but eventually you learn. There are things you can't trade, of course, or at least it's extremely strongly discouraged. A lot of weapons, as we discussed, certain narcotics, or things that are narcotics or otherwise toxic to some species and not to others, some types of technology, and so on. A very large number of worlds are reachable by portals if you know how and have the power to open them, they all have different rules and regulations. Some of them trade a lot and have treaties, such as the K'nn grouping, some like yours don't. A reputable trader like myself attempts to stick to sensible rules even in the latter case, it's good business."
"It all sounds more like some sort of science fiction thing than magic and supernatural stuff, which is how it's always talked about," Nabiki commented, fascinated. Ranma smiled.

"In a lot of ways it is. Calling them 'demons' is probably completely wrong, 'aliens' would be much closer to the truth. I think the first term is left over from events a long time ago when people thought it was all beasts from hell. There are certainly some worlds that are damn close to that idea, which may even be where it started, but a lot of places are quite like here, just with different people. Oddly enough, most of the worlds I know about are actually fairly close to ours, like the air is breathable, the gravity is more or less the same, things like that." He looked interested. "I don't know why for sure, but I think it might be something along the lines of the old parallel world thing SF writers love so much, although that wouldn't explain why everyone looks so different." He shrugged a little.

"Another interesting thing is that portals, as far as anyone can determine, can only be opened by magic," Uthryyl added. "Some of that magic can be automated, as proven by the portal weapons, but it still needs magic. Pure technology can't do it. I've got no idea why. There are some worlds that are pure tech, some that are pure magic, and a lot that are hybrids to one level or another. Yours, like mine, falls into the last category although at the moment it's tipped heavily in the direction of the tech side. My world is much more magic biased although we also like technology a lot. We have a lot more mages than electronics engineers though. You do have some very competent magic workers around. Some are actually better than almost anywhere can produce. Not to mention this whole ki thing that Ranma and you guys use, which I haven't come across anywhere else, at least actually being used rather than as a fairy story."

"Where would you say our world is on the technological advancement scale?" Nabiki asked, very curious. "Things like the comm units are clearly a long way ahead of anything we could produce, and even that rail gun is some way past us, although I've heard that something similar is being researched." The demon looked thoughtful.

"It's difficult to say for sure. There are some things that are very advanced here, some that are quite backward compared to other worlds, but that's true anywhere you go. Your materials sciences and bioengineering skills, from what my research has found, are actually very respectable indeed. It's something I'm keeping an eye on for possible future trading purposes. Electronics and computing are pretty good although nowhere near state of the art in a lot of places, except for one or two areas."

Kasumi nodded thoughtfully. "The SI units are good proof that some places are far ahead of us on that technology."

Uthryyl grinned. "The makers of those things are ahead of everyone on that technology, trust me. They have been for centuries. We don't know a huge amount about them, they tend to keep to themselves, but no one doubts their abilities in computing. The thought that they might be as far ahead in other areas has kept everyone from poking too deeply into them, in case they poke back." He laughed.

"But your world isn't bad at a lot of things. Some of them, yes, you could certainly improve, your energy generation systems are pretty inefficient for example, but on the whole you're probably in the upper third of tech worlds. With some exceptions, around the middle in magical ability. Those exceptions, though, are as high if not higher than anyone else I know of." He shrugged. "I'm sitting at the table with at least two of those exceptions." Ranma and Kasumi looked slightly embarrassed.

"Is there some common medium of exchange, some currency that works across more than one world?" Tamiko asked curiously. "I mean, clearly gold and silver, things like that, can't be used
everywhere, since you've just told us that some places don't value them more than something like steel." Uthryyl nodded.

"Not everywhere, but quite a few worlds use a credit system that they all agree on a common value for. There are actually several of them, with a small number of worlds using more than one, which lets you transfer credit between them. For a fee, of course." He smiled again. "It's kind of complicated, but it more or less works. The idea is that if you have credit in the system it can be used for equivalent value on any of the worlds that subscribe to it, allowing you to transfer credit in and out of local monetary systems at a sensible exchange rate. It's not perfect, but it's useful. Your world, since it doesn't have any official connection with any of the other worlds, isn't on the system but there are obviously ways around that."

The demon looked amused. "I could go on about interworld trade for hours. I've been doing it for over a century. If you really want to know, I could dig up some of the relevant texts and send them to you. Your SI could translate them into something you could read."

Nabiki looked at him, thinking, then nodded. "Yes, please, Uthryyl, I think that I'd like to learn more about that. It falls into my own area of interest and if my life keeps going the way it seems to be heading, it could be useful." He grinned at her.

"Planning on going into business? I could always use another local agent."

The middle sister laughed. "I'm not sure, but it's always a good idea to keep oneself informed about things." After a moment, she asked, more out of curiosity than anything else, "How much do you charge for one of those small fusion reactors?" He looked surprised, while Ranma and Kasumi exchanged amused glances.

"Hmm. I'd have to check on the regulations for transfer of that sort of technology to a non-aligned world, and work out a price. Why, are you in the market for one?" He looked at her with interest. She shrugged a little.

"I'm not sure yet. It's just a thought at the moment, but something you said made me think, about our energy generation infrastructure. There's a lot in the news recently about pollution causing all sorts of long term problems. I know fusion power is something that our scientists have been working on since long before I was born, without much real progress so far, at least as far as making it a usable technology." The middle sister smiled. "Perhaps we could buy it in." The trader studied her for a while.

"Interesting thought. It's potentially a very large change to your society. I'm guessing that a lot of the entities that make a profit from the current systems are probably quite happy with things the way that they are and might push back if you introduced cheap clean power. But, that said, it would probably improve your world quite a lot in the long run." He thought for a few more seconds. "I'll look into it."

"Thanks." They talked for another hour or so, but eventually Uthryyl stood.

"I'm going to have to get back. Thank you for lunch, Kasumi, it was very nice, and thanks to all of you for an interesting afternoon." Ranma and his wife stood as well, taking the demon into the practice room where they quickly set up a portal. He waved then walked through, before they shut it down. Nabiki watched from the doorway.

"That was very interesting," she said as they walked back to the living room.

"Indeed," Kasumi said, looking at her sister. "Are you thinking of becoming a trader, then, sister?"
Nabiki smiled.

"Like I told Uthryyl, I don't know yet. But it's a thought. Keeping my options open, I suppose. Just in case forensic accountancy turns out to be too boring, and magical girl stuff is too exciting." Giggling, Kasumi hugged her sister, then started clearing the table with her husband's help.

Fumiko and Misaki went back to their apartment, looking tired. Everyone was feeling somewhat exhausted as they'd all used a significant percentage of their ki reserves on the firing range. It would build up again but the best method for that was sleep. Aiko slumped on the sofa next to Tamiko and they turned on the TV to watch a movie for while. Heading for the bathroom Nabiki twitched when she caught sight of her Azumi persona in the mirror, she'd completely forgotten once more what she looked like. Staring at her reflection in fascination she leaned closer, studying her orange-gold eyes. They really were somewhat intimidating. Not quite in the same way as Ms Aoyama's blue cats eyes, but still a little scary.

Stepping back she ran her hand through her silver hair. 'I like that effect,' she thought to herself, amused. 'Almost metallic, not like white hair at all. Very cool.' Dealing with what she'd come in for, she washed up and returned to the living room to find both the other young women snoring next to each other, Aiko slowly tipping over to lean against Tamiko. She grinned and went to find her sister, who wasn't in the kitchen where she'd last seen her.

It turned out Kasumi was in the practice room, with the full ward interface glowing around her. "What's up?" Nabiki asked curiously, cautiously negotiating her way around the magic lines to stand beside her sister. The older woman glanced at her, looking worried.

"I had a sudden thought while I was putting everything away and wanted to check whether I was right," she replied, inspecting some part of the magical interface. "Unfortunately, I think I am. It's a good thing I found it."

"Found what?"

Instead of answering directly, Kasumi looked at her and said, "You remember how large a hole Ranma made with his ki shot on the firing range?"

"Vividly." The middle sister would never forget it.

"That was a large amount of energy. A very large amount. However, the amount stored in the wards is considerably larger, as we've been pushing power into the system for years. It suddenly crossed my mind to look at how much energy it might use if it decided that one of us was sufficiently under threat that a response was required." She looked slightly pale. "It seems to me that we may have made a fairly major miscalculation on the effects."

Nabiki wasn't sure she wanted to know, but asked anyway. "How major a miscalculation?" She was getting an unpleasant sensation in her stomach, which only intensified when her sister looked back to the displayed information and slowly shook her head.

"Potentially disastrous. The problem is that there isn't a limit set on how much power it can use for a direct strike. That wasn't an issue when we first set it up, the total power available was high but reasonable. Since then, though, we've stored far more energy than we ever considered likely. More than I thought was possible, actually. If it decided to use all of that at once... Well, that little explosion Ranma made would be... Somewhat exceeded."

"Oh, shit. You're serious?" Nabiki went white. Kasumi nodded soberly.
"Unfortunately, yes. We're going to have to take that part completely off line, the risk is much too high. It will need a complete rework of the relevant part of the spell which could take months." She started making changes as she spoke, while Ranma came in a few seconds later, called by her on the comm. She talked rapidly as she worked, using terminology Nabiki couldn't make heads or tails of but he apparently could. After a short explanation he looked horrified.

"Oh, fuck, you're completely right. Why the hell didn't I see it?"

"You weren't looking, dear. Neither was I. We made some faulty assumptions and hadn't realised how much adding the others changed the system. It's no one's fault, but it's a good thing I noticed before something triggered it. Help me isolate that section, will you?" Nodding, he stood beside her as they worked some remarkably complex operations on the ward system.

"Damn. What a stupid mistake," Ranma grumbled, quickly changing the patterns. He glanced at Nabiki. "It would have been most likely to react to a threat to you, from what I can see. It's a good thing I didn't throw you to a demon. We might not have much of Minato left if I had done." She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"I told you that was a bad idea." Chuckling, he continued working.

Eventually both Ranma and Kasumi finished what they were doing and very carefully checked their results. "OK. That's a fix, but not an ideal one." He looked at his sister-in-law. "We've completely isolated the subsection that would have provided an intervention outside the building for someone in the system who was under attack. I'm not completely happy about that, it does leave you in particular more vulnerable than I'd like, but at the moment there's no half-way house. It's either on or off. On is bad. Possibly very bad indeed." He looked disgusted with himself. "If it had triggered, you'd have been fine, I have no doubt, but anyone within a few kilometres would have ended up having an extremely bad day. Not to mention a very short one."

Shaking his head slightly he studied the system. "It's going to be a huge amount of work to redesign that part. It's so tightly interwoven that we'll have to rebuild most of it one way or another. There's no way to just change that part and put a limit on it, it's not designed for it. Damn." Kasumi put her arm around his neck.

"We can fix it, it will just take time. It's important that we get it right, though, it would be very irresponsible to leave it the way it was."

"I know, Kas, but I'm still irritated. At least as much because I missed it all this time." She kissed him, making him smile.

"So did I. So did Happosai. None of us are perfect and we make mistakes. We caught it in time, so no harm done."

Nabiki watched with a smile. "So what does this mean in practice?" With one last glance at the interface Kasumi dismissed it, then led the way back to the living room.

"Not too much immediately. It will still block probe attempts on you, which seems to be it's favoured action at the moment, but now if you come under serious attack it can't do much more. We'd get notified, of course, and it will still be able to defend the building and anyone inside it very effectively, but it's abilities outside will be much more limited. That isn't too much of a problem for most of us, we can take care of ourselves, but I'm also slightly worried about you, sister. You're not nearly as powerful as we are."

"I know, but I don't think that's a problem," Nabiki replied, sitting down. "It's not like I have any
serious enemies. All its really doing at the moment is hiding me a bit, like you already do for yourselves with your invisibility and the attention diverting techniques, right?" They both nodded, sitting next to her. "So, until I learn those techniques, it's useful, but there shouldn't be any other downsides. I have to admit I'm slightly more comfortable knowing the thing won't suddenly take a dislike to someone and effectively call in an air-strike on them." Ranma grinned at her words.

"More like an orbital laser cannon, but I know what you mean. I'm still a bit worried though."

"You're a professional paranoid, Ranma," she said with her own grin. "You're always worried." Kasumi giggled, holding his hand. He sighed, but smiled.

"True, I guess. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Which is why you're teaching me to defend myself and anyone else in the area, to a horrifying level," the middle sister shot back, laughing. "I do understand that, even if I sometimes have my doubts about it. But I'm not going to get all depressed about it right now. Perhaps next week."

Their laughter woke Tamiko and Aiko, who looked muzzily around. "What? Who?" Aiko mumbled, before standing, stretching, and vanishing. Nabiki blinked, rubbing her eyes after the flash.

"Ow."

"She's got the right idea. I'm off to bed as well, guys," Tamiko said sleepily, stumbling towards the door, still cloaked in the demoness illusion. The remaining three watched as she left.

"It's still quite early, we haven't even had dinner yet," Kasumi said. Ranma shrugged.

"They used an awful lot of ki today. They'll be asleep until morning, I think." He looked at Nabiki. "How do you feel?"

"Very tired, but not to the point of collapsing. But I think I might go and lie down, though. If I fall asleep wake me in time for dinner, all right?" He nodded, smiling, as she went to her room and undressed, pulling the blind down and turning out the light. Lying on the bed she pulled the covers up, then closed her eyes. Pulling up a web browser in her internal view she started going through some of the links that Jun had found, snickering every now and then when she came across something particularly gratuitously wrong. There were some very odd stories out there about magical girls.

She was halfway through reading an article about a recent event involving Azumi, which she was in an excellent position to know was completely wrong, when she fell asleep.

What the hell is it?" Cologne wondered, looking at the incredibly faint traces of some weird energy she'd finally discovered after much searching. The elder had been so sure something odd was going on she'd kept looking for some evidence long after sensible people would have called it a day. She'd had to practically invent a new technique from scratch to even detect the energy, which she was assuming was some sort of magic, because it certainly wasn't anything else she'd ever seen before, and even then she couldn't make heads or tails of it. It was the most complex patterning she'd ever seen.

There were small traces of it around all over the place, most of them, rather worryingly, terminating at her. When she'd discreetly checked she'd also found traces leading to her great grand-daughter, both of the fathers at the Tendo Dojo, and a few other people she knew were
reasonably sensitive to either ki or magic. She had by far the largest amount of the traces, which were steadily fading, but even there it was barely perceptible. If it was a spell of some sort it was an amazingly subtle one, vastly beyond anything she or any of the Amazons could have produced even on their best day.

Attempts to trace it to its source had been completely futile. When she'd tried it just stopped in mid-air, no trace beyond that at all. It was like it had come out of nothing. 'It's almost like some random natural event,' she mused, 'but there's no way it's actually random. Someone or something is doing it, I'm sure of that, but I have no idea what or who.' The elder inspected her results again, shaking her head slowly. There wasn't a magic worker she knew who could have produced something like this, and one of the things she found most disturbing about it was quite how disturbing it actually was. It literally made her head ache to look too closely at it. 'Like playing with raw chaos, almost,' she thought, 'which is impossible.'

"Demon magic of some sort?" she considered out loud, putting some of the scrolls she'd been using as a reference away. There had been nothing useful in them anyway. The thought made her stop, worried. She was well aware that some of the travellers from demonic worlds had far more powerful magic than anything she knew. After a moment she resumed tidying up. "No. A little like it, but not the same." When she'd finished she carefully noted down the method she'd come up with in her own personal shorthand for magic, referring to her notes, before putting the new scroll away carefully. It wasn't a dangerous technique but it required a considerable amount of experience and skill to use, there were very few magic users in Japan that she was aware of that could work it.

'I'm going to have to keep watch. If I can figure out where it's coming from I might be able to work out what it's for.' Hearing a crash from the kitchen she sighed, then went downstairs to shout at Mousse to put his damn glasses on.

"Nabiki? Dinner is ready, if you'd like some." Kasumi's soft voice woke her sister with a start. She looked at the door, where the other woman was leaning in, then smiled. "Thanks. Sorry, I was more tired than I thought."

"I don't mind, sister. You worked very hard today. Have something to eat and you can go back to bed." The elder sister left, closing the door behind her, while Nabiki swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, rubbing her eyes. She had been asleep for about four hours she noticed. A lock of silver hair in the corner of her vision made her smile. She'd held the illusion even while exhausted and asleep.

Sitting at the table a few minutes later, having combed her hair and redressed, she grinned at Ranma, who inspected her and nodded approvingly. "Well done. No degradation at all. You could probably hold that for days, if not a week or two. I'm very impressed." Kasumi spooned out some rice, passing the bowl to her sister with a smile.

"I think we can set you up with some presets now, Nabiki. You should be able to use them fairly easily, I think, and it will get easier the more you do."

"So, Ms Aoyama, Azumi, Mer-Nabiki, Mer-Azumi, right?" The middle sister nodded with a grin. "I still don't know what you're going to do with the mer-forms, but I want to watch if you figure out something funny." Ranma smirked a little at her, making her grin back with a similar expression.

"I'll let you know."

"Anything else?" She thought for a while, eating slowly.
"I still want a flying form. I think that would be amazing. But, hmm, how about the horse-girl one? That could also be funny."

"Based on...?"

"Azumi, I think."

He nodded. "OK. Five should be enough for the moment. Like we said, no point loading you up with too many, but it's good to have enough you can study the differences. It will help with learning the full technique, which I think will be quite a lot of work. Kas and I worked it out together so we're both pretty good at it, but we never tried teaching it to anyone before you guys."

When they finished dinner and cleared everything away, Kasumi sat next to her sister and inspected her for a moment. "Very good. All right, release that illusion, then we can try a preset." The middle sister let go of the energy holding her current form stable, watching as her hands shimmered and changed to the ones she was familiar with.

"That's still very strange to watch and feel," she commented, running her right hand over her face and feeling the familiar contours. "But a lot of fun. OK, what do I do now?"

Kasumi glanced at her, concentrating. "Just wait a moment, I need to build the preset pattern for you. I'll do the Azumi one first." After a minute or two and a brief discussion with her husband, she smiled. "I think that should do it. I'm going to apply it then you take control just as in the previous exercise, which should be quite easy. Ready?"

Nabiki nodded. Once more she felt the change happen, shimmering back into Azumi complete with clothing. "Now, take control of the pattern, don't try to understand it, just take it whole." Kasumi watched closely as her sister carefully accepted the complex magic construct, then smiled broadly. "Good. You've got it. Now, watch carefully. You see this part here?" A trace of energy indicated a specific sub-pattern. Nabiki nodded, fascinated with the spell.

"That's basically the on switch. This one next to it will... link it to you, I suppose is a good description. Activate it like we showed you." Following the instructions Nabiki pushed some energy into the pattern, watching as it changed slightly. "Very good. It looks like it worked. It should stay stable until you delete it now. How does it feel?"

"A little odd, but it's fading. It kind of tingled when I poked it there," Nabiki reported, her eyes shut as she watched the internal energy flow.

"That's fine. Right, you should be able to turn it off by deactivating that node I showed you. Try it." Both Ranma and Kasumi smiled as 'Azumi' shimmered and became Nabiki again. "Fantastic." Her elder sister studied her closely for a moment before smiling again. "It's still stable. Very gratifying, I wasn't completely sure it would work."

Inspecting the spell herself Nabiki saw how it formed a self-contained pattern that didn't show any inclinations to dissipate, yet was only drawing a very small amount of power in the off state. Experimentally she prodded the activation node again, watching as the pattern blossomed into activity, requiring her to feed it more energy, although interestingly, not quite as much as the previous illusion had needed. Kasumi looked pleased as her sister shimmered into 'Azumi' again. Ranma put his hand on his wife's arm.

"Very good idea, Kas. That's a remarkably good spell." She looked at him happily.

"Thank you, dear." Turning back to Nabiki who was flipping between 'Azumi' and her normal
appearance with a grin on her face, she added, "Turn it off and we'll try the next one."

Setting up all five presets took nearly half an hour of careful work but by the end of it, the middle sister could see five little complex knots of energy sitting inside her. Any of them could be activated at will, although it took some practice to successfully manage to switch directly between them rather than going back to her normal form first. She managed it in the end, looking very pleased with herself.

"Not bad, Nabs." Ranma grinned down at her where she was lying on the floor, propped up on one elbow, as 'Mer-Azumi'. The silver-haired mermaid shook her hair out of her eyes.

"Don't call me Nabs," she said in a cold voice, then giggled. He laughed.

"We can do the others tomorrow if they want," Kasumi said, stepping over her sister's silver-scaled tail and heading for the kitchen. Nabiki rolled onto her back and propped herself up on her elbows, looking along the length of her body, before shaking her head.

"This is one of the weirdest things yet." She looked at the martial artist who looked back, amused. "But it's a lot of fun. More fun than blowing huge holes in things, to be honest, although that has it's own attractions." He laughed a little.

"I think it might be that you're a born secret agent in some ways, not a soldier. The disguise spells play right into that. You'll be terrifyingly effective when you've learned it properly, if that's the path you want. I'm sure the PSIA would love to have you working for them." She grinned, shimmering back into her normal form and standing.


"I think all of those at once might be a bit much. You should probably pick one or maybe two."

"At the moment I mainly want to finish my degree. After that, though, it's pretty interesting to see how many more things seem to be possible all of a sudden." She sat beside him, pulling her leg up and clasping her hands over her knee. "At least I know I'll never go hungry."

The man next to her smiled. "We'd never let that happen, you know that, Nabiki. We have more than enough to keep all of us in comfort forever, near enough. If you don't want to work, you certainly don't have to." She looked at him for a while.

"Thanks. But I think I'd like to do something useful with my life. Idle layabout loses it's appeal after a while, I suspect."

Ranma grinned. "For people like us, yes. We all like to do things, we just happen to have a rather wider range of things we can do than most people." After a few seconds she grinned and jumped to her feet.

"Thanks for all of this. Even with my doubts, thanks."

"You're welcome, Nabiki. See you in the morning." Waving to him she headed back to bed, still tired, but happy.

At 6.47AM a faint alarm woke the middle sister. Waving one hand futilely for a non-existent alarm clock, she finally realised the sound was coming from inside her head. "What's going on?" she mumbled out loud.
My apologies, Nabiki," Jun said, sounding regretful, "I didn't like to wake you but I believe I have discovered something you need to look at immediately. It relates to the missing portal weapon."

Instantly fully awake Nabiki replied, 'Show me, please.'

'I have been monitoring the various internet sites your friend Miki informed you of, as well as locating other sources of information with similar content. The majority of them contain what can only loosely be termed information, as most of it appears to consist of anecdotal evidence at best and complete falsehood at worst. However, some of them do have data which is verifiable and consistent. While following a trail through a number of websites and fora I found references to a location that appears to be some form of marketplace for magical or possibly magical artefacts.' The SI was popping up a number of windows illustrating some of what it was describing as it spoke. 'I investigated and discovered that the bulk of this merchandise was clearly fraudulent. But I did notice something interesting.' An image appeared in the middle of her viewpoint.

'This image is of a collection of articles that the seller claimed were magical, although of unknown origin. I recognise a few of them as being genuine, but not of any great significance. Most of them are not genuine, or are out of my experience, but one item stood out. It drew a red circle around something Nabiki had already spotted. 'I am convinced to better than ninety percent probability that this is a portal weapon, as shown in the images Ranma sent us some time ago. Much of it is obscured by the item in front of it, but the portion that is visible matches the images to nearly one hundred percent congruence. The likelihood that this is the missing portal weapon is very high.' Nabiki was holding her breath.

'Where is it?' she asked quietly. There was a pause, then Jun spoke, sounding slightly embarrassed. 'I am unsure.'

'What?' she yelped in her head. 'After all that?'

'The problem is that the collection of items has already been sold, some two months ago. I found this image during a search of the archives of this site. The seller was in Sydney, Australia, which fits with the list of possible destinations of the mage who created the prototypes. Unfortunately the buyer was working through a series of anonymising proxies which has sufficiently obscured the trail that I have so far been unable to locate them. I suspect that the final destination was in North America but so far I cannot prove it. No further images of the device have so far turned up during my search of the internet, but I will continue looking.'

'Damn. Oh well, that's at least the first evidence we've so far found about that thing. Can you locate the seller?'

'I have an address but I cannot guarantee it is correct. This site seems to be patronised by people who value their privacy. I had to break several layers of encryption to get the information I have already obtained. It was easy, of course, but it shows that further information may require a more direct approach.'

Nabiki grinned, sitting up in bed. 'You mean go there and beat it out of them?'

'Yes.' The voice in her head was definitely amused. Getting dressed she commed Ranma and Kasumi, both of whom woke up and responded very quickly. Sending them all the information Jun had found and it's conclusions, she was in the kitchen making coffee by the time they came in.

"Good work, Nabs." Ranma took the cup of coffee she handed him with a smile.
"It was mostly Jun," she replied, taking a long swallow. "And don't call me Nabs." He grinned, leaning close to the side of her head.

"GOOD WORK, JUN," he called into her right ear. She laughed and pushed him away.

"Idiot. So, what do we do about it?"

"You were right, about all we can do is follow the trail. Go there, track down the seller, persuade him or her to tell us who bought it, then go and get the damn thing." He shifted to 'Yori' and called Agent Naito. After a brief conversation with the PSIA man, who complained that she only ever called him when he was trying to sleep, they agreed to meet at the police station again in half an hour. When the black-haired girl disconnected she was laughing.

"He sounded very tired, poor guy." Kasumi called them to breakfast. The other four came up a few minutes later, all of them still holding the illusion spell. "Hey, not bad, guys. Very good, that's everyone able to do it. OK, turn it off, we have a mission. Hopefully the last one from this damn problem. I'll be very glad to see the last of it." Everyone sat down and began eating while Nabiki shared the information Jun had provided and they discussed it.

"That certainly looks like the device," Aiko commented, studying the image. "At least one corner of it. It looks like there might be a bit of glow peeking out as well but it's a rather poor photo."

"Jun processed it as much as it could without degrading it, but the original image was quite small. The description of the collection includes 'fifteen centimetre cubical artefact with glowing crystal ball in centre,' though, which sounds very familiar." Nabiki slurped some miso soup while Aiko nodded.

"We can't take the risk, we have to check," Ranma said, finishing his food. "You still want to come, Nabiki?" She nodded.

"I think so. I missed the start of all this but it would be interesting to see the end. Plus I've never been to Australia. Or North America."

"OK. You coming as Ms Aoyama or Azumi?" He grinned at her. She shimmered and became the forbidding green haired woman, who returned the smile with her own version. Tamiko shuddered.

"God, that's creepy."

"Thank you," 'Ms Aoyama' replied coldly, her voice even less emotional than previously. There was a distinct aura of cold around her. Ranma laughed.

Kasumi looked at her sister and sighed. "Please be nice to Agent Naito and Sergeant Harada, sister. You worried them a lot last time." The disguised Nabiki grinned, all the menace disappearing in an instant.

"I'll be good. Probably."

Soon they had cleaned everything away and gotten dressed in their 'work clothes', as Nabiki thought of the outfits that Kasumi had made. 'Yori' and 'Chou' looked around, then at each other. "We have quite the little team here," 'Yori' said with a grin. 'Chou' nodded looking serenely satisfied.

"Indeed. Shall we go?" They disappeared in a bright flash.
"Why do they always find the damn things in the middle of the night?" Naito mumbled, sucking down his second coffee since he'd arrived. Sergeant Harada grinned at him.

"It's bright and early in the morning, not the middle of the night." He glanced at his watch. "See? Seven thirty." Naito looked at it with bleary eyes, growling something, before diving back into his coffee. "Obviously not a morning person," Harada chuckled. He looked up as a group of familiar people appeared in the middle of the room, waving to them, then stood. Agent Naito finished his coffee and stood as well, inspecting the group approaching them through the half-empty room.

"Hello, Yori, Chou, I haven't seen you two for a few weeks." The black-haired girl grinned at the sergeant.

"Been kind of busy, training the others, that sort of thing." Harada examined Aiko and her girls.

"We noticed that the clothing had changed a while ago. There are a lot of people who miss the old uniforms. Young men, mainly." Aiko grinned, while Fumiko and Tamiko laughed. Misaki was, as usual, eating an apple, but raised an eyebrow. "Joined forces, then?"

"We've been working quite closely recently, yes, Sergeant," Chou replied calmly. "There isn't a formal arrangement but we're good friends." She moved over and shook his hand. "It's good to see you again. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Chou. My wife is expecting her first child, we found out about a week ago." She smiled happily.

"Congratulations. I hope everything works smoothly for both of you. If you have any problems we can help you with please don't hesitate to call."

"Thanks, Chou. That means a lot." He grinned at her. "So, you found the last portal bomb?"

"Ms Aoyama thinks she has information that will lead us to it," Yori said, moving aside to make way for the scary young woman with the pointed ears and the dark glasses. She looked expressionlessly at the police officer and the PSIA man, who took a step back despite themselves. They could both swear they could feel a wash of cold air from her for a second and exchanged glances. Several nearby police officers found urgent business on the other side of the room.

"Hello, Ms Aoyama," Naito said, slightly nervously. She looked at him for a moment.

"Gentlemen. I trust you are well?" They nodded in synchronism. "Excellent. My research has led to a possible sighting of the remaining portal device on a grey-market commerce site for potentially magical artefacts. It appears that it may have been included in a collection of items sold by a person or persons currently unknown in Australia approximately two months ago. Unfortunately, attempts to locate the buyer have so far proven elusive, although circumstantial evidence suggests they may be located in North America."

Naito studied her for a moment. "What is the evidence you have? Is it sufficient to trace the seller?" She nodded.

"I believe so." Glancing at a nearby laser printer expressionlessly, she didn't react when it spooled up, spitting out pages. Naito and Harada looked at each other again, then the sergeant moved to stand beside it, retrieving the paper once it finished. "The trail is somewhat cold, but an address is there. The seller seems to be in the vicinity of Sydney. It should be possible to trace them and... persuade... them to pass on the details of the purchaser." She produced a horrible little smile that made everyone wince. Harada covered his nervousness by looking at the papers, picking one
which had a somewhat grainy photo and showing it to Naito.

"It certainly looks like part of one of the damn things," the agent mumbled. Feeling a cold presence beside him he looked up to find Ms Aoyama peering over his shoulder, having approached completely without sound, making a slight yip of surprise and shock. She appeared not to notice.

"Correct. The probability that it is in fact the remaining weapon is close to one hundred percent. I would suggest that there is no alternative but to investigate. The risks are too high to do otherwise."

"Um, yes, I agree," he said, gingerly easing himself slightly further away from the woman who gave him the screaming heebie-jeebies, trying not to offend her. Somehow he felt that would be bad. "I'll start the process." Pulling out his phone he made the first of a number of phone calls.

Smiling slightly, Ms Aoyama stepped back. "I find this very interesting, but as I have said, I am not a combat specialist. Regrettably I will have to remain behind. I will, however, send a colleague who may be of assistance. She requires more field experience." The green-haired woman glanced at Yori, who nodded, apparently trying not to grin. Harada watched and listened with interest and not a little nervousness.

"Azumi, I suppose?" Yori asked, her eyes bright. Ms Aoyama nodded once.

"Yes. Ms Ito is skilled but not yet sufficiently experienced in combat. It should prove instructive to her to observe you and your colleagues in operation. She can also pass on any information I require directly." Chou studied the woman in the suit.

"Does she work closely with you, Ms Aoyama?" The blonde looked simply curious. "We've trained her recently, she's very promising."

"We are close associates," the disturbing woman said, nodding again. "Thank you for your praise, I will pass it along. I have high hopes for her. It would be gratifying if you could continue her training until such time as you deem it complete." Chou nodded, smiling gently.

"I'm sure that will be no problem."

Harada noticed that the four girls of Aiko’s team were listening to this with a collection of very odd expressions. He sympathised. Any close colleague of this soul-chillingly cold woman was apt to be fairly disturbing in her own right, he felt. A question bubbled up and he had no choice but to ask. "Um, sorry to interrupt, Ms Aoyama..." The woman turned her gaze to him making his throat dry up for a moment, but simply waited patiently. "Is this the same Azumi Ito who has been causing problems for various criminals in Setagaya recently?" She nodded.

"Yes. It was felt that she should gain practical experience with threats that were of a lower grade than the average problem in the Minato area. To date she has acquitted herself well." The woman inspected him closely, icy curiosity apparent in her face. "I am somewhat surprised that you are aware of her exploits, inasmuch as they are not within the boundaries of Minato itself." He swallowed a little.

"Because of the nature of my job I tend to collect stories concerning magical girls from nearby places, except Nerima, which is just too much work. Various colleagues know of my interests and pass on anything they think is relevant." She indicated her understanding.

"I see. Yes, Nerima. A very interesting place, but troublesome." Her face gained a slight edge of thoughtfulness for a moment. "Thank you for the information." Turning back to the other young women who were still watching her wordlessly, Yori apparently with amusement, she added, "I
believe I have relayed everything of use I can at this juncture. I wish you good luck with your operation."

"Thanks, Ms Aoyama," Yori replied, smiling. "Would you like Aiko to give you a lift to your next appointment?" The woman with green hair momentarily smiled slightly. Harada stepped back again, he just couldn't help it. He was in awe that Yori apparently didn't notice, but thinking about it he remembered the look she'd had all those months ago with the ex-Yakuza man they'd captured at the terrorist site, realising that the black-haired girl was at least as scary but just didn't show it very often.

"That would be appreciated, Ms Yori. Thank you." Yori glanced at Aiko who made a slight 'follow me' gesture, walking to the middle of the room. "Gentlemen," Ms Aoyama said, nodding to Naito and Harada, who nodded back, inwardly very relieved that she was leaving. She and Aiko disappeared with the normal flash of light, which Harada noticed curiously seemed to leave a slight rainbow after-image.

'Hmm. That's new, I'm sure it never did that before,' he thought, before returning his attention to the others.

Appearing in the middle of the living room, the disguised Nabiki and Aiko looked at each other for a long moment, then dissolved into wild laughter. Nabiki dropped the illusion and staggered over to the sofa, groping for support, then dropped onto it, heaving with mirth. "Oh, god. That's so much fun."

"Poor Sergeant Harada, he looked really worried. And Agent Naito! When you snuck up on him and looked over his shoulder, I thought he was going to faint." Aiko sat next to her friend laughing like mad. "It's really cruel, teasing them like that."

"I can't help it. When I'm wearing that body, and get into the 'Ms Aoyama' mindset, it just happens." Nabiki slowly slipped out of laughter into giggling. "It's hysterically funny, though. I wonder if I have some sort of multiple personality thing going on?" Aiko looked at her, then fell over laughing again.

"We all do, I think. Ranma and Kasumi more than anyone I've ever met, but you're incredibly convincing as well. Those two can change a lot more than the outer appearance, they put on any personality they want so convincingly it's worrying."

"I know, I'm in awe of their abilities. I'm nowhere near that, except possibly in the scary cold types." Aiko grinned at her.

"That's because you're always a scary cold type." Nabiki looked insulted, then giggled.

"Possibly true."

Standing, Aiko tried to get her expression back to one that wasn't grinning widely. "I'd better get back. See you in a little while." She vanished, leaving Nabiki still chuckling on the sofa.

"With all due respect, that woman gives me the willies," Naito said when Ms Aoyama was safely gone. Harada nodded vigorously.

"Me too. She's terrifying, even when she's trying to be nice. I assume that was her trying to be nice?" Yori glanced at Chou then grinned.
"Yes. She's... Well, I've seen her scare someone almost to the point of fainting just by smiling at him when she wasn't trying to be nice." The young woman chuckled. "But underneath she's a good person." They stared dubiously at her.

"If you say so," Naito mumbled, not convinced. "OK, we're waiting for authorisation from the Australian government. Hopefully it should come through fairly quickly. They were much more cooperative at the beginning of all this than the Americans, although I'm not entirely sure that they believe us. Whatever the truth, they'll probably get back quite soon. I'll call you when they do. This is good timing, by my counting we only have about a week or so before the thing goes off regardless."

"Slightly more than that, but OK. Thanks. We'll go back and get ready. With luck this will be fairly quick and easy." Yori grinned, clearly not believing her own words. Naito sighed.

"I know. I'll pack for a few days, then."

"Good idea. Would you like Aiko to pop you home?" He considered it.

"I suppose that would be a good idea. My car can stay in the parking garage until we get back." He glanced at Harada who nodded.

"The Captain won't mind."

"Thanks." He looked at the papers on the desk that Ms Aoyama had printed out, picking them up and flipping through them. "How on earth did she do that, I wonder?" he mused. Harada looked at them, then at the printer, smiling a little.

"Probably intimidated it into submission." Yori started laughing, while Chou and the others grinned. A moment later Aiko reappeared.

"How did it go?" Yori asked her. She looked relieved.

"She's gone."

"Fair enough." Laughing, Yori added, "Could you drop Agent Naito at home, then come back for the rest of us?" The petite brunette smiled.

"Of course. Are you ready, Agent?"

"Yes, just let me grab these documents, I want to look them over again." He picked up all the remaining printouts and folded them, putting them into an inside pocket. "See you later, Tetsuo." Harada sat, nodding to the PSIA man with a smile.

"Have fun."

Half-grimacing, Naito replied, "As always. I so enjoy these magical girl adventures," then moved to stand beside Aiko, disappearing seconds later. Harada laughed.

"Take care of him, Yori," he requested. The girl smiled.

"Of course we will. We like him. See you soon, Sergeant." Aiko reappeared, they clustered together, then with a flash the room was magical girl-free once more. Looking at the place they'd been Harada shook his head, amused, then went back to work.

Nabiki looked up as everyone appeared next to the sofa, picking up the remote and turning off the
morning news. "All sorted?"

"Yep," 'Yori' replied, shimmering back into the female Ranma. "We're just waiting for the call, like last time. Hopefully there won't be a problem. As soon as it comes we'll grab Agent Naito and go. With luck, we can finally wrap this up once and for all." She dropped into the seat next to her sister-in-law. "Still want to come?"

"Certainly. I should be safe enough with all of you to protect me," the middle sister replied, grinning.

"You could probably take the thing on your own at a pinch," Tamiko said, looking at her with amusement. "Just remember, make sure to vaporise at least fifty percent of the body including the head with one shot. Try not to miss and blow up a building." Ranma groaned at the reminder of the events of several months ago.

"Three times!" she muttered to herself, while the others laughed.

"I seem to remember that I wasn't the one who missed on the firing range," Nabiki replied smugly, making Tamiko look embarrassed and her team-mates giggle.

"OK, OK, I'll shut up now," the auburn-haired young woman said with a grin. Resuming her normal appearance, Kasumi headed to the kitchen to make another pot of coffee while they waited, smiling to herself.

"It was slightly mean of you to scare them so much," she protested mildly on her return, handing out mugs to everyone. Nabiki laughed.

"I know, I suppose it was, but I don't seem to be able to help it. Thanks, by the way." She lifted her mug to her sister who nodded acknowledgement.

"Poor Agent Naito. The man didn't deserve such a scare. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he noticed you standing there." Kasumi sipped her coffee, her expression slightly at odds with her statement. She was clearly quite amused.

"Impressively quiet as well, Nabiki," Ranma said, studying her with interest. "You've been practising." The middle sister looked pleased.

"Thanks. It seems to be getting easier. The last robbery I intervened on, the thief didn't know I was there for nearly a minute, when I was only standing half a metre behind him. The shopkeeper he was trying to rob was nearly pissing himself with laughter which really confused the guy." She smirked, looking momentarily remarkably like Ranma, who chuckled.

"I remember the recording. It was pretty funny."

They waited for the call, going over the information that Nabiki and Jun had gleaned, trying to work out the best strategy, until finally the call came in an hour later. Ranma answered, talked briefly with Agent Naito, then disconnected. "That's it. Right, guys, once more into the breech and all that sort of thing." Shimmering into 'Azumi' as Ranma and Kasumi took on their own disguises, Nabiki stood beside the rest of the group.

With a rainbow-tinged flash the building was empty again.
Nigel looked at the clock on the dashboard, cursing the morning rush hour traffic ahead of him. He was going to be late for work yet again. His shift had started two minutes ago. Picking up his phone he hit the relevant speed dial button, waiting impatiently for the other end to answer. "Hi. It's DS Taylor. The traffic is horrendous, I'm stuck on the A36 somewhere around Camperdown. I'm going to be around twenty-five minutes late arriving."

"All right, Detective, I'll pass that along to your unit." The dispatcher went quiet for a moment, then came back on the line. "I have a message that you should divert to the ASIO office, you're closer to there than here anyway. You're to meet an ASIO Officer Michael Graham."

"What for?" the police officer asked curiously. "That's the first thing I've heard about it."

"I don't have much information Detective, I'm sorry. All I've been told is that you've been assigned to an operation that's come up suddenly and that you're to report to the ASIO. They'll tell you what it's about." Shrugging, DS Taylor nodded even though the woman couldn't see him.

"OK, fine. I'm heading over there now, if anyone needs to know I should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Detective, I'll let upstairs know. Good-bye."

"Bye." He disconnected and put the phone back into the centre console of the car, quickly looking around then indicating and switching lanes, while wondering what was going on. He'd met a couple of the ASIO guys in the past but only in passing, he'd never worked with them. Glancing in the rear-view mirror he turned off into a side street that was fairly empty, stepping slightly harder on the throttle that strictly necessary now that he could do more than stop-start driving.

Fourteen minutes later he pulled into the parking structure under the building he was aiming for, showing his ID to the man in the booth, who nodded and pressed the button that raised the barrier. Parking, he got out into the relatively cool air, taking his sunglasses off and putting them in his pocket while walking to the elevator to the main reception. Once upstairs he looked around, then headed to the front desk of the fairly nondescript lobby. "Hi. I'm Detective Sergeant Nigel Taylor." He showed the young man behind the desk his ID. "I was told to meet an Officer Graham here?"

The man smiled at him.

"Certainly, DS Taylor, he's expecting you. If you could just sign in here, then put this visitor pass on, please? I'll also need your phone and your side arm, you can have them back when you leave." Not completely happy but understanding the reasons Taylor extracted his phone, turning it off and handing it to the man along with his service weapon, having removed the magazine and carefully
checked the safety was on. He noted with approval that the security man did the same before locking them both away in a box under the desk. Once the security formalities were dealt with, the young man pressed an intercom button and spoke quietly into the headset he was wearing. "If you could take the middle elevator to the fifth floor, Detective, Officer Graham will be waiting there for you. Tallish fellow, blond hair. You can't miss him. If he's not there please wait, don't go wandering around. People get a little skittish around here if they see someone they don't recognise, you understand?" Nigel grinned.

"Security services are like that."

"Quite." Smiling back, the man pointed to the relevant elevator. Walking over to it Nigel pressed the button and waited, then stepped inside when the doors opened with a soft bong sound. Prodding the fifth floor button he quickly found himself deposited into a neutral-grey room with several corridors opening off it, and sounds of people working in the middle distance, muted by good sound-proofing. Standing across from the elevator was a man approximately his own thirty years of age, who met the description the security man downstairs had given him. This new person, presumably the ASIO officer he was here to meet, smiled at him and strode forwards, his hand outstretched.

"DS Taylor? I'm Michael Graham. Call me Mike." Shaking the offered hand Taylor nodded acknowledgement with a return smile.

"Nigel, please, Mike. So, what's going on? You guys don't call for our guys very often." Releasing his hand the other man indicated he should follow, leading the way to an office a short distance down one of the corridors and closing the door before replying.

"It's a sort of... interesting problem," he said, looking both amused and a little worried. He motioned to a coffee maker on the side table. "Coffee? Or I can get some tea if you want, or some soft drinks or water."

"Coffee will be fine, thanks." Mike turned the machine on, waving Taylor to a chair then sitting behind his desk. He studied the police officer for a moment.

"Do you remember that incident in London just after Christmas?" the blond man finally asked. Taylor thought, then nodded.

"Yes. Some sort of terrorist bomb or something, I recall. Quite a few people dead, lots of damage."

"That's it. As you probably won't be surprised to hear, the official stories were... incomplete." Nigel snorted a laugh.

"That doesn't surprise me at all. They never tell the truth, or at least only tell as little as they can get away with. Our lot, the Poms, the Yanks, everyone hides things." Mike grinned.

"Very true. But sometimes it's for a fairly good reason." He studied the other man again, then shrugged. "This is going to sound bloody ridiculous, but it's true." Getting up he made them both a cup of coffee, then sat again, opening a folder Taylor had noticed on his desk, stamped CONFIDENTIAL in large unfriendly letters. "The attack was a terrorist one, all right, but not like a normal one. You know, explosives, bombs, that sort of thing. The device was," he paused, sighed, then finished, "magical." Taylor looked at him quizzically.

"Magical? You mean, all happy and wonderful, made by pixies?" He grinned, as did Mike.

"No. I literally mean powered by magic. It was planted by magical terrorists." It was Nigel's turn to
study him, which he did with a very sceptical expression.

"You've lost me," he finally admitted. The other man sighed a little, shaking his head.

"I told them this would be difficult," he mumbled. "OK, look. Magic, real magic, is actually real magic. As in teleportation, demons, all sorts of things that you'd find in a kids fantasy book. It exists. You with me?"

"Not as such," Taylor admitted, still looking sceptical. With another sigh the ASIO man got up, retrieved a DVD from the folder, then inserted it into the player on the table across the room from his desk, turning on the TV it was plugged into in the process. Picking up the remote he returned to his desk and sat again.

"Watch this. It's compiled from some footage taken in London by an amateur videographer, as well as some security camera footage." He pressed play.

Taylor stared as the slightly shaky video played, recognising some of what he'd seen on the news months ago but from a viewpoint he hadn't seen before. The girls wandering around in outfits that he'd have been slightly surprised to see on the beach were weird, but what they were doing was simply unbelievable. When one of them physically picked up the back of a large van that must have weighed at least three or four tons and held it in the air while a soldier crawled underneath to extract a pair of casualties, he sputtered with shock.

"It's some sort of special effects!" Mike shook his head, smiling a little.

"I'm afraid not. We checked. There were a number of reliable witnesses, not to mention camera feeds and recordings from at least three sources that all showed the same thing. It's real."

"But..." The intelligence officer nodded understandingly at the exclamation.

"I know. It's a lot to take in. Apparently the young women you can see there are from Japan. There were two more who we didn't get any video of. They were in London specifically to deal with the incident, partly because they were involved in the capture of the original terrorists who started the whole thing, but mainly because no one in the UK could deal with it. Not without some fairly impressive collateral damage. In fact, from what I've been told, those girls are probably the only reason that the terrorist plan didn't succeed, which would have been extremely bad."

"How didn't it succeed? Something like sixty or so people died in that attack." Taylor kept watching the video, now showing various security camera views of the street, with the four girls and an equal number of soldiers rescuing more casualties.

"Well, considering that the original plan consisted of at least several hundred of the devices, only one of which caused all the trouble in London, and they managed to stop it and reduce it to only six, I think we can agree that they were pretty effective." The detective winced.

"Hundreds of attacks?"

"That was the plan, and likely only the beginning. Each device was intended to be placed in locations around the world, then triggered randomly. Something as bad as the London attack would happen each time, or worse."

"Holy fuck..." Taylor turned back to the other man as the DVD finished. He nodded soberly.

"Pretty much. Proper end of the world stuff, if you can imagine it. The terrorists were some sort of weird cult, an offshoot of that Aum Shinriko bunch of loons that the Japanese dealt with a few
years back. Only crazier."

"So if it wasn't a bomb, what did cause all that damage?" Taylor asked curiously.

"It was a demon."

"A... demon?" Mike seemed to be enjoying his reaction.

"Yes. Two, actually. The terrorist device is some weird magical thing that somehow brings them here from wherever it is that they come from. Hell, for all I know. They're practically unkillable. The military in London apparently shot one point blank with a 40mm grenade launcher half a dozen times and only pissed it off. Automatic gunfire it barely noticed."

"Good god."

DS Taylor was feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

"It's all pretty weird, I admit. Pulling a photo out of the folder he showed it to the policeman. "This is one of the devices. The PSIA in Japan circulated information on the things and a warning months ago when they wound up the cult, with a notice to be extremely careful if one was found. Basically, don't touch it, call them, and stay out of the way. The information came from very high up in the Japanese government which is the only reason anyone believed it at all, but most people didn't believe it very much even so. The Yanks weren't taking it seriously, the Brits and the Canadians were, the Mexicans basically laughed as did the Russians, and our people took it with a pinch of salt."

"You seem to be taking it seriously now," Nigel noted. Mike nodded.

"We have to. The London thing made it clear that they weren't talking complete bollocks, but we still weren't totally sure what was going on. Then, just before New Year, two more of the things turned up in the States. Luckily, before they triggered. One in LA, one in New York."

"Was it connected with that bomb they found in Times Square?"

"Same incident. The demon calling things didn't make the news, the bomb did. It seems that the terrorists planted the bomb first, a massive one just under that big ball thing they have there, then came back at some later point and hid one of these 'portal devices', as the Japanese refer to them. The Japanese consultants found the device, and in the process uncovered the bomb, which the NYPD and the FBI disarmed. Good thing as well, it would have killed hundreds of people at least, never mind any demon attack. The LA one was planted outside that cinema where all the Hollywood stars have their footprints in the pavement. They got that one as well. Apparently there was quite a search for it, but I don't have any information on what it involved. The LAPD isn't talking for some reason."

"This is all pretty hard to believe," Taylor noted, putting his empty cup down. The ASIO officer shrugged.

"I know. I've been researching it for several months and I still find it all weird. The Japanese take it more or less as normal, though. There are a couple of places in Tokyo where things like this happen pretty regularly, if you can believe that. No idea why. The end result is that they don't blink an eye at the concept of magic. The Brits seem awfully casual about it as well, for some reason."

Taylor was beginning to have a nasty suspicion creep over him as all this was being explained. "One of those things is here, isn't it?" he asked slowly with a sinking feeling in his stomach. The other man looked slightly surprised, but pleased, nodding.
"It's possible. The devices were on timers, which had a maximum run time that expires in something like ten days. One of the Japanese intelligence assets managed to trace a sale on some weird website that included something that bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the last device. The address they got is in Richmond. They haven't been able to trace the buyer yet, and considering the time constraint, have suggested that the best method is to simply find the seller and get the information directly. Our higher-ups have agreed. They're sending a team which should be here in about fifteen minutes. I've been ordered to help them, or at least keep an eye on them just in case something weird happens, and it was also decided that we needed a police liaison. That's you." He grinned.

"Why me?" Taylor asked, curious. "And why not the Federal Police, this seems more along their sort of line."

"The AFP isn't involved in this one at the moment. I'm not entirely sure of the reasons, but the people upstairs decided that they wanted it handled by the ASIO. There are security implications that are rather beyond the remit of the AFP, is all I've been told. Personally, I suspect that someone in the Federal Police service annoyed someone in the government and this is how they're getting back at them." He grinned.

"As for why you, your name came up as someone your bosses felt had a rather more... open minded approach to life. We're going to be dealing with a number of apparently magically talented young women. They even call them Magical Girls. It's something of a phenomenon in Japan, apparently, although no one can tell me why. There are quite a few of them running around the place, amazingly enough with the tacit approval of the Japanese government. Possibly because, if what I've heard is even remotely true, they couldn't stop them in any case. They seem to have taken a pragmatic attitude to it all and just decided to make the best of it." Mike snickered. "I'm informed that two of the people turning up are exceptional even by those standards and have been keeping the others under control for a few years now. They were talked of in tones of extreme respect. You wouldn't believe how high up the government in Japan their names could get them. I was told in no uncertain terms, 'Be polite. Or else.'" Leaning forward he pushed the folder towards the detective.

"Here. Have a quick flip through that, then we can meet them." Taylor accepted the file and read the fairly sparse contents quickly and with interest. There were a number of reports which went into more details about what the ASIO man had summarised, along with more photos, including a number showing the horrifyingly large bomb the Americans had defused in New York, and some rather blurry ones of six young women, with no identifying features. Mike notice the one he was looking at, puzzled. "Magic, apparently. They value their privacy and have some way of enforcing it. If they really want to, cameras don't see them at all. I'd love to know how they do that, it would come in handy sometimes."

Nigel chuckled. "I can imagine," he muttered, looking through the rest of the file. When he finished he closed it and handed it back to the officer who locked it in his desk, then looked at his watch, while standing up.

"Right, they should be here any time. Come on, let's go meet our guests." The pair left the office and headed for the elevator. Rather to Taylor's surprise they went up not down.

"Where are we going?" he asked curiously. Mike grinned.

"The roof."

"They coming in by chopper or something?" The cop was still puzzled. The grin on his companion's expression grew slightly.
"Nope. Something less standard. I hope we get there in time, I want to see it." The door opened and they got out, the ASIO man leading the way to the nearby stairs for the last part of the trip, taking them up one flight and out onto the top of the building, on which was a helipad with the large H in a circle symbol. It was currently empty, a windsock to one side rippling gently in the light breeze blowing from the south-east. Just as Taylor was about to ask his companion, who was watching the centre of the area with a fixed intensity, what was going to happen, it happened.

Suddenly, with no sound or warning, eight people were standing in the middle of the helipad. Taylor jumped, instinctively groping for his weapon until he remembered it was locked away behind the security desk downstairs, then he looked slightly embarrassed, while Officer Graham grinned happily. "Wow," he breathed quietly. "It really is true. Amazing." Taylor glanced at him, then back at the group of seven women and one man, who had quickly looked around then headed in their direction. A middle-aged Japanese man in a suit, who was clearly some sort of government official, was leading the group with a short young woman, perhaps twenty, striding beside him. She had very long night-black hair with a brilliant blue streak in it bound back in an incredible braid that reached down to the middle of her back, and was wearing silk clothing with the same colour theme, as well as a confident look that showed good humour and keen intelligence with a hint of 'mess with me and you die'.

DS Taylor was an experienced police officer, he had years of experience reading people, and this girl gave off danger in waves, more so than anyone he'd ever met. The tall blonde in grey and green just behind her and to her left was nearly as bad, while the one with the weirdest silver hair he'd ever seen in the long leather coat in a matching position on her right just gave him the willies for some reason. The other four, who were wearing matched dark blue clothing with gold trim in a similar style to that which the first two were, seemed to be looking around simply enjoying themselves. Even so he got the very distinct impression he was looking at a squad of highly trained and experienced combat operatives rather than the collection of attractive Japanese young woman they, on the face of it, seemed to be. Something about the way they moved put him just the slightest bit on edge.

The leading pair drew up in front of them and stopped, while the others fanned out in a way that made it uncomfortably clear that they were ready for anything. One of them produced a banana and began peeling it, making another one, who looked related, sigh. The man glanced at both of them for a moment then turned to the ASIO representative. "Officer Graham?" he enquired politely, in very good English.

"That's me," Mike said, holding out his hand, which the man shook. "Call me Mike. You must be Agent Naito from the PSIA."

"Yes. It's nice to meet you." They shook hands then Mike looked at the short woman with the black hair.

"And you are clearly Yori. I've heard things..." He grinned, as did she, holding out her own hand.

"Sorry about that. Stories seem to get around. Yep, I'm Yori, this is Chou and Azumi, and over there are Aiko, Misaki, Tamiko, and Fumiko." She indicated each person in turn. The four girls mentioned last smiled happily, the auburn-haired one waving to them, while the blonde, Chou, smiled gently in a way that reminded both men of their mothers, also shaking hands with a calm greeting. The other girl, Azumi, looked at them then nodded politely with a small smile that made them both shiver for a moment.

"Um, yes, this is DS Nigel Taylor from the New South Wales Police," Mike said, recovering nicely and indicating the man standing beside him. "He's our police liaison. I've brought him up to speed
on the situation, although I'm still not sure if he believes it all."

"I am having trouble, I admit, but what I just saw is pretty damn convincing," Nigel said, also shaking hands. "I'm prepared to be convinced."

"Good attitude. It's a lot to get dumped on you, I know, but unfortunately it's all real." Yori looked slightly amused. "So, you're aware of the problem we have? We need to find that bloody portal device as fast as possible, the timers aren't all that accurate, plus we've had problems with them going unstable in the past. I'll be damn glad when we've killed this last one, there have been too many close calls as a result of that cult."

"Hopefully it should be fairly easy to get the information you need, Yori," Mike said. "Richmond is about sixty kilometres away, it will take us a couple of hours to get there especially with so many people, but once..." He trailed off as she grinned at him, understanding crossing his face. "Ah. Yes. Teleportation." Shaking his head he exchanged glances with the police officer next to him. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"It's damn useful, though, and a lot of fun," Aiko said, moving closer and looking amused. "Do you need to get anything? If not, we can go right now." Mike looked at DS Taylor, who shrugged, still not completely sure he believed all of this.

"I need my phone and my gun, they're locked up downstairs."

"OK, I'll go and get them. Back in a couple of minutes." He left while the remaining people looked around. Agent Naito came and stood next to Taylor, watching as the females in the party spread out across the roof, looking at the view. Chou stayed with them, smiling calmly as she watched Azumi look around, then jump up on top of the elevator shaft motor room to get a better look in the direction of the Opera House, her coat billowing dramatically about her as she landed. Yori was talking to Tamiko, both of them standing right on the edge of the roof looking down ten stories with no obvious regard to their own safety, pointing out something of interest. The policeman looked slightly worried, which she noticed.

"Don't worry, they're in no danger," the tall blonde woman said, smiling at him. "Even if they did slip they'd land safely. They're just curious."

"I guess you'd know," he replied, looking at her as she watched her companions. Even with the air of potential danger surrounding her their was also a feeling of serenity, which offset it to a large degree. He felt he could trust her implicitly to look out for people. Yori gave the impression of barely restrained chaos, as did the other four in blue to a lesser degree, and the enigmatic Azumi he couldn't work out at all. "Forgive me if I find all of this a little... weird." She laughed, glancing at him for a moment.

"I'd be worried myself if you didn't, all things considered. Even in Japan we can take people by surprise sometimes. You haven't had any contact with any of this yet, you're actually doing very well." Chou looked out over what she could see of the city from their vantage point. "It looks interesting. I've never been to Australia before. Is this temperature normal?"

"Pretty much. It's heading towards winter but it won't get much colder now. In the summer it goes up to around forty degrees centigrade or so, higher further inland. A lot of visitors can't handle it." He grinned. "I met some Brits a few years ago in the middle of summer who looked like they were melting. Poor sods. Didn't stop them enjoying themselves, got to respect that." She laughed again.

"We met some very nice and competent people in London during that horrible time after Christmas. I liked them. Mostly."
"It must have been nasty, based on what I learned today." She nodded, turning to him.

"It was, very much so. So many poor people being hurt or killed, just enjoying the holiday. I was very angry about it." The look on her face, just for a moment, made him shiver. "We were able to save a lot of people, which was very nice, but unfortunately we couldn't save everyone. I'm just glad we were able to stop it being worse. We want to avoid anything like that happening again. Luckily we could in the US, and hopefully we can find this last device and deal with it before anyone else gets hurt."

Taylor nodded slowly. "I guess it's probably out of the country now, so I suppose from our point of view that's good, but not so much for anyone wherever it is at this point."

"Indeed. We need to trace it as quickly as possible. Hopefully, we still have a little over a week, but the things are booby-trapped, not hugely reliable, and very dangerous. Unfortunately, the only part that is reliable is the portal generation, so even a faulty one could cause a disaster. If we can find the seller and persuade them to tell us the buyer, we're one step closer. Then, finally, we can wind this horrible saga up once and for all."

"So, this cult, terrorist organisation, whatever it was, what was their master plan? What did they hope to accomplish?" Chou sighed a little.

"Basically just death and destruction for it's own sake, I'm afraid. There was some bizarre belief structure behind it, but it doesn't hold up to any form of logic anyone else can come up with, even less so than normal terrorists. Sometimes they actually have a reasonable goal in mind, even though their methods are unreasonable, but in this case it's just... not sane. At all."

Taylor grimaced. "Not good. Makes things very unpredictable."

"Quite." They were interrupted by the return of Officer Graham, who handed Nigel his phone and weapon, the magazine still out. Reloading it and checking again, he holstered the gun, turning his phone back on and dropping it into his pocket.

"All ready then?" Yori said from behind them, making both men twitch. They'd had no idea she'd approached. Aiko was standing next to her.

The ASIO man nodded. "I guess so. Ah, what happens next?"

Aiko smiled. "The first time you'll probably feel very unwell for a few seconds, it hits most people like that. It passes quickly, though, but be prepared. Other than that, there's nothing to it." She stepped closer to them, all the others quickly taking their places. The brunette glanced at Yori, then snickered and saluted jokingly. "Landing party ready, Captain."

"You've been watching too much TV again, Aiko," Yori chuckled, before looking portentously into the distance and snapping crisply, "Energise!" Nigel was just in the middle of grinning when the world jumped and he suddenly felt extremely nauseous.

"Urgh..." he mumbled, his head spinning. Someone grabbed and steadied him. "Thanks." When his head stopped going round and round like it was trying to unscrew itself he opened his eyes again, looking down at Yori who was holding him carefully.

"Feel better?" she asked with a smile. He nodded.

"No worries. That was pretty nasty, though."

"It's only like that the first time. Second time you might feel a slight twinge, after that you're fine."
Releasing him she stepped away. Mike was standing a couple of metres away with his head down, swaying a little, Chou next to him talking quietly to him. After a moment or two he recovered as well.

"That was very unpleasant," he commented, looking healthier already. "OK, I guess we're here." They all turned to look at the house they'd appeared outside, which corresponded to the address he'd been sent. It was a fairly large, quite old one, built in the style of the early nineteen-hundreds, obviously expensive at one point but now slightly going to seed. The garden surrounding it was a bit overgrown, full of some impressive specimens of plant life that were in need of care and a trim. As they walked up the path to the front door, he said, "Richmond is a fairly old town, dating back to the early nineteenth century, but it's basically a suburb of Sydney now. Fairly expensive place to live. There's about five thousand people in the area, and an Air Force base nearby. I couldn't find much information on the owner of this place in the limited time I had available, only a name and a phone number. Hopefully someone is home."

"Oh, there's definitely someone in there," Yori said confidently. "We're being watched right now. From across the street behind us as well." Both Australians looked at her, then at each other, then over their shoulders. A curtain dropped back into place in the window of the house on the other side of the street.

"OK. Slightly weird, but OK." Taylor moved towards the door of the house. "I'll do the first part, if that's all right with you people, it will probably be easier anyway. We might have trouble explaining why so many people are here in one group. It does look a bit odd." Yori glanced at Naito, who grinned.

"We are coming on a little strongly," he said. She smiled, then turned to the others.

"Chou and I will go in. Um, Azumi, too. The rest of you push off for a while, we'll let you know when we're ready." Aiko laughed.

"All right. We'll wander around and enjoy the view." She and the other three turned around and walked off down the road, looking about with interest.

"Better?" Yori asked Taylor, who chuckled.

"A bit. Come on, let's see what happens when I ring the doorbell." He walked up the steps and across the veranda to the front door and did precisely that. A few seconds later an impossibly strong hand grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him to the side just as a thunderous report accompanied the front door sprouting numerous holes as someone on the other side discharged what sounded like a shotgun. Shaking with adrenaline, the detective picked himself up from the floor where he'd landed when Yori had grabbed him. Chou had Naito and Azumi, Graham, on the other side of the door. They all looked at the door, then at each other. The sound of a pump-action shotgun being cycled made him duck again just as most of the remaining undamaged pieces of door scattered themselves down the front path from the second shot.

"Holy fuck," he yelled, reaching for his handgun. Mere seconds had gone by since the first shot. Yori put her hand on his, stopping him drawing the weapon, and shook her head. He could barely hear her speak over the ringing in his ears.

"Let me," she said, then stepped forward. The two Australians watched wide-eyed as, mid-step, she faded from view. They gaped at each other then looked back in time to see what was left of the door swing open. A short pause was followed by a snapping noise that sounded like a large spark. Moments later the girl put her head around the door. "It's clear. One occupant and a lot of guns. Come on in." They headed for the door, the two locals somewhat more hesitantly than the Japanese.
contingent, who didn't seem worried. Inside they found Yori inspecting a 12-gauge pump-action Remington shotgun curiously, next to an obviously elderly but physically very fit woman, lying limply unconscious in a chair. Several more guns were on a table next to the chair along with quite a large amount of ammunition.

She looked up at them. "Vigorous old girl, it looks like. Not too friendly. You might like to check that box on the floor, Detective, I think it might explain her rather overenthusiastic greeting."

Looking at her for a moment, he nodded and knelt down, opening the large plastic crate by the chair. Several more like it were stacked at the back of the room, and they could see some more in the hallway leading to the back. His eyes widened.

"Good grief," he muttered. Chou and Mike both leaned over curiously. The blonde looked impressed.

"That's a lot of cannabis," she said calmly. "I would imagine it's worth quite a lot of money." Inside the crate were dozens of small bricks of cannabis resin neatly wrapped in plastic, with their weights on paper labels stuck to them. Azumi carefully opened another crate at the back of the room.

"This one is full of bags of the dried plant," she reported. "So are the rest," the silver-haired girl added, investigating. "There must be at least a hundred kilos of it here."

"Well, it's not quite what we were looking for but it's certainly leverage to get her to talk," Officer Graham said, inspecting the lethal granny in the chair. He still looked somewhat shocked. Being shot at wasn't his normal routine. Taylor could sympathise, he didn't like it either. Interestingly the three women seemed completely unaffected, and while Naito was clearly not happy about it he also wasn't too worried.

"Where did it come from?" Chou wondered out loud, picking up one of the resin bricks and looking at it. "From what I understand this would need a substantial installation for growing. Several hundred square metres, I'd think. This house isn't big enough even if every room but this one is set up for growing." She returned the drug to where it had come from.

"I'm certainly interested in finding out," Nigel muttered, looking around. "Never mind the being shot at part of the day. I don't think I like this little old lady very much." He returned his attention to the others. "This is way, way beyond personal use, she must be a major dealer or supplier. Once you've got your answers I think I've just made a very interesting arrest. Attempted murder, firearms violations, narcotics supply, and anything else I can think of to throw at the bitch."

"I'll wake her up and we can asked her a few pointed questions," Yori said, looking grim. "I'm past the point of being polite with this one, I think." She moved to stand beside the old woman, touching her head with her fingertips, which glowed violet for a second. The elderly woman jerked, then opened her eyes. Looking around alertly she stopped dead when she saw the six people watching her. Taylor held up his police ID.

"Oh, fuck," she muttered.

"Oh, fuck, indeed, granny. Shooting at a police officer is something we really don't appreciate. You're going to need a very good lawyer." She sighed heavily, then stared defiantly at them.

"You don't have a warrant."

"I don't need one. You're the one who fucking shot at us through a closed door. After that, you're mine." He paused, then indicated the people with him. "Before that, though, you need to listen very carefully to what these people have to ask you." She looked at the others, her gaze stopping on
Yori who stepped forward and looked seriously at her.

"I need to know about an online auction that completed on the fifth of March." The old woman looked blank. "Of some interesting artefacts? Possibly magical ones?" The look didn't become any less blank. She shook her head.

"No idea what the hell you're talking about." Yori looked mildly annoyed.

"Mystic Mart Seller ID GMY1980 ring a bell?" The old woman looked, if possible, even blanker.

"I honestly don't have any idea what you mean," she replied. Yori studied her, then sighed.

"No, you don't, do you? Damn." She looked up at the two Australians. "She's telling the truth, unfortunately. She really doesn't know." Looking back to the woman she studied her for a moment. "Does anyone else live here with you? Or has stayed here in the last few months?"

"Only my bone-idle grandson, but he took off weeks ago. I have no idea where he went. Good riddance, to be honest." She looked annoyed. "Stole a kilo of my best weed and twenty grand on the way out as well, the little fucker."

"Could you describe him please?"

"He's a short little skinny chap, a bit taller than you. Dirty-blond hair, scruffy beard. Never took any care with his appearance. Likes to wear black."

Chou knelt next to the chair. "Did your grandson have a computer?" she asked calmly. The old woman nodded.

"Spent half his life on the damn thing, and the other half on the phone. I have no idea what he was doing. Damn machines, I never saw the point in them. He took that with him as well. My phone line hasn't worked right since he moved in a year ago, always some strange weebling noise on the line when I want to use it. At least that seems to have stopped since he went."

"What is his name?" the blonde asked.

The old lady scowled. "Geoffrey Young. His mother picked a terrible name, I always thought." Yori looked mildly amused.

"Let me guess, he was born in nineteen eighty?" She nodded.

"Right. How did you know?"

"That's his user ID. GMY1980. Not very imaginative."

"Neither is he," she said, looking around, clearly still trying to figure out a way out of all this. "Look, how about if I give you the contents of that box over there?" She indicated a cardboard box half under a pile of magazines near the hallway to the back of the house. "Would that make you go away and forget all this?" They all exchanged glances, then Azumi, who was closest, investigated.

"About a quarter of a million Australian dollars, I'd say," she said after a few seconds, holding up a neatly wrapped bundle of cash. "Lots of these," Mike and Nigel looked at each other, then at the old woman, who was staring at them hopefully.

"OK, we can add attempted bribery of a police officer to the list of charges," DS Taylor said smugly. Officer Graham glanced at him with a smile.
"She offered it to me as well. That's attempted bribery of a federal employee, which I think might be a bigger charge."

"Hmm. You're right. Well, we can charge her with both." Yori grinned, Agent Naito started laughing, while Chou looked amused. Azumi watched with a neutral expression, although Taylor got the impression she found it funny. The old woman didn't.

"Fuckers," she mumbled. Sitting up slightly she looked quickly at the table and the weapons on it. Yori shook her head even as Taylor made a motion towards his gun, just in case.

"I wouldn't," the Japanese woman said in a kindly manner.

"Who are you people?" the old woman asked. The girl grinned.

"Not your problem any more." She reached out and the woman slumped. "She's fine, but this will keep her from... making a mistake," she said, looking to the cop. He shrugged. He wasn't all that fussed, not after nearly being killed.

"Thanks for getting me out of the way of that shotgun, by the way," he said. Yori smiled.

"No problem. Why don't we look around a bit, see if we can find any leads to her grandson, then you can call your people to mop all this up."

"Sounds like a plan." He looked at the rather murderous old girl. "You sure she won't wake up on us and leg it?"

"She's turned off for the moment, she'll be out for at least an hour."

"Good. She was annoying me. I like my grandmothers the sort who greet you at the door with a glass of lemonade, not a fucking twelve gauge." Pulling a set of disposable gloves out of his pocket he put them on, then carefully unloaded the shotgun Yori had confiscated, putting the weapon and the shells safely away from the old woman. As an afterthought he handcuffed her as well. Just in case. Yori watched, smiling.

Naito had produced his own gloves, handing some to Mike, who put them on as well. The magical girls watched, then Chou nodded, pulling several sets out of nowhere and giving them to her colleagues. "Just so we don't cause the good detective any problems," she commented when Azumi gave her a questioning look. Removing her fingerless gloves, she put the disposables on, as did the other two.

"Please try not to move anything too much," Nigel said, carefully going through a stack of mail on the windowsill beside the remains of the front door. They spread out, hunting for anything that might be a clue to the whereabouts of one Geoffrey Young.

After fifteen minutes they'd come up with very little. As they gathered in the front room again to compare results, Tamiko suddenly appeared in the doorway, looking at the remains of the door with a raised eyebrow, then at the unconscious old woman in the chair and the crates of drugs. Both eyebrows went up. "Wow. Hey, guys? Come and see what we found in the back garden."

They all looked at her.

"I thought you were enjoying the view," Naito said, looking amused.

"We were. We decided to enjoy it in the back garden for a while." Grinning, the auburn-haired young woman waved them outside. "Then we found something. Come and have a look. It's really interesting."
"You're not fooling me," Yori said with a laugh as she walked past. "You just got nosy, didn't you?" Her only answer was a giggle. The blue-clad girl led them around the side of the house into a large, overgrown garden. The house was built in front of a low hill, the land going up a few metres then back, covered with trees and bushes in an almost impenetrable mass. Set apparently slightly into the hillside was a rickety old wooden storage shed, with a lean-to shelter built on one side under which was a collection of household miscellany including a clearly broken lawn mower. She pointed at the shed.

"So?" Mike looked at her after a moment. "It's a shed. What's so interesting?"

"Have a closer look." Tamiko was grinning as if she had a wonderful secret. He glanced at his colleague, then approached, looking carefully at the building. The other three girls were standing a couple of metres away watching. They were wearing expressions that for some weird reason suggested they were talking about all this, even though they clearly weren't. Puzzled, he looked back. Tamiko waved him on. Turning back to the ratty little building he looked at it carefully, then gently prodded it with one hand. It wobbled. Peering in through the dirty window all he could see was a dim view of the contents one would expect in such a building, which was basically a pile of crap. Broken lawn chairs, half a stepladder, some old gardening tools, that sort of thing. He yielded his place to DS Taylor, who repeated the exercise, after which Naito looked in curiously. All three men exchanged glances, then turned to the girls.

"And...?" Nigel said slowly. Tamiko giggled. Moving to the door she stuck her finger into a small hole on the wall some distance from the handle, apparently pushing. There was a click and she turned the rusty doorknob, then pulled the door open. It swung easily on very well maintained hinges, giving the first hint that something was odd. They walked over and peered in.

"Bloody hell," Nigel said quietly. Inside, the shed was not at all what it appeared. The outer building was merely a shell, with a half-metre gap between it and an old concrete structure sticking out of the hillside, which had a steel door embedded into it. The window of the shed was boxed in and not visible from the inside. He inspected it carefully.

"It's a photo," Yori commented from around the side, looking carefully in the window, then coming and looking in the door. "Very clever. She took a photo of the inside of the shed through the window, I guess without any glass in the way, then printed it life-size and stuck it into that frame. If you look in, with all the dirt and stuff, you think you're seeing the inside but you're not."

"Tricky old woman," Taylor muttered, almost respectfully. "That's close to brilliant."

"It gets better," Tamiko said, grinning happily. Pushing past them she pulled the steel door open, causing a wave of hot, damp, pungently scented air to roll out. "We really have to learn your lock-persuading trick, Yori, we had to snap this one." Inside the door was a flight of stairs leading down, into the hill. Reaching inside she flipped a switch, causing lights to come on. "Have a look." She noticed Taylor reaching for his weapon. "There's no one in there, we swept it thoroughly." Nodding, he put it away again, deciding to trust her, since they seemed to be at least as professional as anyone he'd worked with in the past. Stepping inside, he slowly headed down the stairs, everyone else filing in behind him.

Reaching the bottom, some ten metres down, he stopped and looked around. "Holy shit!"

"What the hell is this place?" Mike wondered out loud. They all exchanged glances, then returned to inspecting the site in front of them.

"Fairly impressive if nothing else," Yori said quietly, looking at the rows and rows of hydroponic tanks stretching away down the concrete corridor that led away from the stairs, lit with oddly
coloured and incredibly intense lamps. The air was humid and thick with the smell of cannabis. "This is certainly where all that weed in the house was grown. I wonder where the power is coming from?"

"From what we could work out it looks like there's an underground cable that they cut into. There's what looks like an entire electrical substation in one of the rooms. The equipment is pretty old, at least forty or fifty years," Misaki said. She pointed with the hand that didn't have an orange in it. "Down that corridor to the right."

Agent Naito was looking carefully at some of the light fittings, as well as the wiring. "This is nineteen-forties vintage stuff, I think. Pre-war or during it." Mike suddenly snapped his fingers.

"That's it. I remember now. There's supposed to be an old WW2 bunker buried around Richmond somewhere, but no one seems to know where. This has to be it. That old biddy is growing pot in it." Tamiko led them down the corridor past the hydroponics tanks, which were gently gurgling away to themselves, past several other corridors that showed the structure was substantial in size, eventually into a large two-story split level room with a balcony around part of it. "It's an old bunker for sure," he said. "Look, that's where the big map would have gone, and there's where the various controllers sat. It looks identical to one I've seen pictures of in Bankstown, which is fairly close to here. Amazing. It's built right into the hill."

"I think the entrance we came in must be some sort of emergency exit," Aiko suggested. "We explored and there's a much bigger door that won't open in that direction. On top in the right place it's completely filled in and has a house on it, which looks fairly new."

"How did you find it?" Taylor asked curiously.

"We were poking around in the woods up on the hill, just looking around, and could tell it was hollow underneath. It was just a matter of following the tunnels until we found an entrance, but it was a bit of a surprise to discover it came out behind that old woman's house." Tamiko looked pleased with herself. Her answer raised more questions than it answered as far as the Australians were concerned but they shrugged and accepted it. Magic, presumably.

"I hope you kept an eye open for spiders and snakes," Mike said. Fumiko laughed.

"Misaki was looking for snakes, she likes them. We couldn't find anything." He looked worried.

"Australia has some of the most poisonous snakes in the world. It's not a good idea to get too close."

"Don't worry, Mike, they aren't a threat to us," Yori commented, smiling at him. "It would take something pretty exceptional to even break the skin. A snake won't do it." He looked dubious, but nodded.

"OK."

"Come and have a look at the last thing," Tamiko said.

Mike stared. "There's more?"

"Yep."

Down one corridor were a series of steel doors like the one upstairs, most of them open, the rooms full of plants or equipment. One seemed to be the main control room for the elaborate installation, with more automated control equipment than seemed plausible outside a small factory. They
arrived at a door that was much more heavily built than the others, with a sign on it that was still barely readable under the dirt. "Armoury," Taylor read out loud.

"It's still locked. Feel that?" The auburn haired girl looked at Yori and Chou, who nodded slowly.

"It's faint, but that's definitely the energy trace of a portal device. It was here, quite a while ago. That's why we couldn't feel it from on top, along with all the steel, concrete, and earth." Yori looked pleased. "Confirmation we're on the right track. It's something of a relief."

Chou frowned. "There's something else in there as well. I can feel several faint magical signatures."

"I know. I wonder what they are?" The black-haired girl studied the door for a moment, then reached out a hand, putting in on the handle. She appeared to concentrate for a moment. "It's all rusty and full of crap," she mumbled, then nodded. "Got it." She pulled and the door opened with a creak, releasing a wave of musty air. Looking inside she found the light switch and turned it on. Several bulbs glowed revealing a series of metal shelves on which were arrayed various boxes and odd items. Everyone looked in.

"What is all this stuff?" Nigel asked, entering the room and looking at one of the shelves. There were a number of weird little trinkets on it, including a wooden stick about thirty centimetres long with the end apparently burned off, what looked like a slightly melted silver tiara with a cracked pink stone set into it, a number of odd appearing little statues, a hollow glass ball, and other things that wouldn't have been out of place in a very low-end antiques shop. Yori stepped up beside him and looked at the shelf. She reached out and picking up the tiara, turning it over in her hands and looking at it curiously, before putting it back.

"Magical artefacts," she replied. "Some of them, anyway. Most of this is crap at best, but there are a few things that are real. This is, although it's ruined, that wand there was real once but now it's scrap, one of those voodoo dolls has a little power around it. A couple of other things." She moved over to another shelf where Chou was running her hand over an empty spot.

"It was here, for some time. Perhaps a month or so." Yori checked then nodded. She motioned to Azumi, who had been quietly observing them the whole time.

"Come here, feel this," she suggested. The silver-haired girl slipped between Nigel and Mike, making both of them move slightly further away as she passed. Holding her hand a small distance above the shelf she concentrated, then nodded.

"I see," the girl said in a voice with little emotion in it. "Fascinating. That is the energy signature of the portal device?"

"Yes. It's very faint, the only reason it's still discernible is that it was here for quite a long time. But you should be able to identify it at some distance with a real one."

"Interesting." She stepped back, then looked around. Her orange eyes met Nigel's and he flinched slightly. This seemed to mildly amuse her.

"All of this is safe, there's nothing we need to do about it," Chou said, turning to the three men. "The only truly dangerous thing was the portal device and that's gone. We should sweep the place once more just to be sure there's nothing nasty left behind, but it looks like there probably isn't much more we can learn from here. I would think, based on this, though, that young Geoffrey is someone we need to find as fast as possible. He's clearly been collecting potentially magical artefacts for while. I suspect he may be somewhat sensitive to magic which would explain how he managed to find so many real magical devices, and possibly how he laid hands on the portal
device. It clearly wasn't planted here by the mage, either he found it or bought it from someone who did."

"I'm going to call this in," the detective said. "This is a very big find, we're going to have a lot of people very interested in this and the old woman for some time. I can't remember the last time so much pot was found around here, and I've never even heard of an installation this complex."

"There will be a lot of interest in the bunker as well when all this is over," Mike said, looking around as they exited the armoury and headed back to the exit. "I know people have been searching for it for a long time. I guess there will be some archaeological interest if nothing else." He, Naito, and Taylor headed up while the girls stayed behind to double-check that there wasn't anything magical and dangerous left behind. The detective was just finishing up his phone calls when the Japanese women trooped around the side of the house as a group, appearing pleased.

"Nothing untoward to report," Chou said, approaching them. "The bunker is clean of any magical devices or booby-traps."

"Thanks," Nigel said, putting his phone away. "I need to wait for the local police to arrive to secure the area and the suspect. What's your next step?" Yori leaned against a tree and glanced at Chou, who peered into the house at the still-unconscious old lady.

"We can't learn much more here, I think," the short woman said thoughtfully. "We have a name, a birth date, a basic description. Hopefully that's enough to go on. We know roughly when he left, about two weeks after he sold the collection. We don't know why, where he went, or if he had help."

"I can get his description and details out, we can start a search for him. But Australia is a very big place. With a head start as big as the one he has he could be very difficult to find. He might not even be in the country any more." Taylor shrugged. "It's kind of a long shot."

"It's about all we have," Mike said. "I'll get the ASIO involved, we have resources that the police don't, but Nigel is right, it could be difficult. At least with you people here we don't have any travel issues, which will help a lot. But whether we can find one kid in all of Australia in less than a week...?" Shaking his head he seemed doubtful. "Difficult. People have vanished for years, or even permanently, without too much effort."

"It's possible the old woman has associates who might have some useful information," Agent Naito interjected. "She can't possibly have maintained that entire facility by herself, especially where it came to harvesting the crop. Quite a few people must be involved."

Taylor looked at him, then nodded. "True. Wiring the place, installing all that equipment, hiding it like that... That took people and money. Lots of it."

"We could ask," Yori suggested, straightening up. Just then they heard sirens, as three police cars screeched around the corner down the road and shot towards them. DS Taylor grinned.

"Locals making a big fuss." He walked down to the edge of the road to greet the policemen and women who jumped out of the cars, looking around alertly. Speaking to them for a moment he came back with two of them following, while the other four began setting up police tape around the front of the property. "This is Sergeant Wiley and Constable May." He made the introductions. Both officers seemed slightly puzzled by the presence of an ASIO officer, never mind the Japanese people, but said nothing about it. Going back to the house they looked inside, the constable whistling loudly when he saw the cannabis and the weapons.
"Whoa. I always thought that the old lady was a little weird, but I had no idea this was why. Mind you, it would explain a few things in this neighbourhood over the years."

"Wait until you see the bunker," Taylor said. "That's pretty impressive whichever way you look at it." Yori walked over and prodded the old woman, who was faintly snoring, which made her twitch and wake up. Looking around she spotted the new faces and scowled. "Right. I'm officially placing you under arrest for narcotics supply, multiple firearms violations, attempted murder, and attempted bribery of a public official," Taylor told her with satisfaction. He read her her rights while the local Sergeant wrote down the details of the arrest. The old woman refused to give her name, which didn't help as the local police were familiar with it. It turned out to be Emily Williams. When they were done she was, fairly gently with due respect for her age, heaved to her feet and escorted to one of the police cars, soon finding herself safely locked away in the back.

"The drugs squad and the crime scene people will be here in about an hour. They're going to have fun for some time with all this lot." DS Taylor looked satisfied.

"We should still ask Mrs Williams about her associates. I'd prefer to do that sooner rather than later. Time really is of the essence here." Agent Naito glanced at Yori and Chou, who both nodded.

"OK. I'll get her transferred to headquarters. That will take about an hour or so, then maybe another hour to get her processed. Now she's officially booked in we have to stick more or less to normal procedure, but when she's back at base we can arrange to have you with the interrogation team."

Mike looked at him. "If there is any problem with your people let me know. I'm under orders to cooperate, the higher-ups are taking all this pretty seriously, so if you need any heavy muscle, the ASIO can lean on your superiors." Nigel grinned.

"That could be fun. Probably not needed, but I'll bear it in mind. I'll go back with them, and meet you there?" Mike nodded, exchanging phone numbers with the detective. "OK, I'll call when we're back. You guys could go and get lunch or something, it's... hmm, it's only half past eleven. Hmph. Felt like later, with all the excitement." Yori smiled.

"Don't worry, we like eating. We'll find something." Shaking his hand, she led the rest of the Japanese people outside, Mike following after a quick good-bye. "Back to the ASIO building?" she asked him.

"May as well. Less people to see anything weird." He grinned, as did she.

"Fair enough. OK, Aiko, when you're ready." The petite brunette nodded with a smile, then they vanished. Nigel, who had been watching from the house, blinked at the brilliance of the flash.

"What the hell was that?" Sergeant Wiley said, looking up from where she was cataloguing the guns on the table. He shrugged, smiling a little.

"Difficult to explain..."

Officer Michael Graham was having a much more interesting day than he'd expected. This whole magic business was interesting anyway, but to actually meet the people involved in a number of events that were so far outside normal experience was something he was finding a lot of fun. He could certainly have done without the being shot at part, true enough, but otherwise so far everything made him pleased to have the job he had. He'd been researching the issue of the 'portal devices' since the Japanese government circulated the warning after the operation in Tokyo, at first with a significant scepticism, but after a fairly short time, with growing belief.
Interviews with a few people who had been to the Minato area of Japan, all of who had at least one weird story to tell, had made it clear something unusual, at least to people outside that country, was going on. He'd traced a few expatriate Japanese citizens from there, as well as a couple from a place called Nerima, the latter of whom seemed very relieved to be living in Australia. One had point-blank refused to talk about her life in Nerima, while the other had only been able to discuss it after he'd bought him several drinks. Then he had trouble getting the man to shut up about it. What they considered 'martial arts' in that place sounded insane, even if one discounted the more spectacular stories as hyperbole.

The former residents of Minato were, on the whole, happier to talk about their experiences, although most of them were also quite pleased to no longer be there. They all had stories of these Magical Girls getting it on with demons of one sort or another, and in many cases causing more damage. That agreed with the information he acquired through other channels. The arrival of the pair of Yori and Chou some three or so years ago seemed to have marked a turning point in the collateral damage, though, since they seemed to be surprisingly effectively reining in the more excessive enthusiasms of the various groups. No one seemed too clear on exactly how other than it involved a considerable amount of shouting.

He'd laid hands on some recorded TV footage of encounters between Yori and one or other of the groups, as a result having an entertaining afternoon watching them and howling with laughter. She ripped into them like the world's most ferocious drill sergeant, making that old cliché so beloved of movies seem somewhat understated. It was hysterically funny, even if he didn't catch all the Japanese nuances. Mike spoke the language reasonably well, which was one of the reasons he had been given the assignment in the first place, but he was also sure he was missing a lot of subtlety. After a considerable amount of effort he finally also managed to get a copy of a video shot in a park somewhere in Minato sometime in late autumn the year before, a video he'd heard rumours of for some time but which was remarkably hard to track down. Watching that one had made him simply sit quietly for nearly forty minutes, just appreciating the sheer artistry and skill of the two women involved. Sitting opposite them and watching one of them shovel sushi into her face like some sort of eating machine didn't detract from the beauty of what he'd seen, although it did make him smile at the contrast.

Chou noticed him watching Yori and smiled slightly. "She likes sushi," the blonde said calmly, eating her own food very neatly and politely. He noticed that even so she was packing away a considerable amount of it. The other girls were also eating enough to stun a fairly large man.

"I can see," he chuckled, taking another bite of a tuna roll. "So do I, but I suspect her capacity is larger than mine."

"Her capacity is larger than almost anyone's," Azumi noted dryly from the end of the table. He glanced at her, noticing that she was almost smiling. The air of cold competence coming from her wasn't diminished at all, but he also somehow felt she meant no harm. That said, the young woman was... disconcerting. Her orange eyes met his and she nodded slightly, making him smile back, feeling she had a fairly good idea what he was thinking.

Agent Naito came back into the restaurant, having taken a large roll of Yen to the bank across the street to change into local currency. "Here you go, Yori." He handed her an envelope and sat down.

"Thanks," she said, pulling out some Australian dollars and distributing them to the others, before handing the remainder to Chou. Once more the PSIA agent wondered what the source of their income was, they certainly didn't seem to lack funds.

"We seem to have at least proven that the device was here, so we're heading in the right direction,"
he commented, finishing his coffee and waving to the waitress for a refill, thanking her politely when she complied. "That's something. But I'm not happy about our chances of finding the thing in time. Tracking this young man could be problematic."

"There is very little choice, we have to try as the consequences are unpleasant otherwise," Chou replied. "Hopefully Mrs Williams can give us the names of her associates so we can locate them and see if they can give us more information on her grandson. At the moment we simply have too little information to go on. Then, if we can find him, hopefully we can get the name of the buyer out of him. It's one small step at a time. Rather frustrating." Sipping some water, she put the glass down and sighed. "I would much prefer just to be able to go directly to the end of the hunt, but that isn't feasible."

"We'll find it," Yori reassured her, smiling at the blonde woman, who smiled back. Mike watched them with interest. There was little in his research that gave much in the way of information on the relationship between these two, other than it was long lasting and close. He had a suspicion it was deeper than that. Yori glanced at him, then smirked a little, clearly understanding his gaze. "So, I guess you've researched us and the various incidents surrounding these devices? Find anything interesting?" He laughed.

"It was assigned to me when the warning first went out, for a number of reasons, and to be honest it's been very interesting. My bosses first wanted me to find out whether any of it was true. They were very sceptical, you understand, at first. If your warning hadn't come from so high up in the Japanese system I think it would have been ignored." Yori glanced at Agent Naito, who shrugged a little. "But considering the source, it was felt that we had to take it seriously. I was assigned to look into the whole thing and produce a report on it. It's been difficult, you two particularly are very difficult to find information on."

"Good. That's the idea."

Mike chuckled. "I thought as much. I'm very impressed by your security, it's much better than pretty much anyone else's I've dealt with." She seemed pleased. "To be honest, I wasn't concerned with your private life, merely whether the entire concept was real. There was quite a lot of evidence fairly easily obtainable that showed it was. Recorded news segments, eye-witness testimony, reports from visitors to Tokyo, that sort of thing. Even one DVD I finally tracked down that was the most incredible show I've ever seen." Yori looked at Chou, both of them seeming slightly embarrassed.

"Ah. That one. Yes, it seems to impress people," she said with a small smile.

"If you ever get tired of the action side of life you have a great future as artists," he said seriously. "That was some of the most impressive... I don't really know what to call it, martial arts seems too limited." Mike shrugged a little, trying to decide on a description. "Dancing, perhaps? Certainly the last part. Performance I suppose is the best. You even provide your own special effects. It was beautiful."

"Thank you," Chou replied, smiling at him in a way that made him feel happy.

"You're welcome. I watch it occasionally when I need a boost. The music was amazingly well done as well."

"That band is very good," she said. "I would like to do something like that again at some point. It was enormous fun."

"It certainly looked like you were enjoying yourselves." Eating a little more sushi, he pushed his
plate away, full. "After the London incident, people started taking the whole thing much more seriously. I found that I suddenly got a lot more attention when I needed things, as well as some assistants. We've been studying the Magical Girl phenomenon ever since." He looked at them curiously. "I can accept magic, now at any rate, since there's so much evidence for it. Once we started looking into it we found things all over the world that could be explained quite well like that. The question I'm still puzzled by is why magical girls? I mean, surely magic is used by both men and women, where it's used?"

"Certainly it is. There aren't a lot of mages around, it has to be said, but they're not vanishingly rare either. Some of them are very good, some not so much, but they're fairly evenly mixed between male and female. And they're all over the world although we do have a lot more of them in Japan, specifically in the Minato ward of Tokyo, than most places. I have to confess we're in the dark at the moment as to the reason the Magical Girls, specifically, exist, though," Chou replied. "And why it's so specifically a Japanese thing. There have been one or two in other places over the years, but oddly, normally even they are of Japanese descent. It's something of a mystery."

"Why Minato?" he asked. "Tokyo is a very large city, it seems odd that this would be limited to such a small part of it." She shrugged.

"Again, we're not sure. There is an undeniable fact that portals seem to be more easily opened there and as a result we get a lot of otherworldly travel to and through the place. As a result the magical world thrives there although it's not obvious in most cases unless you look for it. We're the leaders in interactions with visitors from other places, by a very large margin. You'd be quite surprised how many so-called demons trade with people in Minato, or even live there. Even the locals would be somewhat shocked." She grinned at the look on his face. "Most of them are very nice people. Many are friends of ours."

Naito was listening with amused interest. He chuckled a little, causing Mike to look at him. "I had the same reaction the first time I found out about this. The PSIA has been watching the whole magical girl thing for a long time, with considerable interest, but we didn't know very much about it. A lot less than we thought we did, actually. Talking to Yori and Chou has improved our knowledge more in the last eight months or so than the previous thirty years. I was one of the ones who was involved with filling some of the data requests your ASIO had, I know the information we passed on. Most of it is quite recent, but it leaves a lot unanswered, quite a lot of which I suspect we'll never know. At least officially." He looked around at the seven females who were watching and listening. "They're friendly, but they don't talk much about themselves or their friends. Only about the general situation." Seven women laughed.

"We like you, Agent Naito, and respect both you and the PSIA, but we have to be very careful," Yori said with a chuckle. "Privacy comes naturally to us. Plus there are some things that aren't the business of anyone who isn't directly involved."

"That's understood, by some amazingly high up people, trust me. There is a lot of respect both ways." Naito smiled at her, then finished off his last piece of tuna. Mike listened with interest. The mutual respect between the government representative and these people who could only be described, something even they would likely agree with, as wild cards, was very unusual but fascinating. He wondered if it would even be possible any place other than Japan, at least to this degree.

"The local Minato police are remarkably comfortable with the whole thing," the Japanese agent said, looking at the Australian one. "They have a very good relationship with several of the groups and a number of the visitors. I've been surprised in the past how completely unsurprised they are about very weird things happening. Things that even the PSIA finds a little odd they just take in
Yori grinned. "We like to help where we can. Although, that said, some of the girls are extremely disrespectful of the police. That's an attitude Chou and I have tried hard to correct. Generally speaking the police are worthy of respect, we feel, they do a difficult job with none of the advantages we enjoy. Being rude to them is just... rude."

"I've seen recordings of some of your corrective actions," Mike replied, a look of amusement on his face. "They seem unusually effective. Also rather loud and intimidating." Yori grinned again, while Chou sighed a little. The other girls laughed.

"She is fond of shouting," Aiko said, snickering. "It's very funny to watch. I've seen some of the girls she's yelled at literally stand to attention and do everything except shout 'Ma'am, Yes, Ma'am!' when she really gets going. The ones that don't start crying, that is." Yori had an expression half-way between exasperation and embarrassment.

"I'm not that bad." All the other girls except Chou exchanged glances, then nodded.

"Yes, you are," they chorused, making her laugh. Chou smiled, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"You can be rather intimidating, dear." Yori looked at her with a small smile.

"Look who's talking. The last person you got angry at had a heart attack while you were talking to him." The blonde looked at the table, going slightly pink.

"He was a very unpleasant man." Mike glanced at Naito, who nodded, looking slightly worried. Clearly the memory was one he recalled vividly. The ASIO man made a mental note to ask, he was curious now. Just then his phone rang. Looking at it, he nodded.

"It's DS Taylor." He answered, having a short conversation, then hung up. "They'll be ready for us in about fifteen minutes. Mrs Williams isn't all that cooperative, apparently." Yori glanced at Chou, who nodded slightly.

"She'll talk to us, I think." There was a look on her face that made Mike's blood run cold for a moment.

Emily Williams, despite the tough exterior she was putting on, was worried. At rather more than seventy years of age she was too old to find the prospect of jail anything other than very worrying at best, and she knew full well that her little operation was going to attract a very long sentence. It seemed likely that she was going to spend the rest of her life behind bars. Even so, though, she was going to make the pigs work for anything they wanted from her. She didn't like the police at all. To be honest she didn't like anyone, but the police were at the top of the list.

Once more she cursed her damn grandson under her breath. The little shit had somehow brought the pigs right to her front door, something she’d avoided for twenty-five years, longer than he’d been alive. 'I should have strangled the little fucker the moment he popped out of Susan,' she thought bitterly. 'I knew he was trouble, just like that lazy bastard of a father of his. Good thing someone else got him before I had to, saved me the trouble of disposing of another body.' She looked up as the door to the interrogation room opened, admitting the cop who had arrested her along with the government man who'd been with him. They closed the door after the two officers who had been watching her carefully, one male and one female, stepped outside.

"Hello, Emily. May I call you Emily?" DS Taylor said politely, sitting down in the other side of the
table and turning on the recorder. She glared at him, not saying anything. After a moment he shrugged. "Emily it is, then. You're in a lot of trouble. Production of narcotics, assault with a deadly weapon, attempted bribery, quite a large number of other offences. Even theft of electricity." Her glare deepened and he smiled a little. "It's funny, really, if you'd simply answered the door all we wanted to ask was about the online auction that it seems your grandson was involved in. Everything else is a direct result of your unfortunate decision to fire that shotgun through the door without even checking who was on the other side." His expression hardened. "Something that I'm personally not very happy about. So, here we are."

"We still want to know the location of your grandson, Emily," the other man said calmly. "Will you cooperate?" She transferred her glare to him.

"Fuck off."

"Ah. Not feeling helpful, then?" She gave him a thin-lipped smile full of anger. "Oh, well. Regardless, you're going to spend a long time in jail, but cooperation at this point might mean the difference between the rest of your life or just most of the rest of your life." Emily stared wordlessly at him. "No? Oh, well. We're going to keep asking anyway."

"We'd like to know about your associates, please, Emily," the cop said, pushing a notebook and pen towards her. She glanced at it, then crossed her arms defiantly. "We know for a fact that there were at least eight other people involved, from the fingerprints we've already found and our initial interviews with your neighbours. We need to talk to them." Shaking her head, she spoke for the first time.

"You're not going to get anything out of me. You're wasting your time." They returned her look, then glanced at each other.

"We don't have time for this," the government man said quietly to his colleague. "Perhaps we should allow Yori to talk to her as she suggested."

"Probably a good idea." Taylor studied Emily for a moment. "Hopefully she'll survive, we still need to question her more about the cannabis operation." They stood, while she wondered what they were talking about. 'Yori' must be that short Japanese girl who was at the house along with the others, the one who had been asking all the questions. She was puzzled as to who they were and what their relation to the pigs was. The last comment of the cop was also somewhat worrying.

The sound of the door closing interrupted her musings just as she was about to ask for more information. Now it was too late. Shortly after, the door opened again, admitting the girl with the deep black hair in a long braid, along with another one wearing a long leather coat, who had hair that was almost a metallic silver, and orange eyes. They were each holding a mug of coffee, the silver-haired one having two. Pulling out the chairs they sat and stared at her. She stared back. Eventually the black-haired one pushed a mug towards her. "Coffee?"

"You're not cops," she said, before glancing at the mug. After a moment she picked it up, drinking a third of it thirstily.

"No. We have no official standing with the Australians at all, we've only visiting. I'm Yori, this is Azumi." She indicated her companion, who was silently sipping her own coffee, watching Emily carefully. "But we're working with them on a very important case. Think of us as consultants."

Emily shrugged, drinking a little more. The coffee was surprisingly good.

"OK. Not that it matters."
"We need to find your grandson. He has information that's vital in stopping a terrorist attack that could kill possibly hundreds of people, but he doesn't know it. Will you help us find him?"

"No. I don't care. About him, or you, or any of these other people." Finishing her coffee she put the mug down hard. Yori raised an eyebrow.

"That's a rather callous outlook on life. Are you sure? It might make the courts look more favourably on you from what I've been told. You're facing some very serious charges. The police really don't like being shot at. Neither do I."

"Do I look like I give a shit?" she snapped. "There's nothing you can say that will change my mind."

Azumi smiled coldly. "I wouldn't put money on it," she commented in an icy voice, the mere tone of it making a chill run down Emily's back. There was little emotion in that voice, but what there was seemed fairly predatory. Like a shark talking to it's next meal. She looked uncertainly at the young woman, then returned her attention to Yori.

"I'd be quite pleased if you would reconsider your position, Emily. You'd be helping a lot of people."

"This is some sort of good cop bad cop thing isn't it?" the old woman said patronisingly. "It won't work."

Yori smiled at her.

She shivered, feeling her heart nearly stop for a moment. That smile was much worse than Azumi's. Forget sharks and meals, this was demons from hell looking at their next soul.

"Oh, no," the girl said in a soft voice full of menace, "it's much worse than that. This is bad cop, really bad cop. Guess which one I am?"

Shaking, Emily suddenly picked up her mug and flung it directly at the girl. Who, without taking her eyes off her own, reached out and caught it in a flash of motion too quick to see. Holding it she glanced at it briefly, then handed it to Azumi, who put it on the table in front of her. "That was careless. You seem to have slipped."

"Who the fuck are you people?" she asked apprehensively.

"Consultants, as I said." Emily stared at her.

"To who? Satan?" This made them both look amused.

"No. At the moment, to the Australian government, and the Japanese one. So, will you please tell us about your associates?" About to defiantly tell the girl to fuck off again, the words died in her mouth as she noticed what Azumi was doing. Leaning on one elbow, appearing mildly bored, she was running one finger around and around the rim of the mug that Emily had thrown, while staring directly at her. The unusual, and under the circumstances, very worrying thing about this otherwise normal action, was that there was a small ball of green energy covering the end of that finger, glowing dimly in the brightly lit interrogation room. As it passed over the rim of the cup a small amount of it simply vanished with a faint hissing noise, to the effect that the mug was gradually disappearing. Around and around the finger went, less and less mug being left each time. Emily stared in horror.

"What the fuck are you?" she mumbled. Yori glanced at her companion, then nudged her. Azumi
appeared disappointed in a peculiarly emotionless way, stopping what she was doing and picking up the remaining half of the mug.

"Oops," she said calmly, before putting it back down. "How silly of me."

"Emily." The voice made her return her attention to Yori. "We really need to know." The look in her eyes nearly made the old woman have an accident. "Now." The eyes, purple she absently noticed, were almost glowing. Azumi was watching her like a snake watching a mouse, a physically palpable air of cold rolling off her. Emily noticed with horror that the mug of coffee next to her, which was still half full, seemed to have frozen solid somehow. Trembling with fear, she nodded. The pigs she could handle. This... This was so far past anything she was prepared for she had no idea what it was.

"All right. I'll tell you." With trembling hands she picked up the pen that was still lying across the notebook that DS Taylor had left on the table, then began writing. Yori nodded with satisfaction.

"Thank you."

"She seems to be enjoying herself," Agent Naito said with a laugh. Taylor glanced at him, then back through the one-way observation window in the room adjacent to the interrogation room. "Which one? Not that old woman, certainly."

"Yori. Azumi is very hard to read. I only met her this morning."

"She's kind of scary, to be honest," Nigel said, watching the young woman smile at their suspect slightly in a way then even through the glass made him shiver.

"Trust me, Yori is a lot scarier. Absolutely terrifying, to be honest, when she wants to be." The three of them watched as the black haired girl smirked at the old woman, who looked like she was going to faint. "You see?"

They stared as Azumi began idly evaporating one of the mugs, apparently bored. Naito grinned. "Nice move. Very well judged." Shortly after that the suspect cracked, reaching for the pen and beginning writing. When she'd finished Yori nodded in satisfaction.

"Thank you. I'm sure your cooperation will be taken into account." Both girls stood and left the room, the two police officers that had been standing outside re-entering and watching the now limp with relief old lady, who almost looked pleased to see them. A few seconds later both women rejoined the three men in the observation room. Yori handed Taylor the notebook.

"Nine names and addresses. These are the people who worked for her. Apparently they're members of some motorcycle gang that's based in the general area a lot of the time. I would imagine that means they're not likely to be hugely cooperative." He looked through the scrawled writing, nodding.

"That type can be difficult. I'll get people out to all these addresses and round them up," Looking at her he smiled. "That was impressive. Deeply worrying, but impressive." She looked pleased.

"I'm surprised there was no lawyer in with her."

"She refused when we offered. Hates lawyers nearly as much as the police for some reason. It's not my problem if she wants to represent herself, she'll do more damage than good in all probability."
"OK." Yori tapped one name on the list. "Apparently this one is the leader of the gang. It might be worth grabbing him first. The next name is his second in charge, he's probably a good one to go for as well. According to Emily in there these people are fairly violent and not likely to be pleased to see the police. She also said they're well armed." The girl looked seriously at him. "We could deal with this for you."

"I talked to my superiors, they would prefer us to deal with it ourselves. No offence."

"None taken, of course, but please remember we need to do this as quickly as possible. Let us know if we can help."

"I will do." He nodded to her and Azumi, then left the room. She sighed a little watching him go.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she muttered.

"We have to let them deal with it if they want, Yori," Naito said to her, while Azumi and Mike listened. "We're only guests here, we don't have any official standing."

"I know." The young woman sighed again. "I'm just worried about the time, and also I don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"We do appreciate that," Mike said, stepping forward. "I'll talk to my own bosses and see if we can push this along, but at the moment it's a police operation."

"It seems a little odd to allow us here then not allow us to help," Azumi commented emotionlessly. He looked at her before nodding slightly.

"True. We seem to be having mixed messages, I'm afraid. I'll see what I can do to clear it up."

"Let's get back to the others," Yori suggested. "If Tamiko or Misaki gets bored odd things might start happening." Agent Naito looked alarmed, opening the door and hurrying out. She snickered. "He's so easy sometimes..."

Laughing, Mike followed her and Azumi as they went after the PSIA man.

"Well, this is boring," Tamiko said, glancing at Naito with a slight smile. "We could go and have fun like we did in LA..." He went pale.

"Um, no, I think it would be a good idea to wait for Detective Taylor to let us know what's happening," the agent said, looking at Chou as the most likely to come to his aid. His eyes were pleading. She smiled gently at him, nodding agreement.

"The Agent is correct, Tamiko," she said in her soft voice, making him wilt a little in relief. He was used to dealing with difficult people, but the magical girls were a different kettle of fish entirely. He liked them very much but they could be quite a handful. LA still gave him the cold sweats. Thanking her with his expression he went back to making notes on the trip so far for his report.

Yori was grinning at him, sensing what he was thinking. She sighed theatrically. "I agree with Tamiko, this is a little boring. I hope they don't take too long." All of them turned to look when Officer Graham came into the conference room, Tamiko and Misaki with hope in their eyes. He stopped, looking around at them, then sat next to his Japanese counterpart.

"My superiors have decided to let the police handle this for the moment, although they asked me to pass along the message that they were aware of the time constraint and if nothing useful happens in
the next few hours, they'd rethink it." He shrugged. "Sorry, that's the best I can do."

"That's all right, Mike," Chou said graciously. "We don't mind waiting." She gave Yori a hard look when the other woman raised a hand with an impish smile. "Do we?" Yori lowered her hand looking abashed.

"No, love." She grinned as Chou nodded, satisfied. "So, what do you do for fun around here?" she asked curiously. "Back home we normally go and find some minor criminals or a hostile demon or two and terrify them. It worked amazingly well in LA as well. There are an awful lot of gang members there, you hardly even have to try to find them, they find you..." Naito sighed, remembering.

"I didn't enjoy being bait." All the girls, even Chou, laughed. Mike was looking between them, wondering what they were talking about.

"You got two all by yourself, Agent," Misaki said with a grin. "That's not a bad score under the circumstances." He smiled a little.

Shaking his head, Officer Graham decided he didn't want to know. "Well, while crime here isn't as bad as in LA, there are a fair few troublemakers. Although I don't think we should be going looking for them at the moment."

"Aww..." Tamiko looked at him with a giggle. He smiled back.

"We could go and look at the various sights while we wait for the police operations to finish. They're out looking for all the people on the list and DS Taylor thinks we should have the first of them within a few hours. Some of the addresses are a considerable distance away, though, which may take time."

"Have we learned any more about Geoffrey Young, Mike?" Chou asked. He pulled a folder from under his arm, opening it and looking through it.

"A little. He has a passport, but it hasn't been used in the last six months. I've put a block on it as well as a notification alert. He won't be able to leave the country, not that it helps a lot, but it's something. We know he hasn't left, at least using that identity. In all probability he's still around. He has a fairly clean record, some minor run-ins with the police, a caution for cannabis possession, two parking tickets, that sort of thing. Nothing major. Other than that, not much. He doesn't seem to have a bank account or any credit cards, his driving license is up to date, nothing that stands out. There's an alert out on his license as well. No mobile phone number on record, so that doesn't help much." He pulled a glossy colour photo of a young man matching the description Emily Williams had given them. "We do at least have this." Pushing the folder across the table to the blonde he watched as she and Yori quickly looked through it.

"Nothing very useful there at all except for that photo. At least we know what he looks like." Yori sighed, mildly disappointed. "I really want to be out doing something rather than sitting around." Several of the young women nodded. Azumi had taken possession of the folder and was reading everything in it very carefully, Naito noted. Eventually she closed it and returned it to the ASIO man.

"Very little to go on. Hopefully he will either use the internet, which will allow us to trace him, or turn up as a result of the police searches." Naito looked at her curiously.

"Do you think he could be traced that easily if he does use the net?" She nodded, smiling slightly.
"Ms Aoyama is very good at that sort of thing. He has not been seen online since the sale completed. I passed his details on when we got them, she's searching, but so far has found nothing. I'll be notified if something does turn up."

"All right. That sounds good." He studied her for a little longer.

"Do you have a question, Agent?" she asked, coolly polite. Slowly nodding, he didn't reply for a moment.

Eventually he asked, "How well do you know Ms Aoyama?" It was her turn to study him.

"Very well indeed. We've known each other for a very long time." She seemed amused.

"Can she be trusted? I have to admit I find her... off-putting. Terrifying, to be honest. Even more so than Yori." The black-haired girl looked mildly insulted.

"Really? I'll have to work harder." Chou nudged her in the ribs and she subsided, grinning a little.

"I trust Ms Aoyama as much as I trust myself," Azumi said after a moment. For some reason Tamiko giggled. He nodded slowly.

"All right. I'll take your word for it."

"Who is Ms Aoyama?" Mike asked curiously. He didn't recognise the name.

"A colleague of ours," Yori answered. "She is exceptionally good at intelligence operations. She was responsible for the lead that led us to find the LA portal device, and as a result the New York one, and she also tracked this one down. We would have been far too late in the US without her. A very large number of people probably owe their lives to her." Azumi glanced at her but said nothing.

"She's not the sort of person you forget in a hurry," Agent Naito said, with a slight shudder. "Trust me. Even if you want to." The seven magical girls all seemed to think this was quite funny.

"She's not that bad, Agent, surely? She grows on you after a while." Chou smiled at him.

"She's the creepiest person I've ever met," he replied. "She'd give a ghost nightmares."

"I met a ghost once," Azumi said, apropos of nothing. Everyone looked at her. "Nice girl." After a moment, when it became apparent nothing else was going to be said on the matter, they all decided not to comment.

"Right." Mike looked at the silver haired girl for a few seconds longer. She smiled slightly at him. Feeling that this mysterious Ms Aoyama might have competition in the creepy arena, he looked at Yori instead. "While we wait why don't we go and look around? From what you said many of you have never been to Australia before." Aiko and Fumiko looked at each other and laughed.

"We should go back to the Sushi place in Brisbane some time. It was amazing." Aiko smiled, while Mike stared, then shrugged.

"OK. So, what would you like to see?"

"Uluru might be interesting. And the Opera House. Perhaps a nice beach?" Chou looked thoughtful. "Some kangaroos, I've never seen one in real life."

Misaki looked interested. "Oh, some crocodiles! I like crocodiles."
Tamiko grinned at him. "That place all the wine comes from, um, the Barossa valley, that could be fun." He laughed.

"You realise all those places are thousands of kilometres apart?" They exchanged glances, then looked at him steadily. After a moment he got it. "Oh. Right. Teleportation again. I keep forgetting." Aiko seemed very amused.

"It's something you get very used to very fast, trust me, Mike."

Agent Naito chuckled, turning to the ASIO officer. "It's completely ridiculous. When we were in LA we went home to Tokyo for a change of clothes for a barbecue. Fifteen thousand kilometre round trip to change my suit." He chuckled. "To be honest, there's no real reason to stay in Australia while we wait, we could just go home, which is something that does indeed take a lot of getting used to."

"There's no fun in that, Agent," Chou said, smiling gently. "If one is on a mission, so to speak, one should stay focussed and in the same country as the mission." He grinned.

"I take your point."

"Well, then, shall we go walkabout, as we say around these parts?" Mike stood, as did the others. Tamiko looked at him with a smile on her lips.

"Aside from the accent, you don't speak the same way as we hear on TV," she said. "I was looking forward to talking Australian. I've been practising! G'day, Mate, where are the drongos now?" He burst out laughing.

"We don't all talk like Crocodile Dundee, you know." She looked disappointed. Patting her on the shoulder, Aiko urged her to move to the place all the others were standing, giggling.

"So, where to first?" Chou looked at the brunette.

"Uluru, I think. I've always wanted to see it."

Aiko nodded, the world flickered, and it was suddenly very bright and very hot. "Gah. That's a shock to the system," Naito said, immediately sweating heavily. He noticed that none of the girls seemed particularly bothered by the heat, even Azumi who in her black leather coat looked like she should be comatose from heat exhaustion. If anything she looked less bothered than anyone but Yori. Noticing his expression, she looked mildly amused and moved to stand next to him. A sudden drop in temperature made him look at her in mixed surprise and thanks. "I have no idea how you're doing that but thank you," he said, meaning it.

"You're welcome, Agent," she replied. They looked around. A few kilometres away was the impressive sight of what had once been known mainly as Ayer's Rock, a huge red sandstone outcrop sticking out of the otherwise largely featureless desert in a somewhat unlikely manner. "That is certainly impressive," she added, looking at it with interest.

"Indeed," Chou said. She glanced at Yori. "Feel that?" The black-haired girl nodded slowly.

"Interesting. There's a source of magic somewhere under it. Very old, not very powerful now, but it must have been huge a long time ago. I wonder if that's why the local people have so many legends surrounding it?"

"It seems likely."
"Shall we go closer?" Aiko asked. They all gathered around her and with a flicker they were standing mere metres away from the point the rock rose from the plain. Once more they dispersed. A number of people, apparently tourists, were scattered around the place, while several coaches and quite a few cars were parked some distance away. Naito stuck closely to Azumi as she walked around looking at everything, the others dispersing widely. Several tourists looked at them curiously, as their attire seemed slightly out of place for the area, but no one seemed ready to say anything.

"I believe the local Aboriginal people don't like tourists climbing the rock," Azumi noted, looking at a trail of tourists heading up a path in the distance.

"That doesn't seem to be stopping them," Naito said.

"No." They headed back towards Yori and Chou.

"I wish I'd thought to bring a camera," the agent mused. He blinked when a rather nice Nikon SLR was handed to him by the girl walking beside him. There was no obvious place she could have been keeping it.

"Use mine. It's loaded with a fresh roll of Fuji Velvia 50. Please don't drop it." The girl looked at him, a slight smile on her lips.

"Thanks," he managed, gingerly taking the camera from her. She waited while he composed and took a few shots. They resumed walking, reaching Yori as Tamiko and Officer Graham did from the opposite direction.

"It's a pretty damn big rock," Tamiko said, staring at the outcrop. "Nice colour, as well."

"Dawn and sunset is the best time, it looks absolutely amazing then," Mike said, following her gaze. "There's a good reason so many photos are taken of it."

"It's YOU!" came a shout from behind them. Chou and Yori exchanged glances, then turned, as did the others. A teenaged boy, American judging by the Stars and Stripes t-shirt he was wearing, not to mention his accent, was staring at them.

"Oh, god," Yori muttered. "Him. What the hell is he doing here?"

"It is somewhat unlikely, dear," Chou said calmly. "But you know how these things go with us. I imagine he's on holiday." The teenager ran up to them, dragging a woman behind him who seemed to be his mother.

"I can't find anything about that movie you were promoting in LA and I've looked everywhere," the boy said excitedly, staring at Yori fixedly. "I went to every studio, none of them would tell me anything. There's all sorts of rumours on the internet but no one seems to know anything. When is it coming out? What's it called? Who's starring in it? Are you starring in it? What's your name? Are you really Japanese? How did you do all those things outside Mann's? Do you really know Martial Arts? Was it just a trick? What's the plot of the movie?" He stopped to take a breath while the woman beside and behind him sighed, looking apologetically at the little group.

"I'm sorry, he just won't shut up about it." She gave her son a hard look which he completely missed. Chou smiled at her in a kindly manner.

Yori shook her head, looking torn between yelling and rolling around laughing. In the end she settled for sighing heavily. "Look, kid, there is no movie! You understand?" He stared at her, outraged.
"No movie? You were promoting it, I saw it! It was on the radio and even on entertainment news on TV. Of course there's a movie. You can't fool me. You people have the weirdest promotional system I've ever heard of, but it's brilliant. All my friends want to see it. When's it coming out? Just tell me the name, even." He looked pleadingly at her. She glanced at his mother.

"Bit of a movie fan, then, is he?" The older woman rolled her eyes.

"You have no idea."

The teenager kept jabbering, following them around for a few minutes. Naito was trying not to laugh, while Yori was clearly becoming mildly annoyed. Eventually the other girls returned, looking curiously at the sight before them. Fumiko put her hand over her eyes for a moment when she recognised the young man while Misaki grinned. "You're all here! That's great. Are you going to do another fight scene?" He looked around eagerly. "Where are the cameras? I guess they must be hidden. Is the movie going to be set in Australia?" Shaking her head, Yori turned to Aiko, who was trying to keep a straight face.

"I think we should probably go." The brunette nodded, giggling.

"Can we stop at the last place so I can get a good photo?" Naito asked.

"Sure." Aiko waited for them to all gather around her, while the teenager watched with great interest. His mother was looking apologetic again.

"Are you going to do a fight scene now?" he asked. Yori sighed, while Chou giggled and nudged her. Aiko laughed, grinning at the boy.

"No, something better. Watch closely." He stared, while she glanced at his mother. "Close your eyes." The older woman studied her for a moment, then did as requested. The teenaged boy, of course, didn't. Winking at him she teleported.

When his vision had recovered he looked wildly around, then grinned so widely his head was in danger of separating into two pieces.

"That movie is going to be AMAZING!"

"It was very funny, Yori," Chou said, glancing at her partner, smiling slightly. Yori nodded a little.

"I suppose so. But he just won't stop!" With a shrug she joined the others who were looking down on a pleasantly bucolic scene, a wide valley stretching away in front of them with dozens of what were clearly vineyards visible right out to the horizon. Tiny dots of people were visible moving around in between the vines, picking the grapes. "That's an awful lot of grapes," she added.

"The south Australian wine industry is pretty big," Mike said, moving to stand beside them. "I don't know a huge amount about it but I think most of those people are only around to pick the grapes. It's very seasonal work, of course."

"I like Australian wine," Chou said, looking around. "Penfolds is quite nice. There are some dreadful ones as well."

"It's all spoiled grape juice to me," Yori said, chuckling. "Taking perfectly good fruit juice and letting it go bad. How can you build a tradition on that? It's crazy!" Chou looked at her fondly.

"That's because you have no sense for the finer things in life, dear," she said quietly. The other
woman looked at her with a grin.

"Thanks a lot."

Laughing, Naito glanced at them. "We should probably find a good wine shop. Perhaps there are some decent deals here? I like Australian wine as well and my wife loves it, she'd certainly like me to bring a few bottles back." Aiko walked over to them and pointed.

"How about trying that town down there? It looks a decent size, it must have some shops in it." Shortly they were standing in a car park outside a place that did indeed seem to be a purveyor of alcoholic beverages. Entering, they received a number of odd glances, but once again no one seemed too concerned. Everyone wandered off to look at the stock, Yori going with Chou despite obviously having no real interest in it.

Mike was in the process of reading the label on the back of a bottle of Shiraz when a loud altercation at the till made him look up. The shop owner was angrily arguing with a large man who seemed insistent on leaving with a case of beer without paying for it. The various patrons of the store stopped what they were doing, watching the argument, one or two of them, obviously locals, beginning to move to intervene. The man suddenly pulled a small pistol from his belt under his jacket, pointing it at the shop owner, making everyone else freeze.

"I'm fucking taking it! So back off or I'll blow your face off." The man behind the desk raised his hands and stepped back as far as he could manage in the tight confines of the till area.

"Look, mate, we don't need that. Just take it and go." The thief, satisfied and drunk with both power and some beer he'd already imbibed before deciding he needed more, motioned with the pistol. "Open the till. I think I want what's in it."

"Hey. You only wanted the beer just now." The thief smirked slightly drunkenly.

"And now I want more. Tough luck. Open it." As the shopkeeper angrily turned to follow the instructions, he looked past the man and stopped dead.

After a few moments of staring, he looked back to the thief and said casually, "You might want to rethink your plan, mate." Puzzled, the man stared at him. Becoming aware that for some reason his back seemed to be getting very cold, not to mention the way the shop had gone dead quiet in a manner that even his gun hadn't managed to produce, he glanced over his own shoulder. The gun sagged a little in his grip as he went white.

Behind him were arrayed seven young women, one in the middle a metre and a half away glaring icily at him, six more in a half circle behind her. None of them looked happy. The closest one gave him a very unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. Her unusual silver hair and very disconcerting orange eyes were bad enough, the long black leather coat added a certain air of danger, but it was the base-ball sized spheres of green energy she was holding in either hand that were the icing on the cake. A definite wash of cold air was coming from her and he even noticed that there seemed to be frost forming on her sleeves.

The way the other six girls were holding a number of visibly glowing edged weapons was certainly something that concentrated his mind and sobered him up pretty damn fast. The ones on either end even seemed to have what looked for all the world like a real light-sabre each. He swallowed.

"Put the gun down," the silver-haired girl said in a voice that could have replaced the cold-room at the back of the shop for the effect it had on him. He shivered.
"Um. Don't want to," he replied, trying to be brave. She raised an eyebrow.

"Now."

Deciding that he'd go down fighting he swung the pistol in her direction as fast as he could manage. It wasn't nearly fast enough. One ball of energy caught him in the chest with a loud crack, while the other took the gun clean out of his hand. She blurred forward faster than he could make out and grabbed it before he hit the ground, his jacket smoking slightly. Leaning over him she smiled in a manner that made him fear for his very soul, then squeezed the gun in her hand. It creaked and collapsed. A voice in his ear softly said, "Good night," giving him just time to look sideways and see violet eyes before everything went black.

The shop stayed quiet for a long moment. Azumi looked pleased, dropping what was left of the gun on the unconscious thief's chest. Turning to the shop-keeper she produced two bottles of wine and put them on the counter, saying politely, "I'd like to purchase these, please." He stared for a few seconds, then grinned broadly.

"For you, my friends, anything you all want is at cost." She smiled while behind her the various other patrons of the shop began discussing what had happened.

"Holy shit," Mike whispered, glancing at Naito, who smiled and shrugged.

"She's being trained by them. I think she's learned her profession very well, personally." Mike stared at him, then at the seven women, who were browsing the shop as if nothing had happened. Yori had neatly tucked the would-be thief in a corner out of the way so he wouldn't inconvenience anybody and was now looking at a display of snacks, whistling softly to herself. Eventually he went back to what he was doing, thinking that the stories didn't do it justice. Not even slightly.

By the end of their shopping trip Chou and Yori had somehow made several cases of wine vanish, while the store owner was adding up the total. Accepting a large quantity of notes he looked pleased. "Thank you for dealing with our friend here," he said, picking up the phone. "I'll call the police now. I thought it would be a good idea to let you finish shopping first."

"Thanks," Yori said. She studied the thief for a moment or two. "He'll be out for about another twenty minutes, I'd say."

"Sounds good. Thanks for the business, come again any time. Twenty-five percent discount for life." The store owner grinned at her, then switched his attention to the phone as it was answered. "Ah. Hello, I'd like to report an attempted robbery, please." By the time he looked all the girls and the two men with them were gone. A bright flash came from outside his shop, making him stare for a moment, then dismiss it. "No, he's still here. I don't think he's going anywhere."

DS Taylor stopped in the door of the conference room, looking around at the people in it with raised eyebrows. Tamiko was wearing a classic bush hat, with corks dangling from the brim, flicking one of them with a smile on her face. Misaki was examining a stuffed crocodile carefully. "We should have got a real one," she grumped, reaching for the packet of crackers on the table. Her sister shook her head tiredly.

"Where would you put it? Our apartment isn't that big."

"It could live in the swimming pool...?"

"I don't think they like chlorine, Misaki," Yori said patiently. "Anyway, I knew someone with a pet crocodile once, she was nuts. You're not nuts. Well..." She grinned at her friend. "Not completely
nuts at any rate." Misaki smiled at her, playing with her toy. On the other side of the table Chou had a stuffed kangaroo, which she seemed pleased with. Naito was unloading a roll of film from a camera, while Azumi and Aiko seemed to be discussing the contents of a case of wine. Next to them were half a dozen interesting shells, still with some sand on.

Staring for a moment, he shook his head in wonder. "You seem to have managed to find something to do while I was away," he commented, coming into the room and closing the door. Mike looked at him with an exhausted smile.

"You wouldn't believe where we've been," he said.

"Where?"

"Everywhere! They just don't get tired..."

Naito snickered, reloading the camera carefully. "Now you begin to understand what I have to deal with," he murmured. Chou glanced at him, then back to Yori, who was examining a genuine hand-carved boomerang with interest. Both of them smiled.

"Hmm. OK, other than that, did you have an interesting time?"

"Yes, thank you, Detective," Chou replied, looking amused and pulling a bottle of wine out of nowhere. "We got this for you. I hope you like reds." He accepted it with a small laugh.

"I do, actually. Thanks." Putting it to one side he sat, dropping a folder on the table and opening it. "Right. So far, we've rounded up three of the people on the list." He distributed several photographs. "These three. The other six we can't locate. Witnesses say they all got a phone call just after we arrested the old woman, my guess is that someone in the neighbourhood is on their payroll and warned them. We'll look into it but it's not very important right now. The main thing is that they've disappeared."

"How irritating," the blonde said mildly, looking at one of the photos. She handed it to Yori, who looked at it before passing it along. "I assume we can question these people, perhaps they can suggest the location the others have gone to. Or locations, assuming they've all hidden separately." Chou raised an eyebrow at him.

"We can question two of them. In fact, they're in the process of being fairly strongly interrogated. The last one is more of a problem, he decided that resisting arrest by means of a firearm was a brilliant idea, but turned out not to be a very good shot. Our guys were. He's in hospital and not expected to make it." Yori and Chou looked at each other.

"That shouldn't present a problem." Yori grinned at him. Naito was nodding, as were the other girls.

"You have some sort of mystical healing ability you can use to make him all better?" Taylor asked slightly sarcastically. The black-haired young woman looked very amused and nodded.

"Yes."

He stopped and stared at her for a moment. "Oh. OK, then. I guess we'd better deal with him first before it's too late."

"Which one is it?" she asked. He moved the photos around on the table, passing her one.

"This guy. Al, he's called. Albert Jones, twenty-eight, a string of drugs convictions as long as your
arm, not to mention several firearms offences. How the hell he's even out on the street is beyond me, he should have been locked up for good years ago. Very nasty piece of work."

"All right. Let's visit Mr Jones, make him all better, then extract everything he knows." She grinned maliciously.

Doctor Niven looked at the chart, then at the monitor next to the bed, which was beeping rather more erratically than he liked. "It doesn't look good," he said to the nurse who was adjusting the drip plugged into the man on the bed, who was pale and drawn. A bandaged wound on his upper chest was already slightly red-tinged. "The internal bleeding is still going on, I suspect. BP is low, pulse is all over the place. I think we'll have to go in again. The bullet must have nicked a vessel we missed the first time when it shattered on his clavicle."

"Will he survive another round of surgery?" the nurse, Rose, asked him. He shrugged. "I don't know. But he'll die for sure if we don't operate, so it's not like we have a choice." He turned as he heard footsteps behind him, finding the room had five more people in it. "Hey. Who the hell are all of you? This is a restricted area." One of the men pulled out a police ID and showed it to him.

"Detective Sergeant Taylor, NSW police. This man is a suspect we need to question." The doctor looked at him with disgust.

"Well, you're not going to get an answer, now or perhaps ever. He'll be lucky to survive another two hours even if we open him up immediately."

"That won't be necessary, Doctor," a soft voice said from beside him. He looked to see one of the other people, a tallish blonde woman of Japanese ancestry, looking carefully at the patient. The other female with the little group, a short woman with very long black hair in a braid, was standing next to the nurse on the other side of the bed. She gently moved Rose to the side, then leaned over the patient, putting her hand on his chest.

"HEY! What the hell are... you..." He trailed off in shock as her hand began glowing a pretty purple-violet colour. Beside her the nurse gasped, raising her hand to her mouth.

"Damaged aorta, repaired but leaking, nick to the gall bladder from a bullet fragment, a number of cracked ribs, one from the bullet and the rest from the surgery, chipped clavicle, several damaged nerves, very low blood pressure, and he's about three years away from lung cancer." The woman looked up at him. "Don't worry, we've got this." The blonde pulled a chair up and sat on the other side of the bed, putting her hands on the unconscious man as well. "You get the bones, I'll sort the innards, OK?" Nodding, the tall woman's hand began glowing golden as she slowly moved them around. After a moment she carefully peeled the dressing away, revealing the sutured wound with a drainage tube in it.

Removing the tube carefully, showing considerable expertise, she moved her hands over the wound, which when they passed had healed completely. A pair of tweezers was suddenly in her hand, with a small line of golden light coming from her other index finger. This sliced each suture in turn, which was expertly removed with the tweezers. When they were all out she made the small wounds they'd left vanish as well. Resuming her careful work she ran her hands over his rib-cage, then his upper chest. "The skeletal problems are done," she reported shortly. The short girl nodded absently, concentrating on her own work.

"Got the aorta sorted, the gall bladder was minor, just looking for pre-cancerous tumours in his left
lung. Want to do the right one?" With a nod the blonde went back to work. Doctor Niven watched in amazement as the two young women fixed a nearly irreparably damaged patient in less than five minutes. Rose was staring in astonishment, while even the three men who'd come in with them seemed surprised by the speed with which they worked.

"Got it, that's the last of them. He really doesn't look after himself," the black-haired girl said. One final pass and she looked pleased. "And that's the neural damage sorted. Nothing too serious, mainly some sensory ones around the bullet passage." Standing, she glanced at the doctor. "Ah, sorry, rude of us, but we were in a bit of a hurry. I'm Yori, that's my partner Chou. We're consulting for the Australian government on a rather important problem." He shook the hand she thrust in his direction, too stunned to do anything else.

"David Niven. Doctor David Niven. Surgeon." Her eyebrows went up. Sighing, he nodded. "Yes, like the British actor. I've heard all the jokes, don't bother." She chuckled a little. "OK, so mind telling me how the hell you just did whatever it was that you did there?"

Glancing at Chou, Yori shrugged a little. "Would you believe magic?"

He stared at her for a long moment. "I think I might have to. I don't have any other explanation for it." This made her chuckle again.

"Well, strictly speaking it's not magic at all. It's a very advanced application of something called ki. But most people have never heard of it so magic is normally more understandable if not any more believable."

"Ki. That's one of the eastern names for some sort of spiritual energy, isn't it?" he asked, which made her inspect him carefully, slightly surprised. She nodded.

"More or less. It refers more to life energy than spiritual energy, there are small but important differences. But that's essentially right. I'm surprised you've heard of it, most people outside Japan and China haven't and even a lot of people who live there don't know anything about it." He smiled at her.

"I used to be fairly seriously into martial arts. One of my Sensei talked about it. I could never understand what he was on about. But I think he must have known something, after what I just saw." She looked him up and down carefully.

"Hmm. Shotokan Karate, around purple belt?" He nodded, impressed.

"Yes. I'm out of practice, I haven't done anything serious for a couple of years. No time. How did you know?"

"We're pretty good at martial arts ourselves," Yori said, seeming amused. Behind her, the Japanese man who was in the group that had so suddenly arrived made a suppressed snicker.

"Which ones?" Doctor Niven asked curiously.

"More or less all of them," she replied. He stared, then nodded. There was something about both of them that made him think they probably were being truthful. They all turned to look at the patient as he coughed, stirring on the bed. Chou and Rose immediately went to his side.

"Lie still, please," Chou requested, as she gently removed the breathing tube from his nose and throat. Doctor Niven could see she knew exactly what to do. Aside from the ki healing, the woman plainly had considerable medical training. Rose helped her, falling into the practised routine in the presence of someone who was obviously very competent in her field, as she would have assisted
They soon had the IV removed, the cannula plugged, and the patient sitting up in bed. He looked around the room, clearly slightly taken aback by the number of people in it. Fixing his eyes on Taylor he narrowed them, recognising a policeman with the instinct brought on by years of law-breaking. Chou touched his shoulder, making him look at her. "You should avoid any sudden moves for a few days, you were seriously injured. You're fine now but it will take some time for your body to rebuild it's reserves. You may feel light-headed for a few hours as well."

"Who are you?" he asked. "And what's going on?"

"You were shot resisting arrest," Nigel replied, stepping forward and holding up his ID. "If it wasn't for these two young women you'd quite likely be dead now, from what the doctor tells us, so I'd be grateful and polite to them." Al looked at him expressionlessly, then at Chou and Yori, who both nodded.

"You had quite serious internal injuries. It's unlikely you'd have survived another session of surgery," Yori said. "Not to mention you were on the fast path to an aggressive lung cancer. It would have killed you in about three to four years, I'd say." He paled. "Don't worry, we fixed it. In return, I'd very much like it if you could provide some information to us." Staring at them, he finally nodded.

"OK. I'll talk to you." Fixing the policemen with a glare, he added, "But only to you. Everyone else goes." Yori glanced over her shoulder. After a moment Taylor sighed his agreement.

"All right. We'll be outside with the others."

"May we have the file, please, Detective?" Chou asked. He handed it over, then ushered the others out, closing the door behind him.

"Aren't you worried about their safety, Detective?" Rose asked worriedly. "He's a violent criminal."

"I doubt very much they have anything to worry about, Nurse," he said, grinning. "Trust me, it's not them who would get hurt."

Inside the room, Al pulled himself further up in bed, his head momentarily swimming a little. "Ugh. That's no fun," he mumbled, holding it in his hands. When it went back to normal, he looked at the two women sitting next to the bed. Thoughts of making a break for it momentarily went through his mind. They were immediately suppressed, partly because he just didn't feel well enough and was sure he'd get caught again easily, but mainly because there was something in the eyes of the women that made it abundantly clear he wouldn't make it to the door even if he was fighting fit and heavily armed. He wasn't sure how he knew, but was completely sure he was right.

"So. What do you want to know?" he asked. Chou pulled a photo from the file, showing it to him. "Ah. Him. Slippery little bastard. Emily's grandson. What's he done?"

"Disappeared, mainly. We urgently need to find him. Any idea where he might be?" Yori looked evenly at him. He shook his head.

"Sorry, no idea. He took off about, oh, maybe two months back. Emily was furious, he pinched a load of weed and some cash. We looked for him for a while but came up empty. Weird little geek, always poking around on his computer doing something or other. Never could work out what. Didn't like the kid very much, there was something about him that got right up my nose for some reason." She looked disappointed but unsurprised.
"Can you think of anyone who might know where he'd go?" she asked. He thought for a moment.

"Maybe. There was one of our crew he seemed to get on with, Sam. Sam Kosovich. Don't like him much either. Greasy little bugger, you can't trust him. He'd sell his own grandmother for parts if he needed money." Yori seemed mildly amused while Chou looked through the folder she was holding, coming up with a photo of a thin blond man with a stringy moustache. She showed it to him.

"That's him. Geoff talked to him all the time when they were supposed to be working. He kept lots of weird shit in the old armoury in the bunker, strange crap he found god knows where. Some of it gave me the creeps. Sam seemed to like it, he brought some things for him and I think he sold a couple for him as well. He's the only one I can think of that the kid might have talked to."

"Where can we find Sam?" Chou put the photo away.

"Not completely sure. When we got word the cops had busted Emily everyone cleared out fast. I wasn't quick enough. Sam was off faster than anyone. If he's not still running he might have ended up at the old clubhouse, I know a few of the guys were going to go there. That's your best shot."

They nodded, looking at each other. "Where is this clubhouse?" Yori asked. He gave them an approximate address and directions.

"There's nothing around it for about twenty k. If they're there you're going to have a lot of trouble. The place is some sort of old factory, very heavily built. You'd need a small army to take it, plus the guys are pretty well armed." Yori grinned.

"Don't worry about us." She looked at him curiously. "You seem to be remarkably cooperative. Don't you have some sort of code about betraying your friends?" He shrugged, one corner of his mouth going up slightly.

"They're not really my friends. Just some guys I know and work with. We get on OK, mostly, but I don't much care what happens to them." She nodded, standing, as did Chou. Both of them headed towards the door. "Hey," he said when they were half way. Both stopped and looked at him. "Cancer? Really?" Yori smiled.

"Yes. If I were you I'd stop smoking and doing all the drugs you were using. We cleared everything out and healed you up, but if you go back to that it could come back." He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Thank you for the information. With some luck you might have helped save the lives of a lot of people." She studied him for a moment. "It's not too late to turn your life around. You're certainly going to prison for a considerable time, but you're young still, and now, healthy. You should think about finding a different career path." With that they left, allowing him to lean back and ponder her words.

"These are aerial photos of the place you got Mr Jones to tell you about. He's right, it's very isolated and looks pretty heavily fortified, for all intents and purposes. It was some sort of explosives manufacturing plant in the sixties, from what I could find out. Heavy construction in case something went wrong and a long way away from anything valuable. It's been abandoned for at least twenty years." DS Taylor looked at the photographs spread out on the table. "Difficult to deal with if there are people in there with guns and no compunctions about using them."
"It shouldn't present too much difficulty," Yori said as she studied the photos. "We've dealt with more complicated situations. I think we need to do this ourselves, though, there's no point risking any of your people." She looked up at his slightly dubious expression. "Don't worry. We know what we're doing."

Tamiko giggled. "Yes, we're professional magical girls!" Despite himself he laughed.

"OK. My superiors don't seem to mind, and from what Mike there says the government is more than happy to let you deal with it, that way they don't have to pay for it and they have someone else to blame if it all goes sideways." Yori looked amused, while the others grinned. Even Azumi seemed pleased.

"We should teleport in here," Aiko said, also looking at the photos, pointing to a position on top of a hill that looked like it would have a clear line of sight to the building. "Leave you guys behind, then we can go right to the building here and get inside. It's dark now, so they won't be able to see much, which should help."

"You girls can see in the dark too, I suppose," Nigel chuckled. They gave him a look. "Ah. OK, then. I'll go get some night vision kit for those of us without superpowers." He was soon back with three sets of night vision goggles, which he explained the use of quickly. "Right. I suppose we should make a move."

One quick teleport later they found themselves in a very dark night on top of a hill. The stars shone brilliantly without any artificial light to drown them out. "No moon. That's useful," Yori's voice came from somewhere in the dark. Taylor put his goggles on, turning them on and looking around. The world was green and somewhat grainy, but visible. He saw that Naito and Mike had both put their goggles on as well. All the girls had disappeared. Turning to look at the building he could just make out a couple of figures standing outside it, which appeared too big to be any of the females. One of them suddenly dropped, then the other one did the same. At the same time all of their phones beeped. The three men exchanged goggled glances, then answered.

"Hi. It's Yori. We found two guards outside, they're down. There are four more inside. It looks like that's all of the people we've been looking for. We're on our way in." The conference call went silent for a short while. In the distance sounded a short burst of gunfire, punctuated by a couple of loud bangs that clearly weren't normal explosives. A flash of light came from the building, whiting out the goggles for a moment. Everything went quiet again.

"We've got them. No casualties worth speaking of, although one of the idiots shot one of his friends by mistake. We healed him up and put them all to sleep. Back with you in a moment."

"That was quick," Taylor said with surprise. Naito laughed.

"Trust me, those girls are very, very good at what they do. A small biker gang isn't even a workout for them." A bright flash came from the building and suddenly they were looking at seven figures that appeared out of nowhere, six of them carrying a body each slung over their shoulders. The entire operation had taken less than four minutes according to Nigel's watch. He looked at it, amazed, then at the dimly visible women.

"We should hire you lot in for raids," he muttered. Out loud he said, "That's very impressive. Back to the station?"

"Yes. This is getting close to my limit for people, so I'll do half of us in one go, then come back for the rest," Aiko said, gesturing for him to join her, Azumi, Tamiko, and Fumiko. "Where should we take them?"
"Central booking, please." With a nod they disappeared. The startled desk officer in the booking room jumped violently as the group appeared in front of him, reaching for his gun until he recognised Taylor.

"What the hell?" he yelped. The detective smiled.

"New procedure. We've got six suspects, three more are coming," Aiko vanished again, reappearing moments later with the rest of the party. "Like that." Staring, the officer gazed at them all, then shrugged. Once the prisoners had been woken one at a time and processed, they found themselves in holding cells with no real idea of what the hell had happened.

Sam stared across the table at the two women sitting there, then at the plain-clothes detective leaning against the wall of the room smirking at him. Nervously scratching his head he waited for one of them to make the first move. Unfortunately, the other three people appeared to have more patience than he did, so he finally cracked under the weight of all the stares. "Who are you people?" he asked. The two young women exchanged glances, then looked back at him. The one with the silver hair and the orange eyes gave him the creeps, she was just looking at him as if trying to decide how best to mount his head on the wall, rest of body not required. The other one, smaller and with long blue-striped black hair in a braid, seemed less scary on the surface but Sam's well developed threat assessment sense, honed after years of dealing with dangerous people on both sides of the law, was screaming at him that he'd never met anyone as dangerous as this person.

After a long pause, she smiled slightly. "We're consultants on a rather important case. You, I hope, have information of use to us relevant to that case. I would like you to give it to me."

"What information?" He looked baffled. They way this woman and her friends had raided the clubhouse so efficiently in the dark had shown him that they were certainly more than just 'consultants', but he wasn't sure what they actually were. Extremely worrying, definitely. The girl produced a photo, making him blink, because she hadn't pulled it out of her pocket, or from a folder, it was just suddenly there in her hand. Pushing it across the table to him she waited for him to get a good look at it.

"We need to find this person as fast as possible. Information we received suggests that you may be able to help us do that." Sam looked at the picture of Geoffrey Young, his heart sinking. This wasn't good.

"Um, never seen him before in my life," he tried, hopefully. She inspected him, then smiled in a way that made him nearly lose control of his bowels.

"Not exactly true, is it? Or, to be more blunt, you're lying. I can tell, regardless of the fact that we already know you both know him and talked extensively to him." Pausing she let him sweat for a moment. "Talk extensively to me. Immediately." He stared at her for a few more moments, then glanced appealingly at the cop, who shrugged.

"Their game at the moment, mate. I'd strongly suggest that you do what she says. You really wouldn't like to see her get annoyed." Sam finally gave in, not being the strongest-minded person around, not to mention the way the silver-haired girl seemed to be licking her lips as if she was now considering what he'd taste like medium rare.

"OK, OK. What do you want to know?" he said, leaning as far away as he could. The other one smiled, obviously pleased.
"Thank you, Mr Kosovich. I'm Yori, this is my associate Azumi. We, as I said, need to locate Geoffrey Young. We're told that you spent quite a lot of time in his company. Do you have any idea where he might be? And, for that matter, why he left so suddenly?" Sam sighed.

Gathering his thoughts, he began speaking. "Geoff is kind of a weird guy. Always talking about magic and supernatural things. He'd find strange little objects in shops, at flea sales, that sort of thing, then trade them with other people like him. I helped him sometimes, some of those little trinkets were interesting. I even bought a couple for my girlfriend. I delivered a few for him as well, and picked some up when he bought them online. There was some website he used to sell things and occasionally buy them as well. He made a fair amount of money but not a huge amount, although he was generous with his commissions when I helped. Then, about three months ago he put together a collection of several items and put the whole lot up for sale. No one paid much attention for a while, but all of a sudden two people began bidding against each other like crazy. He was jumping up and down about it. The price just kept going up and up, it finally sold for nearly two hundred grand. Neither of us could believe it. He crated everything up and sent it off when he got paid. "

"Where did he send it?" Yori leaned forward. "Can you remember the address?" He shook his head.

"Sorry, I have no idea. It was overseas, I know that much, but he handled that part himself." She looked disappointed, sitting back and thinking for a moment.

"All right. Go on."

"Everything was pretty good for a week or two. He'd got his money, the buyer seemed happy, so he got back to buying and selling. Emily was in the middle of a crop so she wasn't paying much attention, the rest of us were helping her, and Geoff was just keeping to himself. Then, out of the blue, he panicked. He was running around like the devil himself was after him. When I got him to calm down it turned out the other person after that collection had contacted him and made some demands. Those turned into threats. He was terrified. The guy, whoever he was, knew too much about him, like where he lived and who he was, which was supposed to be impossible, the web site was heavily encrypted from what he said. That made him even more paranoid, he was convinced that whoever ran it was in on it. So, in the end, he ran."

"Where to?" The cold voice from Azumi made him twitch. Looking at her, he shrugged a little.

"I'm not completely sure, he wouldn't tell me. But, if I had to guess, I'd say probably somewhere around Alice Springs. I saw some maps in his car, which seemed to be open to that general area. It's a good choice in a sense, I guess, it's more or less in the middle of the country and a hell of a long way from anything. But I wouldn't want to live there. He trashed his computer and his phone, burned all his paperwork, then drove off. That's the last I saw of him, about two months ago I'd say."

"We were told by the police he didn't have a phone," Yori commented curiously. Sam shrugged.

"He got me to buy him one so it wasn't in his name. He was pretty paranoid." Smiling slightly, he added, "I guess someone really was out to get him. You, aside from anything else."

"Has anyone else been around looking for him before us?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of. All the threatening was done online. Geoff told me he was going to have to lay low for a year or two, stay off the net, because he could be tracked. He had enough money to do that easily. Not to mention the twenty grand he pinched from Emily on the
way out, which I think was just to annoy her. They didn't get on."

She nodded thoughtfully, studying him for a moment. Looking at Azumi briefly she returned her attention to him. Another photo appeared. He inspected it when she pushed it across the table. "Do you recognise this?" He nodded slowly.

"Yes. That was one of the things in the collection that Geoff sold. The buyer asked specifically about it, in fact. Weird thing, even compared to his other junk. It glowed green and gave me a very strange feeling being in the same room." He looked at the photo of the crystal sphere in the mass of metallic tubing, shaped roughly into a cube, then shivered. "Not a nice feeling."

Yori smiled grimly. "Where did he get it, do you know?"

"Not exactly. He turned up with it one day, he told me he found it somewhere in Sydney, near the botanical gardens. About, um, four months ago. He wouldn't go into details on it. I got the impression that it sort of scared him but he couldn't resist it. After the first week he put it in a box and stashed it at the back of one of the shelves in the old armoury. When he decided that he was going to sell an entire collection of things that was the last one to go in, I don't think he wanted to get rid of it, but at the same time he wanted it gone." Looking at them as they exchanged glances again, he asked curiously, "What is it?"

"An extremely dangerous weapon, I'm afraid. Think of it like a bomb." Yori sighed. "Thanks for your help, Mr Kosovich. Hopefully it's given us something to go on." She and the other girl stood, then left the room with the detective, who was replaced by a burly constable and another officer who started asking awkward questions about his activities over the last couple of years.

"Somewhere in the area of Alice Springs is still a large area, but I guess it's something." Mike looked at the map spread out on the table. "I suppose the easiest thing is to go there and start asking around. I can get the local police involved. With some luck we might be able to get a lead on the young man."

Misaki looked worried. "The answers he gave raised more questions, some of which are a little unsettling," she noted. Agent Naito nodded.

"Someone was specifically looking for the portal device. That's not good. In theory we have all the people who were involved, and none of the government agencies aware of the device would touch it. Not now."

"It's possible two different parties are looking for it, which is even more worrying. Don't forget whoever made the threats to Geoff." Yori stared at the map, irritation on her face. "I suppose it's possible that there was something else in the collection they wanted, but can we take the risk?"

"We should probably attempt to locate the other party involved as well," Azumi said quietly. "I have passed the details we learned and the number of the phone Mr Kosovich obtained for Mr Young to Ms Aoyama. She's going to try to trace the second prospective purchaser."

"Well, until we get any information on that path we should concentrate on Geoff Young." Taylor checked his watch. "It's pretty late now. I at least need some sleep. No one in Alice Springs will be around either, I'd think. We should get some sleep and pick this up in the morning." Everyone looked around, then one by one agreed.

"I'd love to rush off right now, but you're right," Yori sighed. "Let's find a hotel and relax for a little. I'm kind of hungry as well." Misaki tossed her an apple which she plucked out of the air
without looking. "Thanks."

Fumiko and Tamiko were talking quietly on the other side of the room. The auburn haired girl
looked up, smiling. "Can we play the gang game after we get dinner?" she asked hopefully. Naito
groaned. Biting off a large piece of apple with a crunch Yori looked amused, but said nothing.

"We'll have to see how the evening progresses," Chou told the other woman, then looked around.
"Shall we go and find somewhere to eat, then? We can find a place to stay after that."

"Sounds like a plan," Aiko replied, jumping to her feet. "I vote for that sushi place in Brisbane."

"We had sushi for lunch," Tamiko protested.

"I like sushi," her friend said, laughing. "So does Fumiko, Misaki will eat anything as will Yori,
and I know Chou loves it as well."

"Oh, all right then. But I might want a pizza later."

"From the place in New York or that one in Rome we got them from last time?"

Tamiko thought. "Let's try the New York one." Mike and Nigel exchanged wondering glances. Agent Naito grinned at them.

"It takes a little getting used to," he said quietly, as they watched the young women deciding how
many different places in how many different countries constituted a decent night out.

"You can say that again." Mike looked somewhat awe-struck. None of his research had really
properly prepared him for all this. "Do they really go to New York for pizza?"

"Apparently. Fumiko says it's the best place she's found so far."

"Bizarre."

Yori looked at him and DS Taylor. "Are you guys coming for something to eat?" Mike thought for
a moment.

"Why not. I like sushi too, and Brisbane is quite an interesting place. You up for it, Nigel?"

"Oh, hell. Why not. I have to be home in three hours, though, or my wife will worry." He laughed
slightly. "She'd probably worry more if she knew I was going out with seven attractive
superwomen, and only two other men." Yori stared at him, then looked around at the others, before
they all collapsed laughing.

"Sorry. Kind of an in joke," she explained when she'd recovered a little. "Don't worry about it."

Packing up, they gathered together and seconds later were standing outside a restaurant seven
hundred kilometres further north. It turned out Fumiko was right, the sushi was exceptionally good.
They had a very nice meal, during which Mike and Nigel, and to a lesser extent Agent Naito, drank
rather more than was completely sensible. Afterwards, they were in a very good mood indeed. The
restaurant was very pleased with the group, as between them they managed to eat enough for a
party three times the size, and tipped very well. Chou paid with a large pile of cash, smiling at the
waitress. "It was excellent, thank you very much. We'll certainly come again." The woman smiled
back, accepting the money before wishing them a pleasant evening. Outside they all looked
around, then just started walking aimlessly along the street, chatting.
"Thanks for a nice meal," Mike said to Chou, beside him. She turned her head to him and smiled slightly.

"It's no problem, Mike. Thank you for showing us around earlier. I'm sorry if we ran you a little ragged. Sometimes we tend to forget that not everyone has quite the same level of stamina we have."

He laughed for a while. "I suspect that hardly anyone has the same level of stamina you people have. It's been very nice to meet you though, after hearing so many things about you and the other magical girls in Minato. I haven't been to Tokyo for some time but I enjoyed it last time I went."

"It's an interesting place, certainly. Some parts of it more than others." The blonde looked amused as he nodded with understanding."

"So I gather." He sniffed the air. "Hey, do you smell smoke?"

"Yes," she replied, looking around. Yori and Azumi had stopped and were also sniffing.

"That smells like plastic burning. Quite a lot of it," the short black-haired young woman noted. Glancing around, she looked up at the building they were next to, a four story apartment block. "Hang on." Walking a couple of steps closer she jumped vertically to land neatly on the roof. Mike and Nigel gaped. Looking at them with a small grin, Azumi did the same. A few seconds later they dropped to the ground. "There's a car accident on the next street over, it must have just happened. One of the cars is on fire and it's spreading. You'd better call it in, while we go help." All seven of the girls vanished around the corner at a remarkable speed. Mike looked at the police officer next to him, who seemed as stunned as he was at the rapid disappearance, then pulled his phone out of his pocket.

"Where are we?" he asked, dialling the emergency services. Agent Naito looked around and read off the street address, which he passed to the operator, while all three of them nearly ran down the street. When they rounded the corner they spotted the accident immediately, as it was rather difficult to miss. Three cars and a truck had somehow had an argument at a junction, all of them losing fairly spectacularly. One of the cars was wedged into the front of a shop, while another was on its side burning merrily. The truck was halfway on top of the last car. A number of people were standing nearby, several of them with phones in their hands, while a few were gathered around a prone body on the pavement, which one of the vehicles had clearly come into contact with during the incident.

Chou was bending over the person on the road as the three men trotted up, the two Australians breathing heavily. Mike glanced at Naito, who grinned at him, perspiring lightly but not looking too winded. "The PSIA obviously has a better physical fitness standard than the ASIO," he commented when he got his breath back.

"You pretty much have to if you're going to hang around these girls. I live in dread of the day Yori decides I need more training. She's hinted at it on more than one occasion."

He grinned, then watched as Chou put glowing hands on the injured person's leg, rapidly healing what looked like a very nasty break. The onlookers gasped, several of them pushing closer for a better view. "Hey, move back a little, let the lady work," he called, showing his government ID, which had the desired effect.

A loud whoosh sounded from the direction of the burning car and all eyes turned in that direction to see a cloud of vapour cover it, extinguishing the flames. Azumi emerged from the cloud supporting a middle-aged man who was covered in blood, followed shortly by Yori who was
brushing her clothes off looking annoyed. "Yuck," she muttered as she approached, "Oil is a bitch to get out of silk." Helping Azumi with the injured driver, she got to work healing him.

By the time the first ambulance arrived, immediately followed by a pair of fire engines and a police car, the truck had been bodily picked up and moved off the car under it, which was in turn moved to the side of the road and the two, luckily still alive, occupants extracted and healed up. The car embedded in the shop had been left where it was, as it now was performing the useful task of keeping the building up, necessary since it had removed some load-bearing wall on it's way through. The driver was pried loose, though, by some miracle only requiring minor healing. The fire-damaged car was also moved out of the way by Misaki, who was still complaining about soot all over her hands from picking it up. Fumiko and Aiko were directing traffic around the accident site, glaring at people who slowed to rubberneck, which had the effect of making them move on with alacrity.

The crowd had swelled to several dozen people who were watching with shocked interest. Seeing a relatively slight young woman pick up a vehicle and walk off with it was somewhat unusual, after all, inevitably attracting a certain amount of attention. Walking back across the street from where she had been investigating the car stuck in the building, Tamiko looked around then stopped next to Mike and Nigel. "You'd think they'd never seen magical girls at work before," she noted with a wide grin. Glancing at her the ASIO officer sighed.

"Does this happen a lot with you all? I mean, we seem to have had a surprisingly large number of rather odd occurrences for one day." She shrugged slightly.

"It's about par for the course, I'd say. Less demons than usual, but we do seem to attract odd things, or at least be around when they happen. Keeps us on our toes." The girl giggled a little, turning to look as the ambulance screeched to a halt next to them. "Oops. I hope they don't mind we did their job for them." Two paramedics jumped out, one of them running around to the back and whipping the door open to reveal another one, who thrust a folding trolley out the door, the first one catching it skilfully as the legs unfolded and locked, while the driver looked quickly around then walked rapidly over to the small group of people clustered around Chou, who was talking to the woman whose leg she'd fixed. The blonde looked up at him and smiled.

"I'm sorry, I've already repaired the damage. I think we've dealt with all the casualties now." She glanced over at Yori who was checking over the last of their patients, the driver of the car in the shop. The other woman nodded to her without looking.

"Yep. This guy is fine now." She stood from her squatting position next to the driver, who still looked somewhat shell-shocked, patting him encouragingly on the shoulder as she rose, then walked over. The other two paramedics had rushed over with the gurney and were now standing looking slightly awkward as it became apparent that there were no injured people to deal with.

The lead paramedic looked around at the scene, noting all the Japanese women in similar clothing who seemed to be running the event with worrying competence, then gaped as Misaki, not entirely satisfied with the positioning of the damaged truck, casually shoved it into a more pleasing location. "Who are you people?" he asked in a somewhat shaken voice. Yori grinned at him.

"Just some visitors. Luckily we happened to be in the area and could help. Although washing the oil out is going to be difficult," she added, looking down at her shirt in annoyance. He stared, wordlessly. More sirens could be heard as two fire appliances screamed down the road and braked heavily, followed seconds later by a police car. Yet more people jumped out and ran around, getting quite excited. Yori watched with amusement as one of the newly arrived officers inspected the scene, then looked around. He spotted the various magical girls, his eyebrows going up, then
looked thoughtful, before walking over to the group of her, Chou, and the three men. The paramedic stood nearby, trying to work out what the hell was going on.

Looking Yori and Chou up and down for a moment, the officer glanced over his shoulder at the other five, who were wandering around checking that everything was in order, before turning back to the first set of visitors. "I assume this has something to do with you people?" he asked slowly. The black-haired young women grinned, before turning to Mike, who smiled a little. Pulling out his government ID he showed it to the cop who studied it for a few seconds. "Hmm. Interesting. What brings the ASIO to town, I wonder, and to a traffic accident of all things?"

"Just passing, as it happens. My friends here are very good at... well, disaster management, I suppose you could say. We were merely in the right place at the right time." Mike looked at him steadily.

"Ah. I see. I suspect there's an interesting story behind that, but I also suppose it's not one I'll learn." The officer smiled. Looking at Yori again, he inspected at her carefully again, then did the same to Chou. "My girlfriend is Japanese. She comes from Tokyo, a place called Minato. Do you know it?" Yori watched him watch her with a grin on her face. Beside her Chou also looked amused.

"I'm familiar with it, yes," she replied, suppressed laughter in her voice.

"She's told me some very strange stories over the last couple of years. Things about demons and demon fighters, who for some reason are always female. Frankly, not very believable stories, but she swears they're true." Yori was looking even more amused. "Oddly enough, some of them are about a pair of young women whose descriptions are remarkably similar to you and your friend here." The officer looked at her for a long moment, while she grinned. "Strange coincidence, I guess."

"Most likely," she replied. He grinned back.

"I think we probably owe you some thanks. From what I can see this could have been very nasty. Lucky no one seems to have been hurt."

"Very lucky." She turned her head as the other girls came over, joining them. There was a moment of wordless communication between them which gave Naito and the others the impression that they had somehow had a real conversation, then Aiko nodded. Stepping a few paces to the side, she waited. Yori looked back at the officer, holding out her hand. "Give my best to your girlfriend," she said. He shook it with a smile.

"I will. Miss...?"

"Just Yori." She joined the others who had clustered around Aiko. Raising her hand she waved once, before the entire group vanished with a bright flash. The policeman blinked a little, then grinned. Looking at the paramedic, still standing there gaping a little, he chuckled.

"You wouldn't believe some of those stories. I think I do, though."

"He went down there, Harry," the young man said, pointing to a dark alley. "Bold as anything, and pretty drunk. Looked Japanese. Nice suit, not a local. He should be good for some fun if nothing else."

Harry looked slightly dubious. "I dunno, Emilio. There's been some really weird stories going around the last couple of hours. I heard that Mark and his crew went after some businessman a few blocks over and just vanished. Something strange is going on. Maybe we should call it a night." His
friend snorted derisively.

"There's four of us and one of him. He's twice our age as well. What's he going to do? It's not like he's some Kung Fu master or anything. Let's just roll him and get on with things. I need a drink." The other two young men with him and Harry nodded. Eventually the dark-haired gang member overcame his out of character nervousness and agreed. The four of them produced a selection of weapons ranging from a machete to a baseball bat and fairly quietly went after the target. All four of them vanished into the dark of the alley...

Two hours later a routine patrol from the local police screeched to a halt as a bedraggled young man, bound securely with his hands tied behind his back, hopped out of an alleyway and fell over just in front of them. Looking at each other for a moment the two officers, one male and one female, returned their attention to the youth struggling in the middle of the road, having apparently not even registered the presence of their vehicle. After a moment they both got out and walked over, looking down at him curiously.

"That's the ninth one so far tonight, Sue," the male officer said reflectively as he inspected the figure writhing around angrily in the middle of the road. The woman nodded.

"Yep. Weird, isn't it?" She squatted down and shone her flashlight in the face of the youth, who froze and started whimpering in fear as he realised he wasn't alone. "I recognise this one, Emilio Valdez. Nasty little shit, he's a professional mugger. Looks like he picked the wrong person to mug tonight, though." There was a rather unprofessional smile of satisfaction on her face. "I wonder where the rest of his crew is?" Both cops looked in the direction of the alley. Eventually the man sighed.

"I'll call it in."

Sue prodded the bound figure with her flashlight. "Hey, Emilio. Who did this to you?" He looked up at her, his eyes wide and frightened.

"Don't know. Can't remember. Just... orange eyes in the dark, and that voice... So cold. Keep her away!" He shivered and lost control of his bladder. Stepping back with an expression of distaste, Sue stared at him, then shrugged.

"Very weird. Last one said purple eyes."

DS Taylor looked up as a familiar group of people entered the room, putting the phone down as he did. Yori grinned at him. "Hi, Detective. Recovered from last night?" He nodded, then held his head with one hand for a moment.

"More or less. Still have a brutal headache, though. I don't normally drink so much." She laughed, walking over and putting a hand on his shoulder. It glowed slightly and he was shocked how quickly his headache simply faded away as if it had never been. "Good god. That's absolutely amazing." The young woman smiled, then frowned slightly, running her hand slowly down his side to stop at his waist. She looked at him.

"You got shot a while ago, didn't you?" she asked. He nodded again.

"Yes. About four years ago. Small calibre bullet, a ricochet from a near miss. It went through one kidney and bounced around inside a little. I spent three weeks in the hospital."

"It still hurts from time to time, doesn't it?" He stared at her.
"How do you know that?" he asked, impressed. She grinned.

"We're actually pretty good at this. There's still a small fragment of the bullet in there, it's just under the surface of your right kidney. The irritation is causing a lesion to form, which isn't a good thing in the long term, never mind the pain. I'm surprised the doctors missed it, but it might have been hiding behind a bone on the X-ray." She looked around, then indicated the table, moving the map they'd left there the day before to one side. "Come on, lie down here and we'll deal with it." Nigel stared again. It sounded like she intended to perform surgery right then and there.

"What?! Right here?"

"Yep. Come on, hop up, this will only take a minute or so. You won't feel a thing, trust me." Looking at her confident expression, he glanced at Mike, who shrugged, and Agent Naito, who simply smiled.

"You can certainly trust her. The things I've seen them do..." He shook his head in respectful wonder. "I certainly want them for medical help if I ever get into trouble."

"Oh, hell, I guess so," Nigel mumbled, thinking about what he'd seen the day before with the gang member in the hospital. Taking his jacket off he handed it to Mike, then lay down on his back on the table. Yori pulled his shirt up, then glanced at Chou, who handed her a pair of long fine tweezers she'd produced from nowhere. She was also holding some surgical wipes which had presumably come from wherever the tweezers had. Everyone else stood and watched, fascinated.

"OK, roll slightly onto your left side, then don't move, this won't take long." Yori bent over his side. Misaki, behind her, moved to close the door and lean against it. He felt the area abruptly go numb. There was a faint hissing sound accompanied by a slight smell of burning meat, which made him pale a little although he couldn't feel anything, while Mike, who was watching with interest, suddenly looked slightly ill.

"Do I want to ask what that was?" he asked, staring at the ceiling. Yori shook her head without looking away from what she was doing.

"Probably not." He could see out of the corner of his eye that she was carefully manipulating the tweezers, presumably with the tip now inside him somewhere. The thought made him a little queasy. "Ah. Got it. There we go." She held the instrument up, a shard of metal a few millimetres long held in the end, covered in blood. Handing them to Chou she accepted a wipe, then cleaned up. Thirty seconds later she stepped back. "All done." Nigel stared at her, then down at his side, which looked completely unblemished. Mike also stared at it.

"Holy shit," he mumbled quietly. "That was unbelievable." Yori seemed pleased.

"Nothing much to it, really. It wasn't in very far, only about four centimetres. I healed the lesions in the process. You'd possibly have developed one or other kidney problem in a few years if it had gone untreated. The metal would have eventually dissolved, there wasn't much there, but that's not ideal either. It would have become very painful in the end as well." Taking the tweezers back from her partner she looked closely at the bit of metal in the end, wiping the blood off it. "Tiny bit of copper jacket, I think. Nothing much but it was in an awkward place. Here you go." She held it out. With a glance at her he took it, staring at the thing.

"That's what was causing the pain?" he asked. She nodded.

"It should be fine now." Beside her, Chou picked up the bloodstained wipes and held them in her hands, closing them around the things. There was a faint 'foomp' noise and golden light showed
from between her fingers. When she opened her hands it was to brush a small amount of ash away. She noticed Mike and Nigel staring at her and smiled a little.

"They were a potential biohazard, it would be irresponsible to leave them in the normal waste." Yori handed her the tweezers which were now sparkling clean without a trace of blood and she made them disappear back to wherever she kept them.

After a few more seconds of silent wonder, Nigel sat up, then stood, accepting his jacket back from Mike. They looked at each other before turning to the young women. "Thanks. I have to admit, I didn't expect surgery on the conference table when I came in, but thanks." He prodded his side, smiling. "That's been annoying me for years."

"No problem. Neither of us likes leaving medical issues untreated, especially when it's so quick to fix them." With a quick grin at him Yori pulled the map back into the middle of the table. "So, where do we start?"

Trying to get his head back into the right mindset after so casually being operated on ad-hoc, he stared for a moment, then turned to the map himself. "I called the central police station in Alice Springs, spoke to a Superintendent Sharon Weiss. She's expecting you all later today. She didn't have any direct knowledge of Mr Geoffrey Young but was going to start making enquiries." Yori nodded, looking closely at the map.

"Are you coming with us, Detective Sergeant?" Aiko asked curiously. He glanced at her and shook his head.

"Out of my jurisdiction, that's Northern Territory, I'm New South Wales. I could come but it probably wouldn't help very much. I think it will be better if I stay here and work on the rest of that gang, it's possible that new information will come up. If it does I'll get it to you."

Chou smiled at him. "Thank you for your help, Detective. We'll make sure you find out what happens. If we do get the information we need we'll probably have to leave quickly, but I'm sure we could come back at some point. I like Sydney from what I've seen of it." Taylor grinned at the blonde.

"I'm not entirely sure Sydney could handle having all you people around for an extended time." Pulling a folder across the table he opened it, looking through it with a sardonically amused expression. "There seem to have been a number of rather odd occurrences late last night. So far, twenty-seven known or suspected gang members have been found tied up, usually with evidence implicating them in some sort of violent street crime. Most of them don't seem to be able to remember what happened. The ones that can remember anything really, really don't want to talk about it." Looking at the seven girls he raised an eyebrow. "I don't suppose any of you might have an idea of what might have happened?" They all looked back at him innocently.

"Not at all, Detective," Fumiko said with a small smile. "It seems like a very odd coincidence. Strangely enough, much the same thing happened in LA when we were there. Very weird indeed." He closed the file, grinning.

"Hmm. OK, off you go, then. Have fun."

Yori snickered. "I think we probably will. Take care, DS Taylor." Shaking hands with them all he watched as they gathered at one end of the room then vanished. Collecting the paperwork together he left the room, absently rubbing his hand over the spot that no longer hurt.
"Superintendent? There are a number of people here to see you. Quite a lot of them, in fact."
Sharon looked up from her computer to the civilian support person talking to her, then over to the
door of the main room when he indicated. Through it she could see the lobby of the police station,
which did indeed seem to be fairly full. "One of them is an Officer Mike Graham from the ASIO.
He says you're expecting them?" She smiled.

"Thanks, Art. If it's who I think then yes, I am expecting them. I'll come out, the room is a bit
crowded as it is." Standing she picked up some paperwork and followed the man back to the lobby.
Looking around at the group of nine visitors she spotted the only non-Japanese one. "I assume
you're Officer Graham from the ASIO?" she asked. He nodded, showing her his ID, then putting it
away again.

"Superintendent Weiss, I guess." She nodded back, smiling.

"That's me. Your DS Taylor from Sydney told me that you and a team of consultants from Japan
were looking for someone, a Geoffrey Young. He said it was very urgent. Can you tell me more
about it? He didn't go into much detail." She looked curiously at the seven girls and the older man
with them.

Mike indicated the group. "This is Agent Naito from the PSIA in Japan. The young ladies are, ah,
let's call them free-lance specialists."

"Specialists in what?" she asked suspiciously. A short girl with long black hair and violet eyes
laughed, stepping forward to shake her hand.

"Things most people find very hard to believe. Hi, I'm Yori. This is Chou and Azumi." She
indicated the two girls with her, one tall blonde and a young woman somewhat shorter with
extraordinary silver hair and orange eyes, who was watching the entire scene with cool
detachment, but gave Sharon the impression she didn't miss anything. "Over there is Aiko, Tamiko,
and Fumiko, and Misaki is around somewhere." She glanced around, then grinned. "Ah. You have
a vending machine. She has trouble resisting them." Fumiko sighed while Tamiko giggled. Yori
looked back to the Superintendent. "Do you have somewhere private we can talk? This isn't really
something we should discuss in public."

"Of course. Follow me, please." Leading the way through another door and down a corridor to the
rear of the station, Superintendent Weiss held open the door to the main meeting room. "Come in,
take a seat, and tell me what's going on." Everyone filed in, Misaki bringing up the rear with a
handful of snacks and a pleased expression. Closing the door Sharon watched as they all sat, then
took her own seat, looking around. "OK, I'm getting extremely curious. A lot of young female
'specialists' in something odd, a member of the Japanese security services, and one of our own, all
after this Mr Young. What's he done? Why the interest? And why do you think he's somewhere
around here?"

Yori and Mike exchanged glances, the young woman gesturing for him to begin. "It's kind of a
long story. Do you remember that incident in London just after Christmas...?" As she nodded he
began his story, Yori taking over after a while with input from the others where necessary. After
twenty minutes of the most fantastic story she'd ever heard, they fell silent and she sat back,
considering what she'd been told.

"You realise that sounds completely unbelievable? Magic, demons, terrorist cults, all the other
stuff?" she asked, finally, looking around at them. Yori looked at Chou for a moment, then both of
them faded from view, leaving apparently empty chairs. Sharon stared in disbelief. "Oh, my God,
the tall dark-haired woman whispered. Mike looked slightly surprised then grinned. After a few
seconds, both young women faded back into visibility again. Azumi held out a bottle of water she pulled from nowhere, shaking it gently to show it was full. Holding it at arms length she looked at it, as did everyone else. Seconds later the bottle crackled, expanding slightly as it froze completely solid, mist visible as moisture in the air condensed out, running down the sides and to the table where it dispersed. She gently put the bottle down with a faint clunk, looking calmly at Sharon, who gaped back.

After a very long pause, she somewhat shakily said, "OK, I think I probably believe it. Holy crap." There was another pause. "It's all true? Everything you told me?"

"Every word," Agent Naito said, looking sympathetic. "Sorry, I understand it's a lot to take in. We've explained this to a fair number of people around the world so far, most of them have trouble with it. Some of the demonstrations our friends here have come up with have been somewhat... startling. This was probably one of the less exciting ones." He glanced at Yori and Aiko, who were grinning. "There's a school head mistress in LA who would agree with me." Chou nudged Yori when the other woman snickered.

"Oh, come on, it was pretty funny," the black-haired woman said, looking at her companion, who sighed softly. Sharon watched them, wondering what they were talking about, then decided it probably didn't matter. Staring at the bottle of ice which was slowly thawing again in the heat, she shook her head.

"Wow. All right, I guess we'd better try to find Mr Young, then. The only information you have is that an acquaintance saw he had some maps of this general area in his car?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Yori said. "Mr Kosovich seemed to believe it was quite likely he came in this direction, but we don't have any real evidence one way or the other. It's the best clue we do have, though, so we need to check. I'm not sure what the best approach is to achieve that. We're open to suggestions."

Superintendent Weiss sat back in her chair and thought for a while. "Alice Springs isn't a hugely populated place, and it's spread out quite a lot. You could probably disappear fairly well even in town if you kept to yourself. If he came here it could be difficult to find him, especially if he's in one of the outlying areas. There are a number of small groups of houses quite a long way away from the town as well, which makes it more difficult. I suppose we should probably start by circulating his details around the shops, banks, bars, that sort of thing. If he's here he needs to eat at least. After that, we can try going door to door, but it could take quite a while. We can't really pull everyone off other duties for this. I can probably round up about, oh, maybe fifteen or twenty people to start with."

"It's a start. With any luck we can track him down fairly quickly. I don't think he's very practised at being a fugitive, so he's quite possibly made mistakes. I hope he has, at any rate. We have a distinct deadline for finding the portal weapon, which is no more than ten days from now. The closer it gets the more nervous I am about it." The young woman looked worried. Sharon nodded with understanding.

"DS Taylor emailed me the photo you have of Geoffrey Young. I've printed a couple of dozen copies, so I think we should distribute them among the officers and have them take them on their rounds, just in case, then get people to start asking questions."

"We could split up and also ask around," Fumiko suggested. "Every person helps."

"Good idea. We'd better get started, then." Superintendent Weiss got up, taking one last look at the still frozen water bottle in the middle of the table, before shaking her head and opening the door.
Forty minutes later every free person in the station was equipped with a copy of the photo of Geoffrey Young and heading out into the town and beyond. The magical girls and Agent Naito, after some discussion with the Superintendent and Officer Graham, had decided to have Aiko teleport them to widely separated areas of the town and begin asking around, just in case they got lucky. Naito went with Mike, while the others went off on their own.

Walking slowly along the street they'd been assigned, the two men stopped at every house, knocking and asking the same question, 'Have you by any chance seen this young man?' The responses were mostly polite and invariably negative. Between houses they talked.

"How long have you been working with the girls?" Mike asked his companion curiously, as they stopped for a break in a rare patch of shade, wishing he'd thought to bring the icy-cold water bottle Azumi had produced. Naito wiped some sweat from his forehead, leaning against the building they were next to.

"Directly, since somewhere around early September last year, when all that terror cult stuff began. I knew of them before that, of course, although only as much as the PSIA knew which wasn't and isn't very much. As you found out they have very solid security and don't talk about themselves." He shrugged a little. "No one in our government is too worried about that, to be honest. It's generally felt that the magical girls deserve their privacy considering what they do for the country. Some very important people at the highest level of power let it be known some time ago that none of them should be interfered with. I'm not entirely sure why, but on the whole I agree with it." He laughed a little.

"I don't know who Yori and Chou know but I'm pretty sure they have some remarkably high-up friends for some reason. All the girls tend to be looked on as a valuable resource, but those two particularly are spoken of with true respect by some quite extraordinary people."

Mike nodded as they began walking again. "That's the impression I got during my research, certainly. I spoke to quite a few people directly, and through some contacts in my government, indirectly to people in yours. The overall response I got back was essentially, 'Be very polite, and believe anything they tell you.' There was a kind of proprietary pride coming through in the responses along with considerable respect and some unspoken warnings about what would happen if we upset them. Reading between the lines it seemed to suggest that it wasn't only the girls themselves we should worry about in that case." They stopped to show the photo to a passer-by with no useful result.

"I think it was probably the responses we got back from the Japanese government, and from where in that government those responses came, that convinced my own superiors as much as anything that all this was real. My own research just added to that. I was sceptical myself when I was assigned this work but it didn't take long to change my opinion." Shaking his head, he though back to everything he'd seen and heard. "That DVD I laid hands on is... incredible." Naito smiled.

"I know. I've seen it. I wish I could have seen it live. Perhaps one day." They walked in silence for a little while." Eventually he spoke again. "Despite the occasional moments of terror and a constant feeling of inadequacy, I consider myself very lucky to be associated with all those young ladies. They're amazing people, who are steadily becoming friends, even if a lot of their lives are a complete mystery to me. Because of them I've seen some truly astounding things and had my eyes opened to an entire world I never knew existed. I have a feeling that they're going to end up changing everything, given time, them and their friends."

He laughed again. "Mind you, I've had to write some extremely strange reports recently, even by the standards we've come to expect. Magic is something the PSIA is reasonably familiar with but
the last few months have been a bit out of the ordinary even so." Mike chuckled.

"I can imagine. Some of the things I've read have been completely insane. It's like some sort of fantasy novel crossed with a detective story."

"That's not a bad way to put it, actually. Throw in some science fiction, and a little military action movie, and you'd come up with something close to what we've ended up doing a few times. Only not quite as mad." The Japanese agent wiped his brow again. "This is hot work. Do you mind if we stop at that shop over there and get something cold to drink?"

"Good idea." Mike checked the light traffic then headed across the street, Naito following. Entering the store they headed for the chilled drinks section, grabbing a few bottles of water, then went to the till. Paying for it, he unscrewed the cap and drained one bottle immediately, feeling instantly refreshed. The shopkeeper watched with amusement.

"Pretty hot for this time of year," he commented. Both men nodded, on their second bottles by now. When he'd quenched his thirst, Naito showed the man his copy of the photo. Inspecting it carefully, he shook his head. "Sorry, I can't say I've seen the fellow." He looked at them. "You two cops or something?"

"Something like that." Mike showed him his identification. Appearing impressed, the store keeper handed it back.

"Kid must have done something interesting to get the government looking for him."

"It's mostly information. We think he may know something relevant to a case we're working on. If you do remember anything, could you please call the main police station and ask for Superintendent Weiss?" The man nodded.

"Sure. But I'm pretty sure I've never seen him. Do you have a copy of that photo I could keep? I can show it to some of the regulars." Mike pulled out a spare copy and handed it to him. "Thanks." Dropping their empty bottles into the bin next to the till, the two men went on their way, leaving the storekeeper studying the photo with interest, before pinning it to the wall behind the counter.

"Nothing. No one seems to have seen Mr Young as far as we can tell," Sharon said with irritation, slumping at her desk. Yori and Chou sat down on the other side of the desk, looking mildly annoyed. They were the only ones back at this point. The search had gone all day with no hits, not even vague ones, which didn't please anyone.

"That's a nuisance," Chou said quietly, looking at the photo she was holding. "I do hope that we're at least looking in the right place. It would be very irritating if he'd never come here in the first place." Yori sighed heavily.

"Please don't say things like that, love. It's just depressing." Superintendent Weiss studied them both for a while.

"How long have you two been doing this, this, magical girl thing?" she asked in the end. Yori glanced up, then smiled a little.

"Quite a while. I still don't consider us magical girls, we're martial artists, but I seem to be fighting a losing battle insisting on it." Chou looked amused, while Sharon snickered. "It's been a few years. I was kind of involved in something pretty close to this for a long time, but all the running around after demons is a more recent development." She shrugged a bit. "It's fun and good exercise if nothing else, and you meet some very interesting people."
"I can imagine," Sharon said, chuckling. "I certainly have done and today was the first time I'd heard of it."

"I'm sorry if you found we shook your world view, Superintendent," Chou commented. Sharon glanced at her.

"Don't be. It's interesting and quite refreshing to have some of your preconceptions challenged. Certainly not what I expected when I got up this morning, I'll say that much, though." Chou laughed lightly. Both young women looked around at the door suddenly, Sharon following their gaze. A few seconds later Agent Naito and Officer Graham walked in, looking exhausted, followed by Aiko, who looked around for a moment then hurried out again.

"No luck?" Yori asked, in the tone of voice that said she already knew the answer. Both of them shook their heads.

"Nothing. We've left photos with several places, but so far no one seems to have seen him at all." Mike sat down with a thump, seeming both tired and annoyed. "We must have walked about fifteen kilometres and talked to more people than I can count. Did any of you have any luck?"

"Nope. Sorry, pretty much the same as you two. None of the others have found anything either from what I've heard."

"Damn. This is not going very well." Yori shrugged.

"Not ideally, but it would be a bit unusual if we'd just walked into town and found him in the first five minutes. We don't even know for sure he's been here."

"Yes, we do," Azumi said, as she entered with Aiko, both of them looking excited. Everyone turned and stared at her. "I just spoke to an old man in a little garage in Braitling, a bit to the north of here." Sharon nodded, producing a map from her desk drawer and unfolding it. Azumi looked at it then pointed. "About there. Apparently, something like six weeks ago he sold some beer and a spare tire to someone who looked very like our missing Mr Young, although he had a beard and seems to have dyed his hair brown. The old fellow was pretty convinced it was him, though. He didn't say much, but when he left he was in a hurry, heading north on the Stuart Highway. He made enquiries about camping, which the fellow I talked to thought was weird, since he didn't seem to have any camping equipment and no one really wants to camp in the desert anyway."

She moved to lean on an unused desk. "The old man thought that his car was making some very unfortunate noises and was likely to have a major problem in the near future. He suggested getting it fixed, but our fugitive was in too much of a hurry to stop. The guy said he wouldn't be surprised if he only got about another two or three hundred kilometres before it broke down. He seemed to know what he was talking about."

"There isn't much out there in that direction until you hit Tennant Creek, which is a good four hundred and fifty kilometres north of here. One or two little towns, a small airfield, some farms, that sort of thing. If he broke down very far from a town he could have gone days before anyone found him, which would probably be fatal unless he had a lot of water with him." Sharon was studying the map. She indicated a position along the highway in question. "Assuming the garage man was reasonably accurate, he'd be somewhere along here. Mind you, six weeks later either someone would have found him, or he's dead."

"It would be most unfortunate if he was dead," Chou said calmly. "For him, certainly, and for us as well. I suppose the best thing to do would be to try this town you mentioned and see if anyone there has seen him, and if not work our way back in this direction." She looked out the window at
the side of the room. "How long until it gets dark?"

"About two hours," Sharon said, checking the time.

"It would be easier in the light," the blonde said, "So we should probably get on with it. Aiko, can you go and get the others, please?" With a nod the short brunette left. Soon everyone was back at the station, gathered in the same room they used earlier. After a short discussion the decision was made to teleport to Tennant Creek and begin their enquiries all over again. Mike groaned faintly. Glancing at him, Chou smiled. "I'm sorry, it's been a long day. We could go without you and Agent Naito if you'd like to rest." He shook his head.

"I'll be OK. I need a good strong coffee first, though." Aiko looked up, then smiled and vanished. Five minutes later she was back with a tray of disposable cups of coffee with the logo of a New York coffee shop on them. Handing them out she grinned.

"These guys do a very nice coffee." Mike looked at his cup in astonishment.

"Did you seriously just get coffee from New York?" She nodded, laughing a little.

"Of course. It's good."

"Good grief. You people are unbelievable." Sipping it, he nodded approvingly. "That said, this is very good coffee."

"Told you," she said, giggling. Sharon was watching with amazement. Glancing at Agent Naito she raised her eyebrows, causing him to chuckle.

"You'll get used to it." Yori burst out laughing, making him grin. Sipping his own coffee he nodded approvingly. Superintendent Weiss called the local police in Tennant Creek, telling them that they would be arriving shortly. When they had finished their drinks, they all got up. Aiko approached her.

"It will be pretty disorientating the first time," she said, giving the standard warning of nausea. The superintendent nodded.

"I understand." She braced herself, then nearly fell as the world shifted. Her stomach roiling, she staggered a little, feeling someone holding her steady until she felt better, which was surprisingly quickly. Once she was over the sensations, she thanked Aiko, who had been the one to grab her, then looked around. "Wow. That's amazing. We really are here, just like that." Aiko smiled.

"I know. I've been able to do this for years but it never gets boring." They were standing outside the fairly modest police station in the town, which was considerably smaller than Alice Springs. A couple of people were staring at them, having witnessed them appear out of thin air, but after a moment both of them shook their heads, dismissing it as impossible, then went about their business. Aiko looked after them as they walked off. "You'd be amazed how often that happens." Sharon and Mike headed inside with Yori, while the others waited outside in the evening sunlight. They came out a few minutes later with a man in his early forties, rather sun bleached and grizzled.

"This is Jack Creswick, Senior Sergeant here. He's an old friend." They all greeted him, while he looked around at the group, somewhat puzzled.

"So you're looking for this Geoffrey Young chap, Sharon?" he asked, inspecting the photo she'd handed him.

"Yes. I don't suppose you've seen or heard of him?" The man shook his head slowly with a
thoughtful look on his face.

"No, I don't think I have. Mind you, I do recall hearing that a few weeks ago there was a car found about sixty k south of here with a knackered engine. Just dumped by the side of the road. No sign of the occupant, although there were some personal belongings in it. One of the road train drivers had spotted it and mentioned it when he pulled in to refuel. I was on leave at the time but one of our lads went and had a look. No sign of foul play from what I can remember, but I don't know much more about it. I'll see if I can find out some more for you." He went back inside, returning some five minutes later with a younger man.

"This is Constable McClure. He was the one who went to check on the car. Jason, tell them about what you found." The young blonde man stopped staring at all the foreign women with a start, making several of them grin, then nodded.

"We got a report of an abandoned vehicle five and a half weeks ago. I drove out to have a look. It was an old Holden in pretty bad shape. From what I could see the engine oil had leaked, the engine was seized solid. It had probably been there about two days. There were some clothes, a little cash, and a small amount of marijuana in it, along with a few other items. No identification, and the plates and VIN number were missing. It looked like someone had dumped it there. I arranged to have it towed back so we could trace the owner, but so far we haven't had any luck."

"Is the vehicle still here?" Chou asked curiously. He nodded.

"I think so. It was being kept at a garage on the other side of town. As far as I know it's still there. No one reported it missing, there was no report of a missing person either, so to be honest it's pretty low priority. I didn't see any signs of foul play or anything like that, it looked like the car had simply broken down and been dumped. The missing plates and the like was a little odd, but sometimes people do that so we can't chase them up and fine them for littering." He smiled a little. "We do try to find them, but it can take a while."

"Do you mind if we have a look at it?" Yori asked. Both policemen shook their heads.

"Help yourself," Jack replied. "Jason, go and get the file on it, will you?" The younger man nodded and went back inside, reappearing shortly with a folder in his hand. He gave it to Yori.

"This is the report I filed on the car. Not much in it, I'm afraid." She flipped through it, then handed it to Azumi, who also read the contents before returning it to the constable.

"Have you seen this man?" she asked, holding out the photo of Geoff Young. "He may have a beard and brown hair now." Constable McClure looked carefully at the photo, then shook his head. "No, sorry, never seen him before. Is that the driver of the vehicle?"

"We think so, but we won't know until we see it," Yori told him. She looked at the others. "I'll take Azumi and Agent Naito and go have a look at this car, you other guys may as well start asking around just in case someone has seen him. Maybe he got picked up by another vehicle. We might get lucky." The girls all nodded. Aiko moved over to Yori and Azumi as Naito joined them, then the little group disappeared in a flash of rainbow light. Constable McClure gaped while Senior Sergeant Creswick stared, then laughed.

"There's some story you have to tell me, Sharon," he said, turning to his friend. She grinned.

Agent Naito looked at the battered car the garage owner had directed them to, then at the folder of information he had been given by DS Taylor before they left Sydney. "It's the right make, model,
and colour, according to this," he said, bending slightly to peer under the vehicle. "I think it might have hit a rock or something like that and cracked the sump, that would explain the leak." Yori looked at him, then easily lifted the vehicle onto it's side, inspecting the underside of the engine. She nodded.

"Yep. Look, you can see the marks here. He must have been going pretty fast and ran over something." Lowering the thing to the ground she looked up to see Azumi staring out from inside the car, with a frown on her face.

"Could you warn me before you do that?" the silver haired girl said with an edge to her voice. Yori nodded, grinning.

"Sorry."

"Twit," Azumi muttered, going back to poking around inside the vehicle. Naito chuckled to himself, once more amused by the antics of these remarkable people. For such powerful individuals, they acted amazingly normally. He found it refreshing.

"I'm fairly sure this is his car," Yori said, "there are traces of several different types of magical energy in the rear. I'd guess he used it to store or transport some of his artefacts." Azumi opened the door and got out.

"Nothing I can find inside to give any clues to his whereabouts," she said emotionlessly. Naito sighed.

"Another dead end."

"Not quite. It's his vehicle, I'm more or less sure, which means we're still on his trail. To be honest it's going better than I feared. Hopefully we can find someone in town who has some idea about what happened to him. It's a pretty small place, there can't be more than two or three thousand people here, I suspect that if he did come through we'll be able to find someone who met him. We haven't got a lot of options, anyway."

"I know. Still, it's annoying."

"That it is," She sighed. "Oh well. Back to the others, then, and we can ask around some more." Aiko appeared next to them seconds later.

"That's good timing," Naito commented, which seemed to amuse her and Yori equally. "Have any of the others found anything yet?" The brunette shook her head.

"That's good timing," Naito commented, which seemed to amuse her and Yori equally. "Have any of the others found anything yet?" The brunette shook her head.

"No, sorry. Everyone is all over town and a couple of the local cops are also asking around, but so far nothing." Abruptly arriving back at the police station, where Superintendent Weiss was speaking to Sergeant Creswick, they walked over.

"It's almost certainly the right vehicle, Superintendent," Yori told her. "So there's a chance we can find someone who knows something. He might have been picked up by someone from here, or who was going through here. I suppose he could also have been picked up by someone going in the other direction, or just wandered off and fallen over, but I hope not."

"There's also the possibility he got involved in something unpleasant," the superintendent replied, frowning slightly. "My information is that he had a considerable sum of money with him. If some random passer-by happened to find out about that, well, out here where there aren't a lot of people for hundreds of kilometres, it's a good place to lose a body." Yori scowled.
"I know. I have to admit the same thought occurred to me. I think Azumi and I should go and check out the place the car was found, just in case. It shouldn't take long." She looked at Aiko, who nodded, then the three of them vanished again. Agent Naito sat on a nearby low wall, wiping his brow.

"Wow. Those girls have more stamina than anyone I know," he said, glancing at Sharon. She smiled a little.

"Long day, Agent?"

"It usually is when they're involved." He grinned. "But it's always interesting." She laughed.

"I can imagine." Shaking her head she walked over to stand beside him, the sergeant following and listening with interest. "I'm still having a little trouble with this, not least because everyone seems to take such extraordinary things so much for granted."

Naito nodded understandingly. "I'm not surprised. That's a pretty common reaction to people who meet them for the first time. It can be a bit much. The six, or seven now that Azumi is around, of them do tend to make you reassess everything you thought you knew about how the world works. But I have to admit they'd a damn good cure for boredom!"

"That Azumi girl isn't someone I'd like angry with me," Sharon said, leaning on the wall he was sitting on.

"None of them are, trust me. They're all remarkably good natured and fun to be around, but when they go into combat mode..." He shivered a little. "I've seen it. Yori is probably the scariest, most deadly person I've ever heard of when she's like that. I don't think anything would stop her if she decided to go all out, except being killed, which would take something pretty damn unusual. And even then I'm not so sure she wouldn't come back." He snickered. "She'd be absolutely furious by that point!"

"It's surprising to me that your government allows these girls to just wander around if they're that dangerous," Superintendent Weiss said, raising her eyebrows. He shrugged.

"It's not like we could really stop them. But aside from that, they are genuinely liked, some of them loved, by the communities they serve. And yes, it really is a matter of serving the community. All the girls, even the more destructive ones, put themselves in the way of considerable danger voluntarily on a daily basis to protect people, with no pay and no real reason to do it aside from the fact they feel it's the right thing to do. People back home deeply respect that. It strikes the right note both from a cultural viewpoint and a personal one. Yori and Chou particularly have made a huge difference to the lives of many, many people in their community. That's gained them a hell of a lot of respect and admiration, right the way up to the highest echelons of government." Naito looked at his watch, then turned back to the superintendent who was listening with interest.

"Basically they're considered a national asset now. All of them really. This little group is right at the top of the list. They're directly responsible just in the last few months for saving the lives of countless people, possibly thousands, all around the world, and shutting down a cult that could possibly have killed millions."

He shrugged. "That gets them practically anything they could want. The funny thing is that I don't think they even realise it, or to be honest, care very much. That's not why they do it."

"Impressive. They certainly seem like nice people, I have to admit. Well spoken and educated, although in some very odd areas." Sharon laughed a little. "Areas I'd have sworn yesterday were complete fantasy."
"They are nice people. Ones you can count on if you're in trouble." Naito grinned. "If I was needing medical care I know who I'd want as my doctors." She looked intrigued.

"Medical skills as well as everything else?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe the things that lot can do. Aiko bounces around all over the planet as if she was crossing the room. Yori and Chou can heal basically anything from what I've seen, never mind having better and more impressive fighting skills than anyone I've ever heard of. Azumi... I'm not sure about her, but I have a very strong feeling that she may be one of the most intelligent people I've ever met. Her friend Ms Aoyama gives me the creeps, but even she is a remarkable intelligence operative. Misaki and the others are kind of a mix, exceptional fighting ability with intelligence and a lot of common sense. Yori is training all of them, so I expect that eventually they'll all be something even more remarkable than they are now. Plus, they're just generally nice people to be around, even though they have a weird sense of humour."

"Real superheroes, by the sound of it." Weiss looked interested. He shook his head a little.

"Not like you might be thinking, not like the comics. They don't go out of their way to stand out, they don't much even like publicity. Most of them, at any rate. There are a couple of groups back in Minato that do stick out, a tendency to show off and make stupid speeches. It drives Yori nuts from what I can tell." They both laughed. "Basically most of the time they're just normal, nice people, the sort you enjoy talking to. But when it really counts, you've got something on your side that would make anyone with a brain think very hard about starting trouble."

"Can I keep some of them?" Weiss joked. He stared at her, then nearly laughed his head off. When he recovered, he replied, "Funny, the authorities in other countries are normally fairly relieved when they go and everything goes back to something approaching normal." She shrugged, grinning.

"I'm more open-minded, and out here we could use all the help we could get." Sergeant Creswick chuckled from where he was listening, but before he could say anything Yori, Azumi, and Aiko reappeared a couple of metres away. The three already there turned to them.

"Nothing," Yori said, looking both annoyed and relieved. "We scanned the area for a kilometre or so all around where the vehicle was, but aside from a small amount of litter and some kangaroos there was no trace of anything interesting." She grumbled to herself for a moment under her breath. "I guess we just keep asking around."

"Nothing else to do," Superintendent Weiss said with a sigh. "Although it will be dark in a little while. How long do you want to keep at it?"

"I'd like to keep going until we find him, but you're right. Let's say, another hour, then we give up until tomorrow." Yori glanced at Aiko and Azumi, who nodded and vanished. Shortly the brunette reappeared. "Coming with me, Agent, Superintendent? Or would you prefer to go separately?" She looked at them enquiringly.

"We should go separately, I think, to cover as much ground as possible." Sharon looked at Naito, who nodded agreement.

"I'll make my own enquiries," Sergeant Creswick said, "I know a few people who might be able to help."

"OK. That sounds like a plan." Shortly, Aiko had transported them all to the relevant areas
Evie looked away from the customer she was arguing with at the sound of the door opening, to see a Japanese woman of about twenty or so, wearing dark blue silk clothing and leather boots, enter the café. The woman was fairly tall and looked very fit, radiating an air of competence, like a police officer, but different somehow. The sound of a fist slamming down on the table drew her attention back to the man in front of her and caused her to sigh. "Ben, stop hitting the table, you're causing a fuss. Now, please just pay the bill and go, I've had enough."

The short wide figure of Ben Hodel reddened considerably, visible despite his sun-darkened visage. He huffed a little, pushing himself to his feet. "Damn it, Evie, all I want is one date! You're always flirting, leading me on, but you turn me down every time." She sighed again, not wanting to go into this in front of other people.

"I'm not flirting, I'm just being friendly. I'm sorry if it came across as anything else." He glared at her. "Look, to be brutally honest I'm not interested in you, sorry. Right now I'm not really interested in anyone, not after last time, and you're not my type anyway. So can we please just stop talking about this?" She pushed the bill across the table to him yet again. "Just stop embarrassing yourself, pay up, and go home. You'll feel better in the morning." She didn't mention the four beers he'd had, although the implication was there. Ben took a step forward, gritting his teeth, making her step back cautiously. The half-dozen other customers watched the little drama with rapt attention, one or two of them ready to step in. Ben was well known to have a short fuse.

"Bitch. You're all alike, leading people on then refusing to put out," he muttered to himself, just loudly enough for her to hear. She flushed angrily.

"Right. That's it. Get out and don't come back, I don't want you in here again if that's your attitude." Evie snatched up the slip of paper and ripped it up. "Consider our debt settled." He stared for a moment, going dark with rage. Two regulars also stood, as he fumed, then lashed out at her. The two men dived forward but stopped when Ben suddenly found himself with his arm twisted painfully behind his back and his face on the table he was standing beside. It happened so fast everyone had to think about what actually took place.

Evie stared in shock. The girl who'd entered, who had been at least five metres away, was now holding Ben firmly down with no signs of effort at all, an expression of mild interest on her face. She'd moved so fast no one had even seen it as anything other than a blur. Bending over the man she said politely, "That wasn't very nice or very smart. If I let you go will you leave quietly?" He struggled violently for a moment making the table shake and everything on it rattle, to absolutely no effect.

"Let go of me, bitch!" he yelled. She sighed.

"You're really not very cooperative, are you?" the girl said quietly. After a moment, she reached out with her other hand and carefully poked a couple of places along his spine. He went limp so suddenly she had to grab him. "Hmm. That works remarkably well," Evie heard her mumble, as she rolled Ben over and picked him up. Carrying him outside she gently lowered him to the ground,
leaning him against the side of the building, then came back inside. Evie had followed out of shocked curiosity and had to move out of the way. The girl looked around. Half a dozen or so startled faces met her gaze. Smiling slightly she nodded to them all, then turned to the owner.

"I'm sorry about that. I hope I wasn't interrupting anything important, but he looked like he was about to do something neither one of you would enjoy." The woman stared at her for a moment, then smiled back.

"No, I think a good sleep will be what he needs." She sighed, glancing out the door at the comatose figure of the farmer. "He's not a bad person, really, but his attitude to women isn't good and he's a nasty drunk. That's why his wife left him in the first place." Returning her gaze to the young woman she held out her hand. "Evie Porcelli. Welcome to Evie's." The visitor grinned.

"Misaki. Thanks." Leading the way back to the counter Evie looked at Misaki, who was inspecting a chilled display cabinet with a number of desserts in it, an expression of interest on her face.

"Would you like a slice of pie, Misaki?" The girl grinned again.

"Yes, please. Can I have some of that cherry one?" Shortly she was sitting down with a large slice of pie, topped with ice cream, eating it with enthusiasm and appreciation. Evie went off to serve her other customers, who were talking about what they'd witnessed, then returned to the young woman who had so easily dealt with Ben.

"So, are you new in town?" she asked, sitting down on the other side of the table. Misaki shook her head, chewing, then swallowed.

"Not quite. We're just passing through, myself and some friends." She ate another bite of pie. "We're consultants to the government, here from Japan on a case. We're looking for someone." A photograph was suddenly in the hand she wasn't holding the fork with, making Evie stare in surprise. "I don't suppose you've seen this guy?" Taking the photo Evie looked carefully at it. It looked very vaguely familiar, causing her to think hard.

"Um." Misaki looked up, slight surprise and some hope in her expression. "Perhaps." She kept looking at the photo.

"That's it. I remember now. I'm pretty sure it was this guy. He came through about, oh, a little over five weeks ago or so. He was with a truck driver who stops in occasionally on the way through. I think he'd had car trouble quite a way down the road or something like that. The trucker called him Matt. He looked nervous, like he thought someone was after him." Looking up she smiled at Misaki. "I guess someone is."

"Several someones, I'm afraid. He should hope that we get to him first." Misaki finished her pie, then glanced around, returning her attention to Evie.

"What did he do?" she asked curiously.

"Mostly he seems to have managed to involve himself in something he should have stayed out of. We need some information he has." The young woman looked quite pleased. "I don't suppose you might have any idea where he is now, do you?" She shook her head.

"Sorry, no. He and Vince, the trucker, left after getting something to eat. Vince has been back a couple of times but this Matt fellow wasn't with him. I didn't ask what happened to him, to be honest I didn't think much about it." She looked up, waving to a man on the other side of the café.
"Hey, Logan! Come over here for a moment, will you?" The dark-skinned man looked up, then stood and made his way over to them.

"Misaki, this is Logan, he's another truck driver. Logan, any idea when Vince is coming through again? He's a friend of yours." Logan smiled slightly.

"Kind of a friend. He's a little difficult to really like. He should be back in town tomorrow sometime, I think. He's coming down from Darwin, going to Adelaide, as far as I know."

"Do you have any idea where he might stop for the night?" Misaki asked. He shook his head, grinning.

"He might not. He's fond of uppers, it makes him twitchy, but keeps him going for days sometimes. Other times he'll just pull over somewhere and have a nap. Last time I saw him was about a week ago, he gave me a rough idea of his schedule, but other than that I couldn't tell you where he is. Somewhere between Darwin and here, which is a hell of a long way."

Misaki nodded her understanding. "Thanks. That helps a lot. What's Vince's last name, by the way?"

"Dacey," both Evie and Logan said at the same time, then grinned at each other. Misaki giggled.

"Thank you both." Another Japanese girl, a short brunette entered the café, walking over to them. "This is my ride, Aiko. Aiko, this is Evie and Logan."

The new girl smiled at them. "Nice to meet you. Thanks for the information."

Misaki stood, glancing at her plate. "How much do I owe you?" she asked. Evie waved her hand. "Forget it. Thanks for dealing with Ben." Looking out the door into the gloom she asked curiously, "What did you do to him, anyway? How long will he be asleep?"

"It was a pressure point technique I learned recently. He'll be out for a couple of hours." Misaki looked amused.

"Damned impressive," Logan remarked, grinning at her. She returned the grin.

"Thanks. Right, we'd better get going." Both girls left the café. Seconds later there was a brilliant flash of light that lit the room, causing everyone to go and look out the window, but nothing could be seen.

"Vince Dacey, forty five years old, a few minor charges, mainly narcotics possession and driving under the influence, with a couple of speeding tickets," Sergeant Creswick said, looking at the screen of his computer. "Nothing very serious and nothing recently. I seem to recall the guy, tall and skinny, dark hair. Always wears blue, for some reason. We'll put out a bulletin on him and his truck, we might get lucky and find him if he happens to go past a patrol car or stop somewhere, but in all likelihood our best bet is to wait for him to get here. Assuming your information is accurate that should be sometime tomorrow." He glanced at Misaki, who nodded.

Yori sighed a little. "Getting closer, but more waiting. This is really irritating." Chou put her hand on her partner's shoulder, smiling serenely.

"We have no choice. The area is too big to do anything else but wait. Don't worry, we're closing in. Hopefully he will arrive quite early." Looking at Creswick she asked, "I assume you will stop him
and hold him when he arrives?" The sergeant nodded.

"Of course. I'll let Sharon know as soon as we have him."

"Thank you." The blonde woman looked around at the other members of her group. "I think we should take Superintendent Weiss back to Alice Springs then return to Sydney. We all need something to eat, and poor Agent Naito and Officer Graham look dead on their feet." Everyone turned to study the two men, who did indeed look ready to fall over.

"Sounds like a good idea," Fumiko said. She nudged Naito, who had nearly fallen asleep, causing him to jerk awake with a muttered exclamation. The girl grinned at him.

Mike handed both Superintendent Weiss and Sergeant Creswick a card. "I can be reached on this number any time, day or night. Call as soon as you know anything." They both nodded. Leaving the police station, Sharon shook hands with her old friend.

"See you soon, Jack," she said, then walked over to the others. He closed his eyes, having witnessed the teleportation flash several times now and knowing what to expect. When he opened them again the group was gone. Shaking his head in wonder he went back inside to finish his shift.

Vince looked in the rear-view mirror, frowning at the flashing lights of the police car behind him. Quickly checking his speedometer he shrugged. He was at the limit, so it wasn't that. Relieved that he'd used the last of his amphetamines a few days ago, he was sure as a result that there was nothing in the vehicle that the police could have problems with. Indicating left he pulled over as soon as he found a safe place to do so, rolling the window down and leaning out as the police car pulled in just in front of him. "Hey, Dean," he greeted the constable who got out, recognising him.

"What's up?"

"Hi, Vince," Constable Bardon said as he approached. "Don't worry, it's nothing serious. The police in Tennant Creek want to talk to you, something about a hitch-hiker you picked up a few weeks ago. Can you make sure you stop by the station there as soon as you arrive, please?"

Puzzled, Vince nodded. He wasn't entirely fond of the police but they weren't too bad if you were polite. He'd done nothing illegal that he was aware of lately so it didn't seem likely that this was going to cause him any problems.

"Is everyone out looking for me?" he asked, curious and slightly amused. Bardon laughed.

"More or less. They seem pretty concerned about this guy, whoever he is. Things would be a lot easier if you had a phone, or even a radio. You're a trucker, for god's sake! Don't you all use CBs?"

Vince snickered.

"That's very eighties. I've got a UHF radio for emergencies, but the whole point of this job is that I don't have to talk to people for a lot of the time. I like my solitude. What would I want a phone for? It wouldn't work most places I drive anyway." The constable grinned, then walked back to his car, waving to Vince. Turning his lights off he pulled out, turned around, and went back the way he'd come. Vince put the truck in gear, slowly pulling out and resuming his drive, looking out at the early dawn morning. He'd be in Tennant Creek in an hour or so, perhaps then he'd find out what this was all about.

Mike woke to the sound of his cell-phone buzzing at him from beside the bed. Reaching out he fumbled for it, finally picking it up and pressing the call accept button by feel. The phone disappeared back under his pillow where his head was. "Hello?" he mumbled into it.
"It's Superintendent Weiss. Jack Creswick just let me know that this Vince Dacey will be arriving in Tennant Creek in about twenty minutes or so. A constable from a town further north spotted him an hour ago heading south and intercepted him, passing on the message we wanted to talk." More awake, Mike rolled over, removing the pillow and dislodging the cat, which was sleeping on his back. Annoyed, it meowed, then wandered off to find something warm and less mobile to sleep on.

"OK. I'll contact Agent Naito. We should be with you in about a quarter of an hour or so, I think."

"I still find that remarkable," Weiss laughed, "You're nearly three thousand kilometres away, yet you'll be here in fifteen minutes." Mike snickered.

"I know. It's nuts. Especially since most of that is just getting up and getting dressed."

"See you soon." She hung up, still laughing. Getting up he hunted for some clothes while calling the Japanese security services agent, passing on the details, then headed for the bathroom. By the time the knock on his door came he was dressed, shaved, and had fed the cat. Opening it he smiled at the eight people outside.

"Hi. Shall we go?" Joining them the entire group disappeared. The cat peered curiously out the window at the place they'd been, then got distracted by a bird.

When they arrived in Tenant Creek with Superintendent Weiss, they found a large truck parked outside the police station, covered with dust and still making little creaking noises as it's engine cooled, having obviously just stopped. They trooped inside to discover Sergeant Creswick talking to a tall thin man who was, as advertised, dressed entirely in shades of blue. He turned and looked at them, inspecting them curiously. "These are the people who'd like to talk to you, Vince," the sergeant said.

"All of them?" Vince asked, sounding both amused and puzzled. "We may need a larger room." Yori grinned as Chou giggled. The black-haired woman glanced at her friends, who nodded and left again. Agent Naito and Mike exchanged looks, it was weird the way they'd all done that without anyone saying anything.

"How's this?" Yori asked, pulling out a chair next to the sergeant's desk, where he and the trucker were sitting.

"Better. I don't like large groups of people, I'll admit. It's why I spend so much time on the road." Vince smiled slightly. "That and the money is pretty good." He studied the young woman, then her colleagues. Mike leaned against the next desk along and showed him his ID.

"Hmm. The ASIO? I've heard of you lot but never met anyone from there. Are you all government spooks?" Vince grinned, as did Yori.

She shook her head. "He's a spook," she replied, pointing at Agent Naito, who looked slightly surprised then smiled, "and so is Mike. We're consultants." Chou gave her a look.

"You seem to like that term," she said quietly, but with amusement. Yori laughed.

"It fits." Looking back to Vince she produced the photo, making him look at her oddly, then handed it to him. After a moment he took it and looked at it carefully. "We're trying to trace this man. His name is Geoffrey Young, but from what we learned he may be going by the name of Matt, and his hair is brown now, with a beard as well. Do you recall him?" Vince nodded.

"Yes, I do. I picked him up around five or six weeks ago about eighty kilometres south of here, toward Alice Springs. His car had died on him. Completely seized, there was no chance of fixing
He'd been there for hours when I came along and was getting desperate. Drank half my water in about five minutes. You're right, he said his name was Matt. Um, Matt Corbin, I think. Superintendent Weiss was making notes, as was Agent Naito. Yori nodded, looking satisfied.

"Good. Now, the important thing. We need to find him, urgently. Do you have any idea where he is now? Where did you take him? Did he say anything about his plans?" Vince thought for a moment.

"He said he was heading to Darwin, but I don't think that's true. He seemed very nervous, other than the whole running out of water and nearly dying part of it. Before we left, he took most of the stuff out of his car, then he took the plates off as well and put them in his backpack, which I thought was a little strange. I think he might have removed the VIN plate as well, it seemed to be missing and it looked recent. To me he looked terrified, really, like he was running." He shrugged. "None of my business, the guy didn't seem dangerous which is why I picked him up. If he'd started anything, well, I was pretty sure my machete would have sorted it out." Yori nodded again. Everyone was listening carefully.

"I told him I could take him all the way to Darwin if he wanted. In the end, though, I dropped him off in Elliott. He said he had relatives there, but I'm not sure that was true. It seemed more like a spur of the moment decision." Yori glanced at Superintendent Weiss, who nodded.

"Elliott is a tiny town about two hundred and fifty kilometres north of here. I don't think more than maybe five hundred, maybe six hundred people live there. Most of them are Aborigines, so I'd think a new white face would be fairly memorable. I think there's a caravan park and a few amenities like that there."

"Good. That's certainly helping narrow it down. If he's still there, we should be able to find him. If he's not, perhaps someone knows where he went." Yori looked pleased, smiling a little. She looked back to Vince, who was listening with interest. "Thank you, Vince. It's been a great help."

"You're welcome. Is that all you need?" The young woman grinned.

"Pretty much." Standing, she looked at her colleagues. "Off to Elliott, and hopefully one step closer to Mr Young. I hope it's the last step, we're running out of time." Heading out the door she was followed by the others. Aiko, standing under a tree in the shade, looked up as she came out of the police station, then walked over. The other four young women appeared seconds later from various places around the area, gathering near Vince's truck. He studied them again with interest, before climbing up into the cab. Rolling down the window he leaned out.

"Good luck," he said, starting the engine. With a wave he put the vehicle in gear and slowly moved off. They watched him go, then gathered together. Shaking Sergeant Creswick's hand Sharon smiled at him.

"Thanks for the help, Jack. It's been nice seeing you again."

"You too, Sharon. Next time you come through we should go out for a meal." He looked around at the others. Mike shook his hand as well, followed by Yori and Agent Naito. "I hope you find your man. Let me know what happens, will you, Sharon?" The superintendent nodded.

"Of course." A few seconds later they teleported away.

Adam looked up as someone entered the small police station. He examined the middle-aged woman in an NT police uniform, snapping to attention when he noticed her rank. "Superintendent! What can I do for you?"
"Calm down, Constable, you'll pop something." Superintendent Weiss smiled at the young man. "You are?"

"Constable Adam Wang, ma'am."

"All right, Constable Wang. This is Officer Graham from the ASIO, who is looking for a man he believes has some very important information critical to national security. Agent Naito here is from the PSIA in Japan, he and Yori next to him are aiding the ASIO as it's an international case that started there." She put a photo of Geoffrey Young on the desk. "This is the man we're looking for. His name is Geoffrey Young, but we believe he's going under the alias of Matt Corbin. He has brown hair and a beard now, we think. A trucker dropped him off here between five and six weeks ago. Have you seen him?" The constable looked at the photo carefully, then shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't." He turned and shouted back to the rear of the small police station, "Hey, Koby. Come here a minute." Another man stuck his head around the door, holding a mug of tea in his hand, visibly wondering what the excitement was about. When he spotted the visitors he came into the room, stopping next to his colleague. "Seen this guy?" Wang asked, handing him the photo. "Sometime around five weeks or so ago, brown hair and a beard at the time." Koby sipped his tea while studying the photo, then nodded.

"Yep. Reckon that's the bloke that old Nate rented a trailer to out on his farm. Couple of people at the pub were talking about it a few days ago. Young bloke, doesn't go out much, just comes into town every now and then to buy supplies. I saw him once, maybe twice, about two weeks ago." Sharon glanced at Yori, who looked very interested.

"Can you tell us where this farm is?" she asked politely, yet with a certain amount of excitement.

"Sure. It's about twenty kilometres south, off to the east from the Stuart Highway a few kilometres." He pulled a map from under the counter, unfolding it on top. "Here, more or less. You go down this track, it's pretty rough, but it will get you there." Yori studied it for a moment.

"Thank you. Do you have any idea whether he's still there?" Koby shrugged, drinking some more tea.

"Should be. From what I know he hasn't left, and he never comes into town during the week." The young blond man looked at the four people on the other side of the counter curiously. "What's he done?" he asked.

"Nothing very much," Officer Graham responded, "except come into some very important information. More by accident than anything else. We need that information, so we need to talk to Mr Young."

"OK. Well, if he's around anywhere that's where he'll be." The constable folded the map up and put it away, he and his colleague watching as the four visitors left the station.

Standing around outside the rest of the group was waiting for them. Aiko looked at Yori. "How do you want to play this?" The black-haired woman thought for a moment.

"I think that the best approach is to stay back out of sight and just a couple of us go in to talk to him. He's likely to run for it if he sees a lot of people turn up at once, by the sound of it he's very paranoid. Not stupid, either, he's managed to hide pretty damn well. Most people would have taken a lot longer to find him than we did, and it took us longer than I like. I'll go in with Mike, I think, the rest of you stay back unless something weird happens." They all nodded. Chou studied her partner for a moment.
"I think it might be a good idea to put a ward around the trailer, just in case. It will stop him running."

"Good idea. Very good idea, in fact. Let's do that." Yori nodded, smiling. "Right, let's go." Several people who had stopped to watch the unusual-looking gathering of people found themselves blinking violently in the after-effect of the teleport flash. Constable Wang came out to look around, wondering what it had been, before shrugging and going back inside.

The knock on the door made Matt Corbin AKA Geoffrey Young jump violently, dropping his bowl of cereal on the floor. He made no move to pick it up, instead staring fixedly at the door, before slowly crouching down and shuffling as silently as he could into the second room of the small trailer he'd been living in for the last month and a half. "Oh, fuck," he said very, very quietly, shaking with fear. "How did they find me?" Looking frantically around the room he tried to come up with an escape plan, wishing desperately that he had a weapon, and more to the point knew how to use it. Cautiously he looked out the window at the back of the trailer, seeing nothing but empty land with only the couple of weathered buildings that constituted the entirety of the farm whose owner had rented him this place. Looking out the other window showed nothing useful either, as he couldn't see the door from it. He was slightly puzzled to see no signs of a car, wondering how his pursuers had got here. He hadn't heard one now that he thought about it.

The knock came again. "Mr Young? I know you're in there. I only want to talk to you, I mean you no harm." The voice was female with a trace of an accent, probably Japanese or Korean. He shivered again, looking around and finally grabbing an old bent crowbar that had been the near-derelict trailer when he'd moved in. It wasn't much but against a woman it might be enough. Standing, making as little noise as he could manage, he pressed himself against the wall behind the door into the other room.

"Mr Young? I'm going to open the door and come in. Please don't do anything silly." The door clicked as it unlocked, then creaked as the woman on the other side pushed it open. He wondered how she'd unlocked it. There was a short pause, then her voice came from right outside the room he was in. "I'm coming in now." He twitched a little, he hadn't heard a sound to indicate she was moving across the trailer, which creaked annoyingly at every motion whenever he walked around. Breathing shallowly, trying not to panic any more than he was at the moment, Geoff raised the crowbar and waited, seeing a quite petite woman with extremely long, extremely black braided hair with a blue highlight walk into the room.

With a sudden motion he swung the crowbar at her head, stunned at what he was doing even as he did it. He was even more stunned when the woman raised a hand without even looking at him, catching the crowbar and halting it's downward trajectory as suddenly as if he'd hit an anvil with it. "Fucking hell!" he shouted in pain, letting go and clasping his hands together to try and massage the ache away. She turned and looked at him, smiling slightly.

"Do you greet all your guests like that?" she asked, amusement in her rich voice. He glared.

"Go on, then. You've found me, you may as well kill me. I told you, I sold the stuff months ago. I don't have it, I've got no way to get it back, so you're wasting your time." She raised an eyebrow. "You seem to be working on the wrong understanding. I'm not here to kill you, or hurt you at all. I just need to know who you sold the collection too. A name and an address, then I'll go." It was his turn to look sceptical.

"That's it?" She nodded. "Why should I believe you?"
"Mr Young, if I wanted you dead you'd never even have known I was there. I only need to find the purchaser of the collection you sold. It included something very dangerous, something I need to find and destroy before a very unfortunate event takes place." She looked at him, seeing that he didn't believe her. "We got off on the wrong foot. My name is Yori. I'm acting as a consultant for your government in association with the PSIA in Japan and your ASIO here. Outside is Officer Graham of the ASIO. He can show you official ID to verify what I'm saying. Come and talk to him." Geoff was still unconvinced.

Yori sighed a little. "You collect magical things, correct?"

He stared at her for a moment. "Almost no one believes me when I tell them that. No one believes in magic." She grinned.

"I don't believe in it, I just use it." He looked hard at her.

"You're saying you're some sort of mage? I've heard of them but never met one."

"I'm not a mage. I'm... something else." She studied him for a moment. "Watch." Holding the crowbar she was still holding up in front of him, she quickly tied it into a neat knot, accompanied by the sound of overstressed metal. He gaped.

"Oh... my... How did you do that?" She laughed.

"I'm insanely strong, for a start. Here, it's real." She handed him the knotted steel bar, which he gingerly took. There was no denying the fact it was the same crowbar he'd tried to hit her with. The whole thing was warm, the knot in it was smoking hot from the stress of being bent like rubber.

"Holy shit," he breathed, staring at it. The young woman chuckled.

"I can do things a lot better than that, it's not really magic at all. Just the end result of a lifetime of martial arts and special techniques." Studying him for a moment, she made a slight motion, ending up holding a hollow crystal globe he recognised.

"Hey, I had a crystal ball just like that one." Yori looked at it, then snickered.

"It's not a crystal ball. It's a battery."

"A battery?" He wasn't convinced. She handed it to him. Holding it up to the light he studied it. The thing looked identical to the one he'd left in the old bunker armoury when he'd run after all this insanity had happened. Reaching out with one finger she touched the ball, making him twitch and nearly drop it as it filled with gently glowing purple mist, which produced a tingling sensation in his hand. "Fuck! What's that?"

"Magic. Magical energy, basically. These store it so it can be used to power spells." He gaped at the glowing ball in his hand. "So, do you believe I know what I'm talking about?" she asked after a few seconds. He nodded, still staring at the ball. Gently lifting it from his hand she made it vanish. "Come outside. You're safe, there's no one out there who wants to hurt you. We just want to talk."

Stepping to the side she indicated the door. He stared at her for a long moment, then sighed, leaving the room. At the front door, he took a deep breath, then stepped out of the trailer, wincing a little as he subconsciously expected to hear a shot. Nothing happened.

Standing outside was a tall blond man who looked him up and down, then held out his hand.

"Geoffrey Young? I'm Officer Graham from the ASIO. Call me Mike." Once he'd shaken hands he held out a very official looking ID. Geoff looked at it carefully. It certainly looked real. "You can calm down. We're not here for anything other than to talk. When we're finished you can go back
to...,” he looked at the tired old trailer with a raised eyebrow, "whatever it is you're doing. Although I'd suggest you might want to find somewhere a little more up-market." Studying the man carefully, Geoff finally sighed and nodded. It wasn't like he could get away, although he did glance around wondering briefly if he should make a run for it. Yori noticed and snickered.

"I'd suggest you don't try running. You wouldn't get very far."

"I suppose you'd shoot me or something?" he asked, depressed but curious. She smiled.

"Nothing so dramatic. You just wouldn't get very far. Look." Bending down she picked up a fist-sized rock and whipped it hard away from the trailer. It travelled no more than ten metres before hitting something invisible and exploding into fragments. A brief golden glow was visible in a half-metre circle around where it had stopped. Geoff gaped in shock.

"What the fuck is that?" he whispered.

"We put a ward around the trailer in case you ran. If you'll promise not to try anything we can get rid of it." Without answering he walked slowly over to the place the rock had stopped dead, reaching out and tentatively prodding the air in front of him. Although he could see nothing his hand stopped as if he'd touched a sheet of totally transparent glass. Feeling it with the palm of his hand he shook his head in wonder. The crowbar, and the glowing crystal 'battery', those might have been tricks somehow, but this was clearly extremely real, and extremely not normal. After a moment he turned and walked back to the two other people. Yori was watching him with a small smile while Officer Graham was just waiting patiently.

"Convinced?" the woman asked. He nodded.

"Yes. I still don't trust you, but there's no denying the fact that you seem to know a lot about magic. Or something, anyway. Who are you, really?"

"Like I said, we're consultants, from Japan." Geoff looked at her, then around the otherwise pretty barren area. There was only the three of them there, as far as he knew, with the farmer away on business he was probably the only person other than the man and woman in half a dozen kilometres. That had basically been the entire point of hiding in this god-forsaken place.

"We?"

She looked at him for a long moment, then grinned slightly. Suddenly there were seven more people standing a few metres away, one man and six women. One of the woman, the oldest one, probably about mid forties, was in the uniform of the NT police. The others were all Japanese like Yori. Geoff felt his heart jump, stepping back in shock.

"We." Yori had a distinct smirk now. "These are my friends. Agent Naito from the PSIA, and Superintendent Weiss from the Alice Springs police station, plus Chou, Azumi, Aiko, Tamiko, Fumiko, and Misaki." She pointed to each person in turn.

When he could speak without sounding too much like he was going to faint, Geoff asked shakily, "How the hell did you do that?" The brunette woman, Aiko, who was also quite short like Yori, laughed.

"Teleportation. It's really handy and a lot of fun." Gaping at her for a long moment he shook his head in stunned amazement. After years of collecting things he thought might be genuinely magical, with nothing much to prove it one way or the other past a gut feeling, all of a sudden he was being thrust into the middle of more magic than he was really comfortable with.
"Holy shit," Geoff mumbled, stumbling over to a pile of concrete blocks next to the trailer and sitting on them, looking around helplessly. "This is too much." The tall blonde woman who was in the middle of the pack of girls smiled gently at him, making him feel slightly calmer for some odd reason, then walked over and squatted down next to him. Chou, he remembered her name was.

"Mr Young, I understand you are probably feeling somewhat overwhelmed. Try to stay calm. We're here to get some information we believe you have, but if you let us I think we can probably help you with your current problem." He looked at her for a long moment then slowly nodded, sighing a little. He was tired of running, and the constant fear. If these unbelievable people could help, maybe he should let them. Looking at her, a vague memory flicked through his mind. The young man looked around at the others with a sudden surmise growing in him.

"Magical girls."

"I'm sorry?" Chou asked, although she was smiling slightly.

"Magical girls. I've heard of them. You're all Japanese, you're all female, and you use magic. You're magical girls, like the ones who were in London after Christmas." Yori laughed.

"Not like them. We are them. That's basically what we want to talk to you about." Once more he stared in shock. Yori glanced around at the dusty farmyard. "Look, why don't we go somewhere a little less bare and dry, get something to eat, and talk about this. Afterwards, if you want, we'll bring you back here, or take you somewhere else." She looked at Officer Graham who was listening silently as was everyone else. "The police don't have any interest in him, do they, Mike?"

"Not really. I think that DS Taylor would be interested in talking to him about the operation that his grandmother was running but I'm sure some arrangement could be come to. To the best of my knowledge there's no suspicion that he's done anything particularly arrest-worthy. Assuming that the kilo of cannabis that his grandmother claimed he stole isn't, in fact, in his possession." Geoff froze, trying not to look at the trailer.

Standing, Chou glanced at him, then headed towards the door. "I'll just check," she said mildly. Disappearing inside there was silence for a moment, then a faint 'whoomp' noise came from inside, like a petrol-soaked bonfire being lit. A slight flash of golden light showed from the window. The blonde woman reappeared, dusting off her hands. "No, there doesn't appear to be any cannabis inside there." She smiled at him in a slightly devious manner. Officer Graham chuckled while the Japanese security agent looked hard at her, then grinned a little. Yori snickered.

"So, there's no real problem, Mr Young. Talk to us, talk to DS Taylor, who is a reasonable man, after that you're free and clear." Looking around at them, he finally stood.

"OK."

"Great." Yori looked pleased. She turned to Superintendent Weiss. "Would you like to come with us, or should we drop you off in Alice Springs?" The woman looked at her watch.

"Unfortunately, I think I should be getting back, now you have your man. I'd love to see how this plays out but I have work piling up at the office." Officer Graham nodded to her.

"I'll make sure you get a copy of the report. You've been an enormous help, as have your colleagues."

"Thank you," she said, pleased and smiling. Turning to glance over the others, she grinned. "If you decide to emigrate to Australia, look me up. I'm sure I could find uses for people with your
extraordinary talents." Several of the young woman laughed.

"We may well visit some time," Aiko said, grinning. "It's easy."

"Please do." The petite brunette walked over to stand beside the Superintendent, then with a brilliant flash of light, they vanished. Geoff blinked furiously, his eyes watering, noticing too late that everyone else had glanced away at the critical moment.

"My apologies," Chou said, sounding genuinely sorry. "I should have mentioned the flash." A minute later Aiko reappeared.

"Right, she's back in Alice Springs. I like her. We definitely should come back." Walking over to Geoff she smiled at him. "I have to say this every time I take someone new. The first time, you'll feel pretty sick, but it doesn't last. Just be ready for it, OK?" He nodded, still wondering how his day had gone so weird so fast. "Anything else we need to do here?" the brunette asked, looking at the others. Yori glanced at Officer Graham, who shrugged.

"Not that I can think of. We can come back easily enough if we have to, after all."

"Indeed," Chou replied, stepping to a position on the other side of Geoff. The others gathered around, then the world went briefly insane. He felt a horrible nausea, which bubbled up inside with no warning, causing him to suddenly bend down and vomit. Someone held him, preventing him from falling, while allowing him to deal with the horrible sick feeling that had struck so suddenly. Only a handful of seconds later it began to subside nearly as fast as it had hit. The person holding him handed him a cloth, which he took gratefully and wiped vomit from his mouth with. A bottle of water made an appearance. Taking it and washing his mouth out he spat a few times, then did it again, finally straightening up and looking around. Chou was standing next to him looking at him sympathetically.

"That was a particularly bad reaction," she said in her soft voice. "I'm sorry it hit you like that. It only does it once, though, so you won't have to deal with it again."

Nodding, he looked around, noticing with a shock that they were standing in the middle of what seemed to be a helicopter pad on the roof of a building. The cityscape he could see looked familiar. "We're in Sydney!" he said with shock in his voice. The blonde woman next to him nodded.

"Yes. On top of the ASIO building. Come on, we can go downstairs out of the wind and you can sit down." Following her as she joined the others, he went down the stairs into the building.

Shortly he was sitting at a table in a large conference room of some sort. Looking around he saw they'd gone down a couple of floors but were still fairly high up, judging by the view out the window. Aiko had left a moment ago, abruptly reappearing with another man who looked like a cop. "This is DS Taylor," Yori said, introducing them. "Detective, this is Geoffrey Young. He's been quite a problem to find, but we managed in the end." The policeman studied him for a long moment, then nodded.

"I see. Well, when You've finished I'd like to talk to him for a while, but after that I think he can go. Although I'd suggest he finds someone else to live with." The man almost smiled at that. Geoff snorted.

"I wasn't staying with Gran because I like the old cow, trust me."

"Funny, we've found very few people who seem to like her..." Taylor grinned.

"I can believe that." Looking at the others, who had all sat by now, Geoff shrugged. "OK. You've
got me. What was so important that you chased me half-way across the country?"

Yori produced a photo from nowhere, skimming it across the table to him. He slapped his hand down on it, then turned it over. "Oh. That thing."

"Tell me about it," the Japanese woman suggested. "Where you found it, who you sold it to, anything else you know, please. It's quite urgent." He sighed.

"I found it around four, four and a half months ago. It was buried in the ground on the edge of Centennial Park, on the side near the cricket ground, under a bench."

Azumi, the silver-haired woman who made him nervous every time she looked at him, asked in a voice devoid of much emotion, "How did you come to find it there? It sounds as if it was well hidden." Geoff shrugged a little, trying to think of how to explain it.

"It was basically an accident. I'd been going around various antique and junk shops I know looking for artefacts, I even found a couple that I thought might be genuine, and took a short cut through the park. I stopped for a drink, sat down on that bench, then after a while got a weird feeling. For some reason I ended up convinced there was something under the bench. I spent a couple of minutes looking, then when I couldn't find anything, I started digging. The ground is only soft sand right there, so it wasn't difficult. It was down about fifteen or twenty centimetres. I've got no idea how long it was there or who put it there. The ground didn't look disturbed. When I pulled it out and brushed the dirt off I saw it was glowing."

Yori inspected him curiously. "Didn't that make you cautious?" she asked.

"I thought it was strange, but the whole thing was strange. It looked more like a magical artefact than almost anything I'd ever seen before. Plus it seemed to be working, everything else I've come across was broken or damaged. There was a feeling about it that was... weird." He looked at her. "Come to thing of it, it was a lot like that, um, battery thing you showed me." She nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Go on."

"Well, I got pretty excited. I've been buying and selling artefacts for several years but I'd never seen anything like it before. No one I knew in the business had either. I showed it to a couple of traders I know who are into the same thing, one of them wanted to buy it, the other one told me to toss it in the bay. Sam told me the same thing. In the end I put it in the old armoury in the bunker. The feeling it gave off was... unpleasant... after a while. When I had it in my bedroom I started getting headaches and having nightmares. It was still causing that even from the bunker, not as bad, but I could tell where it was coming from." He looked at the photo again.

"I didn't want to get rid of it, it was the best artefact I'd ever seen, but... after a month or so I was wishing I'd never found the fucking thing. So, since I was running low on cash, I decided to put together a collection of my best stuff and sell it on Mystic Mart, and throw that thing in as well." Glancing around at the people around the table who were listening with great interest, he dropped the photo to the table, then leaned back. "I couldn't believe it when it suddenly started attracting so much interest. The bids just went up and up. Two hundred fucking grand it went for in the end. I thought it was a joke, but the escrow service I use confirmed I'd been paid. I boxed everything up, including that thing, very carefully, sent it off, and a week later my money was released. It was amazing. All of a sudden I was rich. I paid Sam what I owed him for some jobs he did for me, paid off all my other debts, and still had over a hundred and eighty thousand dollars. The buyer gave me a glowing recommendation, even."
"For a while everything was great. I was working on moving out of Gran's place, something I'd wanted to do for a long time, but I hadn't decided where to go. Then, I started getting emails. Then phone calls. It was the other bidder, I don't know how the hell they got my email address, and my phone number. Hardly anyone knew that number, it wasn't in my name, and I didn't use the phone very much. I'm pretty sure that the website was in on it somehow, I can't see how my details could have gotten out otherwise. The encryption that site uses is supposed to be cutting edge, unbreakable." Azumi laughed slightly.

"It's not nearly as good as they think it is," she said, cold amusement in her voice. He looked at her as did Agent Naito and the three Australian men. When she said nothing further, Geoff went back to his story.

"At first the emails were just demands that I cancel the sale, then sell them the collection. They even upped the price to a quarter of a million. Then three hundred grand. I tried explaining that I'd already sent it off and there was no way to get it back, but they wouldn't listen. I even tried to buy it back, but the guy who bought it didn't respond to any of my messages." He sighed, looking depressed and worried. "Then the phone calls started. This guy started making threats. He knew where I lived, what my phone number was, obviously, and my email address, and several other things he shouldn't have known. He got really angry, in fact, shouting at me and swearing. He told me he could make my life hell. He already was, actually, so I wasn't sure what else he could do but I didn't want to find out."

"Did he mention this device?" Chou asked, indicating the photo with one slender finger. Geoff shook his head. "No. He didn't say much about the collection, just that he wanted it and he was going to get it one way or the other. He was getting all high and mighty about it as well, telling me I didn't know who I was dealing with and that I should know my place, give him the stuff, and take my money like a good boy." The young man snorted. "Bloody Pom." Yori looked at the blonde woman with a raised eyebrow, then glanced at Officer Graham and Agent Naito.

"Do you mean he was British?"

"Well, judging by the accent, yes. Very high-brow accent, like you hear on the news when they cover the UK. Snotty bastard by the sound of it. I guess probably well educated? Very full of his own importance." He laughed a little bitterly. "He told me he knew more about magic that I ever would and this was something he deserved. Mage Business, he called it. You could hear the capital letters." Yori looked at him, appearing surprised, then scowled. She looked at Chou, who nodded, also looking quite angry.

"Ah. I have a very good idea suddenly who you're talking about. I think we may have to go and have a talk." Agent Naito looked at them for a moment, then nodded slowly, pulling his phone out.

"I'll call Sir Alan and that Williamson fellow. I think they'd like to know." Leaving the room, he closed the door behind him. Geoff watched him go with puzzlement, then looked back to the black-haired young woman on the other side of the table.

"OK. That's that part explained. Now for the important bit. Where did you send the collection?" She leaned forward, showing complete concentration on him.

"It went to Canada. Somewhere called Garson, in Ontario. The guy didn't give me a name, just a post office box number and a throwaway email address to send a message to when I'd sent the package. I followed his instructions after he'd put the money in escrow, he released it, everything went smoothly. That's the last I heard of it."

"Can you still remember the details of the address, the email account, anything like that?" She
looked hopeful. After a moment he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small notebook, sliding it across the table towards her.

"Before I destroyed all my paperwork I wrote that information down. I don't know why, but for some reason I thought it might be useful. I guess I was thinking that if the second bidder did find me, I might be able to trade it to him to leave me alone." Yori picked up the notebook, flipping through it until she found the page, then read it carefully. A smile crossed her face.

"Thank you, Mr Young. Thank you very much. You may have helped save the lives of a considerable number of people." Handing the notebook back to him she looked around at the other women, who nodded, giving the appearance they were discussing something. Azumi stood and left the room, as did Chou. Agent Naito came back in after she left, closing the door behind him.

"Sir Alan is... not happy," he said, taking his seat again. He seemed amused. "Very not happy indeed. I persuaded him to hold off until we got there, he was all for getting some large men with even larger guns and making it very clear just how unhappy he was. Mr Williamson is gathering information that might be of help right now."

"Good. I think we should deal with that later, after Ms Aoyama tracks down anything she can to help us find this other buyer. With this new information I expect she can work it from the other end." The girl grinned. "She's extremely persuasive with computers." Naito smiled in a slightly worried fashion.

"I don't know 'persuasive' is the right term. I suspect she simply terrifies them into doing what she wants." Yori chuckled, then looked up as Azumi and Chou came back in.

Looking at Yori, the silver-haired woman said, "Ms Aoyama is working on the problem. She expects to have something for us within two hours." Her cool voice sounded satisfied.

"Great." Transferring her gaze back to Geoff, Yori smiled. "Thanks. You won't have any more trouble from that particular source, trust me," she said. There was something about the way she said it that made him lean away. Glancing at DS Taylor and Officer Graham, both of whom had been taking notes during the questioning, she asked, "Is there anything else that you can think of?" They looked at each other.

"I would like to talk to Mr Young when he would find it convenient, to get some more information on what he knows about his grandmother's operation, but other than that, I don't have any reason to keep him." The detective sergeant looked at Geoff. "Perhaps you could come back with me to the station? It will only take about an hour, then you can go." Geoff looked uncertain.

"You promise this isn't a trick to arrest me for something?" Taylor laughed.

"Trust me, if I wanted to arrest you I'd have done it by now. We just want a witness statement. I've got no other interest in your activities or your income." After a few seconds thought, slightly reluctantly, Geoff nodded.

"All right."

"Officer Graham?" Yori raised her eyebrows. The other man shook his head.

"The ASIO isn't interested in him either. Not officially. I would like to talk to him personally about his interests, they might fill in some blanks in the knowledge I have in the magical artefact scene around here, but he doesn't have to if he doesn't want to. I'm just curious."

"OK. In that case, once Ms Aoyama gets back to us, we'll be leaving." She offered him one of her
cards, explaining how it worked. He accepted it with interest, then gave her one of his.

Chou looked at Geoff. "Do you have any pressing wish to go back to that trailer we found you in?" she asked curiously. He shuddered.

"No. It was horrible. But..." Looking around slightly nervously, he finally said, "I did leave something there I want." She smiled gently. Suddenly she was holding a small backpack he recognised very well.

"This, I suspect." Staring, he nodded. She got up and brought it around the table to him. "I would suggest it might be a good idea to put at least some of the money into the bank," she said in a low voice, bending down to his ear, before handing him the backpack that contained over a hundred and eighty thousand Australian dollars, and, he was certain, no cannabis at all. Geoff nodded again.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." The blonde straightened up with a look of amusement, returning to her position beside Yori.

"It's been a very weird and interesting time the last couple of days," DS Taylor said, looking around at the various people around the table. The girls, except for Azumi, smiled. Even she seemed mildly amused. "Let me know how it goes, if you can." Yori grinned and nodded.

"Of course we will."

"I'll see that you both get a copy of the report I file with the PSIA," Agent Naito added.

"Thanks." Standing, he glanced at Geoff. "Well, Mr Young, shall we go? An hour from now you can be back to buying and selling dodgy magical artefacts." Geoff shook his head.

"I think I'll give that a miss for a while. I've got an urge to find another hobby." Several people laughed. He looked curiously at Yori. "What is that thing, anyway?" he asked.

"It summons demons that eat you," she said with a grin. At his sceptical look she snickered. "Honest. It's a good thing you didn't poke it too hard..." Shuddering, he got up, holding his backpack close to him.

"Good luck finding it," he said. Yori nodded, smiling.

Aiko got up and approached them. "I'll pop you back, it will be quicker," she said to DS Taylor, who nodded thankfully. Seconds later they disappeared.
Embedded Sidestory 4 part 2

Part 2

Inspector Laura Deveraux looked at the report that had just come across her desk with a frown. Reading it carefully again, she picked up the phone and punched in a two-digit internal code, waiting for the other end to pick up. "Hello, Evan. I was just reading this report on Halleckton. Where is that, I've never heard of it before."

"It's a small town just to the east of Lake Halleck, which is, oh, roughly fifty kilometres north-east of Garson. I think it was a logging or mining town originally, but it's been more involved in the hunting and fishing side of things for a long time now. It's a long drive on some pretty bad roads, but I've heard the fishing is good and there are some very expensive houses there. It's popular with wealthy people who like to 'get away from it all' without going too far from real civilisation." The other RCMP officer chuckled. "You know the type. Real outdoorsmen who like nothing more than to rough it with none of the creature comforts other than satellite TV, hot tubs, lots of booze, and people to carry their equipment."

Laura laughed. "Oh, yes, I know that type all too well. So, no one has heard anything from there for over a week now?"

"No. From what I can find out, it's not unusual for the town to be completely cut off during the winter, it gets snowed in. There are about two hundred and sixty permanent residents and at peak season it goes up to perhaps four hundred. The season is only just starting, so there's probably only about fifty visitors there at the most. Apparently most of them go there specifically to not be contacted. There's no cell-phone coverage, you need a satellite phone, a radio, or a land-line. The telephone service gets cut off fairly often, it's at the end of forty kilometres of overhead cable and falling branches break the line regularly. Even so, at this time of year going a week without anyone hearing from the town isn't normal. Someone in Sudbury who supplies them with propane raised the alarm, he was expecting an order for a regular refill and didn't get it. He tried contacting them, had no luck, and after a few days got worried. He called us." His voice took on a note of mild concern. "I contacted the local station that covers that area and asked them about it. They said they'd sent someone to check, just in case, but didn't seem worried. It's been some time, I'd have thought they'd have arrived there by now, but I haven't heard back yet. Let me call them, I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Evan." She put the phone down and glanced over the report again, then pushed it to one side and got back to work. Replying to an email, she smiled as she saw one in her inbox from a couple of weeks ago from Richard Harrison from the LAPD. Re-reading it she laughed. They'd become firm friends even before their Japanese trip, the extraordinary events there having cemented that relationship permanently. His email was a general hello, going into the way his daughter Serena and the girl she'd met due to Yori and the others, Sophie, had both taken up martial arts with great enthusiasm. Serena was also apparently serious about archery, having finally talked her father into getting her a nice compound bow for her birthday.

The magical girls from Japan had certainly had a serious influence on both young women. They had to be talked out of hunting down criminals on a regular basis. Serena's father had patiently explained that aside from anything else, Yori and her friends were more than tough enough to deal with the consequences of their actions, as well as having years of experience in such things. A pair of fifteen year old American schoolgirls without magical powers were possibly in slightly over
their heads, even given their considerable enthusiasm for the whole idea. They hadn't been completely convinced but had agreed to leave the law enforcement to the professionals.

"For the moment," Deveraux thought, grinning. 'Having met Serena, I have a feeling that sooner or later she's going to decide it can't be all that difficult and have a go. If Sophie is anything like her, she will as well. I hope they don't get hurt." It was a concern, they certainly didn't have the ability to take a bullet to the stomach and merely look annoyed at the damaged shirt like certain black-haired Japanese girls Laura could think of. 'I'll have to visit Richard and Emily again soon. They're nice people. After the winter we've had I could do with some sun.' Musing on the possibility of vacationing in LA, while also wondering whether a trip to Japan to visit Masao Naito, Tetsuo Harada and his wife, and even hopefully Yori and the others was something she could afford, she answered a few more emails, then began writing up the paperwork on the last case she'd just finished. This kept her involved for the next hour, while she cross-referenced the complicated paperwork and muttered to herself.

When the phone at her elbow beeped loudly she jumped, concentrating so hard on her work it came as quite a surprise, then picked up the handset. "Hi, Laura." The other officer sounded worried. "I finally got hold of the local police who were looking into Halleckton. They sent a car hours ago and haven't had any contact with it since it last reported in about ten kilometres south of the town. When they lost contact they waited for two hours, then sent two more officers to look for the first one. That car dropped off the radar as well."

"Crap. That sounds bad."

"I know. It might just be some weird coincidence, but added to no contact from the town or anyone in it for eight days, and you end up thinking that there could be a real problem. There are no fire reports or any natural disasters I've heard about in that area, it's not very cold at the moment, all the snow has melted, that sort of thing, so I'm at a bit of a loss. I think we need to investigate." 

"Arrange to have Air Services do an overflight and have a quick look, to see if there's anything obvious wrong. I'll talk to the Chief Superintendent. He might want to send something a little more heavily armed than a patrol vehicle if there's anything wrong. If some of those hunters went loopy and started shooting people instead, it could get nasty."

"I've already sent a plane out, we should have something in about half an hour. I'll let you know what the results are."

"All right. Thank you for calling." Hanging up, she dialled another code, then spoke briefly, before putting the phone down, picking up the Halleckton report and leaving her office.

Corporal Osborne raised his binoculars again and peered through them at the town a thousand metres below them as the Cessna banked right on the second orbit. "Still can't see any movement," he said to the pilot. Her voice came back over the headset, slightly crackly and sounding worried. "I haven't seen any signs of life at all. There's supposed to be about two or three hundred people down there right now, it's only six PM on a nice sunny day, so there should be someone wandering around outside. But there aren't even any cars moving."

"Do another pass lower, will you? Perhaps we can get a better view." She nodded, turning the light aircraft left again, then reducing power and slowly dropping. An orbit of the town at five hundred metres revealed no more signs of movement that before, but revealed something that the higher overpass hadn't. "Fuck. Some of those cars are all smashed up. Not like they had a collision, more like something hit them. Or even picked them up and dropped them." He stared, then moved the
binoculars. "Some of the buildings are destroyed as well. Look, that shop is wrecked. There's glass all over the road in front of it, something came through the window from inside." The pilot glanced at the building, then turned again, going even lower. Two hundred and fifty hundred metres up they both had a clear view.

"Good god. What the hell happened here?" the pilot breathed. Half the buildings along the main street had damaged or destroyed front doors, windows were torn out, and several vehicles were crushed.

"I have no idea. It looks like the aftermath of a small war." Osborne kept sweeping the binoculars back and forth, stopping occasionally on something that caught his eye. "I can't see any fires or signs of explosions, but I can't think of anything other than heavy weapons that could have caused this damage." There were still no people visible. "This is bad. You'd think the noise of the plane would attract some attention if nothing else." Osborne was getting a very unpleasant feeling as he searched the ground carefully. Cars were parked in a number of places, showing that there had to be a considerable number of people in the immediate vicinity, but there was no movement. "I'm beginning to wonder if there's anyone left down there."

"What's that," the pilot asked, pointing. "One o'clock, by that green building?" He lowered the binoculars for a moment, getting a fix on what she was talking about, then raised them again, focussing.

"It's just a dog," he reported, watching the large husky-like animal scuttling down the street in a furtive manner. Something about the way it was moving suggested to him it was scared and cautious. He searched the area the dog had come from, seeing nothing for a moment. As the plane circled he suddenly gasped. "Holy shit!"

"What?"

"There's a body down there. No, two, three... five bodies." The corporal stared at the sight for a moment then lowered the binoculars. "They're... incomplete." The pilot took her eyes off her instruments to gaze at him, shocked. "One was missing both legs. It looks like they were trying to get into that house."

"I'll call it in," the pilot said, keying up the radio. She made a quick report, describing what they'd seen and more importantly, not seen. Osborne put his binoculars down, twisting around in the seat and retrieving a camera with a long lens and an extended film magazine from behind him. Opening the slide window on his side of the aircraft he stuck the lens out and began taking photos of the town, first wide angle shots, then zooming in on the damage. Once the pilot had finished talking, she banked left and set the aircraft up for another pass. The corporal took photos of the bodies. As he was searching for the dog again, he noticed movement from under a carport next to one of the houses, in the direction the animal had gone, making him raise the camera to his eye again and zoom in.

"Fucking hell!" he screamed in shock, which caused the pilot to jump violently and twitch the control yoke. The involuntary aerobatics that followed made them both pale. When she'd brought the aircraft back under control a hair-raising few seconds later she glared at him.

"Don't DO that!" she snapped viciously. "What the hell was that for?" Corporal Osborne retrieved the camera from the floor where he'd dropped it during the excitement, quickly checking it was intact.

"Circle back," he said, looking out the window and not responding to her question. "Aim at that yellow building. I need to check something." She gave him a look mixing anger and curiosity, then
did as he requested. Looking through the camera again he stiffened when the same carport came into view. "Oh, god. It's real."

"WHAT is real?" The pilot was becoming frustrated.

"I don't know. I'm looking right at it and I have no idea what it is. It's eating the dog, though." He was snapping photos as he talked. She stared at him in shock.

"Eating...?"

"The dog. Yes. I think it's responsible for the other bodies as well. About, um, three metres tall, two arms, two legs, long tail with spikes, looks like a really big bug with a bad attitude." They circled while he took photos and the pilot split her attention between flying and trying to see what he was looking at. Unable to make it out she looked down in the other direction, then yelped.

"What?" he asked, looking at her. She pointed, banking left.

"Another one." This one was stomping down a side-street, fully visible. As the plane passed overhead it stopped and looked up at it, before moving on again. They looked at each other, wide-eyed, then the pilot pressed the transmit button on the yoke again and began talking in a shaky voice.

Inspector Deveraux listened to the report with a sinking heart. "Oh, god damn it." She glanced at the Chief Superintendent who was also listening, He returned her look, recognising the description as easily as she did.

"The town is essentially gone," Evan said heavily, reading the printout in his hand. "The observation aircraft crew spotted three of those things, plus they think there were probably at least two more from the pattern of destruction. They reported finding twenty eight bodies before they had to turn back because the light was going, but based on the lack of movement or communications it's likely the casualty toll is much higher. It may be total." The other people in the room looked horrified. After a moment he added, "They found one of the cars from the local station. It was upside down and there was a body a short distance from it, in one of our uniforms. The other car is still missing." The officer dropped the paperwork in the table. "They've developed the film the aircrew took. Copies of the prints are being rushed here by air, we should have them in about twenty minutes, but they faxed this one over." Pulling out a sheet of fax paper he showed it to them. The grainy black and white image made Laura's stomach clench.

"Crap. It really is one of those damn things. And you say they think there are five of them?" He nodded.

"There may be more. Five is the likely minimum number."

Chief Superintendent Wilkinson looked to Deveraux. "The information we received said that the portal bombs could only keep the portal open for a few seconds, only long enough for one to come through. Where did the others come from?" She shrugged, frowning.

"I don't know. In London they had two at once, but in the report I read Yori theorised that was because they'd been so close together, fighting or mating, that when the portal opened they both came through at once. Five or more, though, that sounds wrong. Also completely terrifying. One is far more than enough." He nodded, looking back at the fax.

"What are we going to do about this? I'm going to have to report it further up the chain. The commissioner will probably want to bring in the military."
"We should contact Yori. Unless you want the military to napalm the town, which might well not deal with the demons anyway, but would certainly kill any survivors and probably start a huge fire, she and her friends are our best choice." He thought for a moment, then sighed.

"I suppose. Call her, I'll talk to the Commissioner, and try to get him to hold off on anything excessive until she gets here and looks into it." Laura nodded. Pulling out her cell-phone and the card Yori had given her, she jumped when the phone rang just as she was about to dial. Answering it, she said, "Laura Deveraux."

"Hello, Inspector," a voice she hadn't heard in months said.

"Yori? That's... freakishly good timing," Deveraux replied, startled.

"Oh? I was calling to let you know we tracked the last remaining portal weapon to a town called Garson in Ontario. Agent Naito is arranging for us to come there, find it, and deal with it before it goes off, there's only about three or four days left on the timer."

"You're too late, I'm afraid," the inspector told her, sighing. "I know exactly where the device is. A small town called Halleckton, fifty kilometres north-east of Garson. We were just discussing the report we got a few minutes ago. There are at least five of the demons rampaging around there. The town is basically destroyed." There was a long pause.

"Five?" Yori asked, sounding shocked and horrified.

"At least."

"Oh, hell. How did that happen?" There was another pause. "Where are you right now? We'll be there immediately."

"O Division headquarters, London, Ontario."

"We'll be outside in two minutes." The young woman hung up. Laura relayed the discussion to the Chief Superintendent.

"Go and meet them, bring them here. I'll call the Commissioner and let him know." She got up and ran out of the room. Arriving on the street a short while later she was just in time to see eight people materialise from nothing abruptly. She walked over.

"Hello, girls, Agent. It's very nice to see you again but I wish it wasn't under these circumstances." Yori smiled at her and shook her hand.

"Hi, Inspector. It's good to see you again as well. This is Azumi, you haven't met her before." She indicated a young woman with remarkable silver hair and orange eyes, wearing a long leather coat that was swirling around her ankles rather dramatically in the wind. The girl nodded politely, although her expression was neutral.

"Hello, Inspector Deveraux. Yori and Chou have told me a lot about you. I'm glad we've met at last." Laura shook her hand, then quickly greeted the others.

"Come in. The Chief Superintendent is waiting upstairs. We should have aerial photos of the scene in ten minutes or so, but I can tell you what we've found out so far." They all followed her inside and into the elevator. Shortly they entered the meeting room, where Wilkinson was speaking on the phone. Looking over he nodded, indicating the chairs around the table, while still talking. They all sat and waited.
"Yes, Sir. I understand. All right, I'll tell them, they just came in. Thank you, Sir. Goodbye." He put the phone down and turned back to the visitors.

Deveraux made the introductions. "Chief Superintendent, meet Yori, Chou, Azumi, Misaki, Aiko, Tamiko, and Fumiko, along with Agent Masao Naito from the PSIA." Turning to the Japanese group, she added, "This is Chief Superintendent Jacob Wilkinson and Inspector Evan Sanders."

Wilkinson smiled, stepping forward with an outstretched hand, shaking hands with them all. "Hello, ladies, Agent Naito. I've read the reports with great interest. It's good of you to come and help."

Yori sighed. "We truly don't have any choice. We can deal with it more easily than anyone else, plus all this started in our home area in the first place. I feel a certain amount of responsibility, as do the others." Wilkinson studied her, then smiled.

"I think I understand. It's still a decent thing to do. None of this is your fault. The Commissioner passes along his respects and thanks as well." She smiled back.

"Thank you. Right, let's exchange information. We managed to get an address, a post office box number, and a disposable email address after a very tedious search in Australia. It turned out that the portal device had been buried in a park in Sydney, presumably some months ago. About a month after Christmas it was found, by accident, by a young man who happened to trade in magic or presumed magic artefacts. He put it up for auction along with a number of other items, the winning bid coming from someone who had it all shipped to Garson. They paid a considerable sum for it, but the worrying thing is that the purchaser was enquiring about the device specifically. I'm not sure exactly what that means other than it's bad." She glanced about to make sure they were all following her. Wilkinson motioned for her to continue.

"There was also another bidder for the collection who also seemed to know about it. We have a very good idea who it was and will deal with him later, once all this is settled." The expression on her face made them look at each other nervously. "A colleague who has a way with computers, once she had this information, was able to correlate records from Canada with the anonymised records from the secure website that the trading took place on and show that the buyer was working from an internet cafe in Garson. With some detective work she got a name. One Anthony Murray. He appears to be a wealthy collector of interesting things, with a considerable interest in magic although from what we could work out, no abilities in that field. He's not a mage, for example. We did find out that he was trying to find one about a month ago, though, which is after he received the collection. That may go some way towards explaining what's happened, or it may not."

She looked at the fax which was still on the table, reaching out and picking it up, then passed it to Azumi who studied it carefully. "I'm still none the wiser as to how five or more of these things could have come through. The portal devices definitely don't have nearly enough energy storage to keep the portal open for more than three seconds or so, at the most. It's just enough time for a running demon to go through when the portal opens unexpectedly in front of it. That was the entire design idea, which is actually quite clever, even though horrific. I can't think how five of the things could have time to go through even if they were on top of each other. The London event was a fluke, they must have been right next to one another. It's unlikely to have happened again, I'd think, although I suppose nothing is impossible." Laura looked at her, then at the report Evan had put on the table.

"There's no guarantee that there are only five. The spotter team saw three and deduced the existence of two more, but..."
"Tell me what you know," Yori requested. Azumi placed the fax on the table and listened intently, as did the rest of the young women. Agent Naito had his notebook out. Deveraux picked up the printout and read it to them. They listened in silence, with expressions that grew more and more disturbed. As she finished, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Chief Superintendent Wilkinson called. The door opened to reveal a man and a woman in RCMP uniforms with Air Services badges on them. They entered, closing the door and looking around at the table full of Japanese people curiously, before focussing their attention on Wilkinson. The man saluted smartly, followed a second later by the woman.

"Chief Superintendent. I'm Corporal Fraser Osborne, aerial observer, Air Services, this is my pilot, Constable Kelly Robertson. We brought the photos and other information relating to Halleckton. We were the ones who were on the reconnaissance mission earlier this evening. He handed over a thick manila folder, which Wilkinson took and opened on the table. A number of full page glossy colour photos slid out onto the table. Laura and Evan moved to look at them, while the Chief Superintendent spread them out on the table. After a moment he looked up at the two Air Services people who were still standing next to him.

"Take a seat. We'll want to ask you questions about what you saw, once we have a look at these." They nodded and sat in a pair of free chairs next to Chou, who smiled at them. The RCMP officers started distributing the photos to everyone, while Wilkinson picked up the printed report that was in with them, reading it quickly. It didn't say much more about the current situation although it had some background on the town including notable inhabitants and visitors. One name caught his eye, making him grunt with surprise. Yori glanced up from the photo she was studying and stared at him.

"Something interesting?"

"You might say that. Says here that Mr Anthony Murray has a mansion near the lake. Apparently he holds regular parties there, which can go on for days. He's got a helipad, a lot of his visitors come in by air, from all over the place. The US, UK, Germany, Japan, you name it." She looked interested.

"Ah. The connection between Garson and Halleckton explained. I was wondering why all this would happen in what sounds like a small and remote place. I suppose it's a good thing overall, if it had been the middle of Toronto I hate to think of what might have happened. It's bad enough, though."

Azumi looked up from the photo she was inspecting. "There are at least seven of them," she said, slight emotion entering her voice. Everyone looked at her.

"What?" Deveraux asked, horrified. The silver-haired girl nodded soberly.

"The pattern of damage shows seven distinct areas that I've seen so far, with sufficient distance between them that it seems likely that a similar number of individuals are responsible. My information on these demons is that once enraged, something that is close to a default state, they tend to keep moving and causing death and damage until stopped. The probability is low that one would destroy an area, move to another distant spot causing no damage, then begin again. As a result, based on these photos, there are a minimum of seven demons on the loose."

"Shit." Everyone looked at the Chief Superintendent, who seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Indeed." Azumi went back to studying the photos.
"All right, Corporal Osborne, tell us about what you saw. Anything you can think of, no matter how trivial." Yori looked at them closely. "Don't leave anything out." Glancing at each other, they then looked to Wilkinson, who nodded.

"You can tell them anything they want. This is Yori and her friends from Japan, they're specialists in this sort of thing." He shrugged at their expressions. "I know, it sounds insane, but they've dealt with similar situations in the past, very effectively."

Constable Robertson looked around at the girls, who, with the exception of Azumi who was still going through the photos with great care, all looked back calmly. She turned to the Chief Superintendent. "Sir, what is this situation? I've never seen anything like those... things... today. It was like something out of a horror film." She looked puzzled, scared, and rather angry. He watched her sympathetically.

Turning to Yori, he asked, "Would you like to explain? You have more information and experience on this than I do, I only have what I've read in the reports." The black-haired woman smiled, nodding.

"Certainly." Looking at Robertson and Osborne, she said, "What you saw was a particularly aggressive and dangerous demon. Several of them, unfortunately."

"Demon? She said that a minute ago," Kelly pointed at Azumi, "but surely you can't really mean demon. Like from hell and everything?"

"Well, not in the sense of a religious hell and tortured souls, that sort of thing, but other than that, yes, I mean demon. It's what they've been called for a very long time. For a lot of them it's kind of an insulting name, when you get to know them, but for those damn things it fits." The girl sighed. "It's a long story. Basically, there was a cult that was an offshoot of another cult, which was nuts. This smaller group went into the business of magical terrorism, created something we call a portal bomb, then managed to plant half a dozen of them around the world before we stopped them. The plan was for hundreds if not thousands. Six is bad enough. We caught four of them before they activated, but one got away from us in the UK just after Christmas. You probably saw it on the news."

"That's what that was? I thought it was a bomb."

"The UK authorities put out a cover story, blaming it on conventional explosives, with a hallucinogenic gas mixed in. The true story is that it was two of those demons, which managed to kill sixty-five people before we managed to stop them, although we were successful in healing another sixty-seven victims as well. We found another one in time and destroyed it, along with one in Kyoto some time before that, and two more in the US just before New Years. We've been looking for this last one ever since. It popped up in Australia, then ended up here. Somehow it was activated in a way it wasn't designed for and seven of the bloody things have come through."

"Eight," Azumi noted, reaching for another photo. Everyone looked at her.

"Are you sure?" Deveraux asked quietly. The girl nodded without looking up.

"Unfortunately yes."

Fraser was looking at all the women curiously. "So you're all some sort of magical specialists?" he asked. "I'm not sure I believe in magic. I mean, I've heard of some odd things happening around the place, but..." Chou slid a wallet towards him with a small smile. Picking it up he looked at it, recognising it instantly. "How the...?" He patted his jacket. She was at least a metre and a half
"A simple little trick," the blonde said. Several of her colleagues were grinning. Agent Naito sighed quietly, but smiled. Misaki snickered, then began juggling half a dozen orange spheres of energy, making everyone but her friends look at her in astonishment.

"That's new," Deveraux said after a moment. The young woman nodded, looking amused.

"Yori has taught us all sorts of interesting things since we saw you." The balls of energy popped one after another with faint snaps. She pulled out a chocolate bar instead and began unwrapping it, making Fumiko look at her in annoyance. Corporal Osborne stared, then shook himself, smiling slightly.

"OK. I think I believe you." He began recounting the overflight, telling them about how the town had looked normal from altitude but the lower they went the more damage was apparent. The sighting of the demon eating the dog still sent chills down his spine as he told them about it. Kelly added details of her own to the story. Everyone listened silently, only asking the occasional question for clarification. When he finished they all looked at each other.

"Very bad," Chou said quietly. Yori nodded, leaning back in her chair and massaging her forehead with both hands.

"About as bad as it could get short of it being in a major population centre. What the hell happened there?" She shook her head angrily. "I've been having nightmares about something like this happening ever since Kyoto. That fucking cult has a lot to answer for." Chou held her hand for a moment, then looked around at the assembled people, before returning her gaze to her partner.

"We'll deal with it, like we did in London."

Azumi put the last of the photos neatly on the stack she'd build beside her, leaning back with a sigh, then looked around the table. "Nine of them."

"Oh, damn it," Sanders mumbled. She shrugged slightly.

"Sorry. That's what I can determine from the photos. I also spotted thirty-nine bodies or partial bodies. It seems likely that the casualty count is considerable, possibly much higher than that figure."

Yori nodded, sighing deeply, with an expression of disgust on her face. "If the demons have been running unchecked in that town for at least eight days it's entirely possible that they could have killed every person in it, I'm afraid. They are extremely aggressive and difficult to stop. There isn't much possibility of any weapons a normal civilian would have access to being able to do more than irritate them. The military in the UK used a 40mm grenade launcher on one at one point, all it did was make it furious." All the RCMP officers but Deveraux paled. She simply nodded, remembering her own encounter with a considerably less tough demon. Anything worse than that was something she was in no hurry to encounter.

"There is another rather disturbing problem." Everyone looked at Aiko, who had been sitting silently with her team, listening. She glanced around. "These things seem to have one hell of an appetite. They eat anything that moves. If they've managed to kill everyone in Halleckton, what next? They're not going to stay there if there's no food."

Everyone looked appalled. Azumi nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good point. Presumably they will start to move away looking for something to eat, sooner or later, if they haven't already begun to
"That's an understatement," Agent Naito said, looking very alarmed. "What's the nearest town to this Halleckton place?"

"It's way out in the middle of nowhere, luckily," Inspector Sanders said. He pulled out a map from his pile of documents, unfolding it on the table, then pointed. The PSIA man got up to look. "Nothing much except for perhaps one or two logging camps and things like that until you get around the other side of Wanapitei Lake here. Hardly even any roads worthy of the name. Then, you're into Skead, not a very large place, Bailey Corners, Falconbridge, places like that. They have a lot more people although they're not huge either. Garson is probably the closest place with a reasonable number of people." He looked up. "Can those things swim?"

Yori and Chou exchanged glances. "I have no idea," the short woman admitted.

"If they can, it's a straight path of about fifty kilometres. If they have to go around all the lakes in their way it could be as much as twice that. There is a lot of forest out there as well, it's difficult to get through if you don't have a road, although from seeing those things I think they could just push their way through it. It would still slow them down. I don't care how strong they are, they're not going to be running through all that." Naito was tracing the route with his finger, looking worried.

"Those demons are a lot faster than you'd believe. I wouldn't underestimate how short a time it might take them if they decide to head south. You haven't seen them in action. I have, it's horrifying." The RCMP man looked at him, nodding reluctantly.

"I'll take your word for it. Even so, I expect it would take a day or two worst case."

"We'll have to hope they haven't moved off, then." Yori frowned. "I guess we go in and deal with them. Nine is getting a little ridiculous." She looked at the Chief Superintendent seriously. "It may be necessary to use considerable force to be sure we've stopped the things. If we have to do that, it's likely that the damage will be considerable. Total, in all probability." Wilkinson stared at her.

"What do you mean, total?" he asked slowly.

"I mean, if it gets really bad, you'll have a new lake, once the water stops boiling." He went white.

"You can do that?" Azumi snorted, making Yori glance at her with a small secret smile.

"Oh, believe me, I can make quite a large hole in the countryside. I'd prefer not to, but if it's a choice between a dead town and a live one, the dead town is going to go away very suddenly."

"I think I'm going to have to talk to the Commissioner again," he said slowly, reaching for the phone. "What about any survivors?" he asked suddenly, his hand on it. She sighed.

"I suspect there aren't any. We'll check very carefully, of course, and we can evacuate them easily. Don't worry, we're not going to do anything dramatic when there are people around. Property damage, unfortunately, is another matter." Nodding, he picked up the phone and dialled. Everyone sat silently while he had a fairly long talk, before hanging up and groaning.

"It's getting messy. The Commissioner referred it to his superiors, who have insisted in bringing in the military, who seem to think they can solve it by dropping a couple of heavily armed teams in and just shooting their way through anything in the way." Yori appeared alarmed, while Chou sighed.

The blonde woman said, "That won't work. I can refer them to some very competent soldiers in the
British Army who would strenuously argue against that approach, if it would help." Wilkinson looked worried.

"I know, I've read the report from London. The MoD made it very clear that conventional force wasn't very effective against these things based on the reports from their military. But our boys seem to think they can do a better job."

"Unless they plan on bringing in some extremely heavy artillery all they'll do is make the demons appallingly angry, which will only make the problem worse, and probably lose their teams as well. It would take an exceptionally large conventional explosive to do much more than inconvenience one of them. Heavy incendiaries might do it, if you scored a direct hit, but that would be difficult. Nine times in a row would be nearly impossible. Not to mention that I expect you'd have a major forest fire to deal with afterwards." Chou glanced at Yori, who nodded agreement.

"If they go in we'll have to go with them. It would be much better if we went alone. Collateral damage may be considerable in this case. We might not have any choice. If we can send any of them back through a portal we'll use that option, but under the circumstances we might not be able to arrange that." Yori shrugged helplessly. "I don't like destroying other people's things, I hate it in fact, but with nine of those damn things running around we might not be able to take care of all of them without some heavy effort, which will be hard on the scenery."

"So you said. I told the Commissioner. He's not too happy about it but understands the problem. I argued against the military operation, and he agrees with me, so he's going to try to persuade the people upstairs to try it your way. I suspect that the town is a loss anyway, so more destruction isn't the end of the world. I'm more worried about survivors, and those demons getting out into the surroundings."

"You and me both. If they get away it could be very difficult to track them down."

They discussed possible problems and solutions for another twenty minutes, waiting impatiently for the phone to ring. When it finally did Wilkinson grabbed it instantly. Answering he listened carefully for a while. "Thank you, Sir. I'll tell them." He hung up again and turned to Yori, who was staring at him. "The politicians called an emergency meeting, talked it over, and also spoke to someone in the British Government at the MoD. They recommended your approach in the strongest possible terms. Our people decided in the end they couldn't risk the military option and gave your team the go-ahead. They did have one condition, which is that they send observers to see what happens."

Nodding, Yori looked somewhat relieved, as did Chou and the rest. "Not ideal, it's more people to keep out of trouble, but better than the alternative. OK, we're ready as soon as these observers of your are. Where do we pick them up from?"

"A Second Lieutenant Edward Kent and his team will be waiting for you at CFB Trenton in ten minutes." The woman and her colleagues stood.

"Right." She looked at Agent Naito. "I'm sorry, Agent, I think it would be best if you stay here." He smiled at her.

"I'm in full agreement with that. I can hold my own against gang members, but demons are another matter altogether." She grinned. Walking over to her friends she looked around.

"See you in a while. Inspector, when this is all over I'm looking forward to catching up." Laura nodded, watching them all.
"Be careful," she said, worried. Chou smiled at her.

"Always." With that the group vanished. She stared at the place they’d been before looking at Naito, who looked back with understanding in his eyes.

"They're very, very good at this. If anyone can deal with it, it's those young ladies."

"I know. I still worry. They're all so young." She inspected him curiously. "Gang members? What have you been up to, Masao?"

He looked proud although slightly guilty. "I got three this time all on my own." Laura raised an eyebrow, causing him to begin explaining. Soon everyone left in the room was rolling around laughing.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?" The voice came from a short, wiry man with very dark skin as he walked up to the other three men, his rifle over his shoulder. "I just got booted out of bed and told to report to you for some special mission." He looked at his watch. "It's half past eleven, I was just getting to sleep."

Second Lieutenant Kent turned to him, then shrugged slightly. "I'm not sure, Corporal. I was just given one of the weirdest mission briefings I've ever had. The Major told me to pick three men I could trust for an insertion and observation mission into hostile territory and be quick about it. That was half an hour ago."

"Insertion into where?" Corporal O'Rourke looked at his superior officer suspiciously.

"Some little craphole by the name of Halleckton about five hundred or so kilometres away, north of Sudbury," one of the other men grunted, adjusting his equipment vest. The corporal looked at him, then back to the Lieutenant.

"Hostile territory in Canada? What the hell is going on?"

"Apparently something has gone completely sideways in this Halleckton place. The Major was saying something about creatures killing and eating everyone there." Kent shrugged once more. "It sounds crazy. He was reading a report and looked like he couldn't believe it either, but it came down through the proper channels. I asked why they didn't just bomb the hell out of the place if that was the problem and he said that the report said that it wouldn't work."

"So why are we going in with just some rifles and a few grenades, if an air strike won't do the job?" the last man asked in a calm, deep voice. Everyone looked at him.

"I'm not really sure, Silva. Apparently some specialists from Japan who are experts at dealing with this situation are on the way. We're supposed to accompany them, observe what happens, and give them any help they might need." The lieutenant looked puzzled. "I don't know much more than that. Anyway, do a radio check." They all tested their communications system, which worked perfectly. "Got your cameras ready, Master Corporal?" Kent asked Silva. The tall man nodded, patting the pack he had over one shoulder. "Good."

"Why are we standing around in the middle of the parade ground like this?" O'Rourke asked. "Are they coming in by helo?" Kent shook his head.

"No idea. I don't know anything about them. Just some Japanese demon-killing specialists, is what the Major told me." They all looked at him in the dim light with extreme scepticism. "I know what it sounds like, but that's what he said."
Silva looked up, checking for aircraft lights approaching them. "So when do they get here?" he asked.

"Ten seconds ago," a rich female voice with a slight accent said from behind them. They all swore in shock and whirled, reaching for various weapons. The three young women standing five metres away in a triangular formation looked at them with varying expressions ranging from cool detachment to sly amusement. The girl in front, who looked about twenty if that, stepped forward, completely ignoring the fact that three pistols and a rifle were pointed at her. "I'm Yori. This is Azumi and Aiko. The others are waiting for us just outside Halleckton. Do you have everything you need?" She looked around, her long night-black braid swinging about, then back at them.

"Who the hell are you and how did you get here?" Kent demanded, not lowering his weapon.

"I just told you. I'm Yori. You're waiting for us. Are you coming or not, we don't have a lot of time." She folded her arms and looked at him. He studied her, then the other two. The one introduced as Azumi had a very unusual hair colour, it looked almost metallic silver in the lights of the buildings some fifty metres away, while there was something odd about her eyes as well. She gazed at him expressionlessly, as if she was prepared to stare until he fell asleep. She didn't seem to be moving at all. The other one, Aiko, was somewhat shorter, about Yori's height, with brown hair and an amused expression. She was looking around with interest, more or less ignoring the others.

"You're a woman," O'Rourke stated curiously. She grinned.

"Oddly enough, I realise that. Is it a problem?" He shrugged.

"Not really. It's just a bit unusual, considering you're supposed to be some sort of combat specialists." He lowered his pistol, reholstering it. "Lieutenant, I don't think they're going to hurt us." Aiko giggled, glancing at him before going back to inspecting the buildings.

"How did you get here?" Kent asked, slowly lowering his weapon. "I didn't hear a car and there haven't been any aircraft movements for fifteen minutes." Yori grinned at him, while Aiko returned her attention to the squad.

"We have other methods," she replied. He stared. After a moment she chuckled. "Hey, what's that over there?" she asked suddenly, pointing behind them. They all turned to look. There was a flash of light from behind them and they abruptly found Aiko walking towards them from twenty metres away.

"What the FUCK?" Kent squawked in shock. The other three men stared, speechless, as the girl rejoined her friends wearing a broad grin

"Like that. So, ready to go?" O'Rourke looked at Silva, who suddenly smiled. He shrugged.

"Lieutenant?" Kent stared at him, then back at Aiko, before putting his weapon away. The other two had already done so.

"This is getting really strange," he muttered. Yori chuckled, then the three girls walked over to them.

"The first time through a teleport will make you feel awful, but it only lasts for a few seconds. Get ready." The world jumped and they found themselves in complete darkness lit only by a crescent moon. Silva retched, dropping to his knees, feeling someone steady him, while O'Rourke swayed.

"Oh, Christ, that was horrible," Kent groaned, hearing the sounds of someone being sick nearby. Very quickly the nausea passed, allowing the four soldiers to look around. Silva flipped his night
vision goggles down and turned them on, looking around in the green-lit darkness, to find a tall
woman beside him holding his arm.

"Do you feel all right now, Master Corporal?" she asked in a soft, gentle voice. He nodded.

"Thank you, miss...?"

"Just Chou." Releasing him she stepped away. The rest of the squad activated their NV goggles as
well. "Introductions are in order. You've already met Yori, Azumi, and Aiko. I'm Chou, this is
Misaki, Fumiko, and Tamiko. We're about two kilometres east of the edge of Halleckton."

"I'm Second Lieutenant Edward Kent, this is Master Corporal Bruno Silva, Corporal Mawuli
O'Rourke, and Private Mikkel Pedersen." The seven females nodded at each name. Several of them
looked curiously at O'Rourke, who grinned.

"My mother was from Ghana, my father comes from Dublin. Hence the name." Yori laughed.

"Fair enough." Pedersen was spitting, trying to get the taste of vomit out of his mouth. She handed
him a bottle of water, which he took with a muttered thanks, swilling his mouth out then spitting
again, before drinking some of it. "OK, this is the situation. There was a weapon which ended up
here. The story is long and involved, no point going into it right now. It got activated somehow, in
a strange manner which I'm still not sure about, which made it do something it wasn't designed to
do. It's supposed to summon a demon. It managed to produce nine that we know of. I'm hoping
desperately that's all. These things are unbelievably dangerous. They also eat people, and are close
to impossible to kill with conventional weapons. Luckily we use extremely unconventional ones."

"The demons have killed anything up to the entire population of the town of Halleckton, which
could be as much as three hundred people," Chou said, taking up the explanation. "We are going to
search for any survivors, heal and evacuate them, then deal with the demons. There is a possibility
that this will require the destruction of the entire town, although we'd like to avoid that. Your
government wanted to deal with this with a military force, which would have been disastrous. We
managed to avert that and persuade them to allow us to deal with it, but they insisted on an
observation squad. That's you."

Yori looked seriously at them. "Please listen very carefully. Your lives depend on this. Your
weapons will not work on these demons. At best you'll irritate them a little. Trust me, I've seen a
well-armed soldier go up against one of these with a 40mm grenade launcher with six direct HE
grenade hits, which slowed the demon down for about ten seconds. He'd have died on the spot if I
hadn't distracted it. Do not try to take one on, you will die. Do you understand me?" They
exchanged glances then nodded. There was something about the air of command that the woman
suddenly had that would allow no other response.

"What do you want us to do, Ma'am," Lieutenant Kent asked, the term of respect coming
automatically. She looked slightly surprised while a couple of her colleagues snickered for some
reason.

"Observe, as your orders say. From a safe distance. If it goes bad, we will set up a ward that the
demons can't get through. Think of it like a force field. If that happens, get inside it immediately,
and do not try to exit until we tell you to. OK?" All of them were finding this difficult to believe,
but they'd also all noticed the seven women moving easily around in the near total darkness with no
problems at all, even though they didn't seem to have any NV equipment with them. There was
certainly something unusual going on. The teleportation, which was undeniable, was another clue
that they were well out of their comfort zone.
"Right." When there was no dissent in the ranks, Yori looked satisfied. "We're going to go in. Aiko, you stay here with the soldiers. We'll call you in if we need survivors evacuated or when we've cleared an area. The nearest demon is about two and a half kilometres away, just inside the town. Chou and I will go in first and scout around, we need to locate them all, then the rest of you come in when we call. Azumi and Fumiko, Misaki and Tamiko." All the girls nodded while the soldiers gaped as Yori and Chou simply faded into invisibility.

"Fuck me," Silva breathed in astonishment. Azumi looked at him with a raised eyebrow, which made him apologise. This seemed to amuse her.

They waited. Twenty minutes later, a voice came on their theoretically secure radio link.

"Lieutenant Kent? This is Yori. We've located eight of the demons. Number nine is being awkward. We think it's probably gone underground somehow. Am I right in thinking that there was a lot of mining in this area at one point?"

"Yes, I think so. The entire Sudbury area is metal rich, from what I know, there are mines all over the place."

"OK. It might have found an old mine shaft. That's a nuisance. We're going to have to leave that one until last, unless it suddenly jumps out at us. We're scanning the area for survivors now. The others are on their way to join us."

All four soldiers suddenly noticed they were alone save for Aiko, who was leaning against a rock looking bored. They hadn't heard a thing to suggest the young women were on the move.

"Who the hell are these ladies?" O'Rourke said in a low voice. "I've seen special forces experts that couldn't move that quietly. And how are they communicating with each other, or for that matter us? I thought these radios were encrypted." Kent shrugged.

"No idea. This is all so far out of my experience I'm just going to follow orders and roll with it."

Pedersen snickered. "Whose orders? The Majors or hers?"

"Whoever keeps me alive," Kent responded, grinning.

"We've found some tunnels. We're following them to find the place it got inside, and to see if it did get inside." There was a long pause. "Yes, that's confirmed. There are footprints going in but none coming out. I'm going to collapse the entrance to the mine so it can't easily get out. We don't think there are any other exits, we traced the tunnels and it's a fairly small mine under a hill." The horizon to the west lit briefly with a purple flash like lightning. About ten seconds later they all heard a drawn out deep rumble, like something a significant explosion would produce. "That's done. We can dig it out later once we've sorted the others out. Whoops, one of them is coming this way."

The soldiers exchanged glances. Aiko was looking alert, she was clearly aware of what was happening somehow. Another flash, a golden-yellow one this time, lit the horizon. "One down," Yori's voice came. The blast rolled over them seconds later. "I have a feeling that was our free one. The others are staying inside the town amongst the buildings. Aiko will bring you forward to our position, it's safe now." The brunette girl walked over to them and before they could brace themselves the world jumped again. Yori glanced at them, then went back to examining the substantial crater in the ground they were standing in front of. It was a good ten metres across and radiated heat. Pedersen stared at it, then at the two girls.

"How the fuck did you do that?" he asked, shocked. "It would take a good ton of HE to make a hole that size." He walked over and looked at it from as close to he could get, which was several metres
away due to the intense heat. The crater seemed to be glass-lined, suggesting whatever formed it
was something quite unlike ordinary explosives. It looked more like a crater from a really tiny
nuclear weapon. When he turned around to ask more questions both Yori and Chou had vanished
again. Aiko looked at him.

"Don't worry, it's safe. There's no radiation or anything." The thought hadn't occurred to him but
now it had been mentioned he looked nervously at the crater again, walking further away. The girl
giggled. Once more they waited. Eventually Yori came back on the radio. "We've found a survivor.
The demons seem to have moved back in the direction we think the Murray residence is in. I think
we worried them when we killed the first one and they're retreating to where they came through.
That probably won't last. But for now it's safe to come in."

Once more Aiko teleported them. This time they found themselves inside the town extents, with a
number of buildings around them. Most of these had holes in which showed in shocking detail how
the demons had simply ripped their way inside. A few lights were on, but most of the town was
dark, and it was eerily quiet. "Over here," Yori called, waving from a house to their left. She was
standing inside what had been the living room, looking out through where the wall used to be. The
soldiers walked over. There was a strong smell of blood as they approached, the metallic tang in
the air familiar to them, although not in the quantities they saw when they reached the building.
Pedersen swore and crossed himself, while the others winced. The inside of the building looked
like an abattoir.

"Holy...," O'Rourke managed, before he had to look away. There were bits of meat scattered
around that took considerable imagination to identify as parts of a human body.

"It's about five people, we think," Chou said quietly, looking around from where she was bending
over a sixth one. This one was more or less intact, although the left foot had been chewed off. It
was a boy of around fourteen, wearing a blue t-shirt and shorts, who seemed to have been trying to
hide under the sofa. "Fumiko found him. She's gone to look for other survivors before the demons
come back. So far he's the only one we've found alive." Returning to her patient she ran glowing
hands over him, making them all stare. Kent lifted his NV goggles to see the glow was a beautiful
soft golden colour like an autumn sunset. Yori moved past him, squatting down carefully to avoid
the blood. Her hands glowed purple as she also checked the boy.

"Several broken ribs, a skull fracture, and that foot. We should stabilise him then Aiko can take
him back. The foot can wait," the girl said. Chou nodded, concentrating.

"The ribs are coming along well. Can you do the skull, please? I'm worried about the oedema, it's
fairly bad. I'll seal the leg."

"Got it." The two women worked in silence while the soldiers watched, fascinated. "OK. His head
is fine. Another hour and he wouldn't have made it. I hope he doesn't have any memory issues as a
result of the injury." She looked around for a moment. "Although that might be a mercy." Looking
up she motioned to Pedersen. "You, Private. Go back with Aiko, we'll take him to your medical
facility. Make sure the doctors don't do anything but let him sleep. We'll deal with the leg after this
is all over, understand?" Private Pedersen nodded. Aiko moved past him, carefully picking the boy
up as if he was weightless, then motioned with her head for the soldier to follow her. "Don't let
them try to wake him either," Yori called after them. Seconds later a rainbow flash lit the street and
they were gone. Standing, the black-haired woman looked around at the ruined house, an
expression of anger on her features.

"Someone is going to pay for this," she muttered. "Assuming he hasn't already done so." Chou put
a hand on her shoulder then left the building, followed by Yori moments later. Silva took out his
camera, turning the flash on, then took several photos of the inside of the house, before following them with a sick expression on his face.

"We've got another one," Yori suddenly said. "Down the street about two hundred metres." She dashed off, Chou right behind her, at a remarkable speed. The soldiers followed more slowly. The smell of blood was omnipresent and they could see more death and destruction everywhere they looked. Some houses seemed undamaged, while others would have sustained less damage if a grenade had been tossed inside, but every one of them concealed a grim secret. Silva photographed everything he saw that seemed relevant. When they arrived at the location the two women had gone to they found Yori holding a truck over her head while Chou carefully disentangled a small girl from the remains of a car. Azumi was helping her by peeling back sections of the roof as if it was made of silly putty. They gaped at the casual show of incredible strength, Silva taking more photos once he got over his shock.

Finally extracting the girl, who looked about eight, Chou picked her up and carried her to a nearby bench, laying her gently on it. Yori dropped the smashed truck back down with a crunch. Walking over she and Azumi looked down at the girl, who Chou was checking over. "She's remarkably undamaged. Two broken fingers and some cuts. I've fixed them already. I think we should make sure she stays asleep."

Yori nodded, watching the girl as Chou put her hand on her forehead. There was a brief flash of light and the blonde looked satisfied. "I want to find someone who can tell us exactly what happened," the petite woman said, "but I don't think she could. Poor kid." Aiko reappeared next to them with Pedersen in tow. Yori looked up, completely unsurprised. "Another one. Same deal. Hands off until we get back." The soldier nodded, picking the girl up. Both of them vanished again.

Azumi turned to the others. "I'm going to help Fumiko again." She moved off rapidly. Looking to the north, Yori frowned slightly.

"They're moving around a bit but more or less staying put. I wonder if we could put a ward around them and trap them. It's still a pretty large area, bigger than anything we've tried before." She glanced at Chou, who looked back at her with a thoughtful expression.

"The power isn't the problem, it's stabilising it over such a large area. Perhaps if we all work on it? Once it's up it will be stable." Yori nodded slowly.

"That might work." She looked around as Aiko and Pedersen reappeared once more. "Take them to the roof of that building over there," she said, pointing to the tallest building in sight, which was about four stories with a flat roof. "They should be safe up there, for a while anyway, with a decent view." Aiko looked at the building then nodded.

"OK. Come on, guys." All four soldiers followed her, then vanished. Reappearing on top of the building they looked around, walking over to the edge of the roof in time to see her appear next to the small figures of Yori and her partner, before they disappeared again. Silva walked to the edge of the roof and looked down, then around at the mostly dark town.

"This is the weirdest night I can remember having," O'Rourke said, coming up beside him. The other soldier nodded in agreement.

"You can say that again. I feel completely helpless. Look at that." He indicated the town with a wave of one hand. "Probably hundreds of bodies out there, things in the dark that kill and eat people, yet we can't do a thing about it." He looked at the smaller man. "What do you think of those girls?"
"They're fucking terrifying. How the hell are they doing all of this?"

"Magic? I don't know, it's as good an explanation as anything. Maybe they're aliens or something. This is all straight out of a movie anyway." They turned when Lieutenant Kent approached. "I guess we just wait here like she said, sir." He nodded.

"Our orders said they were in charge. I'm still not convinced that these 'demons' are that tough, but for the moment we may as well wait." The lieutenant looked around for a moment, then pulled out a small recorder and began muttering into it, dictating some observations. He'd been meant to do that all along but in the surprise of the whole thing, had forgotten. Now he was trying to remember everything he'd seen so far.

A couple of minutes later Pedersen pointed. "What's that?" he said, sounding awed. The other three turned to look north to where he was pointing, then gaped at the sight, which was very impressive. A huge shimmering dome had appeared a kilometre or so away, encompassing an area that must have been several hundred metres across. It looked like a giant soap bubble, iridescent colours moving around on the immaterial surface. After a moment's staring, Silva raised his camera and took several shots, hoping the film was fast enough. The bubble flickered a few times but ultimately stabilised, looking far more solid, before slowly fading out of visibility. Shortly after that, Aiko and Yori appeared on the roof making them jump. The black-haired girl looked pleased.

"That worked. It should stop them getting out. There are six of them inside, the seventh one ran for it and just got out in time. Chou and the others went after it. Hopefully that's all of them located and either contained or destroyed." An orange flash suddenly lit the horizon a few kilometres away to the north-east. "Misaki got it." Yori smiled a little. "Good. Seven left that we know of, all of them somewhere they shouldn't be able to get out. We can resume searching for survivors." With that she walked off the edge of the building, making all the soldiers rush to the edge and look down, only to see her moving off down the street with no sign she'd just dropped fifteen metres.


"I assume you guys don't want to follow her that way?" she asked. They all looked at her. "Come on, let's go down. You guys can help look now the demons are safely out of the way." With that she teleported them all to the street. They stood around for a moment then spread out, looking at the ruined houses and smashed cars, not to mention the occasional corpse. Most of them had parts missing. A few minutes later Yori came back with Chou and Azumi.

"It's probably best if we each go with one of you guys. I'm still not absolutely certain we've accounted for all the demons. I'll go with you, Lieutenant, Azumi with O'Rourke, Chou with Silva, and Aiko with Pedersen. Misaki and the rest are searching down near the lake. We should be able to cover the rest of the town in about three hours." She looked around for a moment. No one seemed to have any major objections. "OK. Spread out, keep your eyes and ears open for any signs of survivors. If there are any demons, please, guys, let us handle them, all right? Just stay back and observe like you're supposed to." She grinned, her green-lit face showing amusement. "I know you want to try taking one on, but in this case you really are out of your depth."

"We can follow orders, Ma'am," Second Lieutenant Kent said. She laughed.

"Even when you don't want to, right?" He nodded, smiling. "Good. Let's get to it." The four teams went off in different directions into the dark.
extraction, with a slender athletic build. She moved like a predator, he noted, smoothly and with quiet efficiency. All the girls did, it was one of the most notable features of them. Yori and Chou had an air of barely restrained immediate danger about them that the others didn't possess quite as much, but Azumi also showed it to a degree. He thought she'd be an extremely dangerous opponent. After a moment he noticed she was looking at him, having seen the way he kept glancing at her. Her silver hair showed highlights as they moved past one of the rare working lights in a house.

"You seem intrigued, Corporal," she remarked in a cool steady voice. He nodded.

"I am. I've never met women in a front-line combat role before, never mind the superpowers or whatever it is that you have." She smiled slightly.

"I'm not really one of the main fighters," she replied, "more along the lines of intelligence gathering and backup."

"I'm pretty sure you're very good at the fighting even so," he said. She shrugged a little.

"I suppose so. I'm still learning."

"Was this a deliberate career choice?" he asked curiously. She snickered.

"No. I kind of fell into it. Very long story. But I'm told I have a gift for it." She stopped, looking to the left. "Did you hear that?" He listened carefully, then shook his head.

"I can't hear anything. What was it?"

"Sounded like somebody coughing. Over there somewhere." Azumi pointed to a house set back from the road, which had a garage to the side which had partially collapsed. They headed slowly in that direction, looking around carefully. There were large footprints in the lawn which showed the past presence of the demons. The girl studied them closely, kneeling, then stood up. "Two of them, I think. The prints are slightly different sizes." Walking over to the remains of the garage she listened again. Beginning to ask a question, the corporal stopped when she waved a hand indicating she wanted quiet. Kneeling down she put her ear to the ground.

"There's someone down there. I think there's a basement or something. I can hear breathing." He watched as she moved around slightly, then lay down, listening intently. "Two... no, three people. They sound like they're breathing with difficulty. Maybe the air's bad." She concentrated harder.

"Their hearts sound wrong as well, much too fast." O'Rourke stared at her in amazement.

"You can hear their heartbeats through god knows how much cement and dirt?" he asked in a voice full of astonishment. She nodded, frowning slightly.

"Only barely, but yes." Standing, she looked around, as did the soldier, then walked over to the remains of the garage. "Check the house, see if there is an entrance from there. I'll clear some of this crap and have a look here." With a nod he went inside the building. It was more trashed inside than out, with huge gouges on the walls and around the frame of the front door, which was lying in pieces on the floor just inside the hall. Stepping over it he looked around, heading towards the back of the house opening doors as he went, his sidearm in his hand just in case. Near the kitchen he found a door hanging off its hinges with a set of stairs going down. It was too dark even for the NV goggles so he turned on the IR illuminator set into them, cautiously heading down the stairs. At the bottom he looked around. It was basically a small utility room, with washing facilities on one side, a furnace on the other, and at the end a set of steps that led to what looked like a door into the garden. A couple of plastic kayaks were hanging on the wall, with three bicycles stacked
against the wall under them.

Other than that, there was nothing. He checked carefully, but could find no entrances to any other underground rooms. Keying his radio he said, "Azumi? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Corporal," her voice came back. "Did you find anything?"

"Only an empty basement. In the direction of the garage there's nothing but a blank wall. No way in to wherever those people are."

"OK. Come back, you can help me move some of this stuff. I believe there is some sort of old bomb shelter that the garage was built over."

"On my way." He was moving as he spoke. Arriving back outside he found her lifting half the garage roof off the floor of the building.

"Can you grab the end of this and stabilise it, please?" she asked. "The weight isn't an issue, but it's so floppy it keeps catching on things." Nodding, privately astonished once more by the extraordinary strength she possessed, he guided the end of the several hundred kilos of wood and insulation as she manoeuvred it into the middle of the lawn. "I'm letting go, are you clear?" she asked.

"Yep." Releasing the load she dropped it with a crash. They went back into the garage. "That must be it," the corporal said, pointing to a metal door set flush with the floor near the back. It was half-buried in concrete blocks that had once formed part of the rear wall.

"Indeed. Let's move this debris and see if we can get it open." Azumi started piling blocks up to form convenient sized amounts to remove, shifting six or seven at a time. They were heavy enough that O'Rourke, who was a strong man despite his relatively slight stature, could only lift a pair of them at a time without straining. She showed no effort at all. Once they'd cleared the door she inspected it in the dark, feeling around the edges carefully. "It's locked on the inside," the girl reported. Grabbing the handle in the middle she exerted herself, resulting in a groan of stressed metal, before the handle abruptly snapped off.

Looking at it in disgust she muttered something in Japanese. Tossing it into the corner of the garage the young woman stared at the door. "We could knock," Corporal O'Rourke suggested only half-facetiously. The look he received made him grin.

"If they haven't heard us by now, either they're unconscious or think we're the demons," she replied, looking back to the door. "That's a very solid door. I could blow it open easily enough but the concussion would probably kill anyone down there. I may have to call Yori or Chou to come and cut it open. Unless..." He watched as she got a thoughtful expression. Kneeling down, sweeping the skirt of her coat out of the way, the silver-haired girl tapped around the edges of the door listening intently. "Ah. There... and there. Two locking bolts. Let's see if this works." The soldier gaped as a glow built around her hand, enclosing it in a sphere of energy which whitened out his NV goggles. He flipped them up out of the way to see that the leaf-green glow lit the entire garage. She glanced at him.

"I haven't tried anything like this on this scale," the girl commented, then leaned forward and pressed the ball of greenish fox-fire against the thick metal door in the first of the places she'd located. Her fist slowly sank into the metal with a crackling sound, the steel alloy vanishing into the energy. After ten seconds or so she withdrew her hand from the hole she'd made, looking into it. The edges were glowing dull red. "OK, that's one." She repeated the process on the other bolt. "Got it." A wave of cold air came from her hand, chilling the metal to ambient temperature rapidly.
Reaching in she used the holes as hand-holds and pulled it open easily, dropping it to the floor with a clang. A wave of horribly stale air rolled out, redolent with the smell of human waste and other disgusting scents.

"Gah, that stinks," O'Rourke said.

"We should let it air out for a moment." The girl stood, waiting, with a calm expression. "Yori and Lieutenant Kent found another survivor," she suddenly said. "An old man, a few hundred metres away." He looked at her, wondering yet again how on earth she was doing that, as there was no visible radio equipment. She smiled very slightly. "It should be OK to go down, I think." They climbed into the hole the door had covered, Azumi leading the way, using the ladder bolted to the wall. It descended some six metres, then became a passageway leading back under the driveway, about another ten metres. This ended in a door with a hand-wheel in the middle like something from a ship.

"Looks like navy surplus," the corporal noted with interest. Grabbing the handle Azumi twitched.

"Ow," she said mildly.

"What?"

"It's electrified. Don't touch it." She turned it, meeting momentary resistance which ended with a sudden metallic snap, before the wheel spun. When it stopped moving she pulled the door open. There was a gunshot, horrifically loud in the confined space, making O'Rourke hit the floor with his ears ringing, his weapon in his hands.

"Please don't do that," he could just make out Azumi saying surprisingly gently. "We're here to help you." Looking up he saw her standing in the doorway tossing a copper-jacketed bullet in her hand then catching it again. The room beyond was lit by a number of chemical lights, revealing a man and woman in late middle age along with a boy of around sixteen. All of them were gaping at the girl in the doorway. None of them looked very well, the man in particular was clearly only holding himself up with an extreme effort of will, as the gun he was holding shook wildly in his hand. He looked at it for a moment, then lowered it, staring at the silver-haired young woman.

"But... I shot you?" he stammered. She nodded, smiling a small amount, then handed him the bullet.

"Yes. Quite good aim under the circumstances. Please don't do it again."

"Who are you?" the woman asked in shock and relief, mixed in equal quantities, as the man sat down hard, staring at the bullet in his hand.

"My name is Azumi. This is Corporal O'Rourke from the Army. Come with us, we'll get you somewhere safe and less unpleasant than this place, unless you really want to stay here?" She shook her head violently.

"No, I really, really want to get out."

"I must warn you that there is a very large amount of destruction up there," Azumi said, looking at them one by one. "Your house is more or less destroyed, as is the town. There are very few survivors. We've located six so far." She got a slightly distant expression for a moment. "Seven. One more just turned up."

"There were over three hundred people in Halleckton a week ago," the man said heavily, dropping his pistol to the floor with a clunk, then putting his head in his hands.
"I know. I'm sorry. I'm afraid it's very unlikely that any of them managed to escape."

"What the hell were those things?" the boy asked, speaking for the first time. The young woman looked across at him.

"Demons."

"Demons?"

"Yes. Well, strictly speaking it would be more accurate to call them alien life-forms, but demons is as good a description as anything. They came through something called a portal. There were nine of them. We've destroyed two and trapped the rest."

All three people in the bunker stared at her in disbelief. "Come on, let's get you upstairs and somewhere safe. Explanations can wait. You all look dehydrated and hungry."

"We ran out of food yesterday and water this morning," the man said. Azumi pulled three bottles of water from nowhere and distributed them. Unscrewing the caps the survivors drained them without questioning where they'd come from. "Thank you," he said when he'd finished the bottle. Unsteadily, he stood, his wife helping him. Their son watched for a moment, then also helped. Azumi and O'Rourke stood out of the way as the three headed slowly for the ladder. They needed the help of the two rescuers to climb it as they were weak from hunger and thirst, but shortly they were all standing in the remains of the garage. Aiko and Pedersen were waiting for them.

"These are friends of mine," Azumi said to the survivors. "They'll take you to CFB Trenton, to the medical unit there. You can get food and more water when you arrive. Are there any medical problems any of you have?" They shook their heads.

"We managed to get into the shelter before those things came through," the man said, looking around at the destruction he could barely see in the darkness, before turning back to her. "We're all basically fine aside from being down there for however long it's been."

"Eight days," his wife said. He looked startled but nodded after a moment.

"God. Was it that long?"

Aiko inspected them. "I'm afraid, considering the condition you're in, that the teleport will be rougher on you than normal. I can arrange for you to be unconscious if you'd like, you won't feel it then. Otherwise you're probably going to be violently sick for a few seconds." They all looked at each other, then around at the remains of their home.

"We just want to get out of here as fast as possible," the son said, looking at his parents. They seemed to agree.

"OK. Get ready." Azumi and O'Rourke stepped back as the group vanished, then began their search once more.

"Seventeen people. That's all they found," Inspector Deveraux said heavily, putting her phone away. "Yori is sure that they've found everyone left alive there. One of them was one of our people from the second car the local station sent out. They couldn't find any trace of the other one. The survivors between them suggested that the total population was approximately three hundred and nineteen people, give or take half a dozen. Those things have killed something like three hundred people in the last week. And that's only because they ran out of victims."
Chief Superintendent Wilkinson appeared ill. His face had paled when she'd mentioned the death toll. "Oh, lord, that's unbelievable. This is much worse than London." After a moment's silence, he asked, "What about the demons?"

"They've destroyed two, have one trapped in an old mineshaft, and six more trapped behind something Yori calls a 'ward'. Some sort of forcefield, I think. They were about to go in and check out the Murray residence, they left that for last. Apparently it's very large with some sort of underground part, possibly using another old mine for that. It's the only place they haven't swept yet. She says she wants to be sure the portal bomb is destroyed."

"They can blow the entire place to hell for all I care," Wilkinson growled. "I hope that bastard is still alive, though. I want him."

"We all do. If Yori finds him we may have to settle for seconds, though. She is very unhappy."

"If he is still alive, he'll remain that way, unless he seriously threatens someone," Agent Naito said, watching them both. "Yori isn't a killer, she's a warrior. There's a difference. She'll keep him alive for you, not slaughter him out of hand, however much she might enjoy it personally." He smiled in a rather worrying way. "But she'll terrify him to the depths of his soul, trust me. He'll be lucky to come out of that encounter with his sanity intact."

Deveraux smiled in much the same manner. "Good."

Second Lieutenant Kent inspected the large house partially build into the hillside overlooking Lake Halleck. It was perhaps fifteen metres above the waterline, with a set of wooden stairs leading down to a private dock to which several boats were moored. Two of them had sunk, only the bow visible from the larger one. The other was barely floating, completely swamped, but not yet on the bottom of the lake. To one side of the main house was a tennis court, beyond which was a swimming pool with a helipad laid out near it, a brand new and now completely written off Bell 230 Executive helicopter lying on it's side some distance from where it had landed. A gravel car park had half a dozen expensive SUV type vehicles in it.

"Someone has money to burn," he commented, looking around.

Chou looked over to him. "Anthony Murray is apparently a multi-millionaire. He made his money in the financial markets, although his reputation is one of someone who is more than a little ruthless, not very concerned about damage to other people, or possibly even pleased by it. He's been implicated in a number of scandals in Canada and the US but never charged. There were rumours of bribery, intimidation, and blackmail. Not a very nice person I fear."

"Plus you can add he's responsible for the deaths of some three hundred people," Yori growled, scanning the area. "For that, he's going to pay, assuming he hasn't already." She was furious. Chou put an arm around her for a moment, then released her.

"Let's check." They walked towards the entrance to the house, warily looking around. "Don't go past that row of trees over there," the blonde said, indicating a point some fifty metres away. "The warded area the demons are trapped in starts just after it. The wards won't let them out, but they would let you in. That would be bad." All four soldiers looked, making mental notes to stay the hell away from the trees.

"Got it." Kent stared up at the three story building. A number of windows were broken, apparently from the inside, while the front door and much of the surrounding woodwork was lying in the driveway. A car was on it's roof near the garage to one side, burned out, while the garage itself was
somewhat scorched from the heat, the large door badly dented where the car seemed to have collided with it. The damage looked about a week old for the most part, although the burnt-out car was probably more recent, since it still smelled strongly of fuel. As they approached they could see several bodies, some severely chewed, scattered around near the door, which gave the impression that the people inside had made an unsuccessful bid for freedom. "What a mess," he added, looking down at one body. Squatting down he opened the jacket and pulled out a wallet, opening it to look for ID. "This guy was the helicopter pilot, I think, he's got a pilot's license with rotary wing aircraft rating."

"Poor bastard." Silva took a photo with the last of the roll, then reloaded his camera, before documenting the other bodies and the damage to the house and grounds. The flash strobed in the darkness, lighting up the area intermittently, while Yori and the girls fanned out carefully checking the grounds. Kent watched as Misaki and Fumiko stared at the ground, walking around slowly, clearly following something they could see or feel.

"What is it?" he asked curiously, approaching them. Fumiko looked up.

"There are several tunnels under here. Maybe ten or twelve metres down. One seems to lead towards where the demons are, another one goes downhill in the direction of the lake. Some others lead under the house."

"Old mines again?" he wondered out loud, looking at the ground. He couldn't see anything unusual. She nodded, her attention back on the driveway.

"I suspect so. They seem to be a fairly even width but open out occasionally." After a moment she stopped following the tunnels and walked back to him. "I'm guessing that the portal device is down there somewhere, the demons came through then followed the tunnel to some exit over there past the trees, then came back above ground. All the damage to the house seems to be from the outside inwards, not the other way around, which suggests they didn't come from inside."

"Makes sense." He went back with her to where Yori and Chou were discussing something, while Misaki kept mapping the underground works, joined after a moment by Tamiko. When he reached them, Yori looked around.

"There's definitely someone alive in there.. It feels like perhaps three, maybe up to six people. At least one of them is unconscious which is why the uncertainty. There's also traces of some reasonably strong magic, several different types in fact, something that leads us to believe that Mr Murray's collection of artefacts is inside somewhere. He certainly has more than the collection from Australia, aside from the device nothing else in it was very interesting from what we could make out. There is some sort of primitive ward blocking the emanations which is why we didn't detect it from further away." She shrugged.

"At least the portal isn't active, they're almost impossible to shield at all, the ward here wouldn't make the slightest difference. You'd be able to feel it kilometres away." Concentrating, she nodded after a few seconds. "Right. I've killed the ward. Let's see if that makes a difference..." She fell silent, exchanging a glance with Chou. "Odd. I can't quite determine for sure if there are any more demons down there, they merge into the background. I can feel the ones behind us, and just about the one in the mine, but I'm getting strange readings from underground. I think it's all the magical artefacts kicking up interference. There's a possibility another demon or two might be loose down there, so be very careful."

Chou added, "The people we can sense are just outside the area that was warded. I suspect that they're locked in to some sort of panic room. I believe that's fairly common among wealthy people, and in this case, the presence of the old mine workings under the house would make it fairly
straightforward to construct something very difficult to get into by an attacker." She looked around.

"Misaki found something to the side of the house." The group walked over, rounding the end of the building to find the young woman examining a set of pipes and ventilation equipment on a concrete pad in the side garden.

"Looks like some sort of air inlet and exhaust for an underground room," she said, glancing up for a moment. "This is a high flow low pressure pump, along with filtration equipment, emergency shut-off, radiation detectors, toxic gas detectors, you name it. I can't even identify half of it. There's a big battery for it as well, it's running off that at the moment." The equipment was emitting a low humming rumble, clearly active. "Very expensive installation. The sort of thing you'd find on government emergency bunkers."

"The panic room must be right under here," Chou said, looking at the ground. "There's certainly a large void down there, and some life signs are in this general area, more that way though." She indicated the house. "The amount of earth and rock in the way makes it difficult to be certain."

"We could dig our way in," Yori suggested thoughtfully. "Or teleport." She glanced at Aiko, who shook her head.

"I'd prefer not to. Enclosed spaces underground can be tricky."

"Fair enough."

Chou pondered the problem. "Perhaps it would be better to go through the house. There's less likelihood of harming someone that way." After a moment Yori nodded.

"OK." They all trooped back to the front door, Azumi and Aiko joining them, as Silva walked over with the other two soldiers. "Right. In we go. There definitely aren't any demons in the house itself, so you lot can go through that. Look for any survivors. If someone is badly injured and near death we might not detect them until we're closer. Chou and I are going down to see if we can find the entrance to wherever the people we can detect are. Aiko will come with us. Each of the soldiers with one of us, be careful, and keep in contact." Everyone nodded, grouping up and entering the building.

O'Rourke and Azumi looked around the ground floor kitchen they'd entered moments ago, then exchanged glances. It looked like a hurricane laced with broken glass had gone through. Every item of furniture was smashed to pieces, there was a hole in the wall, and pipes leaking from the ceiling. Several bullet holes were evident in the walls. The man responsible for them was on the floor. And the walls. And the ceiling. They moved on, as there was nothing else to do. It was the fifth room they'd searched, but luckily only the first body.

The room exited into a small courtyard, a few metres across, before going into another part of the building which was partially built into the hillside. They entered cautiously. Azumi stopped, looking around. "There's something in here," she whispered to the corporal.

"Where?" he asked, unlimbering his rifle while putting his side-arm away. She looked at the gun but said nothing about it.

"I'm not sure. I can feel something odd, though. It's difficult to explain." Looking around, she pointed. "That way, I think. Be careful." Very slowly they edged their way to the door into the next room. It was a long hall, some sort of dining room, perhaps twenty metres in length, with windows all down one side overlooking the lake. Several of them were broken. Nothing was immediately
visible so they went in, staying close to the wall. After a few paces, O'Rourke stopped.

"That's not you breathing, is it, Azumi?" he asked, knowing the answer. She shook her head, looking up. In one corner of the room was a sort of balcony opening out over the floor, on which was lying an horrific creature. It was curled into a ball, but the corporal estimated it would be over three metres tall when erect. A long tail twitched slightly, while one of the arms came up and scratched its back. "Shit."

"Keep quiet," the girl hissed, crouching down and aiming at it with her right hand. "Yori missed this one somehow," her voice sounded in his radio, making him twitch in surprise. He stared at her. She was looking intently at the demon, while her lips weren't moving. She glanced at him, a small smile flickering across her mouth. "I'm going to have to take it out. If it wakes up it's going to be much more difficult to deal with." He nodded, quietly moving to the side. With no sound, a ball of green energy grew in her hand, reaching the size of a basketball before beginning to shrink again, becoming brighter in the process. O'Rourke stared for a moment, then looked back at the demon.

Which was looking back at them.

"Fuck!" he yelled, diving to the side as the thing launched itself in a flat trajectory at the pair of them. Azumi fired her energy ball then leaped to the side, the demon crashing to the floor and sliding out the door they'd just entered as the green energy sphere blew an enormous hole in the end of the room with a massive boom, shattering every remaining window instantly. Ears ringing, both of them whirled to see the demon getting to it's feet in the courtyard. O'Rourke opened up on it, an entire magazine punching holes all over it. The thing staggered, roaring in pain and rage, before turning to look at him. Swearing under his breath the soldier dropped the magazine from his weapon and rammed another one in, opening fire again.

The demon bent down and picked up a large flagstone, whipping it at him like a frisbee. Azumi accurately shot it out of the air with a much smaller energy ball half-way between the thing and his head, making him flinch, yelping in pain as he was spattered by gravel. Ducking, he took aim again. Once more it picked up a stone, throwing it even harder and faster. The girl missed with her return fire, then rammed him out of the way where his head would have been and caught her in the chest. With a cry of pain she was thrown several metres.

"Azumi!" he called, worried, not taking his eyes off the demon.

"Ow," she replied, sounding breathless. "That really fucking hurt."

"You OK?"

"More or less. I'll live. Get out of the way." He dropped to the ground, there was something in her voice that made him move without thinking, or it could have been the growing green light coming from behind him. Just as he hit the ground another, bigger, energy ball shot over his head and hit the demon between the eyes. Most of it vanished with a brilliant flash and a sound that blew him flat. "Got the fucker," she said, then groaned in pain. Opening his eyes which had involuntarily closed during the flash, he looked over his shoulder. The girl was sitting up, one arm across her chest. She rubbed her body gently, grimacing. Standing, he cast a glance at the courtyard, which now contained the legs and tail of a demon, before walking over to her and offering his hand. Taking it she pulled herself to her feet. "Thanks."

"Thank you. That rock had my name on it. It certainly wouldn't have bounced, even with the helmet."
"You're welcome. Ow." She looked at the smoking remains of the demon with satisfaction.

"Do we need to get Chou or Yori to heal you?" he asked with concern, looking at her carefully. There was some blood soaking through her clothes.

"Not yet. It's not serious but it hurts like a bastard. Let's finish our sweep, then we can go back."

She inspected him. "You'll need some work as well," the girl noted, touching a cut on his face. Reaching up he found there were several of them.

"Tis but a scratch," he said with a grin. She looked at him for a long moment.

"A scratch? Your arm's off!" He laughed in sudden relief, the combination of her cold expression and the appropriate quote was hysterical. Smiling a little, she warmed considerably. "Come on, sir Black Night, let's finish our mission." Chuckling, he followed her as she made her way through the debris.

Lieutenant Kent found himself accompanying Fumiko. He glanced at her as they ascended the stairs to the next floor. She smiled back. "How are you doing, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"All right, I guess, Fumiko. I've seen some pretty nasty things in the past. I was in the gulf in '91, that wasn't a lot of fun." He went quiet for a moment. "But... this is home, you know? This sort of thing isn't suppose to happen at home. All this death, destruction, pain, it's bad. Such a nasty way to go." The girl sighed a little.

"I know. I sympathise. We've encountered these things before, seen what they do to people. London was bad. This is much worse, of course. But even when the first one turned up nearly a year ago in Tokyo, it was horrible. Tamiko got hurt fairly badly, five people died... If it wasn't for Yori, it could have been a lot worse. Since then, she's taught us a lot, we're much more powerful and able to deal with the things, yet even so we couldn't prevent any of this." They arrived at the top floor having climbed three flights of stairs very cautiously without seeing any people. "It's not a nice feeling, being helpless to stop this sort of thing happening. It's our entire reason for doing what we do." The soldier nodded, while carefully peering through a doorway into a wrecked room, his rifle at the ready.

"I know. Despite our rather different methods," he looked at her and grinned briefly, an expression she returned, "I think we work on a similar basis." Fumiko checked the room on the other side of the corridor, shaking her head soberly when she came back out.

"Another body, I'm afraid. A young woman."

"Damn. How many is that now?"

The girl thought for a moment. "Two hundred and thirty-seven bodies we can identify, another probable forty-three partial bodies, and scenes that suggest the presence of a further twenty-two kills, but with no bodies left." Kent sighed.

"That's..." She nodded, understanding exactly what he meant.

"Yes." They moved on. While they were checking the last room, Fumiko suddenly looked up. "Azumi and O'Rourke just encountered a demon." Kent looked at her, worried. There was a distant explosion. Fumiko winced. "Oh dear. She missed." Gunfire broke out somewhere downstairs to the rear of the building. It stopped, then restarted, accompanied by a pair of smaller blasts, then a massive one. The house shook slightly. "She got it. She's slightly injured, O'Rourke is fine except for some scratches," the girl reported after a few seconds.
"How did Yori miss that one?" the lieutenant asked.

"It was asleep. I guess it didn't show up as much on her scan."

"I hope there aren't any more like that," he said, looking around suspiciously. The girl nodded, following his gaze.

"You and me both." Half a minute later, she added, "Tamiko and Pedersen just found a survivor, in the garage." They finished their task, before going back downstairs, meeting Silva and Misaki on the way. The tall soldier looked at his superior, who shook his head.

"One fatality, no survivors."

"We found two more fatalities. Tamiko says Azumi and O'Rourke found another one in the kitchen. No word on Yori's team yet." Going into the garage the four looked around, spotting Pedersen behind a large people-carrier, then headed for him. Tamiko was kneeling next to him holding an unconscious man in his middle-fifties down while Chou set his leg. Her hands glowed as she healed the bone then woke the patient. He stirred slightly, groaning, before opening his eyes and staring around at them all, barely able to see. Realising the problem Chou raised her hand, a gibbous ball of golden light forming in it and illuminating the scene. He gaped, then looked at her calm face, as she smiled gently at him.

"Hello. I'm Chou. How do you feel?"

"My head aches horribly but other than that I feel surprisingly good." His voice was hoarse and scratchy. Looking down at his leg he moved it gingerly, looking startled when it didn't hurt, before returning his gaze to her.

"It's all healed up. Your blood pressure is much too high, I want to have a look at that when this is all over, but in the mean time we'll evacuate you to a safe place." She and Tamiko helped him to his feet, then gave him a bottle of water, which he rapidly drank, before looking around at the others.

"Army?" he asked, seeing the uniforms of the three soldiers. Kent stepped forward.

"Second Lieutenant Kent, sir. We're going to take you to the medical unit at Trenton CFB. The other survivors of the... event... are there already."

"What the hell happened?" the man asked, his voice full of remembered pain. "I was just coming back from a trip further north with some friends, we're all staying at Tony's place, but when we drove up the house looked like it had been bombed. The garage was open so I drove the vehicle in, the other guys got out with their rifles to investigate. Just after I closed the doors I heard shots. And a weird roaring noise, like a tiger on drugs or something. Next thing I knew something hit the door and knocked me flying, right under the car. Last thing I can remember."

"When was that, sir?" Silva asked, a notebook in his hand. The man thought.

"Um, the twelfth, I think?"

"It's the fourteenth today. You were under there for nearly two days." He looked startled.

"No wonder I feel like I could drink a swimming pool." Chou smiled and handed him some more water, which he took gratefully.

"Thank you."
"You were attacked by demons, I'm afraid," she told him, as he finished the bottle and looked around for somewhere to put it. She took it back and made it vanish. The survivor stared in disbelief at her words.

"What!?"

"It's true, sir," Kent said. "It appears that Mr Murray laid hands on a mystical weapon he most definitely should not have possessed, it got triggered, and the result is that a number of extremely dangerous alien lifeforms, our consultants here call them demons, came through and ran amok." Pausing for a moment while he assessed the man, he added delicately, "I'm sorry to say that the casualty count is very high."

After a long pause, the man looked straight at him.

"How high?"

"Including you, we have found only eighteen survivors in the entire town."

Their survivor stared in horror, speechless, for nearly twenty seconds. "Oh, god," he finally said, his face white. Chou put her hand on his shoulder, discreetly checking his state of health.

"You shouldn't worry about it right now. There's nothing you can do or could have done about it, by the time you returned it's likely that most of the deaths had already occurred. Just consider yourself lucky you survived." He made no response, simply staring at the floor, shaking. With a very small sigh she glanced at Tamiko, who moved behind him, then caught him as she gently touched his forehead, causing him to drop like he'd been shot. "He'll be out for an hour or so," she told Kent and the others. "When he wakes up I hope he'll feel a little better."

"They're all going to need a lot of counselling after all this," Silva noted grimly. "I may do myself." She sighed again.

"I know. I wish I could do something about that, but while we're very good with the medical issues, mental problems are beyond our current skills." Aiko and Yori entered the garage, walking over to them. The girls exchanged glances without saying anything, before Aiko carefully picked the man out of Tamiko's arms, stepped a couple of metres away, then teleported out.

"We found the entrance to the panic room. Also what looks like the entrance to the underground section that the magical artefacts are in. It's still locked, so the demons must have got out a different way. There are three people inside the room from what we can tell." She glanced around at them all. "Azumi and O'Rourke found two casualties, both dead, they're on their way back now. That's the house swept. Five dead inside, seven more outside, plus one we found in the basement heading towards the panic room. Actually, all we found was a very large pool of blood and a finger, but I think we can be sure he didn't survive it." Azumi and the corporal came into the garage. "Right. Let's go and extract whoever is in that room, and if it's Mr Anthony Murray, he'd better hope whatever god he prays to is merciful, because I won't be." This last part was said in a growl that sent shivers down the backs of everyone present except Chou, who hugged her partner briefly, an expression that perfectly matched the sentiment on her own face. Popping back into existence Aiko walked over, as they all left the garage, heading downstairs to the basement.

Václav sighed inaudibly at the sound of his current employer's voice, wishing for the umpteenth time he'd never heard the name 'Anthony Murray'. It had brought nothing but trouble, pain, and near death. Near, as in just the other side of it, for several people, he'd seen at least two of them killed by those fucking demons before they'd made it to the panic room. Nick, Murray's security
man, had been torn to pieces in front of his eyes, the man's fifty calibre Desert Eagle doing nothing but drive the demon that had attacked them into a frenzy. At least it had been quick.

"And this is at least half my fault," the mage thought to himself. 'Me and my bright ideas. Oh, it worked, all right, that's the problem. I should have walked away when I found out what that bastard had. But no, I had to accept all that money. Idiot.' He looked up from where he was kneeling by the side of the bed, on which lay Sara, Murray's current, and fifth, wife. "That's the best I can do. I'm running low on power, plus I'm not a healer in the first place. She needs some real medical help." The woman had a badly infected broken arm and, he suspected, internal injuries. She'd fallen into a state that looked horribly like a coma to him some twelve hours earlier. Antibiotics from the panic room medical stores and some simple healing spells seemed to be keeping her alive and her fever down to merely roasting, but he was under no illusions that she would survive short of either a miracle or sudden, serious, medical intervention.

Anthony Murray nodded absently, checking the security computer once more. He didn't seem all that concerned. The mage had formed the opinion that the beautiful blonde woman was seen as another pricey accessory for the financial magnate, like his Ferrari or the helicopter outside. Just something that could be replaced with another, newer, model when it got a little tattered and tired. He stood, looking at the woman on the bed, gently brushing her hair out of her face before turning to the other man. He'd formed an immediate liking for the woman, finding her witty, intelligent, and generally fun to be around. What she saw in the man thirty years her senior was beyond him, aside from the obvious monetary value. He doubted that at the moment she'd think that was enough.

"So, how much longer are we going to be in here?" Václav asked, walking over to Murray. The man sighed loudly.

"You keep asking that. I told you, I set the lock-down for ten days. We can't get out until then, and no one can get in. Don't worry, we're perfectly safe. There's enough food for a month, water as well, the backup generators have enough fuel for twice that, and the batteries would give another week." He gestured grandly around. "The walls are thirty centimetres of vanadium steel set into the rock, which is extremely hard anyway. There's no way those things can get in. That door is nearly a metre thick."

"That's not what I'm worried about! Your wife is seriously injured, she'll be dead in less than a day if I'm any judge."

"I can't do anything about that," Murray replied, casting a glance at the figure on the bed. "The doors are sealed for another two days."

"Oh, fuck it all! Why the hell did I listen to you?" the mage yelled, stomping across the room and dropping into a chair. The financial expert stared at him for a moment then dismissed him, going back to his computer.

"Because I paid you a million US dollars," he said with some rather dark amusement in his voice.

"And look where that got me! Stuck in a fucking underground bunker with a dying woman and you, demons rampaging around outside! God knows how many people have died."

"The army or the cops or someone will turn up and deal with it." Murray swivelled his chair around, fixing the mage with his gaze. "Then we come out, tell them we got trapped and barely made it to safety, thank them profusely, and get on with life. That device is probably still down there. I know it's out of power but I'm sure it could be recharged. The spells were part of it, right?"
Václav stared at him in stunned amazement. "You have got to be insane. After what's happened, you want to try again?"

"Why not? If we can come up with a cheap method of using portals for transport, the US military, if no one else, would pay a hell of a lot of money for it. I know Americans don't believe in magic, on the whole, but I'm sure after a few demonstrations we could convince them."

"You're fucking nuts." Shaking his head, the mage stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the other man. "If you'd shown me that warning the Japanese sent out before we started fiddling with that thing I wouldn't have touched it with a pole of any length."

"I know." Murray shrugged. "That's why I didn't show it to you."

Muttering obscenities in his native Czech, the mage glared at the financier, who seemed unmoved. After a while, he began looking curiously around, then stared up.

"What is it?" Murray asked, noticing this odd behaviour.

"Something..." Václav paused. "Something odd. Something powerful... incredibly powerful." He stared at the ceiling a metre above them for a moment longer. "Several somethings."

"The demons?"

"No. Something much, much worse. I've never felt anything remotely like it." The sensations of something like, but at the same time unlike, magic rolled over him from above, moving steadily closer. Mixed with them was the overwhelming sensation of extreme anger, ruthlessly suppressed. He shuddered. Whatever it was was dangerous on a scale he had no ability to quantify. The energy signature gave him a queasy feeling. Whatever it was stopped directly above them, was joined by several others, two of which were vastly more powerful, one of those being absolutely awe-inspiring, then they moved off again. He found he was whispering. With shock he also noticed that the wards he'd erected around the artefact storage area had simply died, for no apparent reason, at some point in the last ten minutes.

Murray was watching him curiously, having felt nothing, but having been fascinated by the way the mage's gaze had clearly been tracking something on the surface, even though he couldn't see it. "What is it?"

"I have absolutely no idea. I don't know I want to find out, either." The mage shuddered. "It's... beyond my experience, completely. They're in the house, I think, now." They sat silently for a while, listening. "Three of them are coming closer," he whispered, looking at the door. The sources of the disturbing emanations came steadily closer, eventually ending up right on the other side of the door. "They're right outside." His voice had dropped to near-inaudibility. Getting up the financier walked over to the vault-like door, looking at the monitor to one side of it. The image was blank, only a few small smears showing.

"Weird. The camera is working, I think, but there's no lights out there. I'd have thought people would have needed a flashlight or something." There was no reply. Turning he saw the mage staring fixedly at the door with a pale sweating face. "Hey. Sklár. Sklár." Moving over he shook the other man slightly. "You in there? What's the problem?" Václav came back to himself with a jolt, replaying the last few seconds of conversation through his mind.

"I'm not sure they're people," he said quietly, looking up at the man, before he returned his attention to the door. "I've never felt anything like that from a human before."
The presences stayed outside the door for a while, then moved away, before coming back. Abruptly two of them vanished. He jumped. "What the hell...?" The last one, the most powerful by far, was still there. It was suddenly rejoined by one of the first two, another few minutes passed, then both of them vanished again. "I have no idea what's going on. They're all the way over the other side of the house now. Maybe the garage? Or outside?" Glancing at Murray who seemed interested, he added, "They just vanished, then reappeared instantly over there. I think it might be teleportation, but not any sort I've ever come across before. The energy usage was unbelievably efficient, no leakage at all except a tiny amount when they went."

"Teleportation? Hmm." He instantly guessed what the man would say next. "I wonder if that spell is for sale?" Václav sighed. He'd been right.

"Not everything is for sale, you realise," the mage said tiredly.

"Nonsense. You just have to offer the right price." Looking pleased with himself, Murray pulled out a notebook and wrote in it for a while. Struck by a sudden thought, he looked up. "Could they teleport into here?"

"Um. I'm not sure." Murray nodded, making another note.

They sat in silence for a while, broken only by the sound of the keyboard as the financier fiddled with the computer. Eventually, the mage looked up from where he'd been studying Sara again. "They're coming closer. All of them. Six, I think." The sources steadily approached, until they were all right on the other side of the door again. Václav stared at it nervously. With a faint hiss a line of purple light suddenly appeared piercing the door near the left side, pausing for only the briefest moment before it described a neat circle two metres across incredibly fast, then vanished. There was a pregnant pause. The sliced section of door screeched as it was pulled steadily backwards, leaving a hole in the thick metal, a hole that was filled by the figure of a petite Japanese woman, who had long black hair in a braid down to her waist, hair with a brilliant blue streak in it. Her clothing was similarly coloured, matt black silk with a blue stripe off-centre, while leather boots and leather fingerless gloves completed the picture. She glanced around the occupants of the room, her gaze pausing on the mage, who had gone completely white.

"You know who I am," she stated flatly. He nodded, his entire body trembling.

"Yori."

"Correct. I want a word with you." Stepping into the room she indicated the hole behind her. "Out. Now." He stood without saying anything and left the room, Murray watching with surprise. She turned her gaze to him.

"Anthony Murray."

"That's me. And you are...?" He stood, approaching her with his hand out. Two more women, one a tall blonde and one, somewhat shorter, with silver hair, entered silently, carefully picked his wife off the bed, then left again. She ignored them, and his outstretched hand, completely.

"Annoyed. Very, very annoyed. We need to talk." He gaped as she started glowing purple, walking slowly towards him.

Outside the room the mage Václav Sklár was looking around, his heart in his boots. Aside from Yori, someone he'd never thought he'd encounter although he'd heard a lot of stories, he recognised the blonde woman approaching him as Chou, someone else he'd heard things about. Five other women were looking at him with various expressions, none of them happy ones. The silver-haired
girl walking beside Chou gave him a look that chilled him to the bone as she silently passed, going into the panic room. He couldn't feel anything at all from her, weirdly. They both came out seconds later, carefully carrying Sara. Moving off to a clear part of the basement they put her down. He watched as unbelievably effective healing magic of a type he'd never seen before was brought into play, giving Sara the miracle she needed. He sighed slightly in relief.

The four soldiers standing around pointing weapons at him made him nervous, but not as much as the women, who were still watching him with the sort of curious contempt a cat has for an injured mouse that still has some life left in it. When the waves of soul-chilling horror began to flow from the room behind him, all of them slowly smiled with almost identical expressions of demonic glee. Chou glanced at the entrance, then the soldiers who were looking nervously at the hole in the door, before motioning them away. They obeyed without question and with alacrity. The silver-haired girl and one with auburn hair took up a position behind him, then fairly gently urged him to begin walking. They headed upstairs with the blonde carrying Sara.

Behind them, the screaming started.

Laura listened, nodding, then thanked the caller, before putting her phone on the table. "They swept the Murray residence. Thirteen fatalities, four survivors, including Anthony Murray, his wife Sara, and a mage from the Czech Republic by the name of Václav Sklár." She sighed. "The final death toll, assuming no other bodies turn up, is three hundred and fifteen. Twenty-one survivors. Christ."

"At least they got the bastard," Evan said, glancing at Chief Superintendent Wilkinson, who didn't look any happier at this thought.

"True." She smiled viciously. "Yori is talking to him at the moment. It may take a while. When and if he recovers from that we can throw the book at him, although I can't quite work out what we're going to charge him with. Magic and our judicial system are an uneasy fit."

"Felony stupidity, gross misuse of oxygen, and multiple counts of murder, if I can make it stick," Wilkinson said, glaring out the window. "Everything we can think of. They'll probably have to invent new crimes just to charge him properly. I'm half-hoping he dies of a heart attack while she's 'talking' to him."

"That wouldn't help. She'd just bring him back. However many times it takes." Deveraux shrugged. "Can't say it bothers me over-much."

Agent Naito listened quietly. Eventually he said, "She'll bring him back intact, more or less. But I doubt he'll be quite the same."

No one said anything as they waited in one of the rooms upstairs, one that was more or less undamaged, although one of the windows was broken. Eventually, though, the silence getting to him, Václav turned to Chou. "What's going to happen now?" he asked. She looked at him for a while.

"Murray will be turned over to the RCMP. After that he's out of our hands. You, on the other hand, we will want to talk to for some time. We take a considerable interest in matters surrounding the portal devices. I suspect you are one of those matters." He shuddered at the tone of her voice.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for all this to happen. It was just an interesting idea. I didn't think anybody would die." One of the soldiers, a short but tough looking man with very dark skin, snorted derisively.
"Shouldn't have done it, then. If you hadn't, over three hundred people would still be alive." The mage's heart nearly stopped, while Chou glanced at the soldier, who fell silent again.

"Three hundred people?" he whispered in horrified shock. The blonde nodded, an expression of deep disgust on her face.

"Yes. Basically, the entire town. Including you three, only twenty-one people survived. Ten demons will do that." He shook his head, trying not to hear what she said.

"What the hell have I done?" he thought in despair. After a moment, he noticed something wrong in what she'd told him. "Ten?" Chou nodded, studying him with sudden interest.

"Yes. Ten." She looked suspicious. "Why?"

"Ah... There were more than ten that came through." Everyone stared at him.

"What?" One of the soldiers, the one with the lieutenant's patch on his sleeve, jumped to his feet and glared at the mage. Chou gave him a look which made him sit again, although his glare didn't stop. She returned her attention to Václav.

"How many more?" she asked carefully.

"About nine." There was dead silence for a few seconds.

"You're saying that nineteen demons came through the portal?" Chou clarified, raising her eyebrows while glowing a faint golden colour. The danger in her voice made him shrink back into his chair.

"Yes." His voice was very small. There was silence again.

"Oh, fuck," the small corporal said in the end. Chou nodded.

"Quite." Standing, she walked over, then squatted in front of the mage, smiling sweetly at him. "Now, perhaps you can tell me please, where are the others? We've disposed of three and have seven more trapped."

"They're down in the tunnels." She looked steadily at him, forcing him to expand on that. "The portal device is down there. When it triggered, the demons came through. We only just got out in time. We thought they were all trapped, until three of them smashed their way into the house. That's when Murray took us down to the panic room. Nick, the security man, he got attacked on the way. Sara got hurt in that attack but we managed to escape, lock ourselves in, even though Nick didn't make it. He managed to give us the few extra seconds we needed." He shrugged. "I guess there must be another way out they used. I know there's a tunnel that leads into the lake, apparently the miners didn't know how close they were to the bottom when they were digging and broke through. I don't know whether those things can swim, though. Murray hinted at there being another tunnel that came up somewhere outside the house, he'd fitted it out as an emergency escape. He was kind of paranoid. Odd, really, considering how many guests he invites for parties. But he's a weird guy."

"How did the portal stay open long enough for nineteen of the damn things to come through?" the short brunette asked, looking worried yet curious. He sighed.

"It was my brilliant idea. If it hadn't had the results it did I'd be rather proud of it." None of them looked impressed. "That little device was remarkably clever. I couldn't quite work out how it worked although I identified several booby-traps and bypassed them. I did figure out that it was a
one-shot portal generator at heart, though, using a spell I'd never encountered before. It wasn't very energy-efficient, but it was very effective. I studied it for a few weeks, but I couldn't figure out how to make the portal last longer. It would use up all the energy in the storage sphere and shut down." He looked around at them.

"You have to understand I didn't have any idea where the portal opened. I had no idea it was so dangerous. Murray told me he'd bought it online, but what he didn't tell me how he even found out about the thing in the first place."

"How did he find out about it?" the silver-haired girl asked in an icy voice. The mage sighed.

"He happened to know someone in the FBI who owed him a favour and knew he was interested, no, more obsessed, with magical artefacts. In return for cancelling his debt he passed on the information the Japanese PSIA had circulated about the things. He didn't tell me that until we were locked in the panic room, unfortunately, or I'd have never gotten involved." He looked pleadingly at Chou. "You have to believe me. It was a mistake. I had no idea."

"Yet three hundred and fifteen people are dead." She looked at him with pitying anger. "Go on."

"One day I was looking through the artefact that Murray had collected. There are hundreds of them down there. In among all the crap was several things I realised were some sort of magical energy storage device, like the sphere the portal unit was based around, but with much larger capacity. They were about half-charged, maybe a bit less, they were pretty old. No idea where they came from originally. They looked like they were part of something much bigger at one point. There were also a few other odds and ends I thought I could possibly build a bigger version of the portal device from. I know a bit about portals, I'm no expert, but enough to get by. There was enough energy there to power one for some time. So, I played around with it for a while, and ended up with something that looked plausible." Chou was watching him with a fascinated look on her face, warring with the clear and present anger.

"That's quite clever," she said. He shrugged, looking unhappy.

"I thought so at the time. Not so much now. The idea was that the thing I'd built, powered by these storage units, could take over the portal function from the original device, which would create it in the first place. Sort of an amplifier. I didn't know quite how I'd recharge the storage units when the power was exhausted, mind you, but there should have been enough to run it for maybe half an hour. I didn't know at the time the portal it produced was so unstable. Or that it was one-way."

Chou looked at him for a moment, then stood, returning to her chair. "So you tried it."

"No. Not really. The damn thing triggered all by itself when I was showing it to Murray."

"Ah. The timer expired." He nodded with a sigh.

"I think so. I missed that completely. The portal formed, my device worked perfectly and took over holding it open, then the first demon came through. We ran for it while the thing was looking around. I could feel the portal operating, and flickering every time another demon came through. I counted nineteen fluctuations. It ran for just over a minute and shut down. My guess is the power units are still fairly full, but the inherent instability of the portal made it go pop." Chou nodded.

"Yes, they do that. That spell is very inefficient and has a built-in limitation that prevents operation for more than a very short while. Over a minute may be a record."

"Good for me." He clapped sarcastically a couple of times. "I did something clever."
"You did indeed. Unfortunately." The blonde woman was looking at him with more pity than anger now. "Why did Murray want to make a portal in the first place?"

"He had some stupid idea about using them for military transport. Apparently he knew someone in the US Army he thought might be persuaded to pay for something like that if we could demonstrate it. I told him several times it wasn't going to work the way he thought but he insisted it would be fine. The million dollar fee helped make me give it a shot." Shaking his head he stared at his feet. "Stupid of me. I suppose, if I hadn't done it, someone else probably would have, he was willing to pay practically anything, but I don't know if anyone else would have managed to do what I did." Glancing at her he added, "That's it. We ended up in the room, under lock-down. It would have opened in another two days. His plan was to wait to be rescued, claim ignorance of the whole thing, then try again somewhere else."

"What a bastard," one of the soldiers said in disgust. Nodding, the mage agreed with him.

"It wasn't until we were inside that he eventually showed me the notice from the PSIA. I wish to god he'd done that first, I'd have turned him down flat. He told me he knew that which is why he didn't show it to me."

"Mr Murray sounds like an unpleasant individual," Chou commented.

"He is that. How he's never been arrested for some of the things he boasted to me about I have no idea. Money and influence, I suppose. The one good thing to come out of this is that I guess he's finished."

"Definitely." The voice came from the doorway. Václav and the soldiers turned to see Yori standing there with the limp body of Anthony Murray over her shoulder. "We had a nice little chat. He's not going to go anywhere near magic ever again, and would dearly like to be carefully stored away in a jail cell for the rest of his life. Which will be a long and healthy one. I made sure of that." The expression on her face was horrific. Václav found himself desperately wishing he'd never seen it. One or two of the girls giggled, which made it much worse.

"Right. Let's get out of here." Everyone stood, following her outside, Chou carrying Sara who was still out. It was just at the point dawn was beginning to break, although still dark, the sky was slightly lighter to the east.

"What are we going to do about the demons?" the corporal asked curiously. Yori glanced at him.

"I wish I could shove them all back through a portal, but we have no choice. There are too many to take chances with." She looked at Aiko, who nodded. The entire group disappeared. The mage staggered at the incredible nausea sweeping over him, only barely stopping himself from falling. When he recovered he found that they were on a low ridge overlooking what he eventually recognised in the dim but growing light as Lake Halleck, on the other side from the town. In the distance a couple of kilometres away was the hillside the Murray residence was built into. Squinting, he could just make it out.

Yori lowered her burden to the ground, standing looking at him. She prodded him with her foot. "Wake up. I want you to see this." Murray groaned, stirring slightly, making her sigh irritably and bend down, prodding his chest hard. He jolted awake as if electrified, staring wildly around. Catching sight of her he went an unhealthy grey colour.

"No more. Please, god, no more," he whispered, making Václav wonder what she'd done to him. The feral smile she gave the man on the ground suggested it wasn't over yet.
"Come on, up you get. You don't want to miss the pretty fireworks." Motioning with her head to two of the soldiers, she waited as they picked him up and held him firmly. "Right. Now watch very carefully. See over there?" She pointed. Murray followed her finger after a moment, seeing where they were and what she was pointing at. He looked back to see her outstretched hand now contained a pinprick of intolerable brightness, which cast stark shadows of all of them across the ground, like a carbon arc torch. With a slight gesture the glowing point leapt from her hand and shot across the lake with a high-pitched scream. "You might want to close your eyes" she said conversationally, suiting action to words. The financier shut them just in time to avoid the extraordinarily bright flash that followed, accompanied by swearing from the soldiers. Cautiously opening his eyes, Murray stared in total horror at the rising cloud of vapour from the huge, yellow-glowing crater that was now where his house had been. It bit deeply into the hillside, totally obliterating the entire grounds and the mines beneath. Water from the lake was rushing into the lower edge of it, boiling violently where it hit molten glass and rock, adding to the cloud.

The sound rolled over them a few seconds later, a deep roaring thump that made the men all duck involuntarily. Debris rained down around their position, bouncing off a glowing golden transparent dome that had appeared covering their position, or sliding down it to the ground. The non-female members of the group, as one, turned horrified gazes on the petite woman looking at her work with satisfaction.

Turning to Anthony Murray, she smiled again. "Now we can go. There are some people in the RCMP who are quite impatient to talk to you." They disappeared in a flash of light, leaving the scene quiet except for the hissing roar from across the lake as it steadily boiled away at the lip of the crater.

Studying the broken man sitting in the cell, Chief Superintendent asked with mild curiosity, "What did you do to him?" The black-haired young woman standing beside him shrugged a little.

"Just talked." He glanced at her.

"I'm sure." Her smile was somewhat discomfiting. "Thank you for everything you've done. You and your colleagues."

"No problem. I'm more sorry than I can say that we were too late to prevent all this happening."

"It wasn't your fault. You had no idea any of this was going on until well after it happened." They turned and went back upstairs. "If we had tried to stop it, I'm certain that many more good people would have lost their lives. Most of the survivors you rescued would most likely be dead if it wasn't for you girls as well. We owe you a lot."

Yori smiled at him, slightly sadly. "No you don't. We just did what we do. We couldn't not help."

"I know. Thank you anyway." Stopping outside the conference room he held out his hand. After a moment she took it. "You're all extremely good people. I'm very pleased to have met you even under such terrible circumstances. I hope you'll visit some time."

"Thanks. We might well. I like Canada, and I have friends here." She smiled, more genuinely, before they went inside. Inspector Deveraux looked up from talking to Agent Naito, looking pleased to see Yori. Evan was chatting with Aiko and Tamiko, while Misaki was eating a cupcake.

"How is he?" she asked, not really caring.

"He'll live. But I think he's going to be thinking about his life for a long time," the girl said. She
moved to sit beside Chou.

"What did you do with the mage?" Deveraux was curious.

Chou smiled at her. "We took him somewhere he won't be bothering you again." The three RCMP officers and the PSIA agent exchanged glances.

"We will want to speak to him at some point about the charges against Mr Murray," Wilkinson said cautiously.

"That can be arranged. But I think, under the circumstances, we should deal with his final disposition." Chou looked at them. No one seemed to be prepared to object. "Don't worry. He will live, and he will pay for his actions. But, as a mage, you would have trouble holding him. We can arrange something more effective."

"All right. I'm very curious, but all right."

"I almost feel sorry for him," Azumi said, an unusually reflective note in her voice. "He really didn't have any idea what he was doing was dangerous. He strikes me as a decent man who made a terrible mistake."

"I know. That doesn't excuse the deaths of over three hundred innocent people, but it does count in his favour." Yori sighed. "It's a horrible thing. Accidents do happen, people get hurt as a result, but it doesn't make it any the less an accident. Under different circumstances he would have made a good research mage. The work with the portals was brilliant. Pity about the results."

"It may be that our government would want to try and sentence him, but allow you with your resources to arrange for the sentence to be carried out," the Chief Superintendent mused. "That would satisfy everyone, I suspect." Yori glanced at Chou, who nodded slightly.

"I think we could work with that, if you want," she said.

"Thank you." He looked at his watch. "It's seven in the morning, we've been up all night. It's OK for you magical girls, you probably don't sleep anyway, but we older men need some sleep. I need to go home before I fall over." Everyone grinned.

"Understandable. We need to go and finish off the last demon, the one in the mine, do the healing of the survivors, then deal with a small problem in the UK, before we can relax." Deveraux looked at them all.

"When you finish, would you like to relax at my house? I think a decent meal is the least I can arrange after all this." She glanced at Naito, who smiled. "I'd like to catch up as well. Evan, you're invited as well. You too, sir."

"I'd like that," Chou replied, looking around at the others, who all nodded. "We'll call you when we're done."

"Good. In that case, I'm going to bed as well. There's going to be a hell of a lot of paperwork later and I'd like to have some sleep first." She stood, followed by the others. "See you later." Clustering at the end of the table, the girls and Agent Naito waved before vanishing. Opening her eyes, she looked at Wilkinson, who looked back, tiredness and satisfaction in his eyes, along with sadness.

"I'm very glad they came. I only wish they could have tracked that thing down earlier." He nodded sombrely.
"As do I. But, under the circumstances, I think it ended as well as it was ever going to."

"Unfortunately." Both of them left the room, heading home.

"Incredible." The medic standing next to O'Rourke stared in amazement as he watched the two young women repair the injuries of a number of severely damaged people. The sight of the tall blonde regenerating the foot of a young man was probably the most incredible sight he'd ever seen. "Who the hell are they? How do they do all this?" The corporal shrugged helplessly.

"I have no real explanation. It's apparently some sort of magic, that's all I know. They're from Japan, some sort of combat specialists. I have to say that their abilities go a lot further than healing, but I don't think I should say any more." With a nod the medic went back to watching the girls work. The boy hugged the woman when she finished regrowing his foot, tears in his eyes. She smiled tenderly at him, returning the hug before standing and walking over to the other one, the girl with black hair. They talked for a moment, then moved to the next patients. Within an hour they had repaired all the damage, physically at any rate. The medic was fairly sure that these people would need considerably therapy. Many of them seemed to be in shock. If what he'd heard about Halleckton was even remotely true, he could easily understand that.

When they'd finished, they went around the room talking to each of their patients, before waving to them and leaving. O'Rourke said his goodbyes to the medic and followed. Outside, he approached the group of people including the other three members of his team. Azumi looked around as he walked over, smiling at him with an expression that was considerably warmer than her normal one. "Hello, Corporal."

"Hi, Azumi. I suppose you're off now?" She nodded.

"We have business in the UK." Holding out her hand she shook his. "It's been a pleasure working with you."

"Likewise. I think I'll be wishing you were there on the next combat posting." She laughed, looking amused.

"Thanks for the compliment. Take care of yourself." She glanced at Yori, who looked back with interest, before returning her attention to the soldier. "We'd consider it a favour if you neglected to mention our communications abilities in your report. It's not a massive secret, but we'd like to keep it confidential as long as possible, it's a useful edge against some of the problems we encounter." He studied her for a moment, then looked at Lieutenant Kent. The other soldier nodded.

"OK. I can't see it's something that needs to be talked about."

"Thank you." After a moment, the girl walked over to her colleagues. Yori stepped forward, looking at the men. She pulled out one of her cards, handing it to Kent.

"Just in case." Quickly explaining how it worked, she joined her friends again. They all waved to the little group of soldiers.

"Take care, guys. Thanks for the help." Yori grinned at them, before the flash came, bright even in the early-morning sunlight. The squad looked at the empty space for a moment.

"Come on, you lot. Beers are on me," Second Lieutenant Kent said, turning and leading the way to the nearest source of it, while slipping the precious card into his inside pocket. They all followed, each busy with his own thoughts.
Sir Alan was still furious, even close to twenty-four hours after the call from Agent Naito. The tall man, his greying hair waving in the force of the wind his pacing was kicking up, swung around to Harry Williamson of the MI5, shaking his head again. "I can't believe that stupid git," he growled, his heritage showing as he slipped slightly into a distinctly rural accent. "Stupid poncey little oaf. I'm getting very, very tired of the arrogance of those damn mages. After that last incident I thought he might have learned his lesson, but no, the silly bastard is trying to get his hands on another one of those god-damned portal bombs. What the fuck does he think he's going to do with it anyway? He came minutes away from getting his entire team, and possibly the entire research wing of the MoM, gruesomely killed the last time he had one of the things." The Minister stopped pacing, staring out the window into the dark. "Pillock. I'm tempted to just let Yori have him. I'm sure she could think of something creative to do with him. That girl impressed me a lot." Harry smiled a little.

"She absolutely terrifies me, sir. I like her, I think I trust her, but I sure as hell wouldn't want to get on her bad side. I think that would be... extremely unwise. Briefly." Sir Alan laughed shortly. "Oh, I'm counting on it. Robert has gone much, much too far this time. Using MoD resources to get information on this Geoffrey Young person then trying to blackmail him, that's just the tip of the iceberg. What he was trying to do is much worse. He knows full well there is a ban on those things, he was on the committee that voted it in, and here he is trying to sneakily get the last one? Little shit has definitely stepped over the line this time. I couldn't save him from what's going to happen even if I wanted to. He's walked right into a career-ending shitstorm at the very least. He could end up on trial for treason if he's not careful. That ban was backed by royal decree, the secret protocols for that sort of thing still allow for the death penalty." The Minister sighed, sitting behind his desk with a morose look.

"No, he's going to be very lucky if all he gets is twenty years. It's a bit of a problem holding the bastard, he is a very good mage after all, but I suppose if they take his wand away, he's a little more limited. I've talked to his immediate junior in the Ministry, she thinks there is precedent for this, and ways to deal with a rogue mage. But it hasn't been used in three hundred years or more." He looked at the clock on his desk. "Any idea when they're coming?" Harry checked his watch. "Should be sometime soon, sir. They were finishing up the aftermath of this Halleckton affair in Canada. It sounds very nasty. Agent Naito told me half an hour ago he thought another forty minutes, so very soon."

The Minister nodded, opening a folder on his desk, which was marked in large, unfriendly letters with the warning, "TOP SECRET UK EYES ONLY" Under that was written "PORTAL BOMB PLOT – Background, Analysis, & Recommendations." He leafed through the documentation within, stopping on a page at the back entitled "International treaty on research moratorium, weaponised interworld portal generators, draft 5a." Reading the front page again, he closed the folder. "The Americans took some persuading, you know what they can be like with something they think is an interesting new weapon, they really want to have it while at the same time telling themselves they'll never use it. Don't seem to realise history is full of people who thought the same, but ended up using it anyway. Their CIA was pretty keen but rather surprisingly the FBI was extremely anti, their representative ended up shouting at the CIA director for nearly twenty minutes. He'd apparently met Chou, who really put the wind up him. Convinced him good and proper that this was a case where they should stay well the hell away."

The Minister chuckled a little. "It was actually quite funny. The Japanese ambassador suggested, very politely, that if the CIA really wanted to research these things he could arrange for Yori and Chou to come and talk to them. Then he played them some video. Oddly enough, at that point they seemed to change their minds very suddenly. The FBI agent was laughing." Williamson snickered.
"I can understand that, certainly. You wouldn't want Yori angry at you, especially as in this case I suspect this would end up meaning that practically every magical girl in Minato would end up backing her. That should be enough to loosen the bowels of anyone with even half a brain. I've done some research myself, if those girls ever united and decided to do something impressive we'd be lucky if the planet was still in one piece." He shook his head, grinning, but looking just a little worried. "Best not to pull the tail of that tiger, I'm absolutely certain. I'm very glad indeed that the majority of them, from what I can see, have little to no interest in anything other than what they do at the moment."

"The committee came to the same conclusion. It was helped along by the Ambassador, again excruciatingly politely, issuing a fairly hair-raising threat about his country taking any interference in the operations of Japanese 'special talent', as he put it, as an act of war. You could see from his expression that the CIA director had been entertaining some most likely highly deniable ideas about one of their little operations to enlist the unwilling cooperation of one or two of those girls. I have no doubt whatsoever it would have ended remarkably badly, for them at any rate, but I'm fairly sure the Japanese nipped that idea in the bud quite conclusively."

Williamson sighed. "They do rather have the attitude they can take what they want under the aegis of national security, regardless of where it is, don't they, sir?" Sir Alan nodded.

"I'm afraid so. I suspect that there are going to be problems as a result of that in years to come. Some of the things they've done over the last decade or so are going to bite them in the arse good and proper. I hope it doesn't suck us in as well. Mind you, we've done some damn silly things in the past like that, I suppose most countries have. They're just rather more enthusiastic about it and don't seem to learn from past mistakes."

Williamson looked at his watch. "Any moment now, I think." Looking back to the Minister, he added, "I suspect that if they tried anything, Yori would put a stop to it in the most final manner you could wish to, even if the Japanese authorities missed it. The CIA are sneaky, I'm pretty sure she's sneakier."

"Thanks," a familiar voice said, making them both jump and look around frantically. Yori faded into view, grinning, like a lethal version of the Cheshire Cat. Sir Alan looked wildly at her for a moment, then calmed down, beginning to laugh.

"Good god, woman, please don't do that. I nearly had a coronary," the Minister of Defence said, although he was smiling. Yori laughed. Seconds later the rest of her party appeared in the room.

"I'm sorry, Sir Alan, I couldn't resist the challenge. You have a very good security system here."

"Clearly not good enough," he responded. She snickered.

"None of them are. I know someone who could probably sell you something a lot better, though."

He looked hard at her. "Would it keep you out?" he asked suspiciously. She shook her head, still grinning. "Hmm. Thought not." Suddenly grinning again, he got up and walked around the desk, shaking her hand. "It's good to see you again. All of you." The rest of the girls greeted him, Tamiko kissing him on the cheek with a grin. He smiled at her. "You seem to have changed your look. Pity, I thought the other one quite fetching. Although I suppose somewhat impractical for cold weather."

She smiled, amused.

"Chou helped with that. I like these new clothes, they have a lot more style. The other outfit was a bit... extreme." He grinned. Looking at the unfamiliar new face of Azumi, he nodded to her.
"You, I don't recognise." Chou introduced them.

"This is Azumi, we're training her on behalf of a colleague. She's become a valuable addition to our group." The silver-haired girl seemed to almost smile at this, her slightly chilly and distant look warming up for a moment. He shook hands with her.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Azumi."

"Thank you, Sir Alan. Yori and the others have told me about you. It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

Going back behind his desk he sat, as Williamson greeted them all as well. When he'd retaken his seat, Yori and Agent Naito were also sitting in front of the desk, and the others were comfortably arrayed around the room and listening, he said, "So what are we going to do about Robert? From the point of view of the British Government he's completely ruined, although he doesn't know it yet." Yori sighed.

"We've got absolute proof that it was him, I'm afraid. Based on the information Mr Young gave us we had a colleague of ours, Ms Aoyama, look into his computer records from this end. Mr Williamson was able to give her some useful information as well. She didn't take long to find his records, correlate them with the ones from the Mystic Mart website, and prove the link. She's extremely good, if she says it's the case, it is. I'm very unhappy, I thought we had come to an agreement." The girl glowed visibly for a moment, an expression crossing her face that would have made Sir Alan, if he was of a religious disposition, issue a short prayer for mercy. She brought herself under control with some effort.

"So far, nearly three hundred and ninety people have died because of those damn portal bombs. The toll could have been much, much higher if it wasn't for Ms Aoyama's skill and a very large amount of luck. The thought that someone is actively researching the things, despite a pleasant warning to desist, irritates me considerably. Not to mention I'm in a very uncharitable mood after what just happened in Canada." The Minister nodded agreement.

"I feel the same way, believe me. So does the Prime Minister. She's extremely miffed. The action to deal with him has been left in my hands, as it needs to be kept discreet due to the Official Secrets act, which covers even the existence of the Ministry of Magic. To be honest while I was very tempted to round up those soldiers you met at that unpleasantness on Boxing Day and go for a little chat, I'm willing to allow you to deal with it." He grinned nastily. "I would ask that you refrain from causing a large crater, which I believe you refer to as the 'Duck Pond Option', but other than that, you have essentially free rein. I think it might stick better than if I do something myself." Yori had a predatory look on her face that boded ill for a certain soon to be ex-Minister of Magic, while somewhat hair-raising giggles came from Misaki and Tamiko. Azumi was radiating a sort of cold eagerness. Even Chou looked, just for a moment, like a wolf that had just seen a particularly well-fed piglet.

"Thank you. I'll try not to permanently damage him. Physically at least." Yori looked around as Azumi walked over, bent down, then said something in Japanese. Agent Naito winced.

Looking quizzically at them, Sir Alan asked, "May I enquire as to what you're thinking?" Yori smiled in a peculiar manner.

"Azumi suggested that it might be time for the Minister of Magic to meet Ms Aoyama." Looking slightly puzzled, Sir Alan glanced at Agent Naito.

"Is that bad?" The other man looked at him with worried eyes.
"I suspect it could be very bad. She's terrifying when she's in a **good** mood. I don't think she will be this time..."

"I will contact her," Azumi said calmly. "Aiko, would you be able to bring her here?" The brunette teleporter nodded, grinning. Pulling out a phone the silver haired girl dialled a number, then waited for a second or two. When it was answered she had a conversation in an odd sounding language that made the Defence Minister and Williamson stare at her, it sounded unlike anything they'd ever encountered before. Agent Naito recognised it as the demonic trade language Yori and Chou were fluent in. After a while she listened, then spoke again for a few seconds, before hanging up and disappearing the phone. She looked satisfied but somewhat regretful. "Ms Aoyama is more than happy to talk to this person and impress upon him how unwise his recent actions are. Unfortunately, she has responsibilities that cannot be abandoned, so she's asked me to cover for her while she's here. Please take notes, I'd like to learn what happens." She smiled coldly, walking over to Aiko. Both women disappeared with a flash of rainbow light. Shortly Aiko reappeared with another woman, who both British men studied with interest. She returned their gaze through dark sunglasses, then looked around the room, nodding to the Japanese people, before approaching Yori.

"Ms Yori. I believe you would like me to have a conversation. I can spare two hours in this case, my schedule is full but this matter is of considerable interest to me. I have prepared a dossier on Minister of Magic Robert Davenport and his recent activities." She produced a folder from nowhere, opening it and glancing through it with interest. "He has certainly broken a number of UK laws, including a recently passed ban on research on the portal devices, in addition to violating a treaty that is under the process of ratification on the weaponisation of interworld portals and the banning thereof. Admittedly it has not yet acquired the force of law, but as a member of the government that proposed it his actions seem ill-judged. I believe a discussion on the impropriety of certain actions would be beneficial." The folder vanished again. Sir Alan looked at her in astonishment, then down at his own folder on his desk. As far as he was aware only ten people in the world, including him, had read the contents of it. He looked up to see the woman in the smart suit and sunglasses staring at him, with something that was almost a smile on her lips. It disappeared almost immediately. Shivering slightly, he thought to himself, 'Robert, you poor bastard, you're for it now.'

"Who are you, Ms Aoyama? Who do you represent?" he asked curiously but with respect he couldn't avoid. She looked at him for a moment.

"That information is unavailable," she replied after a second or two, sounding almost regretful despite the lack of inflection in her voice. For some reason he felt it unwise to probe further, merely nodding. Turning to Yori, who was smiling slightly, the green-haired woman said in a voice devoid of emotion, "Shall we begin my introduction to Minister Davenport?"

Yori grinned in a way that made all the males in the room shudder. "Oh, yes. Let's go and have some fun." She bounced eagerly to her feet. "Would you like to come and watch, Sir Alan, Mr Williamson?" The two men looked at each other.

"Why not?" Sir Alan shrugged. "I have to admit to a certain curiosity."

Opening his eyes Robert Davenport stared into the darkness of his bedroom. Beside him his wife Janet snores faintly. 'What was that?' he wondered. There had been something just at the edge of consciousness, a sound or feeling. Probing carefully with his mage ability he could find nothing amiss. The house wards were intact, nothing had triggered them that he could detect, while he couldn't hear anything at all other than his wife. Yet, for some reason, he was sure something was
wrong. After a few minutes he slipped out of bed, trying not to wake Janet, retrieving his wand from the bedside table in the process.

Pulling on a robe and slippers he flicked the wand, putting a spell of silence on the door hinges, before opening it and going into the hall, closing the door behind him. Looking around he listened again. Nothing sounded out of place. The ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the downstairs hall was clearly audible, as was a faint hum from the refrigerator in the kitchen. The machine clicked and rattled into silence. Walking as quietly as he could down the hall to the window overlooking the front of the house, he peered out, then froze.

There was a purple glowing smiley face gently rotating in the middle of the lawn, one eye closed in a wink. He stared at it in shock, before reaching out with his senses. While he could see it, he couldn't sense anything at all. Looking around the garden he couldn't detect or see anything out of place, yet there it was. After a moment more, he opened the window and leaned out, peering both directions, before closing the window again. There was nothing out there. Once more he checked the wards. Once more he found they were completely intact. Turning, he headed back down the hall, quickly checking on his wife as he passed the bedroom, before going downstairs. Walking into the living room to get a better view out the window, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a cold voice from behind him spoke.

"Ah. Minister Davenport. I have been waiting for you." He whirled, his wand raised to fire a spell, only to yelp when a tiny ball of energy knocked it out of his hand with a pop. "Please, no violence. I deplore violence." He stared at the woman sitting in the chair next to the fireplace, shocked and slightly scared. She looked back at him through dark wraparound sunglasses. Inspecting her he saw a reasonably tall woman with green hair and pointed ears, in a very expensive fitted suit, some sort of high-tech watch on her wrist, plus those glasses, sitting in his chair calmly watching him, her hands neatly folded on her lap. He hadn't even seen her move when she'd disarmed him.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked, glaring at her.

"You may refer to me as Ms Aoyama. I am here to discuss your recent attempt to purchase the last of the portal generation weapons from Mr Geoffrey Young in Sydney." He went white. There was no way...

"How the hell do you know about that?" he blustered. She smiled very faintly. "I am aware of many things, Minister Davenport," she said, her emotionless voice sending chills down his back. Glancing down at where his wand had landed, wondering whether he could get it before she got him, he stared in shock. It was gone. "It would not have been a good idea, Minister Davenport. Best to remove the temptation."

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice shaking. There was something about her aura that terrified him. It most definitely wasn't human. She took her glasses off and studied him carefully, as if she wasn't sure how intelligent he was, before replacing them. The sight of her blue catlike eyes, almost glowing in the dim light from the corner lamp, which he hadn't noticed being turned on, remained with him.

"As I believe I stated moments ago, I am Ms Aoyama." She pulled a folder out of nowhere, making him stare. Opening it she leafed through it, then looked up at him standing there. She pointed to another chair. "Sit, please. This may take some time." Unsure of himself for the first time since that horrific Yori woman just after Christmas, he sat. He couldn't think of anything else to do. Without his wand he was more limited than he liked. Ms Aoyama continued to silently look through the papers, stopping occasionally to read something. "Most enlightening. It would appear that you have something of a distressing propensity towards stretching the boundaries of the spirit of
"Although your recent activities would appear to exceed those parameters as well. We are not pleased about that fact, Minister Davenport. Not pleased at all." Closing the folder she made it disappear again. "Please explain yourself."

"What do you mean?" he asked, wondering who 'we' was. She gazed at him for a moment, ice in her expression.

"Exactly what I stated. Explain your recent activities, with particular attention to your illegal attempts to acquire a device you were specifically instructed not to investigate." He looked blankly at her for a moment. "It would be in your best interests to comply immediately. My patience is not unlimited, Minister Davenport."

"Why should I explain anything to you? Who do you work for? Not the MoM, certainly. The MoD? MI5?"

"I am not affiliated to any of those organisations, Minister Davenport. Information on my employers is unavailable to you. Suffice it to say that we have the ability and the authority to deal with you as we see fit, due to your own actions." Glaring at her, he jumped to his feet, stomping over to the phone.

"I'm calling someone to come and deal with you. This has gone on long enough." Picking up the receiver he angrily stabbed several numbers, hearing the ringing at the other end for a moment. It stopped. "Hello?" he said.

"Hello, Minister Davenport. Your foolishness is merely wasting time. Please return to your seat so we may conclude our business." Yanking the phone away from his ear he stared at it as if it had bitten him, before turning slowly to look at the woman in the chair. She smiled coldly at him, the expression making him shudder. There was something completely inhuman about it, as if some creature in the form of a human was attempting something it had read about but never seen before. "Please return to your seat," she repeated, gesturing, her voice coming out of the phone at the same time as he heard it from her mouth. Shaking, he put the phone down, then did as requested.

"Who the fuck are you, and what?" he asked in a voice that squeaked every now and then.

"That information is unavailable." She studied him closely for a moment. "We are very displeased that you took it upon yourself to attempt the acquisition of the remaining portal device. As I stated, you were warned about that course of events. Your previous interaction with such a device came perilously close to being the causative factor in multiple fatalities. If not for the prompt action of Ms Yori and her associates this would certainly have happened. Yet you appear to be unable to learn from experience. Do you have some form of educational subnormality? Your records do not indicate this as a defect." She appeared politely curious. He flushed.

"I'm damn smart, thanks all the same," Robert growled. She raised an eyebrow.

"Circumstances would suggest otherwise. It is unimportant. The critical matter is that you have violated a well-meant and, one would think, knowing the parties involved, vehement prohibition on acquisition and study of an item you have no right, moral or legal, to become involved in. Your own government's laws state as much. The treaty your country is the instigator of and is in the process of negotiating with other authorities on this world would preclude such devices from existing in any form." He noted the use of the phrase 'this world' with a shock that jolted his heart. "As a ranking member of this very government, we find it somewhat egregious that you would be acting in such a manner even while such a treaty is in the process of negotiation. Perhaps we..."
should proceed with neutralising the threat you appear to wish to become. I believe you will not enjoy this should it become necessary."

"Is that a threat?" he asked, looking narrowly at her.

"I do not threaten, Minister Davenport. I state courses of action, decide upon appropriate ones, then act on them. Threats are for people who have no intention of carrying them out." She did the thing with her mouth again. "Do not conclude that this description include myself or my employers." He paled again. For some reason he believed her utterly.

"Your own government has decided that your position is now vacant. They are also very displeased with your actions. Subversion of the facilities of your MI5 institution breaches a number of regulations, as does the illegal use of the information you acquired from that subversion in attempting to blackmail Mr Young. Leaving aside the probable ramifications of what would have transpired should your attempts have succeeded, the acts themselves are sufficient for you to be convicted and incarcerated for a considerable time." He stared in horror. "More than adequate proof has been presented to the relevant authorities. I am in the process of deciding whether the fate your own people will bestow upon you is sufficient. Your actions have caused considerable concern to others outside the jurisdiction of your government. There are parties who feel that a more permanent solution is warranted."

Robert Davenport was very close to requiring new underwear. The completely expressionless manner in which this horrible female was calmly discussing what sounded very much like assassinating him sent chills down his back. There was something utterly convincing about it, he had no doubt whatsoever that she would order his termination with about as much emotion as ordering a coffee. He still had no idea who she represented, although several things she'd said suggested that no government on the planet would know about her. Although he was also sure that several would happily pay her to work for them.

"What do you mean, a more permanent solution?" She didn't answer, just turned her head to look at the portal that appeared without warning in the middle of the room. He gaped at it. It was real, there was no doubt whatsoever that she would order his termination with about as much emotion as ordering a coffee. He still had no idea who she represented, although several things she'd said suggested that no government on the planet would know about her. Although he was also sure that several would happily pay her to work for them.

"Where are we?" he asked, trembling.

"This world has no name, or life. It is used as a dumping ground and firing range. It would be little effort to leave you here. You would have all the time you wished to study portals." She paused for a moment, reconsidering. "Ah. I am unfamiliar with the period of time over which humans can exist with no nourishment. Enlighten me, please." Gaping at her for a moment, he waved his hands at the scenery.
"You can't leave me here!"

"You are incorrect. I can leave you here with great ease, Minister Davenport. I believe you meant to suggest that I should not leave you here." Once more that smile-emulation came and went. "A witticism. Most interesting. Please tell me, did it function as intended?" Looking at her in horrified amazement, Robert shook his head wordlessly. "Regrettably. Regardless, what are we to do with you? If you persist in the activities that have brought you to my attention, I will have little choice but to deal with you in a permanent manner. If this world is unsuitable, there are numerous others that could be utilised. The location from where the demons transported by the portal devices you are so enamoured of originate would seem a possibility." He nearly fainted, stumbling on the rocky ground. "You appear to find that alternative unwelcome."

"Please take me home. I promise I'll stop." He whimpered a little as she studied him for a few seconds.

"I will consider it. Please remain here." She stepped backwards through the portal, which promptly vanished with a pop. He gaped, then screamed in fright, running forwards to where it had been. He could see and feel no trace of it.

"NO!" he howled, spinning in place, his dressing gown flapping. The sound echoed around the rocks surrounding him, dying away into complete silence. He could hear nothing other than the wind humming in the stones, not even insects. Staring up at the sky he saw that the star was small and intense, low to the horizon yet still sufficient to make the area as bright as noon at home. Some stars were visible, as the sky was surprisingly dark, despite the brilliant sun. None of them looked anything like what he was familiar with. "Oh, god," the Minister of Magic moaned, looking around. He was already beginning to feel thirsty.

By the time the portal reappeared ten minutes later with a faint crackle he was ready to promise anything. Ms Aoyama stepped through it, inspecting him with cold interest. "I have come to a decision. I will permit you to return to your original location. In return you will agree to accept the fate to which your authorities sentence you. If you fail to comply with these terms I will reassess the situation, which is extremely unlikely to produce an outcome you would find palatable. Do you understand and agree to these terms?" Robert nodded frantically.

"Yes. I'll do it. I promise." The woman studied him closely for a moment.

"Gratifying. It would most definitely be in your best interests to adhere to this bargain. I am not in the habit of giving second chances. Is that understood?" He nodded again. "Excellent. In that case, please proceed through the portal. It will transport you to your point of origin. You will find a number of people there who wish to discuss this matter further." She stepped to the side. Trembling like a leaf, with his dressing gown slightly dripping down the front, he did as requested. Appearing in his living room he looked about, as behind him Ms Aoyama stepped through the portal, which immediately closed.

"Hello Robert. I'm afraid that this latest escapade is your last as a member of the government. The Prime Minister is very angry and would like to have a long talk." Sir Alan looked at him with thinly veiled contempt and anger. "You little fuckwit. You could have killed hundreds of people if you'd gotten your hands on that thing. You know it ended up in Canada? It went off, three hundred and fifteen people are dead as a result." Minister Davenport felt his heart jump again. "That could have happened here. If it wasn't for Yori and her people the results could have been even worse. Why the hell would you want to get one of those things? After Harrods I'd have thought anyone with a brain would have steered well clear."

Staggering to a chair, Robert sat down. He looked around at the people in his room. Yori and the
"I didn't know. I wanted to learn more about it."

"To what end?" The cold voice made him twitch. He glanced over his shoulder like a frightened deer. "The devices were specifically designed as a terror weapon. They have no other purpose. That specific combination of spells could only bring destruction in an indiscriminate manner. My understanding is that this was the entire rationale behind the design. I find it fascinating that you, a prominent mage of this world, would in any fashion believe that study and duplication of such a device could be considered advisable." Ms Aoyama walked over and looked down at him.

"Remember our bargain, Robert Davenport. I will be observing you. If I decide that you have violated the terms of our agreement I will have no choice but to deal with you in an alternative manner." He nodded, completely cowed. "Most excellent. In that case, I believe my business here is concluded." She looked at the weird watch she was wearing. "With twenty minutes to spare. That is gratifying indeed. Ms Aiko, if I could trouble you for transportation, I would be grateful."

Standing from the sofa where she had been quietly watching, the brunette approached the terrible woman. "Of course, Ms Aoyama. Always happy to help." She grinned at Robert, before both women vanished. He blinked furiously at the brilliant light, having forgotten to close his eyes.

"God. That is the most terrifying woman I've ever seen," Sir Alan muttered to Harry, who nodded vigorously. Yori looked slightly insulted. Chou nudged her, smiling gently.

"Yes, sir, she definitely is that." Tamiko giggled, looking at Yori. He approached ex-Minister Davenport. "If you'd like to have a shower, we should go, Mr Davenport. I have a car outside. I expect you will want to tell your wife." He followed the man out of the room. Sir Alan turned to the others.

"Thank you. That was educational, not to mention deeply unsettling." He looked at Yori, smiling. "Invisibility is very interesting." She laughed.

"Useful, too."

"I can imagine." Aiko reappeared with Azumi and sat down again. "It was nice to see you all again. I'm sorry the circumstances were what they were. You should all go and relax, by the sounds of it you've had a somewhat fraught few days." Chou smiled at him.

"We have indeed, Sir Alan. The events in Canada were very upsetting. But at least it's finally over." Yori sighed.

"I wish it had been less bloody." Chou put her arm around the other girl.

"We all do. Cheer up, we can go for a meal with Inspector Deveraux, then go home. It's finally finished. Just normal demons now." The black-haired young woman grinned as Misaki rolled her eyes, pulling an apple out of her sleeve and biting into it. Fumiko looked at her, so she offered her one as well.

Agent Naito stood, watching the girls for a moment, then walked over to the Defence Minister. "Would you like to receive a report on the Halleckton affair, Sir Alan? It might be of use during your treaty negotiations."

"If the Canadians are all right with it, certainly."
"I'll see that I copy you on everything I send them, then. I'm sure that Chief Superintendent Wilkinson will send you his reports as well. I will email him and ask. It's best, I think, if everyone involved has the same information. The PSIA will distribute it."

"Thank you, Agent."

"You're welcome." He yawned. "God, it's been a long day. This teleporting all over the world makes you lose track of time better than anything else I've ever come across." The Minister laughed.

"I can imagine. Very useful skill, though." Aiko looked pleased.

"Do you want to come to the Inspector's house, Agent?" she asked. "I could always take you home."

"I'd like to talk to Laura, but I may ask for an early conclusion, thank you, Aiko." She nodded with a smile.

"It's no trouble." The rest of them stood, then shook hands with Sir Alan.

"Take care of yourselves," he said, watching as they grouped together. Chou smiled at him calmly.

"You as well. Give our best to Agent Williamson."

"I will." He raised his hand, closing his eyes as the flash came, then went to find Harry and the disgraced former Minister of Magic.

Laura looked up as the doorbell rang. "Hey, Evan, you want to get that?" The other RCMP officer smiled, getting up from the kitchen table and heading for the door. Shortly he came back with a considerable number of people. They all looked rather tired. "Hello, you lot. Did you get everything done you needed to do?" Chou nodded as Agent Naito yawned, glancing at him with amusement.

"We did. All the survivors are physically fine, although I'm afraid that a number of them will be having severe problems for a long time. We dealt with the problem in the UK as well. It went about as well as could be expected. The demon in the mine in Halleckton was easy, we opened a portal in the shaft and pushed it through." Deveraux looked puzzled. "We were tired of all the death."

"I see."

Yori pulled up a stool to the centre counter in the large kitchen, slumping on it with her elbows on the surface and her head in her hands. "I'm just glad it's finally over. This has been a bit of a nightmare. Close to four hundred deaths because of some fucking cult that didn't like the way the world was going. It's sickening."

"Very true. But, all things considered, there are a large number of people who have a lot to thank you all for. You didn't have to get involved after all." Chou smiled gently.

"Yes we did. We had no choice." The older woman studied her for a moment.

"I think I understand. Same thing that made me become a cop."

"Quite likely." The blonde watched as Laura began chopping carrots again. "Would you like some
"Thank you. Oh, by the way, Chief Superintendent Wilkinson couldn't make it. He sent his regrets and thanks once more for the help." She moved over slightly as the young woman picked up a knife and a bunch of celery, smiling at her.

"That was nice of him. He seems like a good man." Chou glanced around. "You have a very nice house," she commented.

"It was my mother's. She left it to me when she died two years ago. We grew up in it. My two brothers moved away years ago, one to Germany, one to Australia. Perth. I haven't seen either one of them for about a year." She looked over at the others who were sitting or leaning around the room. "Look around if you like." One or two wandered off to inspect the place. Misaki acquired a carrot and began eating it, while Aiko watched with amusement. Yori snickered. "Anyone want coffee?" Laura asked.

"God, yes, please," Agent Naito said from the kitchen table. "My eyes are going to clamp shut for good if I don't get some caffeine." The others laughed. Evan was watching quietly, listening to them with interest.

"I'll do it," Azumi said, walking over to the elaborate coffee machine on the end of the counter. She began filling it with fresh coffee beans after a quick inspection of the machine. Laura watched for a moment until she was sure the girl had worked out how the machine worked, then went back to her carrots. They talked for a while, Chou and Laura preparing the ingredients, until the coffee was ready. Pouring a cup, Azumi took it over to the PSIA man who was nearly asleep. "Here you are, Agent. It should be good and strong."

"Thanks, Azumi," he mumbled, taking a sip. He nodded. "Very nice." Over the next few minutes the silver-haired girl made coffee for everyone, then sat with her own cup, drinking it appreciatively. After two more cups Naito was fairly awake. By the time the two chickens were in the oven, he no longer felt in danger of falling asleep if he closed his eyes for a second.

Laura looked satisfied. "That will take about an hour and a half, or perhaps two. Let's go into the living room." Following her, holding fresh cups of coffee, they all found somewhere to sit. "So, tell me about all the other things that happened. Richard told me some of the trip to LA, but he only hinted at some of it. What was all that about a movie?" Chou laughed while Yori groaned.

"It was very funny." She explained what had happened, then went over the unexpected meeting in Australia. By the end of the story, Evan and Laura were both weak with laughter.

"You really do attract weird coincidences," Deveraux said with a grin.

"I know," Yori replied, frowning slightly. "It can be a damn nuisance."

They swapped stories until the food was ready, then Yori and Chou helped distribute it, while the others set the table in the dining room. Laura had dug the extra leaves for it out of the basement earlier, making it barely big enough for ten people. Sitting down she looked around, smiling. "There haven't been this many people around this table since I was a child," she said, pleased. "It's kind of nice." Indicating the meal, she added, "Dig in. I hope you like it."

"It looks very nice," Tamiko said, trying a forkful of the roast chicken. Misaki was already eating, looking please, as was Yori. "It's wonderful," she added after the first mouthful.

"Thanks. It's my mother's recipe."
They ate until everything was gone, talking about lighter things than the recent events. Evan chatted to Fumiko and Tamiko for a while, very interested in some of their adventures. Afterwards, she brought several ice cream cartons out, making the eyes of several of the young women light up with glee. "I thought that would please you," she said with amusement. Chou giggled.

"Yori and Misaki, at least, would be your friends for life if you fill them with coffee and ice cream." Both girls looked at her and nodded, grinning. Soon they all had ice cream. Eating slowly, savouring it, the room was quiet except for the clinking of spoons. "This is very good ice cream," Chou said, finishing her bowl.

"I know. It's made by this Italian family I know. They've been making ice cream for about two hundred years, they're pretty damn good at it." Laura finished hers, then looked at the tubs on the table. "Just enough for about two more bowlfuls. Who wants it?" She looked around, not even slightly surprised to see everyone else looking at Yori and Misaki, who laughed. "I expected that, to be honest. Pass your bowls."

After the meal, Chou and Misaki cleared the table quickly and efficiently, filling the dishwasher and starting it, while Yori and Azumi washed the larger dishes by hand then dried them. The kitchen and dining room were sparkling clean in remarkably short order. "Thanks. That's always the hard part," Laura said, coming into the kitchen and looking around approvingly.

"No problem," Yori said with a grin. She yawned. "Wow. I haven't been this tired for a while."

"Poor old Masao is asleep in the living room," Deveraux said, laughing slightly. "Aiko looks like she's on the verge of going as well."

"I'm not surprised. She's done a hell of a lot of teleporting recently." Yori yawned again. "I need some more coffee." They made more, taking cups into the other room and distributing them. She had to prod Aiko awake. Agent Naito was past the point of prodding being useful. Looking at him with amusement, Yori commented, "I think I'll probably have to carry him when we go."

"What's going to happen with that mage, Václav Sklár?" Laura asked curiously. "I mean, where did you take him?" Yori studied her over her coffee for a moment, then glanced at Chou. Looking back to the inspector, she shrugged.

"There are a lot of worlds that are based on magic rather than technology. They tend to know about imprisoning mages. We know people who owe us a lot of favours. After thinking it over, we arranged with one of them to hold him for us." Deveraux looked somewhat worried. Correctly divining her problem, Yori smiled. "Don't worry. They may be demons, but they're also very good, humane people. He'll be well treated, probably better than he would be in a prison here. They've agreed to impose the sentence that your courts hand down. We've told them about the portal devices, they're as upset about it as we are, possibly more so. Offers were made to deal with Mr Murray, in fact." She got a somewhat feral expression. "I was tempted. But I think your own people deserve first crack at him."

"There are going to be a lot of people who want his blood," Laura said quietly. "He's responsible for more death and destruction than any one man in our history as far as I know."

"How are you going to explain it?" Chou asked curiously. "Magic seems like a difficult thing to get across to the general population, even if true." The older woman sighed.

"I know. I have no idea how the government will spin it. I doubt very strongly they'll tell the truth, but it will probably be something vaguely plausible. A bit like London, I guess. Whether anyone but us will know the truth any time soon I don't know either." She sighed again, more deeply. "I
suppose it doesn't really matter in a sense. He'll get prosecuted, most likely convicted, then quietly buried in a prison more or less forever."

"Good." Yori looked upset. "He richly deserves it. Don't worry, he'll plead guilty. We had a talk about that."

"So I heard." The black-haired girl looked momentarily slightly amused at the dry words, then went back to looking depressed.

"I wish it hadn't come to this," she muttered. "If we'd spotted those terrorists a few months earlier, we might have averted this all."

"There was nothing we could do, which you know full well," Chou said gently. "By the time we were brought in it was too late. Recriminations and second thoughts are pointless. We can't do anything useful about the past."

"She's right, Yori," Laura said. "I know how hard you've worked over the last few months. All of you," she added, looking around at the girls listening to the conversation. "No one could possibly have anything to complain about over your efforts. You've undoubtedly saved probably thousands of lives just with these six devices. If you include stopping the cult in the first place it could be millions. I don't know anyone who's done more, individually or collectively, to help people than you seven. Be proud of that, don't dwell on what you couldn't do anything about." They looked at each other, nodding slightly.

"Thank you, Laura," Yori said softly. "That helps." They were silent for a while. Eventually she looked around. "We're going to have to go. It's been nice seeing you again and talking. Let us know how things go, and if you need anything more from us, about this or anything else, OK?"

"I will do." Their host rose, as did the girls. Yori looked at Naito, smiling slightly. She picked him up easily.

"Wow, he's completely out. Better get him home."

"What time is it in Tokyo?" Laura asked curiously.

"About two in the morning. He's got a few hours to sleep, he should be fine."

They grouped together, each young woman shaking hands with both Laura and Evan. Chou hugged her. "Take care, Inspector. Until next time."

"You too, Chou. Say bye to Masao when he wakes up."

"I will." They vanished.

Laura sighed again, then looked at her fellow officer. "Come on, Evan, I guess we'd better get to the office." Shortly they were in their cars heading back to work.

Václav looked up as the demon entered his cell, putting down his book. "You have a visitor, Mr Sklár. Yori would like to talk to you again."

"Thanks." He watched as the demon left, admitting the black-haired girl. She looked around curiously.

"How are they treating you?" she asked, sitting on the single chair he had. He shrugged.
"Better than I probably deserve. Well, I guess. How are you?"

"Not bad. Still tired, it was a long few days, but glad it's all over. I just wanted to get the details on what exactly you did. It might be useful if anything like this happens again." He nodded, then began speaking, while she listened carefully. It was a long story.
When they arrived back in the apartment, everyone stared at each other for a moment, before Ranma, Kasumi, and Nabiki dropped the illusions. They all sat in various places and continued looking at each other wordlessly. Tamiko finally broke the silence.

"That was horrible."

Jumping to her feet Nabiki sprinted for the nearest bathroom, causing everyone to stare. The sounds of vomiting came to them. Kasumi exchanged glances with her husband. "I'll go," she said quietly as he made a move to get up. Nodding, he subsided. They watched her go after her sister.

"I know what she feels like," Misaki said, sighing. "I did the same thing after my first fight, and it was nothing anywhere near as bad as that. She did amazingly well. We've dropped her in the deep end, beyond anything I could have expected."

"Unfortunately true." Ranma was still looking towards where both Tendo women were. Voices could be heard, followed by more vomiting. He looked depressed. "If I'd had any idea what it was going to be like I wouldn't have let her come, but by the time we found out, it was too late. Poor Nabs."

"Don't call her Nabs," Fumiko said, the weak joke making them all smile for a moment. She stood, glancing at her sister. "We should go. You three need some privacy. See you in the morning." The others got up as well, smiling at their friend, then slowly and tiredly leaving the apartment, Aiko too worn out even to teleport. The front door closed softly behind them. After a long moment Ranma rose and went into the bathroom. Nabiki was still kneeling on the floor beside the toilet, Kasumi with her arm around her shoulders, rubbing her back with the other hand. She looked up at her husband as he came in.

"How is she?" he asked over the comm, not wanting to disturb the middle sister.

"Not happy. It hit her all at once. You remember what I was like after that rapist... Like that, but a lot worse." She smiled unhappily. Returning her attention to her sister she murmured to her. Eventually Nabiki looked up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, tears in her eyes. Ranma smiled gently at her. Wetting a wash-cloth in the sink he handed it to her. She looked at it, then took it, cleaning her face, then allowed Kasumi to gently help her to her feet. Nabiki washed her hands, rinsed her mouth out a few times, spat, and straightened up with a deep breath.

"It's OK," Ranma said soothingly. "I'm not surprised you reacted like that. You were using the soul of ice the entire time we were in Halleckton and quite a lot of the time before that. When you turn it off the emotional rush can be overwhelming, never mind everything that happened. There's no shame in it. We're all proud of you, you did a very difficult and terrible job very professionally." She looked at him for a long moment then jumped forward and put her arms around him, holding him tightly, suddenly sobbing. Wrapping his own arms around her he held her, looking over her head at her sister who smiled sadly. As he picked her up and carried her into the living room he heard the toilet flush as Kasumi cleaned the bathroom.

When the eldest Tendo came out she found them sitting on the sofa, Nabiki still holding Ranma. He had his arm around her shoulders as she leaned against him, still crying but silently now. Watching them for a moment she smiled, then went and made three cups of tea. Sitting next to her husband he put his free arm around her, holding her close. They sat like that long enough for the tea to go cold.
"It was so horrible," Nabiki finally said, a catch in her voice. "All those people. So much blood, and death, and pain, and destruction. How could anything like that happen? Why didn't someone stop it?"

Ranma sighed. "We tried. Everyone tried. Some things just happen, and in the end, all you can do is clean up the mess afterwards. That was one of the worst things I've ever seen, but people in wars deal with things as bad if not worse all the time. So do people who clean up after events like aircraft crashes, earthquakes, fires, all sorts of thing. It's a sad fact that death is a part of life. Most people, luckily, never see it like that, but some do." He looked at her, meeting her eyes as she looked back. "Because of what we do, who and what we are, it's probably inevitable that sooner or later we'd get involved in something on that scale. I very much hope that was the only time but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't. We have the ability to deal with things that most people couldn't, at least without even more death and pain, which means that we will deal with those things. That's the type of people we all are. Including you. None of us can let something horrible happen without trying to help stop it."

He brushed some hair out of her eyes, smiling proudly at her. "You were magnificent. You've learned so fast, done so well, it sometimes surprises me, even though I've known all along you had it in you. This was definitely your baptism by fire, though. I'm more sorry than I can say that we got you involved in something so terrible so early in your learning process. I should have sent you home when I realised what had happened." Staring at him for a long moment, she finally shook her head.

"I wouldn't have gone."

"I know."

She was silent again. He leaned his head back against the sofa, Kasumi putting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes. Some minutes later, Nabiki stirred. "At least Ms Aoyama was fun." Ranma and Kasumi both laughed.

"You outdid yourself, sister," the eldest Tendo giggled. "Poor Minister Davenport."

"Ex-Minister, please," Ranma said, chuckling. "Sir Alan was very clear on that."

"He deserved it," Nabiki said quietly. "Anyone who wanted to get their hands on that thing deserved it. It was evil. Nothing but evil."

"I'd have to agree. I'm so glad that it's finally over. I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop for months. That was bad, very bad, but it could have been worse. Thank every god you can think of that it was so far out in the middle of nowhere. If it had been in a large city..." Ranma shuddered. Nabiki and Kasumi both held him tighter.

"We would understand if you decided that you didn't want to do it any more after this, sister," Kasumi said softly. "I know you've never been completely comfortable with your abilities." Nabiki raised her head a little, wiping a tear from her face.

"I haven't decided yet. It still hasn't sunk in, I think. Every time I close my eyes I can see all the blood, and I could swear I can still smell it." She went quiet for a moment. "The smell was the worst part. So much blood..." Shuddering, she held Ranma tighter, for comfort. The feeling of his strong body in her arms helped a little. For the first time she was envious of her sister.

She was still holding him when she fell asleep.
Kasumi raised her head as she heard her sister begin snoring slightly, twitching every now and then, intermittently muttering to herself. She could feel how disturbed her emotions still were even like this. Glancing at her husband, she reached over him with one hand and gently touched her sister's forehead. Brief golden light flared and Nabiki stilled. Ranma smiled.

"For the best, I think. I wish we could do something about the memories."

"So do I. Poor Nabiki. We should never have taken her. It was too soon."

"I know. I'll regret that for a long time. But she's one of the strongest people I know. She'll deal with it. It'll just take a while. We need to make sure we're there for her, that's all we can do. If worst comes to worst, I know a good therapist." Kasumi nodded with a small smile.

"Do you think the doctor has treated a magical girl for PTSD before?" Ranma laughed quietly.

"I have no idea. It would be an interesting case for her résumé, though."

Looking fondly at the middle sister, he glanced at his wife. "How about a fresh cup of tea? I'd get it but I seem to be trapped." Giggling, Kasumi prepared two cups, then came back with them and a large blanket. Arranging it over them all she resumed her position against her husband's left side, sipping her cup.

Blinking, Nabiki opened her eyes as sunlight hit them. It was just after eight AM. She was slightly disoriented, looking around for a moment she couldn't work out where she was. This wasn't her dormitory room or the room she had claimed as hers in her sisters apartment. Movement beside her made her look to her left, to see Ranma, eyes closed, leaning against Kasumi. Both of them were still asleep. She realised after a moment that she was still on the sofa in the living room, and to her slight embarrassment, still had her arms around her sister's husband. More memory came back, making her wince slightly.

#Are you feeling better this morning, Nabiki?# Jun asked out of nowhere. She sighed.

'In a way, yes. In another way, no.'

#Emotions are complex and difficult to emulate,# the SI said, sounding both amused and sympathetic. Despite it's words it was clearly up to the job. #Your performance was exemplary. Considering that you have only possessed these abilities for some months now, I find it unlikely that any of your compatriots would have any complaints about how you acted. You should not either.#

'Thanks, Jun. I'm kind of embarrassed about breaking down like that last night though.'

#I would suggest that such a response was inevitable. You are not a hardened warrior with years of experience, like your team-mates. Yet even they exhibited signs of stress as a result of the massacre in Halleckton. Such things are a normal physiological and psychological response to the situation you found yourself in. My database suggests that a common response to such events would be considerably more dramatic, most likely resulting in the inability to perform satisfactorily during the event itself, which would result in even more risk and potential deaths. You were able to put those responses off until such time as the situation was resolved. That is an unusual trait and one that you should be proud of.#

She considered the words for some time. It was right. Most people, confronted with death on such a scale and in such a manner, would probably have fallen to pieces. Even the soldiers had been upset by what had happened and they'd been trained for things, perhaps not exactly like that, but similar, for years. 'Thank you,' she told it again. 'And thanks for all the help during... that.'
It is my purpose, the SI said, sounding satisfied. A purpose I enjoy filling, as much as I understand that emotion. You are a fascinating owner. She giggled a little, then yawned.

'I'm less tired than I thought I would be. I was worried I'd have nightmares.'

Your sister took steps to ensure you would sleep deeply. I would judge that such steps were warranted. Your emotional state was considerably less stable than usual last night, the machine said. It sounded slightly worried. Are you likely to require psychological intervention? Nabiki smiled, even while she considered the idea.

'I don't think so. But I don't really know. I can handle the memories much better now, although I'll have to see what happens with time.'

It is my hope that you remain sane, Jun said. There was a note of mild amusement in it's artificial voice. She snickered out loud.

'Making jokes, now? You're learning. It's my hope I remain sane as well. One crazy sister in this family is enough.' She considered the idea, glancing at Kasumi, breathing gently on the other side of Ranma. 'Well, two, maybe.' A soft tap on the door made her look over her shoulder. Tamiko came in, grinning when she saw the three huddled under a blanket. Nabiki smiled back.

"Comfortable?" she commed.

"Yes, thanks," Nabiki replied, making the other woman snicker. She disappeared into the kitchen, coming back shortly with a cup of tea each. The middle sister untangled one arm enough, trying not to wake her brother-in-law or sister, to take hers, then sipped it. "Thank you."

"How are you now?" Tamiko asked, peering at her sympathetically. "You seemed very upset last night, which doesn't surprise me. I didn't sleep very well myself."

"I'm much better. Not ideal, it's going to take a long time to get over all that, but better."

"We all thought you did amazingly well, you know," her friend said. "Much better than I did my first time. When we finally did in that demon woman back when we got dropped into all this I was a wreck. Misaki slapped some sense into me and Fumiko, who was nearly as bad, then she and Aiko got us together and out of there very efficiently. But Fumiko told me than when they finally got home, Misaki fell to pieces. She was puking for an hour." The auburn-haired woman shrugged a little. "It hits everyone differently. What you went through on your first serious mission was worse than anything I've ever seen, yet you handled it better than I ever would have under the same circumstances. No one thinks any the less of you because you waited until we got home to have issues. Quite the opposite."

"I'm still embarrassed about it."

"Don't be. I'd be worried if you didn't have problems with the whole thing, to be honest. You'd have to be the emotionless robot you play so well to do that, and I know you aren't." She grinned at the middle Tendo, who raised an eyebrow and put on her coldest expression. Tamiko giggled.

"Except when you want to be." She sipped some tea, studying the others with amusement. "Joking aside, you did incredibly well and I'd be proud to have you at my side any time. All of us would. You're our sister in arms in a very real sense. But if you decide it's not for you, we'd be fine with that as well."

"I haven't decided yet. I have to admit, I don't want to have another Halleckton any time soon. Preferably ever." Nabiki shuddered. "Teasing muggers is a completely different sort of thing."
"I know. I never expected it to be that bad either. It caught everyone by surprise. Something like that was always a possibility, but we all thought we'd find the last device before anything happened. We got four out of six in time. I guess our luck just ran out. Like it did for all those poor people." With a shake of her head she finished her tea and put the cup down. "On the up side, you got your first demon!" She grinned. "It's always a shock when that happens. Those things are damn tough as well."

"I nearly didn't. There's no way I could have taken it on hand to hand, it was stronger than and nearly as fast as Akane, but a damn sight bigger. And much nastier. If it wasn't for the ki abilities and Ranma telling me how to deal with it, I'd have been screwed." She looked at her hand, forming a small ki ball then letting it dissipate. "I still can't believe I can do that."

"You sure picked it up incredibly fast. I'm kind of jealous. It took the rest of us a lot more work." Tamiko looked at her with raised eyebrows, then laughed quietly.

"I've listened to Ranma's explanations as to why it seemed to come so easily, but even so, it seems strange. But I guess, if anyone would know, it would be him. He invented half these techniques in the first place." She shrugged slightly. "I suppose, if I do keep up the magical girl thing, I'm going to have to learn all the martial arts stuff as well. There are times when energy balls aren't appropriate."

"Can't think of one," Tamiko replied, giggling, having considered it. Nabiki smiled.

"I'm damn sure becoming even as good as you guys, never mind Kasumi, would take years. I might never do it."

"Don't underestimate yourself. You learn extremely fast, from what I've seen, and I think Kasumi and Ranma are right, you have a gift for all this. Yes, it would be a lot of work, but I'm sure you'd be very good at it in the end. Not as good as Ranma, but no-one is. Except possibly Kasumi. I'm in awe of her, the amount she's learned in about five years is unbelievable."

"I know. She looks just like the sister I lost all those years ago, but she's changed a huge amount. I suppose everyone does, but in her case it was a shock. It still is sometimes." Nabiki looked at her sleeping elder sister. "Every day I'm so glad I finally managed to reconnect. It's changed my life out of all recognition, mostly for the better. I just hope that one day we can bring her and Ranma back to Nerima."

"Do you think that's likely to happen?" Her friend looked curious.

"I really don't know. It depends on so many things. The biggest one was always Akane. She's improved so much I can hardly believe it. But even with that, there are other problems. Ukyo took herself off the list, which is good. Last time I talked to her I got the strong impression it was likely that very soon there would be wedding invitations going out. Shampoo, though, could be an issue. The Kunos, I don't know. I haven't seen Kodachi for a couple of months, the last time I did she was almost sane, although whether that was just a good act I really couldn't say. She's always had the ability to come across as fairly normal for a short period of time. Tatewaki, on the other hand, really does seem to slowly be growing less nuts. I hope it continues. In some ways he's a decent guy, under all the crazy. Even though he's been responsible for doing some horrible things to Akane." Nabiki sighed.

"The situation there is still delicate, I think is what I'm trying to say. Nodoka has changed the most, she's basically normal, most of the time. I think she really has come to realise at least some of what she was partially responsible for and regrets it enormously. My father and Ranma's are still completely nuts, but in a much less self-destructive manner generally." She grinned for a moment.
"I mean, I never expected that they'd not only take up teaching again, but actually be **good** at it. That was a shock. But, throw Ranma and Kasumi back into all that, I have no idea what might happen. It might work perfectly, it might blow up in our faces. Anyway, it's not my decision. Hopefully, one day, though, it will work out for the best."

"How is Akane doing these days? You haven't said much about her for the last few weeks." Tamiko smiled a little. "*Is she any closer to resolving her sexual issues?*

Nabiki looked pensive. "I'm not sure, to be honest. She's certainly not talking nearly as much about perverts any more, she's even capable of being nice to random men she meets. That's a welcome improvement. I still think my theory about her having a crush on Sayuri holds some water. Whenever Sayuri breaks up with Hiroshi, which happens with depressing regularity, Akane cheers up noticeably although I really don't think it's anything conscious. When she gets back together with him, Akane has a couple of days of being down in the dumps. Even Shampoo remarked on it last time. The therapy is certainly making slow but sure progress on the anger issues, when she gets set off things are much better than they were even only a month ago, but as to that other issue...? I don't know."

"Considering how much time she's spending with Shampoo, maybe they'll hook up," her friend commented, looking amused. "*The Amazons are cool about that, aren't they?*" Nabiki stared at her, then shook her head, laughing to herself.

"Oh, wouldn't that just be the most ironic thing ever?" she asked, highly amused. "*Two of Ranma's ex-fiancées getting together. I have to admit it would neatly solve some problems but I don't think it's likely.*"

Kasumi stirred, mumbling something, then hugged Ranma tighter. He smiled in his sleep, making Nabiki and Tamiko giggle as they watched. "*That's cute,*" the auburn-haired woman said with a grin. "*She's a very lucky woman.*"

"Yes, she is." Nabiki was watching them, smiling. Tamiko glanced at her.

"*Regrets?*" She giggled at Nabiki's quizzical expression. "*I mean, Ranma told us that when you first met, he was given the choice of all three of you. He ended up with Akane more by default than anything else.*" The middle sister laughed.

"Yep. It was like Kasumi and I took one quick step backwards, leaving her in the volunteer position. I wish we hadn't done that, there were much better ways to handle it. I've often wondered what would have happened if we'd just talked it out properly. We were young and self-absorbed." She sighed a little. "*No, no regrets. He ended up with the right sister. I love him like my own brother, more, perhaps, but not romantically. Perhaps if I'd made the right moves the first day, things would have been different, but I think it worked out for the best. I'm just sorry it caused so much pain and chaos in the process.*"

"*All in the past. Right, fancy some breakfast?*" Tamiko hopped to her feet.

"*I think so. I'm pretty empty at the moment.*" Nabiki grimaced. "*Inspector Deveraux' meal was wonderful, and it all ended up in the toilet.*"

"*I won't tell her,*" the other woman giggled. She looked around as the other three entered. Putting her finger to her lips she pointed to Ranma and Kasumi. They all grinned, then began helping lay the table, cook the food, and put it out. When it was done, Tamiko waved a bowl of miso soup under Ranma's nose, which flared it's nostrils, making them all laugh. He opened one eye, then the other one, looking around at the grinning young woman, before glancing down at Kasumi's head.
tucked into his neck.

"Morning," he said out loud.

"Good morning," everyone chorused, then began laughing. Kasumi woke with a start, looking around, then smiled.

"What a wonderful surprise," she said happily, straightening up and running her hands through her hair.

"We didn't want to wake you, you both looked so relaxed there," Tamiko said, grinning. Nabiki finally moved away from Ranma, casting him a look of gratitude.

"Thank you," she said privately to him.

"Any time, Nabiki. Any time." He smiled at her, before getting up and stretching. "How is everyone?"

They exchanged glances. "I'm still kind of tired, that much teleporting is exhausting, but other than that not too bad." Aiko yawned. "I need to practice more, I think."

"You did very well. All of you did. I'm very pleased with our performance over the last few days. I wish it hadn't ended the way it did, but I think everyone did incredibly well." He looked around at them all. "I couldn't ask for better friends and family."

"We all feel the same way, I think," Fumiko said after a moment, glancing at her sister, who nodded, pulling out a cereal bar. The other girl snatched it out of her hand. "We're just about to have breakfast, you pig!" she said, incensed. Misaki grinned, producing another one. And another, when that one also got confiscated.

"I can keep this up all day," she said with amusement. Everyone stared, then collapsed laughing. Sighing, Fumiko unwrapped one of the bars and nibbled on it, which made them laugh harder.

"I'm going to have to get back to the university," Nabiki said, paddling her hands in the water. She looked around. "But not right now. This was a good idea." They were floating in the middle of a lagoon some four hundred metres across, floored with white coral sand, surrounded by a reef on which waves were breaking with a distant roar. Two thirds of the more or less circular island, less than a kilometre across, was a couple of metres above the water and supported a narrow band of trees and plants some hundred metres deep from what the middle sister could make out. A semi-circular beach lined one side of the lagoon. The rest of it, aside from a narrow gap to the ocean, was unforgiving coral, sharp and dangerous looking. "Where are we, again?"

"I don't think it has a name," Aiko said lazily, floating near her staring up at the sky with a smile on her face. "I found the coordinates in a book about three years ago. It's just one of dozens of little islands in the Pacific that no one lives on. There's no fresh water, not really any food except for a few coconuts and some fish, no reason to live here. You'd have a hell of a time landing a boat on it as well, the current outside is strong and the waves are vicious. The nearest inhabited place is at least a thousand kilometres away. But it's beautiful. Except during a hurricane the lagoon is more or less flat calm, it's always warm, and nothing dangerous seems to live here. Dangerous to us, anyway. Some of the fish and snails are very toxic."

"It is a very attractive place," Kasumi said, swimming slowly past. "Why have you never mentioned it before?"
"It was kind of my personal place to get away, you know? Somewhere I could go to decompress. But after Halleckton, I think we all deserve it. So, welcome to Aiko Island." Everyone laughed. She thrust her fist in the air. "I claim this island in the name of Magical Girls everywhere!" the brunette shouted, then giggled. Rolling over, she flicked her tail and vanished underwater, shooting off across the sand a few metres down. Kasumi smiled, then followed.

"We're all nuts," Nabiki said, looking at Ranma, who was floating next to her grinning. The red-headed mermaid nodded happily.

"Yep. Fun, isn't it?"

"At times." They looked as Misaki leaped a couple of metres out of the water with a whoop, flipping over and firing a small ki ball at her sister who was chasing her, before dropping neatly into the water without more than a ripple. Fumiko yelped in indignation, tearing off across the lagoon in pursuit. Nabiki shook her head.

"Completely nuts." She and Ranma exchanged glances, grinned, then joined what became a game of magical girl mermaid ki ball tag. The only thing missing was darkness.

Later they sat on the beach watching the sun near the horizon. It had been a fun day. When they'd become hungry, Aiko and Fumiko had gotten dressed, disappeared, then come back with pizza from New York, sushi from Brisbane, ramen noodles from a place she knew in Hong Kong, and various other items. A few bottles of the Australian wine made an appearance as well. They'd enjoyed the food, making sure to keep all the garbage together. "I don't want my island getting dirty," Aiko said, chasing down an errant pizza box. It eluded her in the wind, forcing her to shoot it down with a ki ball, giggling. "Got you."

Misaki had stayed a mermaid, propping herself up in the shallows and happily eating, next to Tamiko and Ranma who had done the same. Nabiki went for a walk, exploring the island. On her return she watched as her friends played in the water, smiling. Feeling her sister next to her she glanced at her, seeing she was watching as well. "I think we deserved a small holiday," Kasumi said, looking back at her.

"Very much." They both laughed as Ranma pulled Fumiko under, several bright flashes coming from underwater along with small spouts of foam, before the two girls reappeared, giggling furiously. With a glance at each other they both dived in again. By the time the sun was beginning to set they were all pleasantly relaxed. Nabiki had downed close to an entire bottle of wine, cuddling the dregs as she lay on the beach still wearing her mer-Nabiki form. She had a smile on her face.

Misaki had gathered all the dead wood and leaves she could find, lighting a small fire with a tiny ki shot and slowly feeding the fuel into it as the sun set. Darkness came very suddenly as was it's wont in the tropics. A little while later they noticed that the ripples in the lagoon were glowing with phosphorescence. The sight was beautiful, the cold greenish-blue light bright enough to see the bottom at times. Idly tossing shells into the water, watching as a burst of light came from each splash, Fumiko smiled. "Thanks for letting us know about your secret island, Aiko. It's been a wonderful way to wind down."

"You're welcome," the petite brunette said, lying on her back and watching the stars. "It was worth giving up the secret. I can always find another one if I need to be alone." They grinned at each other. A faint snore came from Nabiki, making them all look, then giggle.

"She needed this more than anyone," Kasumi said quietly. "Thank you." Reaching out she gently...
touched her sister, making sure she'd have another decent night's sleep. An hour later they decided
go back. Ranma gently picked up his sister-in-law, still in merform, grinning at her in the dark.

"Should we change her back?" Kasumi watched with a smile. The red-head shook her head,
laughing.

"Let's leave it as a surprise." Her wife rolled her eyes but giggled. Soon the beach was empty again,
the small fire guttering out on the sand.

Nabiki woke, staring at the familiar ceiling of her room in the apartment. Rolling her head to the
side she looked out the window, the blind on which was up a few inches leaving a gap at the
bottom, to see it was a nice day. She smiled. Remembering the impromptu island getaway she was
grateful for her friends allowing her to try to forget the horrors she'd encountered only two days
ago. It had helped a lot. While it was still there at the back of her mind, it no longer had the soul-
searing immediacy it had possessed on their return afterwards.

"A bottle of wine probably helped as well," she said to herself, grinning. Amazingly, her head
wasn't aching. She suspected she had Kasumi to thank for that. That said, paradoxically she was
both very thirsty and had a distinctly overfull bladder. Stretching, she flipped the covers off the
bed, swung her legs over the side, leaped to her feet, then fell flat on her face with a cry of surprise.

"Gahh!" she yelped on the way down, bouncing on the carpet. Rolling over she looked at her tail,
muttering in irritation. "That bastard. I'll bet this was Ranma's idea," she mumbled, dismissing the
illusion and climbing to her restored feet. The laughter from the living room strongly supported this
theory.

"You OK, Nabs?" the martial artist called, mirth in his voice.

"How long have you been waiting for that, you sod?" she called back, getting dressed.

"Over an hour. It was worth it." He appeared in the door, grinning, with Kasumi behind him.
Holding out a mug of coffee he laughed again as she glared at him. A few seconds later, she
giggled.

"OK. You got me. It was pretty funny, I guess." Her bladder reminded her she had more important
things to take care of. "Um. Back in a minute." Rapidly heading to the nearest bathroom she took
care of business, washing up and brushing her teeth at the same time. Both Ranma and Kasumi
were sitting on the sofa on her return. Dropping into her own seat she picked her mug off the table
and took a long swallow from it.

"Better?"

"Much. Yesterday helped a lot."

"I thought it would. We all needed a break after that, you most of all." He smiled at her as Kasumi
got up to prepare breakfast, putting her hand on her sister's shoulder as she passed. "Back to your
classes, I guess?"

"I have to. I've missed a couple of days of lectures strictly speaking I shouldn't have. It's not a
problem, I can get the notes from other students, but I've been letting my standards slip a little
recently. Too many things to do. I don't want to let three years work go to waste, though." She
smiled a little ruefully. "I can't work out whether I'll be bored with less excitement, or relieved
about less excitement."
"Probably both. Kas and I have a lot of work to do as well. Now that those damn portal bombs are history we have to get back to school. It's something of a handful juggling all the different things but luckily we have understanding lecturers. Even if they don't know what we do for fun." Nabiki grimaced.

"Fun!?"

"Well, most of the time it is." He grinned. "I'll admit that recent events came very low on the fun scale."

"Right off the fucking bottom of it, in my view." They sat in silence for a while, finishing their coffee.

"Had any thoughts on whether you want to continue with all this?" he asked after some time, looking at her. She shrugged.

"Not really. I've been trying to avoid thinking about some things, it's like picking at a scab. I'm not going to make any conscious decision while it's so fresh, I suspect whatever I decide would be the wrong thing. I'm just going to go back to work, avoid dwelling on it for a while, then see what happens." She snorted laughter. "I know full well that even if I want to ignore the crazy, the crazy is very unlikely to ignore me, so probably in the end I'll get pulled back in. I just hope it isn't like that again for a very long time."

"You and me both. Once was enough." They shared an understanding look. "I will do my best to keep things that bad away from you, you know that, I hope?"

She nodded. "I do. You're a very good friend, Ranma Saotome, despite being as mad as a tree full of fish." Laughing, he nodded to her, before getting up to help his wife in the kitchen. They had breakfast twenty minutes later, the other girls coming in as had become habit over the months since they'd moved into the building. Aiko left soon after eating, saying she had to help her mother with something, leaving the rest behind.

"Back to school now, Nabiki?" Tamiko asked, sipping tea. The brunette nodded.

"Yes. I can't miss any more lectures. I'm going to get an earful from the Economics professor as it is. He's a sarcastic old goat. Good teacher, but kind of hard to deal with at times."

"How is your coursework going?" Fumiko asked curiously.

"Pretty well. I have two essays due in three days, which is a nuisance, I should have done them a week ago, but with Jun's help I can manage." She smiled. "Best word processor ever."

"I know. I can't get over how useful they are. I'm going to get an earful from the Economics professor as it is. He's a sarcastic old goat. Good teacher, but kind of hard to deal with at times."

"A lot of it is Jun itself. It has a habit of offering exactly the right solution at exactly the right time. They definitely learn. It seems much more like a person now than it did when I first got it." She laughed. "To the point I feel guilty calling it 'It'. But it's told me that's a perfectly logical name as it has no sex."

"Like me," Misaki said, looking slightly put out. Everyone stared at her, then began laughing. "Oh. Did I say that out loud?" she asked, appearing embarrassed. Her sister nodded, tears of mirth running down her face. "Whoops."
"Perhaps you should go clubbing again," Fumiko said through her laughter. "That worked the last time." Misaki got an expression of remembrance, smiling slightly.

"Maybe." Her sister kept giggling.

"What if it doesn't?" Aiko said, grinning.

Nabiki shared a glance with her. "Use a bigger club..."

It took them some time to stop laughing.

The other three girls left after an hour or so, Misaki, still looking slightly embarrassed, heading to the garage she worked at part time while the other two went off shopping. Sitting in the living room Ranma and Kasumi watched Nabiki as she stood at the window, looking out at the view. After a while she turned and leaned against the balcony doors, watching them back. "I probably won't be able to come back for a couple of weeks," she said. "I've just got too much work to do. Not to mention I want to go home and see Akane and the others, I haven't been back for a while."

They both nodded.

"That's fine. I would think things will be fairly quiet for a while. I hope they are. Even I have limitations to the amount of excitement I want. It would be nice to be able to relax for a few weeks." He looked curiously at her. "We're still planning on visiting Uthryyl and his family for a while later this summer. Maybe July. We can arrange it around your holidays. Do you still want to come?"

Giving it some consideration, she nodded. "Yes. Definitely. He and his family are very nice and I find the idea of different worlds fascinating. The only one I've been on was dead, then you blew the crap out of half of it." Ranma chuckled.

"Only one little mountain. No one will miss it."

She laughed. "I'd like to see a world with an entire alien civilisation on it. It sounds very interesting."

"You will like their home world, sister," Kasumi said. "It's very nice. Some of the plants are some very odd colours, the people are nice, and there's the g'rargh to look forward to." Nabiki nodded with a smile.

"That's a very good point." Moving back to the sofa she sat, making herself comfortable. "What's likely to happen about the fallout from the Halleckton affair?" the middle sister asked curiously. Ranma sighed a bit, glancing at his wife.

"I spoke to Agent Naito late last night. The Canadians would like to speak to the mage Václav Sklár sometime in the next week, to get his side of the story. They're building a case against Murray. I'll go and get him, then take him back when they're finished. He's promised to cooperate, so I think I can leave him with them."

"Do you believe him?" Kasumi asked. He nodded.

"Yes. I'm sorry he got dragged into all this. I've looked into him, he has a reputation as a decent man, generally honest and pleasant, not to mention responsible. He made a horrible mistake, people died as a result, but to his enormous credit, realises it all and is willing to take his punishment. After thinking about it I'm going to argue that this should be as light as it's possible to be under the circumstances. Unless you think that's wrong?" He looked between the two women. Both considered the matter.
"I believe that he didn't mean any of this to happen, and was horrified by it," Kasumi said in the end. "It doesn't mean he should get off with no punishment, but yes, I think he should be treated reasonably leniently." Nabiki nodded. "Whether the Canadians will agree is another matter."

"I know. They're going to be out for blood and I can't blame them. Murray is going to pay for it for the rest of his life. In that case it's richly deserved. He knew damn well what that thing was, he went after it anyway, he didn't tell the one person who could have prevented all this happening what was going on until it was too late, and to add to that he's guilty of corruption of an FBI official. I lay the deaths of three hundred and fifteen people squarely at his door. Perhaps not murder, but damn close." The martial artist sighed heavily, scowling. "At least I... persuaded... him to confess to everything else he's done. Some of his past crimes are enough to get him life in jail, never mind what the RCMP can charge him with for Halleckton. I'm sure they'll come up with something interesting."

He looked at them again. "The fallout will be considerable. The FBI has already arrested and charged their agent, and apparently two more who were implicated. They'll be giving evidence against Murray. All his assets have been frozen, I suspect a lot of it will be confiscated to pay for all the damage and deaths, with anything left going to his wife. That poor woman had no idea what a shit the man was. Just got swayed by the wealth, which is a bit stupid but not a crime."

"It sounds like this is going to be a very big case," Nabiki said. He nodded.

"Probably. From what Agent Naito said, the more they look into Murray and his business dealings, now they have his 'cooperation', the more things they find that are, well, disturbing, frankly. He seems to have been involved in a lot of financial crime, market rigging, insider trading, you name it. A lot of people ended up in a bad way as a result of what he did. It even extends as far as Japan, apparently, a couple of companies he owned via some sort of shell corporation have turned out to be of great interest to the authorities. My guess is that it will all go on for years and bring down a lot of people all over the world." Ranma shook his head. "A lot of it is over my head, I know something of business and money but not to that level of detail. It's more along your lines, Nabs."

She smiled.

"Don't call me Nabs." After a moment, she remembered when she'd gotten out of bed. "Twice." He snickered. "I might look into it at some point, but I don't really want to think about it too much for a while."

"Can't blame you." They were silent for a little while. Eventually he added, "Agent Naito said that the RCMP would probably like to take statements from all of us as well, when it was convenient. He's expecting an official request sometime in the next week, although Inspector Deveraux already told him off the record it was very likely. It would be voluntary, but I think it would be good for our relations with them. They're decent people." He glanced at the two young women, who both nodded.

"It's fine with me," Kasumi said.

"Me too. Although I'd like to get a few days of normal life in first." Nabiki sighed a little. "Will they want some sort of written report as well?"

"That's what we normally do. Kas and I wrote up the type of thing we generally give to the PSIA last night and emailed it to Agent Naito. He and his superiors are fine with it. None of the rest of you need to do anything about that unless you really want to. If you do I can show you what they need."

"I'd be interested in reading your reports, at some point. Not now, though."

"OK. Let me know when."

"I wonder what the cover story will end up being?" Kasumi mused. He shrugged.

"I'm not sure. It's going to be pretty damn difficult to disguise all that death and destruction in conventional terms. There are eighteen witnesses to some or all of it as well. It's anyone's guess as to whether they'd stay quiet."

"Not to mention a huge crater where a large house used to be," Nabiki added.

"True. It was pretty big," He laughed. "If we hadn't expanded and hardened the wards to contain it the entire town would have been blown away by the shockwave. Even so the ground shock threw debris all the way across the lake. I would think that most of the buildings that were standing probably aren't any more."

His wife smiled. "The soldiers seemed impressed," she said, "judging by all the swearing."

"I wonder if the lake has stopped boiling yet?" Nabiki asked with a smile.

"Probably. That was an awful lot of water. But I would imagine the whole lake is considerably warmer now. At least it didn't start a fire, which was something I was a little worried about. When Kas, Aiko, and I went back to deal with that last demon we checked very carefully to make sure nothing was burning." Looking at her as she rose, he asked, "Are you going now?"

"Yes. I need to get back." She bent down and hugged him, then her sister. "Take care, you two. Keep in touch. I'll keep practising the katas you showed me, but for the time being I don't have time for any more training. I think I need a little break from the magical girl stuff anyway."

"Understandable." He smiled up at her.

"I'm actually looking forward to a long train journey, as funny as that sounds. Something completely normal." Nabiki grinned, while they laughed. "I'll see you later." The pair watched as she headed down the hallway, closing the door behind her, before digging out their relevant medical books and beginning work for their respective courses, talking quietly together.
Miki hugged John as they listened to the TV in the common room of her dormitory block. The report from JNN was currently showing an aerial view, from a helicopter, of a visibly completely destroyed town, all the buildings flattened. It was on the shore of a small lake, one of hundreds in the area of Canada it was located in, west and north of Toronto. A perfectly circular gouge in the lake shore, just to the north of the town, was clearly shown. The lake had claimed about half of it, the entire water contents steaming slightly.

"A full explanation of the disaster in Halleckton, Ontario, is still not forthcoming, but it is growing more and more apparent that something extraordinary happened in this small, out of the way Canadian town over the last two weeks. Whatever it was came to a head six days ago in what is being tentatively described as some form of massive explosion. Witnesses as far away as Sudbury, sixty kilometres to the south, saw a brilliant purple flash on the horizon just as dawn was breaking. The sound was heard for more than five hundred kilometres, well into the United States as far as Detroit, as well as in Toronto, even as far as Ottawa. No cause of the explosion has been made public yet, although the location of the spectacular crater shown in these images from the air suggest it may have had something to do with Anthony Murray, a multi-millionaire businessman who is reported to have had a large house in the town, in the spot the crater now occupies."

"Mr Murray was arrested on the fourteenth, in an operation involving the Canadian Army, an operation which discovered the tragedy that had befallen the town. Reports so far released indicate that three hundred and fifteen confirmed deaths, the majority of the town, have been recorded, with an undisclosed number of survivors. Our sources indicate the population of the town at this time of year averages approximately three hundred people. If this was indeed the case, the number of survivors of this appalling event could be very low."

"Charges have not yet been levelled against Mr Murray, but sources at the RCMP tell us that a wide-ranging investigation into his current and past activities has been opened, already uncovering a number of serious financial irregularities amongst the group of companies he owns worldwide. The entirety of his assets has been frozen, a fortune currently estimated at some nine hundred and eighty million Canadian dollars, although the RCMP investigators believe that this may be understating the case considerably due to numerous tax reporting issues. Financial regulatory bodies in a number of other countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, and Australia have begun investigations based on the facts so far uncovered in Canada over the last few days."

"There has been one unconfirmed rumour that a number of the so-called Magical Girls, possibly the same ones who were of such aid to the British during the terrorist attack in December last year, were seen in the company of the Canadian Army unit sent in to Halleckton. No further information on this matter is currently available, although we will bring you up to date news as and when we receive it."

"Sara Murray, the wife of Anthony Murray, has filed for divorce."

"This is Kaori Saito, reporting from Toronto for the Japan News Network."

John picked up the remote and turned off the television, glancing at his girlfriend, who looked upset.

"Those poor people," she said, staring at the blank screen for a moment. "I wonder what happened?"
"No one seems to know, or if they are, they're not telling," he replied. "I suppose that in the middle of an active investigation they've probably got their hands full. It will come out sooner or later, it usually does. From what the news has been saying there are going to be a lot of people all over the world that go to jail as a result of all this." He looked up as Nabiki entered the room, smiling at her.

"Hello, Nabiki. I haven't seen you for a couple of days." She smiled back.

"I've been buried in the library writing reports. I missed a few days work and it's been a bit of a struggle to make it up, but I think I'm on top of it now." She moved over to the coffee machine, dropping some coins into it and poking buttons. Glancing at them, she asked, "Either of you want one?" They both shook their heads.

"No thanks, Nabiki. I had two cups earlier, any more and I'll start vibrating." Miki grinned at her neighbour, who chuckled, waiting for her cup to finish filling. Picking it out of the machine she stirred it, then tasted it, making a slight face.

"It needs cleaning," she mumbled, walking over and sitting in a chair next to them.

"It's needed cleaning for three weeks," John grumbled. "It's getting horrible." She shrugged.

"Still has caffeine in it, which is the main thing," the brunette said with a smile, then drank half the cup. "That said..." She put it on the table and looked at it sadly. He snickered a little. Miki giggled.

"Why did you miss so much work?" she asked her friend curiously. "You disappeared for several days, I was getting worried." Nabiki sighed.

"It was sort of a... family affair, I suppose. Some trouble that required a bit of travel." She seemed sad, thinking about something. Miki watched her with concern. Ever since the Tendo woman had come back from wherever she'd gone, she seemed somehow different. Slightly melancholy, as if she was trying to work something out, something that had affected her strongly. The girl hoped it wasn't some family member that was ill or anything like that. She had grown very fond of the somewhat acerbic and very intelligent woman who lived across the hall from her.

"You OK, Nabiki?" John enquired, having noticed much the same thing. She twitched, coming back from wherever it was she'd gone. The brunette looked at them for a moment then nodded, visibly attempting to be more cheerful.

"Yes. Thanks. Just have a lot on my mind at the moment." She picked up the cup, took a deep breath, then quickly drank the rest of it, making him laugh. "I paid for it, I'm damn well drinking the horrible stuff," she said with a grin.

"Better you than me."

"Would you like to go and get a pizza or something?" Miki asked. "We haven't done that for a while." Nabiki looked at her, then after a few seconds, nodded, smiling.

"Yes, I think I would. Why not. And some decent coffee." She gave the machine in the corner an evil look, while the other two laughed, getting up. They headed out of the building, aiming for the pizza place they used every now and then. It was running another two for one on large pizzas, which made them smile. This time, only four large ones were ordered. John looked at the stack on the table, grinning.

"Are you off your feed?" he asked jokingly. "There's barely enough here to keep you going." Nabiki laughed, picking up a slice.
"No need to be greedy. We can always order more, though." Chuckling, he started eating, as did his girlfriend.

"Have you heard about that horrible thing in Canada?" Miki asked. She watched a shadow cross her friend's face.

"Yes," Nabiki replied quietly. "It sounds very unpleasant."

"I wonder what happened?" the other woman said, eating her piece of pizza. "I've been watching the news, but no one seems to know very much. New reports are coming out all the time but it mostly seems to be speculation. And they're saying it's rumoured that magical girls from here were involved? That could be that Yori girl, and Chou as well. The ones you've met."

"It wouldn't surprise me," the middle Tendo said, sighing. "Sorry, just thinking about something. Hearing about that Canadian thing brought it back to me for some reason."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Miki asked, looked at Nabiki. The woman shook her head.

"I can't, I'm afraid. Thanks, though."

There was a pause, while they ate quietly. "The offer's there, if you change your mind," Miki said, smiling. The brunette responded with her own smile.

"Thanks, Miki. I wish I could. It's rather confidential, I'm afraid." She shook her head. "Enough of that. What have you two been up to recently?"

"We went bowling a couple of times, saw some movies, things like that. My coursework is coming along pretty well, I got very high marks on the last test. My dad is very pleased." Miki smiled.

"The statistics course is going well for me, as well," John added. "It's fairly easy, but very interesting." They discussed their work and university life for long enough that the melancholy start to the meal was forgotten, ending up laughing quite a lot, then on the spur of the moment deciding to see a movie. Overall, it was quite a good afternoon for everyone involved.

Akane back-flipped out of the way of Shampoo's kick, bouncing off the wall behind her and launching herself over the head of her opponent. The Amazon girl ducked the retaliatory strike, grinning, then rolled to the side, scissoring her legs around the youngest Tendos ankle and bringing her to the floor hard. She was sitting on her friend's back before the other girl had got her breath back. "That's two out of three, Akane. Want to try for three out of five?"

The slightly younger woman tried to get up, then subsided with a groan. "No," she said in a muffled manner, her face against the floor. "I want lunch first. Then I'll kick your ass." Shampoo laughed, hopping to her feet and helping her friend up.

"That's what you said yesterday. I seem to remember it didn't quite work out that way."

Akane grinned, rubbing a little blood from a small cut over her right eye, then looking at her fingertip. "It will sooner or later," she replied. They headed to the door, meeting Soun and Genma coming the other way. "Hi, dad. Uncle Genma. We're done for now."

"Thank you, Akane. Did you enjoy yourself?" The Tendo patriarch looked closely at his daughter. "Apparently so. You should get that cleaned up and bandaged, or it might scar." Akane smiled.

"It'll be fine. Cologne gave me some ointment she made that stops scarring and bleeding. It works
"OK." Just about to follow Genma inside the Dojo to get ready for the afternoon classes, he turned back. "Oh. Nabiki called. She'll be coming home a little later for the weekend. Would you like to go out for a meal? I thought it might be nice, we haven't done that together for a long time." He glanced at Shampoo. "You're invited too, Shampoo." The two girls looked at each other, then nodded, smiling.

"That sounds nice. Where?"

"Nabiki suggested a place near Tokyo Bay, some sort of Thai-French restaurant. Apparently she's been there a few times with those friends of hers, Rika and Maiko. It's a little expensive, but she says it's very good."


"That's what I said. She told me it was actually remarkably effective, but to steer clear of the red curry escargot." Both women looked somewhat revolted. Her father grinned. "It sounds like good advice. Tonight then. We'll leave about seven." He headed inside.

Walking across the courtyard, Akane smiled. "What?" Shampoo asked curiously.

"I was just thinking it's like old times, just for a minute. Going out as a family, dad teaching, practising the Art... If only Kasumi was here it would be perfect." She stopped, looking up at the sky, a tear in the corner of her eye. The Amazon woman watched her. After a few seconds, Akane wiped her eyes.

Putting her arm around her friend's shoulder, Shampoo smiled gently. "I have a feeling you'll meet again, Akane. One day. Just believe that."

"I hope so, Shampoo, I really hope so. I miss her." They headed into the house.

Cologne sat on the roof of the house across the road, watching her great-grandaughter and the youngest Tendo girl with a small smile on her wizened face. The two seemed to have become good friends, which rather surprised her, but pleased her as well. Shampoo needed someone her own age to be around, which had been awkward until recently. Back in the village she'd had a number of young Amazons as friends, but they were thousands of kilometres away now, except for Mousse, who was in some ways a damn nuisance. She actually quite liked the boy, he was undeniably a very good practitioner of his own Art, but he was also a massive pain at times because he still wouldn't wear his glasses consistently.

Idly wondering if she should pay for him to get Lasik or something, or perhaps see if that Yori girl could help, she watched the two young women disappear into the house before going back to what she had been doing, which was tracing, or at any rate, trying to trace, that weird energy she'd found a couple of weeks ago. A lot of the traces had led to, or perhaps from, the Tendo Dojo, so she'd come back here yet again trying to determine what it was, what it did, and who if anyone was responsible for it. So far she had answers to precisely none of the above. This annoyed her no end. The old woman was used to knowing things that other people didn't, the thought that someone else was in possession of knowledge she not only didn't have, but possibly wouldn't understand even if she did, was supremely irritating.

Executing her detection spell again, she studied the results with interest, then sighed. The energy traces were steadily fading away, now almost being undetectable, for the most part. Only the
freshest ones showed up at all and even they were faint. Looking around she wondered what to do about it. There was no evidence the strange energy was dangerous, or hostile at all, or for that matter even deliberate. It could still be some odd natural phenomenon she'd simply never encountered before. But for some reason she just didn't believe that. Something about it felt targeted. She couldn't explain it, but more years of experience than she cared to remember pointed to someone or something other than nature being behind it.

The thing she was trying not to think about was what her course of action would be if she did manage to figure it out. If it was the result of some artificial source, it was one that was far beyond her in ability and knowledge, which might not take kindly to her interference. She knew full well that while she could, just barely, detect this energy she didn't have a hope in hell of duplicating whatever was producing it, which frankly scared her when she allowed herself to ponder it. The Elder had never in her life encountered anything like it, which strongly suggested it was either something new, or something very alien. In either case, it worried her. Of the two, the latter possibility worried her more. Alien said demon, which could be bad. While most of the demon races she had encountered were around the same power level as a very talented human mage, some were so far beyond that as to make even Saffron nervous, in fact if what she'd read was correct a few of them could squish him like a bug. The thought of something like that playing around in Nerima was worrying.

Cologne shook her head. This was getting ahead of herself, she still had no real proof it even was an artificial creation, never mind whether it was an artificial creation of horrifically powerful, potentially hostile demons. Casting the spell again, she studied the results, then headed off across the roofs in the direction the strongest trace led, stopping occasionally to check again. As always, it abruptly stopped with no warning, after only a few hundred metres. "Damn, that's weird," she muttered, looking around. She was near the centre of Furinkan, on a roof overlooking the main shopping precinct. Sighing, she peered over the roof at the people walking below her, going about their business on this very nice day.

Spotting a familiar figure she smiled. Nabiki was obviously back home, clearly heading from the Metro station towards the Dojo. The middle sister was walking along looking around at the shops, a slight smile on her face, in no hurry. Watching her the Elder grinned. She had developed a considerable respect for the young woman over the years, the last few months pushing that towards something a lot like real friendship. The gifts at Christmas had been unexpected but welcome, showing that Nabiki felt the same way. 'That girl is going to be someone to watch out for in a few years.' She cackled softly to herself. 'Give her a century and she could be running the world.' She watched for a moment then went back to what she was doing. No matter how hard she looked, though, she couldn't find any sign of the energy trace past that point. Sighing, she made her way back towards the Dojo intending to start again.

"Hello, Elder," a voice called from below. She stopped and looked over the edge, to see Nabiki looking up at her with a smile, waving. She waved back, then hopped down.

"Hello, Nabiki. You look well. Are you back for the weekend?"

The brunette nodded. "Yes. I haven't been around much recently, too much work, you know the sort of thing. I needed a break. How are things with you?" She glanced up at the roof, then at the diminutive old woman. "You seemed to be looking for something." Cologne studied her with interest. Yes, very perceptive, as always. She debated what to tell the girl.

"I've been noticing something very weird around here for a couple of weeks," she finally admitted, deciding to be fairly truthful. There was no harm in it. "Some strange form of magic, I think. Very faint. Incredibly faint, actually. I had to pretty much invent an entire spell just to detect it. I've got
no idea what it is or where it came from." She smiled. "You called me as I was looking around trying to work out more about it."

"Is it dangerous?" Nabiki asked after a pause. Cologne smiled again. The girl looked concerned.

"I don't believe so. I'm just curious. It's quite possible that it's just some very odd natural occurrence I've never come across before. There's no indication it's hostile or could cause problems, I just want to find out what it is." This was more or less true although somewhat understating the interest she had in it. Nabiki nodded slowly.

"I see. Interesting." The girl grinned suddenly. "It's lucky we have a warrior mage of your abilities in Nerima, to keep us safe from rogue magic," she said slyly. Cologne laughed, her rusty voice amused.

"Yes, indeed. And I don't even charge for my services." It was Nabiki's turn to laugh.

"You should move to Minato and set yourself up as a magical girl... I'm told the area is awash with them. Although, that said, none quite as... mature... as you, Elder." She was snickering. Cologne was finding the banter very funny.

"As my dear great-granddaughter has told me, I don't have the legs for the costume," she replied, chuckling. Nabiki stared, then laughed quite hard.

"I wouldn't want to insult you by agreeing."

"You should have seen me two hundred and fifty years ago, my girl. It was a different story then." Cologne grinned at the much younger woman. "It's nice to see you again. I hope your education is coming along well."

"In all sorts of ways." The middle Tendo looked momentarily slightly sad, but shook herself and cheered up. "How is Shampoo? And Mousse?"

"They're doing well. The boy is still a pain, I wish he'd wear his glasses more, although I will admit some of the things he does as a result of not doing so can be very funny. Not for him, of course." The Elder smiled. "Shampoo is performing very satisfactorily in her training of your sister. Akane has genuinely surprised me with her dedication to the Art, I must confess I didn't think she had it in her. I'm glad to be proven wrong, though. She has the makings of a fine fighter." Nabiki looked pleased.

"I'm very glad about that. We were very worried about her for a long time." She sighed a little. "Considering all the things that have happened, it's nearly a miracle."

"I would agree with that. What those two young ladies did was nothing short of incredible." Cologne smiled again, remembering. "Truly remarkable. Have you encountered either of them again?"

"I bumped into Yori and some of her friends a while back when I was shopping in Minato," the girl replied, looking amused. "She remembered me. I asked her for her autograph, for a friend you understand." Cologne nodded, grinning. "Honest. Anyway, she was happy to do it, then called several more girls who did as well. I got six signatures for Miki, who was over the moon. Now she thinks I know every magical girl in Minato!" Nabiki chuckled. "It's very funny."

Cologne was amused. The young woman seemed in good spirits despite her earlier momentary melancholy. "I hear that there is a magical girl active in the vicinity of your own university," she said. "Asumi? Asumo?"
"Azumi." The Tendo sister corrected her.

"That's the one. Not as dramatic as some of the Minato girls, but quite effective, from what I've heard." The brunette seemed to find this very amusing. "Apparently she tends to scare the criminals into surrender at least as much as forcing them. Impressive." The Amazon elder nodded wisely, then smiled, laughing. Nabiki joined in. "You should see if you could get her autograph as well. For your... friend." Smiling slyly, she watched as the younger woman giggled.

"Perhaps. She keeps to herself, as far as I know." Glancing at her watch, she looked back to the Elder. "I have to be getting on. We're going out for a meal later, I still need to catch up with the others, then have a rest. It was a long trip." Cologne nodded.

"Enjoy yourselves. Give my best wishes to your family. And tell Akane that I expect some rapid progress, or I won't teach her the Roasting Chestnuts technique next week." Grinning, Nabiki nodded, then went on her way. Cologne watched her go for a moment, smiling a little, then decided that she'd had enough of trying to figure out the strange energy for today, turning and making her way homewards. She'd have another go tomorrow.

Stopping at a clothes store she'd frequented many times, Nabiki commed Kasumi, idly inspected a couple of interesting outfits in the window. "Hello, sister. How are you?" Kasumi asked. The middle Tendo smiled slightly.

"Fine, thanks. Nearly at the Dojo, actually. We're all going out later to that restaurant you took me to months ago." She turned away from the window, continuing on her way.

"That's nice. It's very good. We were wondering how you were, we haven't heard from you for a few days."

"I've been thinking a lot, plus the work, of course. It took a while to catch up, but I'm fine now." Her sister laughed softly.

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. Ranma and I have spent a pleasantly routine week at the University doing much the same. It's very interesting, I was learning about auto-immune diseases recently. Some of them are horrible. Anyway, enough of that. From your tone of voice, there's something else." Nabiki chuckled, causing a man walking past to glance at her, then smile. She smiled back, nodding to him.

"I just bumped into Cologne. The changes to the ward system seem to have worked," the brunette said with satisfaction, heading towards home. "I was talking to her for five minutes or so and she didn't notice anything as far as I can tell."

"Very good," her elder sister said, sounding pleased. "I'll just check the logs to be certain. Hold on a moment, let me bring up the ward interface." The gentle voice of her elder sister paused for a few seconds. "Yes, it looks fine here as well. The system noted her interest in you, it's definitely got her marked as a possible hostile and seems to take great interest in your interactions, but it didn't have to take any active measures. The passive deflection seems to work correctly. That's certainly better than erasing her memory over and over every time you meet."

"I know. It was getting kind of funny in a Groundhog Day sort of way, but annoying as well." Nabiki smiled as her sister giggled.

"Poor Cologne."

"There could be a problem, though."
"Oh?" Kasumi sounded interested but not worried.

"She told me she's found something strange in the area. Some very difficult to detect and faint magic of a type she's never seen before. I have a feeling it might be something left over from the ward system. Is that possible?" There was a long, thoughtful silence.

"Yes, I think it could be. I'm impressed if it is. The traces would be very small and fade quickly, most people would never notice, I'm certain of that."

"Cologne is nothing if not sharp. Clever, as well. She said she invented a completely new spell to detect it."

"Very impressive." Kasumi's voice had a note of respect. "How was she talking about it? Is she worried, or anything like that?"

"She said it was nothing to worry about, she was just curious basically, but I could tell it was more than that. I got the feeling she is a little worried, yes. I don't think she has a clue about where it comes from or who's behind it, which is most of the reason she'd be worried in the first place. Do you think there's any possibility she'll work it out?"

Nabiki waved to an old neighbour, who called a greeting before going into a shop.

"I wouldn't completely rule it out but I think it's unlikely. By now the traces must be very weak indeed. I would expect the bulk of them to have faded completely, and even the most recent ones will soon be undetectable. If we don't create new ones, there should be nothing for her to find."

Kasumi paused, clearly thinking. "Unless she deliberately probes you the wards won't be triggered into active deflection, which should prevent any further traces being created. We should be prepared for it, though. I don't think she's got any reason to start looking into you any further, the system puts up a completely convincing false signature, but with Cologne you never know."

"What do we do if she works it out?" Nabiki had stopped again, inspecting the contents of a bookshop window, to give herself some reason not to arrive at the Dojo too fast, as she wanted to get this discussion finished first.

"I'm not quite sure. We always knew we might eventually get discovered, by either you or the Elder, no one else was likely to work it out, and we're prepared in some ways for that. When you found us we really thought we'd end up with everyone knowing for a while, but when it became clear that wouldn't happen, we were relieved, frankly. While I'd dearly love to be able to go back and see the family, the time isn't quite right yet, for a number of reasons, as you know. The last few months have, in some ways, made it more difficult, with all the things involving Yori and Chou."

Kasumi sighed gently. "We've talked about that before. It's still a concern."

"What about that security spell Ranma was researching?" Nabiki enquired. "You haven't said much about it recently."

"He's managed to convert it to our system and is sure it will work, but we haven't tested it yet. But, yes, you're right, that's probably the best defence we have. Cologne doesn't pose a serious threat aside from the exposure of us, no one from Nerima does, not now, but we don't want the information being spread far and wide just yet." Her sister paused again. "In some ways the only one who she could cause real problems for is you, although I don't think she would. Not on purpose. How would you feel if your new abilities became known to the family and your friends, sister?"

Nabiki considered it. "I'd prefer it didn't, to be honest. Oh, there are one or two people I could handle knowing, but at the moment it would mostly be a nuisance."
"That's understandable. We all need an identity we can use just for normal life. The magical girl lifestyle is fun, but you need to be able to take a break from it on occasion."

"Damn right." The middle sister laughed quietly, resuming her slow walk to the Dojo. "The biggest problem is, as usual, Akane. If she finds out the things I can do now... Well, it could be a very awkward argument. She's much better than me at the martial arts, certainly at the moment, but I'm pretty sure I have her outclassed in other areas."

"Oh, there's little doubt of that, Nabiki. Your ki ability far outstrips hers, both in power and control, and the gap will only widen. You're probably as fast if not faster, coming up on as strong, and with some of the other things you've learned, could give her a real fight if it ever came to it. Even Shampoo would be easy enough for you to deal with as long as you didn't attempt to go up against her hand to hand. I would strenuously advise that you don't for some time, she is very good indeed."

Nabiki chuckled. "I have no intention of getting into a fight with either my sister or Shampoo, but if it ever happened I'd stay at a safe distance and snipe at them. I know my own limitations." Kasumi giggled inside her head.

"I suspect you think those limitations are greater than they are. But I'm glad to hear it. Intelligence is what wins battles, after all. But yes, I agree, Akane could be a problem. Her temper is so much better now, but she could still be very jealous. You know what she's like. She's always been a little like that, and has wanted to be a magical girl most of her life. Finding out that both her older sisters were now would be... frustrating." Amusement coloured her speech, along with sympathy.

"I suppose we'll have to wait and see. If Cologne does start working it out, what then?"

"We'll have to see what the circumstances are. Ms Aoyama might be needed, or perhaps merely Yori." Kasumi giggled again. "It depends on whether the correct approach is incredibly creepy or incredibly dangerous." Nabiki was trying not to laugh out loud.

"We could probably do an absolutely horrifying double-act."

"Indeed. We don't want to scare her to death, poor woman. I quite like the Elder."

"So do I. But I don't underestimate her, either."

"Neither do I or Ranma. We both have considerable respect for her abilities and intelligence. Oh, well, all we can do is prepare as best we can then wait. It's entirely possible nothing will happen." Nabiki snorted with laughter, making her elder sister giggle. "I know, with the way our lives go..."

"I'm nearly there, sis, I'll talk later. Thanks for the information." She was just around the corner of the road on which the Dojo lay.

"You're welcome. Have fun, come and see us again soon."

"I will." Disconnecting, she walked around the corner in time to see something that made her stop and groan. "Oh, for fuck's sake." She watched Kodachi jump around on the roof of the Dojo, Akane and Shampoo both chasing her. It was clear the crazed gymnast was still crazed, despite her nearly normal behaviour over the last few months, or perhaps was merely bored and had wanted some excitement. She was laughing manically, the sound faint in the distance, although the laughter was slightly more strained than usual since she seemed to be becoming aware that she might be in over her head. It was clear that both her opponents were working as a team, with considerable skill.
A distant crash sounded as Shampoo swung a club at the girl, only barely missing with a blow that would have sent her flying, instead punching a hole in the roof, tiles cascading to the road outside the wall. Nabiki winced. "Crap. That's going to cost." She shook her head, about to stomp over and use the patent pending 'Yori' technique of shouting horribly, when a better idea crossed her mind.

She smiled evilly, then carefully looked around, making sure no one was in the area, before stepping into a nearby alley, the one she'd used in the past for a convenient teleportation pick-up.

The woman that emerged a few seconds later adjusted her sunglasses, primly brushed a little dust from the sleeve of her nice suit, then proceeded to stalk towards the Tendo dojo, plants wilting in the wave of cold that followed her path...

Akane jumped to the side to avoid the snapping ribbon, then ducked as a spiked club passed mere centimetres over her head. Her return blow only just missed Kodachi, who skipped lightly out of the way with a laugh, although she was sweating slightly. Shampoo watched, nodding approvingly, then moved to get behind the other woman. All three of them were getting slightly tired, while Akane was doing her best to keep her temper. She was genuinely surprised that she was managing so well, normally Kodachi brought out the worst in her even after Yori and Chou had done what they did. 'The therapy really is working,' she thought to herself, a slight smile on her lips.

Even so she was righteously annoyed. The idiotic Kuno woman had turned up out of nowhere minutes ago, that horrible laugh heralding her arrival, making both girls, who had been enjoying a pleasant sunny afternoon in the garden, wince and sigh, before the first club had buried itself in the grass between them. It was very irritating. The damage to the roof of the Dojo, and a hole in the garden wall where she'd returned the club with more enthusiasm than actual aim, was going to make Nabiki very angry. She didn't want to let her sister down but couldn't quite manage to nail the damn gymnast. She was faster than she had any right to be.

'She's been practising as well,' Akane thought, ducking again.

A polite clearing of a throat from the other end of the roof made all three of them stop suddenly, turning to look, as they hadn't been aware anyone else was up there. Shampoo and Akane froze, while Kodachi looked puzzled.

"Ms Akane Tendo. Ms Xian Pu. How pleasant to see you again. I do hope I'm not interrupting an important activity?" The woman in the expensive suit was standing on the peak of the roof as if it was level ground, apparently not noticing the ten metre drop centimetres behind her. They exchanged glances, shivering slightly. The voice, cold and emotionless, was even worse than they remembered.

"Um, Ms Aoyama. This is a surprise," Akane said, her voice trembling just the smallest amount. 'An extremely unwelcome one!' she thought frantically, trying to work out why the terrifying and probably inhuman woman was there. Neither one of them had been anywhere near Minato since her meltdown before Christmas. Mainly because of what was strolling along the roof towards them. Ms Aoyama stopped to examine Kodachi, who was still standing there trying to work out what was happening, lowering her glasses to look over them curiously, making the wealthy gymnast flinch at the sight.

"Ms Kodachi Kuno. Fascinating." She pulled a notebook and pen out of thin air and made a few quick notes, then put it away again, moving on. Behind her, Kodachi watched, feeling chilled to the bone and not entirely sure what to do. Stopping a couple of metres from the other two, the green-haired woman inspected first Shampoo, then Akane. The Amazon winced when the unsettling gaze stopped for a moment on the bonbori she was holding, an eyebrow going up
fractionally behind the glasses, and quickly put it behind her back. Akane discreetly tossed the club she'd caught when Kodachi threw it at her into the garden while the woman was looking at her friend, twitching at the crash it made as it hit a flowerpot. Ms Aoyama didn't react at all.

"Greetings. I was in the locality on an unrelated matter when it was brought to my attention that you and your colleague were involved in an altercation with Ms Kuno. I decided that I should investigate the circumstances. Nerima has been considerably less prone to the regrettable excesses of damage and disturbance that resulted from your more boisterous activities since Ms Yori and her partner repaired your unfortunate medical problems some months ago. It was my hope that such a condition would continue. I find that I am disappointed that it has not. May I enquire as to the reason?"

All three young women exchanged glances. Eventually, Akane tried, "It was a... misunderstanding. We're sorry about causing any disturbance." The woman in the suit stood completely still, so still none of the participants were even sure she was breathing, for a long moment, then nodded once.

"I see. Is this misunderstanding still ongoing?"

They all looked at each other again. Shampoo shook her head. "No, I think we're good."

"Excellent. I find that most gratifying. May I assume that such misunderstandings are unlikely to reoccur in future?" There was nothing more than polite interest in the innocent question, but all three of them shivered.

"I don't think there will be any more problems," Akane said, glancing at Kodachi and Shampoo, who both shook their heads. Kodachi was looking quite frightened. Something completely out of her experience was happening, which would normally have attracted either an attack or a derisory comment, but for some reason she didn't feel that either option was wise.

"Again, excellent. In that case, please don't let me detain you any further from going about your business. Allow me to express my best wishes for your continued recovery, Ms Tendo." She produced the notebook again, making some more notes while looking at the damage, then put it away. She glanced up, raising her eyebrows at the three young woman who were watching her. "You may go." They all shook themselves, coming out of the horrified trance they'd fallen into, then slowly filed to the edge of the roof and dropped off, one by one. When they looked back from the middle of the courtyard Ms Aoyama was gone without a trace.

"Who in the name of all the gods was that?" Kodachi asked, sounding, for once, totally sane.

Shampoo and Akane looked at each other. "Someone you don't ever want to meet again if you can avoid it," the youngest Tendo said, shivering. "You really, really don't." Shampoo put her arm around her friend, also looking scared and worried.

"Go home, Kodachi. We're done." The Amazon looked at the other woman, then turned and walked away with Akane. Kodachi watched them disappear inside the house, then left quietly, wishing she'd worn something more substantial than a leotard. It seemed to have gotten very cold rather suddenly.

In the alley, Nabiki was grinning slightly maliciously. It was something of a cruel trick, but it had worked remarkably well. 'I don't think we'll have any more trouble like that for some time,' she thought in satisfaction, sitting on an old box and waiting a suitable time to make her arrival less coincidental with 'Ms Aoyama's' departure. After a few minutes, she got up and left the alley having checked there was no one around, reaching the Dojo a minute later. She looked at all the
tiles on the ground outside and sighed. 'Oh well. We can afford it nowadays. It could have been worse.' Opening the front gate she went in, suppressing a sudden wild urge to simply jump over it like Ranma used to, but grinning slightly at the thought that she could.

"I'm home," she called as she entered the house, taking off her shoes. She found Akane and Shampoo sitting in the living room drinking some tea, looking subdued. Nodoka was watching them with concern. "What's wrong?" she asked innocently. "And why is there a huge hole in the Dojo roof?"

"Kodachi decided to visit a little while ago," Nodoka replied, handing her a cup of tea which she took with thanks, sitting down.

"Ah. What happened?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Akane, Shampoo, and Kodachi were fighting on the roof then it all went quiet very suddenly." The elder Saotome woman glanced at the two martial artists. "They came in a little later, like this. They haven't said what's wrong."

Feeling slightly guilty, as she'd clearly had a somewhat more dramatic effect than she'd aimed at, even though she'd tried to turn the creepiness factor down a lot, Nabiki looked at her sister and asked, "What happened, Akane? Did Kodachi beat you again?" The younger woman looked up, slightly incensed, then shook her head.

"No. Something else. Or someone else."

Nodoka and Nabiki exchanged glances. "Who?" the Saotome woman asked curiously.

Shampoo sighed. "Ms Aoyama visited."

Looking a little puzzled, Nodoka repeated, "Ms Aoyama? Who is that?" She thought for a moment. That name rang a bell. "Oh. Didn't you meet her during that unpleasantness with Ryoga, the one that led to Yori and Chou healing Akane?" Nodding, the Amazon woman sighed again.

"Yes. We were hoping we wouldn't meet her again. She's... worrying."

"You can say that again," Akane muttered to herself.

"What did she do?" Nodoka asked. "Did she fight you, or something like that?"

"No. She just asked some questions." Ranma's mother looked even more puzzled. Akane and Shampoo looked at each other.

"It's not the questions she asked so much as the way she asked them," the lilac-haired Amazon explained with a slight shiver. "You can tell there's so much more implied with everything she actually says. I've never met anyone like her. I don't want to. It's..." The girl trailed off.

"Very scary," Akane finished for her. She nodded.

"How odd. Why was she here?" Nodoka asked. Akane shrugged.

"She said she was just passing. I hope that's the case. I really don't want to meet her again." She looked at Shampoo. "I think we need to make sure we don't let Kodachi goad us into anything again." Her friend nodded firmly.

"I couldn't agree more. But I don't think she'll be back for a while. She looked very worried as
well." The young woman half-smiled. "We had her on the run, though. It was good teamwork. You're really coming along well."

Akane grinned, her mood lifting. "Thanks." Nabiki watched them both with a small smile. Things seemed to have worked out well. That only left one thing.

"So..." Everyone looked at her. She smiled more widely. "Who's paying for the damage to the Dojo?" The two girls exchanged glances, then pointed at each other.

"She is," they both said, laughing.

"This is a very nice place," Soun said with pleased satisfaction, looking around at the restaurant. He studied the view of the bay out the window, nodding his satisfaction. Returning his attention to the starter he'd ordered, he took another bite. "The food is excellent as well." Nabiki smiled.

"I do like it, even though it's a bit pricey. I've been here a few times with Rika and Maiko in the last year."

"More than a few times, I suspect, dear," Nodoka said with a smile, eating her food with appreciation. "The Maître-de greeted you by name and asked if you'd be sitting at your usual table." Looking amused, the older woman glanced at the middle sister, who giggled a little.

"OK, true, we've been here a fair number of times."

"Rika and her friend are reasonably well off, I assume, then, if they eat at places like this," the Saotome woman asked. Nabiki nodded after a moment.

"They're comfortable. Some sort of family income. I'm not sure of the details. They don't let it show much, they're both very down to earth people who don't splash their money around. But it does mean they can eat out occasionally without it hurting."

"Very nice. You must invite them around again soon, we haven't seen them for some time. I like them." Nodoka smiled. "You have good taste in friends."

Nabiki grinned. "People tell them that," she said, which made the older woman laugh delightedly. Akane rolled her eyes at her sister, glancing at Shampoo sitting next to her who looked amused.

"A bit full of yourself, Biki," she said, laughing slightly. The older sister chuckled.

"It rubs off from Maiko."

"That young woman does seem very self-confident. I suspect she will be very good at anything she does," the mother of the young woman in question, even though she didn't realise it, said approvingly. "Her partner is also someone who strikes me as very competent. She's good in the kitchen as well. Handy with a knife, which would stand her in good stead if she became a surgeon, I suspect." Nodoka looked pleased with her logic.

"Quite likely." Looking around the table, smiling to herself, Nabiki felt quite contented. It was very nice being out with her family like this. She wished it could include the other part as well, but decided that such a thing might happen in time, with no reason to hurry it. "How have you all been since I came back last time? Aside from breaking things, I mean," she added, looking at Akane for the last part. Her sister looked embarrassed.

"Sorry. We didn't mean to." Nabiki smiled at her, finishing off her deep-fried squid.
"I know. Don't worry about it."

"We've been pretty good. Shampoo has taught me a lot of things, I can beat her sometimes now."

"Twice." The Amazon woman looked at her friend with a grin. "Not sometimes." Akane sighed, then smiled.

"OK. I've beaten her twice. But I'm still getting better." Nabiki exchanged glances with their father, who nodded.

"She is. Remarkably so. I've been meaning to try my own chances with her at some point soon, to see how she's coming along. But I have to say Shampoo is very good indeed, both as a fighter and a teacher. I'm impressed every time I watch them." Smiling, the Amazon looked pleased.

"Thank you, Soun."

"You're welcome." He glanced at Genma, who was, surprisingly for him, eating quite slowly and thoughtfully, listening to the conversation. "I think we might start you on some of the Anything Goes special moves soon as well, Akane. You've certainly come on enough to make good use of them." The youngest sister looked both surprised and pleased. He studied Shampoo for a moment. "I believe it might be a good thing to teach you as well, Shampoo. While you know a remarkable number of techniques for one so young, I think Genma and I may still have a few things that you'd find useful. If you're interested." The lilac-haired young woman exchanged a look with her friend.

"I'd like that, I think. Great-Grandmother would, as well." She smiled.

"Cologne has honoured my daughter with training her in your methods. I'd like to return the honour. You are certainly capable of learning what we can teach." The Amazon nodded, smiling.

"The elder is going to teach me the Roasting Chestnut technique soon," Akane said, looking pleased. Nabiki laughed.

"If you make rapid progress in your current lessons, she told me."

"When did you meet her?" her sister asked curiously.

"On the way to the Dojo from the station. We talked for a while, she seems in a good mood at the moment, and was quite complimentary about you. Both of you. I think she's actually very pleased about how well you're coming on. Not that she's probably say it in so many words."

"Her training techniques can be painful, but she's very knowledgeable." Akane grinned. "I still can't believe she's allowing me to learn all these things. I owe her a lot."

"Honour that debt by learning to the best of your abilities, daughter," Soun said wisely. "I expect that will please her more than almost anything you could do." Shampoo nodded at his words.

"She dislikes people not pushing their limits more than anything," the young woman confirmed. Akane listened thoughtfully.

"I'll certainly do my best not to disappoint her," she replied, then looked up as the waiter approached. They ordered their choices for the main meal, waiting as the table was cleared, then resuming talking. The food arrived quite fast, soon leaving them eating appreciatively with not much conversation for a while.

Nabiki discreetly motioned to the waiter, who nodded, bringing over another bottle of the wine.
they were drinking. Between them Soun and Genma had finished the first bottle in short order, only leaving a little for the others. 'I hope we don't have to carry them home,' the middle sister thought with an inner grin. 'Not that it would be difficult, but it would be a little embarrassing.' She made sure that the rest of them got their glasses filled before the two fathers managed to lay hands on the bottle. Nodoka noticed and smiled slightly.

"Well done, dear," she whispered, leaning sideways a little to do so. "I'll try to keep mine reasonably sober if you can take care of yours?" Stifling a giggle Nabiki nodded a little. She noticed that Shampoo and Akane were whispering together, looking slightly worried.

"Is there a problem?" she asked, taking another forkful of extremely good fish. They twitched a little, looking around, then Akane shook her head.

"No." She paused for a moment, while the others looked at her. "We were just wondering how Ms Aoyama found out about us earlier. We'd only been fighting with Kodachi for a few minutes when she turned up out of nowhere. It was really weird."

"And very creepy." Shampoo added quietly. "She's like a ghost. I didn't hear or sense anything, she was just there. She disappeared in the same way."

"Perhaps she can teleport like that Aiko girl who came with Yori?" Nodoka asked, looking interested.

"I don't think that was it. There was no flash of light like Aiko produces, or anything else. And you can feel Aiko, Yori, Chou and the others. They have very distinctive ki signatures. So much power you wouldn't believe it, especially Yori and Chou. Ms Aoyama is different. A really weird ki signature, not... human, I guess. It's very unsettling. But I couldn't feel anything until she was standing there." She shivered. "Like I said. Creepy."

"She sounds very strange." Nodoka glanced at Nabiki, who shrugged a little.

"She is. And really scary." Akane looked rather subdued.

"Cheer up, sis. She didn't threaten you, did she? You said she was only passing through and just wanted to ask a few questions."

"She doesn't have to threaten. The questions are bad enough. You can tell that so much more is being said than just the words, and she's allowing you to draw the right conclusions. Not that she seems to care one way or the other if you do. I suspect that if she decided to do something, she'd just do it, then go on her way without any trouble at all. It's... horrifying."

"I'd suggest in that case it would probably be best to make sure you don't attract her attention again," Nabiki said, feeling weirdly proud how much of an impact her little experiment had produced on the two girls, but also rather guilty. She didn't really want to genuinely terrify them, only get them to think about what they did before they did it. She seemed to have achieved that in spades. Hopefully Kodachi would be as cowed. She didn't mind giving the Kuno girl nightmares at all.

"That's the plan, believe me," Shampoo said. "I could go my entire life without seeing her again. Happily." They resumed eating, cheering up after a while. Nabiki felt somewhat relieved. She didn't seem to have broken them permanently. Resolving to not bring that particular persona out around her family again unless it was really necessary, Nabiki went back to talking to Nodoka.

At the end of the meal, they ordered desserts. Nabiki had the same poppy-seed ice-cream she'd
tried the very first time she'd visited the restaurant with 'Maiko' and 'Rika', which had become a firm favourite of hers. At her urging Nodoka has some as well. "This is truly amazing, Nabiki," the older woman said, finishing her bowl reluctantly. "I will definitely have to try that again. I wonder if they sell it to take away? It would be nice to have in the freezer."

"They don't. I asked once. Apparently, a lot of people would like them to, but they think that if you can only get it here it helps bring people back." Nabiki grinned. "It's a horrible underhanded trick that works very well." When they'd paid up, which involved a certain amount of wincing on the part of Soun, they headed home, well stuffed and content, quite late. The trip involved switching trains three times, but was mostly uneventful, both fathers dozing off in their seats, while Nodoka was reading a book most of the way.

On the last leg of the trip, Nabiki looked up as they pulled into a station, feeling something odd. She looked around. Shampoo and Akane had both fallen asleep, the Amazon drooling slightly as she leaned against the partition between their bank of seats and the next one, while her sister was slumped forward with her head on her chest, snoring. Nodoka was buried in her book, oblivious to anything else, while both fathers were completely out of it. There was no-one else in their carriage, the last passenger other than themselves having left at the previous station. The next one along had a similar number of people, she could see through the interconnecting door, but it looked like most of them were asleep or reading as well.

Quietly standing up Nabiki investigated where the threat she could sense was coming from, quickly determining it wasn't on the train but the platform. Looking out the window she could see a few people walking away from the train, presumably having just gotten off, but nothing obviously wrong.

#I believe this is the problem, Nabiki,# Jun said quietly, apparently having detected her heightened interest in the platform. It had a habit of anticipating things like that, having learned the subconscious cues of her detecting things it didn't very well. A target lock glowed around the figure of a man at the far end of the platform, as her vision dropped into low light mode. A magnified section of what she was looking at windowed over her main view, allowing her to see the man seemed to be holding a knife, and was definitely threatening someone with it. The victim seemed to be considerably smaller, probably younger as well. #By the biometric parameters I can read I would estimate it is a male between fourteen and fifteen years of age,# the SI added helpfully. Nabiki nodded slightly.

'That's what it looks like to me, Jun,' she replied silently. 'The question is what to do about it. The train is about to leave. If I get off it will raise questions.' She glanced around. No one was watching, but she could already feel the train starting to move again. Looking back out the window she could see the mugger raising the knife threateningly. 'Damn it.' With one final check that she was unobserved, thankful it was so late, she walked swiftly down the car to the furthest door on that side of the train activating the disguise bracelet she always wore in the process. Reaching the door she pushed her left fingers easily into the seal, pulling it open a few centimetres with no trouble despite the best efforts of the pneumatic system, putting her right hand through the gap and aiming carefully...

Kunihiro Tsuchida gaped at the man with the knife, wondering frantically what to do. He'd heard about muggers but never encountered one before. He wasn't enjoying the experience one little bit.

"Come on, kid, you heard me. Wallet, phone, watch, anything else you have, or I'll cut your balls off," the rumpled and unshaven man said, pointing at his chest with a knife that looked appallingly sharp and well cared for, unlike his clothes. Not feeling like pointing out that the knife was aimed
at entirely the wrong area to carry out the threat as stated, Kumihiro began emptying out his pockets, cursing the fact that he’d stayed at his friends house until this hour of the day.

He was looking down at his jacket as he reached for his wallet when he heard a loud pop and saw a flash of green light out of the corner of his eye, followed by a thump, which was accompanied by a metallic clattering sound. Looking up he was startled to see the mugger had vanished. After a moment his eyes drifted lower, finding that the man hadn’t disappeared at all, he merely seemed to have had a sudden urge to lie down. On his face. With the back of his coat smoking slightly, in a circular pattern. In fact, the man seemed to be distinctly lacking in consciousness, his knife lying on the pavement a metre away from his hand.

Somewhat taken aback, the young man wondered what had happened. He looked around, seeing only the train that he’d gotten off slowly pulling away, accelerating steadily with a whine of powerful motors. A figure in one of the doorways caught his attention. It was a woman of medium height, brown hair, smiling at him. His phone, which he had in his hand, rang. Looking at it he slowly raised it to his face, pressing the call accept button with his thumb. "Hello?"

"You shouldn’t hang around on dark train stations this late at night," an amused female voice said. "Kick his knife away from him and go find a policeman. Have a nice night. Bye." She hung up. Looking at the phone for a moment, he returned his attention to the train, which was just entering the tunnel. The woman waved to him with a grin. He waved back uncertainly, in wonder, then followed the advice, realising as he did that he had no idea at all what she looked like or even sounded like any more.

"That was very weird," he muttered as he looked for a cop.

Taking her seat again, Nabiki checked to see if anyone had noticed anything, seeing that Nodoka had fallen asleep as well by this point. Shampoo was snoring, her face pressed unattractively against the glass partition, which brought a smile to the middle sister. She gently eased her younger sister back against the rear of the seat which she was perilously close to falling out of before leaning back herself and finding an interesting TV show to watch in the privacy of her head for the remainder of the trip, an expression of satisfaction on her face.
Chapter 50

Early Monday morning, Nabiki got out of bed, peering out the window of the room she'd grown up in at the dawn. There was no one visible. Listening carefully for a while she became sure she was the only one up. She couldn't feel any of the vague sensations she'd begun noticing when people were near and conscious, something that Ranma referred to as life signs. The phrase made her smile, it was reminiscent of silly science fiction shows she'd loved to watch when she was a child. Opening the window she looked out, unaccountably pleased to be back in Nerima, despite, or possibly because of, her new found abilities and everything that had happened recently. The entire weekend had been very relaxing.

With a sudden grin, she looked around again, just in case, then grabbed the top of the window frame, pushing off and pivoting around it in a smooth move she'd witnessed Ranma perform dozens of times, but that she'd never in a thousand lifetimes have thought she would be able to perform. Slightly to her surprise it worked as advertised, as she found herself deposited on the roof with no fuss whatsoever. Standing upright she looked around, seeing the familiar district from an unfamiliar viewpoint. The brunette turned in a complete circle, before walking slowly up the roof and sitting at the peak, watching the sun rise, her eyes half closed and a smile on her face.

'I think I can handle it,' she mused. 'After coming so far, learning so much, knowing how much more there is to learn, it would be a shame to throw it all away just because of one horrific experience. Ranma is right. There are many, many people all over the world who experience things as bad, or worse, on a daily basis, without any of the advantages I have, or my friends have. They keep going. I can.' She nodded to herself. 'I will. I have all the support I could ever hope for, four new sisters who would do anything for me, and who I would do anything for. They really are family. So is Ranma. I don't want to let them down, but more than that I don't want to let myself down, and giving all this up would be doing that.' Grinning a little at her internal dialogue, thinking she needed a better speech writer, the middle sister stretched, lying back on the roof and staring at the early morning sky. 'But I definitely don't want another experience like Halleckton again if I can avoid it.' The memories made her shudder, but were much less upsetting than they had been a few days ago. She still had intermittent bad dreams, which she fully expected would continue for some considerable time, but unlike the first two nights after she went back to university, she didn't find herself waking up in the middle of the night feeling like she was going to be sick again.

A noise from below made her listen, then quickly scuttle down the roof and swing back through her window, just in time. There was a tap on her door, before her father stuck his head around it. "Good morning, Nabiki. Did you hear something on the roof?" He looked puzzled. "It sounded like Shampoo or Akane, but it's a bit early for them to be practising."

"Sorry, Dad. I only just got up." She evaded the question with a slight feeling of mixed guilt and relief. "Isn't Akane in her room?"

"Ah. I suppose I should probably have checked there first," Soun replied, a wry grin on his face. His daughter folded her arms and gave him a look that made him chuckle. "You're going back soon, I expect?"

"Yes, I have to. I've got some lectures this afternoon I need to attend, and a report to write for first thing tomorrow." Nabiki smiled at her father. "But it's been wonderful being back."

He returned the smile, coming fully into her room and leaning against the wall. "This is your last
year at university, Nabiki. Have you decided what you're going to do afterwards? Further education, or a job?"

"It's a bit more than that yet, I don't graduate until March next year. It's only June now." She sat on her bed as he nodded, looking amused at her correction. "But yes, I'm in the final stretch." The brunette shrugged a little. "I'm still thinking about it. A degree in business and finance should open up a number of possibilities." After a moment, while he was nodding, she added, "Rika suggested a while ago that I should look into Forensic Accountancy."

Her father looked puzzled again. "What's that? I've never heard of it."

"It's sort of like detective work in the financial world. Reverse-engineering accounts, normally very complex ones, that may have been altered to deliberately hide money, for example. It's something of a specialist field, but from what I've found out it pays well and could be quite interesting." She smiled a little. "It uses several different things I have experience with, including some of the skills I learned in school." He looked at her for a long moment.

"I remember some of those skills. They skirted the edge of impropriety, I felt." Nabiki laughed at his description.

"They helped keep the Dojo afloat for a couple of years, though."

"True. Very true." He was still looking slightly dubiously at her. "Although, from what I remember there were nearly as many times when your, um... little projects... caused some awkward problems." He grinned for a moment. She sighed, also smiling.

"I'm genuinely sorry about that. I was a different person then. Hopefully, I'm a better one now." Moving over to her and sitting next to her, he put his arm around her shoulders.

"You've always been a decent person, you just forgot that for a while. We all did, I'm afraid. But things have changed, mostly for the better, and I have to say I'm proud, very proud, of the women my daughters have grown up into." He squeezed her for a moment, smiling, as she looked up at him.

"Thanks, Dad," she finally said, quietly. Soun watched her face for a moment before standing again.

"Whatever you end up doing, you'll be superb at it, bring honour to the family, and I will be proud of you." The Tendo patriarch gave his middle daughter a look of fatherly pride, nodded to her, then left, heading downstairs, while she rolled his words around in her head for some while. Eventually she got up and went down for breakfast, with a small smile on her face.

Eating slowly, savouring her last hour at home until next time, she smiled at Akane, who smiled back, looking slightly surprised at how good a mood her older sister seemed to be in but happy for it. Shampoo tapped on the door into the garden, making everyone look, before entering and greeting them all. "You're early," Nodoka greeted her.

"We wanted to get an hour or so practice in before we both have to work," Akane explained. Soun glanced at them both, looked pleased, then went back to watching the morning news on the TV. A familiar sight came up as the next report started, showing Lake Halleck with the crater notched into the east side, the remains of the town of Halleckton to the south. He turned the volume up slightly, frowning a little. Everyone looked at the images.

"...still no official explanation for what has become known as The Halleckton Event', although as
you can see from these pictures there is a considerable RCMP and Canadian Army presence in the remains of the town. Investigators have been combing through the debris for the last ten days, finding two more partial bodies, bringing the death toll to three hundred and seventeen people. We are told that this is expected to be the final figure, although the RCMP did not completely rule out the possibility of more remains being discovered in future. They believe it is unlikely, as everyone who was known to be in the town has been accounted for, although twenty-two victims are only known by DNA matches to large pools of blood, no remains being found. The amount of blood in each case precludes the possibility of survival, unfortunately."

"Anthony Murray has been charged with three hundred and seventeen counts of first degree murder, aiding and abetting a proscribed terrorist organisation, criminal negligence over property damage estimated to be in excess of three hundred million Canadian dollars, somewhat more than twenty-four billion yen at current exchange rates, multiple tax evasion and financial crimes that are still being uncovered, and numerous other lesser crimes. Associates of Murray in several countries have been arrested, with warrants out for the arrest of at least twenty more people. Chief Superintendent Wilkinson of O Division Headquarters in London, Ontario, who has been leading the investigation against Murray, has gone on record that he also wishes a charge of 'Felony level gross stupidity' to be levelled against the businessman, appearing quite serious. Lawyers for Murray have objected on the grounds of frivolity but the Chief Superintendent is sticking to his viewpoint. We have no information on what has provoked this suggestion."

Nabiki smiled slightly, remembering the man in question, while her father laughed at the suggestion. He glanced at Genma who shrugged, grinning.

"The site of the crater shown in the images that have been widely disseminated around the world is confirmed to be centred on the former Murray residence in Halleckton. There is little left of the site, the vast majority of the property having apparently being vaporised in the explosion that produced the crater, leaving scant evidence for the investigators. Rumours of the existence of an extensive network of tunnels below the mansion have been confirmed, although the tunnels themselves are largely also destroyed. We are told that Murray used an old mine working below the hill into which the mansion was built for storage, although the storage of what is open to question. Speculation is growing, fuelled by the apparent terrorist link, that some form of high explosive in extremely large quantities may have been stored or possibly manufactured under the mansion, an accidental detonation leading to the destruction of the entire site and most of Halleckton from the shockwave."

The picture switched back to a familiar reporter, standing in front of the RCMP headquarters building under an umbrella, looking somewhat damp. It was clearly raining very hard. "The explosion itself appears to have occurred subsequent to the deaths of the majority of the population of Halleckton, a fact that has caused some unusual conspiracy theories to spring up in the last few days. One such theory suggests the mansion was destroyed to cover up evidence, going on to claim that Murray was in contact with hostile aliens that were in the process of establishing a beachhead for the invasion of Earth. Elimination of the town of Halleckton, according to this theory, is due to the 'aliens' requiring live target practice." The reporter smiled slightly, looking politely unconvinced. "Counter-arguments against this theory ask why the mansion would be destroyed but not the entire town, if indeed the authorities wished to cover up such a plot. So far there have been no good responses from the main proponents of this theory."

"There are several other equally unlikely possibilities being discussed on the internet, including an unusual weather event, an attack by demons, a volcanic eruption, and even a punishment from God. The only thing that is currently certain, though, is that no one outside official circles knows what did happen, and so far they are not talking. Enquiries for further information have been rebuffed with the comment that the investigation is ongoing and in it's early stages."
She looked at her notes, then off-camera for a moment, before returning her attention to the audience. "The rumour that a number of Magical Girls aided in the operation in Halleckton has been confirmed in the last two hours by Japanese and Canadian authorities. We are informed that leading the team of special young ladies from Minato were the figures of Yori and Chou, familiar to our Japanese viewers from previous reports both home and abroad. They were also involved in resolving the tragedy in London, England, immediately after Christmas last year. No word is available on the identities of the other girls with them, although it seems likely that the same team as last time were present. Canadian government officials and representatives from both the RCMP and Army have praised them for their professionalism and skills, saying that the Event could have been much worse if they had not become involved, apparently at a request from the RCMP."

"JNN has requested an interview with Yori and Chou through their lawyers, but we received a polite refusal stating that neither one wished to discuss their activities on behalf of the governments of Japan and Canada, especially during the active investigation, for fear of disrupting the case. They did, however, say that they were pleased to have been able to render aid to the Canadians, praising their skills and professional response to a very difficult situation. Yori added that she would be more than willing to provide back-up for the Canadian team if such a situation was to arise in future, but that she sincerely hoped that it would not. No more details were available to suggest what that situation was."

"None of the Canadian Army personnel involved in the initial Event have been identified, although a spokesman for the Army has told us that they would be pleased to work with the young ladies in future should it become necessary. Requests for interviews with the members of the unit that was inserted into Halleckton late on the night of the thirteenth have been denied citing operational security as a reason." She checked her notes again. "No date has yet been set for the trial of Anthony Murray. This case seems set to become possibly the most complex one in Canadian legal history, as such a trial could be months away, and could conceivably last for several years. A preliminary closed-doors hearing is set for two days from today, though, during which the nature of the charges against Murray will be laid out to a panel of judges. Witness statements from the Army personnel and the Magical Girls will form a significant proportion of the hearing. We will bring you updated news on this case as it unfolds."

"Sara Murray has been granted an accelerated divorce from Murray and awarded a minimum fifty percent of his property. This figure may rise during the trial. A sum of money sufficient to live on comfortably was released from the frozen accounts to the former Mrs Murray on compassionate grounds. She has moved into the Murray Toronto dwelling, her first act being the clearance and auction of everything in it that belonged to her former husband, stating that she did not wish to be reminded of him. Paintings and artwork valued at some twenty million dollars were sold for a small fraction of their value, to, as she vividly put it, 'show that bastard how much I hate him.' The reporter smiled momentarily. "A number of more valuable paintings were donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario, including works by Rembrandt, Turner, Van Gogh, and several other masters from Europe and Japan. The Museum has expressed surprise and gratitude for the donations."

"This is Kaori Saito, reporting from London, Ontario, for the Japan News Network."

The view switched back to the anchor in Tokyo, who peered gravely at the camera. "Kaori Saito in Canada, reporting on a case that has gripped the imaginations of people the world over, rapidly becoming one of, if not the, most important investigations into financial irregularities in the last fifty years. Growing evidence suggests that the total sums involved could exceed a trillion US dollars, bringing down banks and other financial institutions world-wide. The SEC in the United States has suspended trading on twenty-three companies in the last five days, with more expected to follow. Financial regulators in at least nine further countries have taken similar action. Two US senators and a General in the US Army, as well as several high-ranking Naval officers, have been..."
arrested by the FBI in connection with the case, although their role in it is not yet clear." He shook his head sadly, glancing at his notes.

"As in the terrible tragedy in the UK late last year, the involvement of talented young women from Minato appears to have been instrumental in dealing with this case. I must say on a personal note that I am once more proud that citizens of Japan have acted with such honour and efficiency to help another country during their hour of need." The statesman-like figure of the respected broadcaster smiled very slightly, before continuing. "Now, we join Seiji Himura live in Kobe where he is reporting on a peculiar case reminiscent of the now-infamous Demonic Piglet of Osaka' some months ago.'

The scene switched to one of a man in his mid thirties standing in front of a building, which appeared to be a hot bath, with a huge hole in the wall. Through it the camera showed that several interior walls were also badly damaged, while steam rose from the shattered baths themselves, a number of people wearing little but stunned expressions being helped from the wreckage by emergency personnel. He raised the microphone in his hand, glancing at the building, before saying, "This is a scene which may be eerily familiar to residents of Osaka, and to our viewers. A hot bath, holes in the walls, and tiny hoof-prints in the ground outside." Gesturing with his free hand to the damage, he waited as the camera panned over the building before returning to him. "As in Osaka some months ago, witnesses say that a small black piglet crashed through the walls and jumped straight into the hot water. No one seems to know where it came from or where it went. We have spoken to a number of people who have stated firmly that it was wearing a black and yellow bandanna around it's neck, another factor that is the same as in the previous nine cases. Damage to the building is expected to require some four weeks and fifty million yen to repair, although the owners state that their insurance will cover it. We are told that a growing trend among public baths is what's being somewhat facetiously called 'piglet cover'. He smiled at this.

"Despite the common description of a 'demonic piglet', no actual demon involvement has been confirmed. Several magical girl teams have looked into the matter with no firm conclusions at this point, although at least one of them seemed shocked by what they found. We are not aware what that is as they won't say. One girl did, however, keep muttering about perverts for some reason." The reporter looked amused yet mildly puzzled. "I have an eye-witness we were talking to moments before going on air here with me. So, if I can ask what you saw, Mr...?" He turned to his right, holding his mic out, as the camera panned to cover... an empty space. "Hey! Where did he go?" He looked off-camera to, presumably, a colleague. "He was right here a second ago. That guy with the bandanna in the blanket." There was an inaudible mumble from offscreen, causing him to look annoyed, then turn back to the camera, visibly trying to settle back into his normal routine.

"My apologies, that witness seems to have moved off. We will talk to other people for our next report at lunch-time. This is Seiji Himura, live in Kobe, for JNN." Soun picked up the remote, turning the TV off in mid-word from the anchor as he began to introduce the next segment, sweating slightly, then turned his head very carefully to look at his youngest daughter. Everyone else was doing the same thing, waiting for the explosion. Akane stared at the blank TV screen, a weird expression on her face, her jaw moving slightly. Eventually, she took a deep breath, opened her mouth, then simply howled with laughter. The rest of the room exchanged wondering glances.

After it became clear that there was going to be no sudden violence, Shampoo giggled. This broke the stunned silence everyone else had fallen into, Nodoka being the next one to break down, but soon everyone in the room was rolling around screaming with hilarity. It went on for some time, making Nabiki feel that some sort of watershed moment had finally, after many years, been reached. She was very glad of that indeed.

When they finally stopped laughing, Akane wiped tears from her eyes, grinning broadly. "Stupid
Ryoga," she said, then looked at Shampoo. "Come on, I think I might be able to beat you today." The Chinese woman rose, laughing.

"You wish. But let's see what happens." They left the room, heading for the Dojo, still giggling.

"That was... unexpected," Soun said slowly, watching them go. "But very welcome. It's the most impressive example I've seen yet of how much she has matured and changed in the last year. I'm extremely pleased about it." He smiled at the others, picking up his tea. Nabiki nodded.

"So am I. For a moment there I thought we'd all have to run, but..." The middle sister grinned. "Good for Akane. Finally, true self-control. I just hope it keeps up."

"I suspect that the visit from this Ms Aoyama woman helped as well, oddly enough," Nodoka commented. "Both of them seemed very worried about her. It's quite strange. But, I suppose, if it helped her stop and think about her responses in future, it's all to the good." She got up and began clearing the table, Nabiki helping her, producing a quick smile of gratitude. "That other matter, the Canadian thing, that's very worrying. I wonder what on earth happened? So many people dead under such odd circumstances. And Yori and Chou being involved as well! I knew those girls were impressive but I didn't realise they had an international reputation."

Following her into the kitchen, Nabiki nodded with a small smile. "From what I've seen I suspect they're not entirely happy about it, to be honest. They stuck me as fairly private individuals. Having the news report on them is probably annoying more than anything else." She began loading the dishwasher while the older woman cleaned the stove.

"I suppose that may well be true. I don't think, though, that they'll be able to keep completely out of the spotlight in this case, there are too many people involved in it. Poor girls. Mind you, they're remarkably competent individuals, I suspect they can handle it if anyone can." She looked over as the middle Tendo shut the machine and turned it on. "Thank you dear, that's a great help."

Watching her for a moment, she asked, "Do you still have Yori's phone number? I remember she said she'd given it to you." Slightly surprised and worried, Nabiki nodded, wondering why Ranma's mother would ask that.

"I think so. I haven't deleted it, certainly." Removing her phone from her pocket, something she still carried for appearance's sake even though she now used Jun exclusively, she played with it for a moment. "Yes, I've still got it. Why?"

"I was just thinking that it might be nice to invite them over some time for a meal. To thank them again for how much they helped Akane and the family as a result." Nabiki smiled, relieved.

"That sounds like a good idea. We should probably wait until I finish this semester in two weeks, the weather will be warmer and we could have it in the garden."

"Ah, yes, that's definitely better. Would you like to call them and arrange it, dear? I expect they're very busy, they'll probably need as much notice as we can give them." She finished her cleaning task, putting the pans in the sink and turning the water on. "You could invite that Aiko girl and her friends as well, they were involved."

"I'll pass the message on, Auntie, we can see what they say." Looking at her watch, another thing she didn't require any more, she smiled. "I'm going to have to get ready, the train I need to catch leaves in forty minutes."

"Go on, then, Nabiki, I can finish here. Have a nice trip." Smiling, the older woman watched as the middle sister left the kitchen, stopping briefly to talk to her father in the living room before going
up the stairs, then she began cleaning the saucepans, mentally compiling a list of possible suitable dishes for a group of magical girls at a garden party.

Sitting on the train idly watching the scenery pass, Nabiki mused on the last few days, smiling a little with her head leaning on the window. Everything had gone pretty smoothly, the Akane situation seemed to be steadily improving, and she'd come to a decision she was comfortable with. All in all things were working pretty smoothly. After a moment she frowned slightly. That was a little worrying. With the way her life was going now, smoothly suggested that something was building up to cause problems. A few seconds passed while she thought about it, then she snorted and shook her head.

'That's getting a little too paranoid,' she thought with a grin. The train began to slow as it entered the station, prompting her to stand. She'd been lucky to get a seat in the first place, the train was quite crowded even though this particular route wasn't the busiest, but giving the scruffy man who had leapt forwards to claim the seat she had been waiting for a cold glare had made him back off quickly. He watched as she got up, staring at her fixedly, prompting her to smile at him which made him look puzzled. When he looked back to her seat, to claim it for himself, he sighed when he realised his momentary inattention had allowed an ancient woman to dart in before he could. She grinned triumphantly at him as he frowned, then looked back at Nabiki who was just getting off, gritting his teeth.

The brunette grinned as she left the station, amused at what had happened, heading back to the university. When she was half-way back, Ranma called. "Hi. How was Nerima?"

"Fine, actually." They hadn't spoken for a few days, and while she'd talked to Kasumi on Saturday morning, she hadn't let them know about what had happened. "I had to pull Ms Aoyama out and wave her at Shampoo and Akane when I got there, though. It was very funny and very effective, although I kind of feel guilty about it now." She sent him the recording, listening to peals of laughter with a grin.

"Brilliant. You're getting remarkably good at that. I'm going to have to work on my scary face, Agent Naito is going around telling people that Ms Aoyama is scarier than Yori! We can't have that! I was here first..." She snickered.

"Oh, Yori is scarier, definitely. Ms Aoyama is just... creepier. We really should try teaming up on the next person we need to intimidate. We could probably literally make him crap himself." Ranma chuckled.

"Sounds like a plan. Anything else interesting happen? Kas told me about Cologne, I think she's right, we probably don't have anything to worry about although we should be alert just in case." Nabiki told him about the train incident and her drive-by ki shot, making him laugh again.

"Good one. I wonder what that kid will tell people happened?"

"No idea. It was a risk but I couldn't just let him get mugged and possibly hurt, though."

"No one saw anything?" He sounded slightly concerned for her. She shrugged a little, entering the university campus and waving to a couple of students she knew vaguely.

"Not that I could tell. Shampoo was someone I was a little worried about but she'd drunk quite a lot of wine and was completely out of it." She send him a picture of the Amazon pressed against the partition, drool running down the glass, causing him to snigger.
"Very attractive."

"I know. I wish I'd thought to take a picture with a real camera, although that might have caused problems because I had nowhere to keep it as far as anyone knew. It would be a lovely picture for a Christmas card or something." This amused him greatly. "I'm pretty sure no one noticed anything. Everyone fell asleep, it was a big meal with about four bottles of wine." She giggled a little. "It doesn't affect me nearly as much nowadays as it used to but I was still feeling a little tipsy even so. The others were worse, they had more than I did."

"Have you come to any conclusions about what you want to do, after Canada?" he asked more seriously, following a short pause. Climbing the stairs to her floor she considered the question.

"Yes, I think I have. I'm in. While I don't like some of the results of what we do, I think you're right that it's important that we do it, and most of the time it's a lot of fun as well." She sighed silently. "Most of the time."

"Don't worry, I know exactly what you mean. I'm still sorry about letting you get involved in the first place. It was too much too soon." She could almost feel his genuine sympathy over the link. "You handled it exceptionally well even so. I couldn't have asked for better support. You may not have the experience yet, but you have the talent and the mindset the rest of us do. Eventually you're going to be... exceptional."

"Thank you, Ranma. I'm sorry it took me so long to come to a decision."

"Don't be. It's your life, none of us would ever force you into doing things that you didn't want to. Especially me. I've had a lifetime of that, I'm not going to let it happen to anyone else if I can avoid it. Training excepted, of course." He snickered as she groaned. Opening her door she went in, closed it again, then sat on the bed. "You're both a close friend and a family member. I'm not going to let you get hurt if I have any say in it, mentally or physically. If you need to talk about this, any time, just let me know and we'll talk. OK?"

"OK. Thanks again." They were silent for a moment. "Oh, one thing Kasumi said made me think. She said she thought I could take on Shampoo and win. What do you think about that?"

"Well, up against her with no ki ability you'd be toast, I'm sure of that," he said, chuckling. "She is very, very good. Aiko and the girls are better, Kas is far better, and me..." Nabiki laughed.

"Very modest, Saotome."

"You know me, modesty comes naturally." His voice was full of amusement. "But you, no, as far as hand to hand combat goes you're nowhere near her class. You're certainly stronger and faster, which would help to a degree, but not for long." He paused momentarily while she nodded to herself, feeling that this matched her own feelings. "You will be, trust me."

"It will take a long time."

"Less than you think, but it won't happen overnight. Give it a year and you'd stand a good chance. Two and you'd take her to pieces. With Kas, me, and the others training you, the natural talent you have, and your remarkably quick learning curve, you'll pick it up pretty fast. We'll still be better, of course." Nabiki giggled at the smug tone in his voice for the latter sentence.

"Of course you will."

Ranma laughed for a moment. "On the other hand, Kas is quite right that you could still take her if you avoided close in physical stuff, which you can do easily. You could outrun her, then snipe her
from a safe distance. She's quick and very tough, but you'd get her, I have no doubt. Possibly quite a lot of the surroundings as well, if it ever came to that, she'd need a lot more ki in the shot than most people, but in the end the outcome isn't much in doubt."

"Interesting."

"Why? You thinking of going up against her?"

"No. It was just something that made me think. I still have trouble believing how fast I've become... this, I guess. It's only been, what, six months?"

"More than that, really. If what I suspect about exposure to our magic catalysing your ki abilities is correct, that's been going on for a year. Hey..." He stopped for a moment.

"What?"

"Do you realise what the day after the day after tomorrow is?"

"Thursday?" She couldn't think of anything else important.

"Well, that too, but the important thing is that it will be exactly one year since you found us."

Nabiki thought about it and realised he was right. "Wow. An entire year. It seems longer, yet shorter."

"It's weird, time. I know what you mean. We should go out, mark the occasion somehow. Can you get away that evening?"

"Yes, I can," she replied, checking her calender with Jun. "I have an assignment I need to hand in on Wednesday but I can finish that easily by Tuesday afternoon, then I'm free. The end of term is in two weeks so I can't stay long, I need to bone up for the tests on the last few days, but I'd like to go out. Where?"

"Hmm. Good question. Brisbane for sushi again? It's very good there."

Nabiki giggled. "It's so weird even now thinking we can just pop out to an entirely different country for a meal." Ranma chuckled at that.

"Sometimes it even makes me wonder at it. Aiko takes the whole teleporting thing so matter of factly it's pretty strange even for people like us."

"Yes, I think I'd like sushi again. We could go back to Aiko Island after for a little while and swim as well."

"Sounds like another plan. I'll talk to the rest." He paused. "The other thing is that Agent Naito has passed on the official request from the RCMP about the statements we were talking about, finally. They've run into some delays in getting everything set up, you've probably heard how big this case is getting. We seem to have pulled the pin on the grenade for sure, when it went off an awful lot of things got blown into the light."

"Yes, I saw the news this morning. I've been avoiding it since we got back, I didn't want to be reminded of Halleckton for a while, but Dad was watching it at breakfast. It sounds like it's getting incredibly complicated."

"Unbelievably so. That idiot was right in the middle of a whole web of illegal operations, him going
down is taking a lot of other people down as well. All good, really, it looks like all sorts of very unpleasant and destructive practices will come to a very sudden end because of this. Even with the influence some of these people have it can't cover up all this publicity. Anyway, we've been asked, very politely, if we could possibly spare them five or six hours on Wednesday to tell them what happened in our own words. The panel of three judges is likely to be very curious. I understand part of the delay is finding three judges who would actually believe any of it. We may have to... demonstrate." The martial artist laughed, Nabiki joining in.

"Sounds interesting. OK, I can get away. Canada is something like thirteen hours behind us, isn't it?"

"Yep. They're starting at nine AM their time, which is ten PM for us. Bit of a pain but we should be able to handle it. Poor Agent Naito is going to miss some sleep again, though." She nodded thoughtfully.

"All right. I can do that. Any idea what will happen?"

"I'm not completely sure, but what we've been told is that they want to speak to each of us one at a time, listen to our account of what we each did, then ask a few questions if necessary. The four soldiers will be there as well. Once they have all the facts, our bit is done. They'll look at all the other evidence including the other attacks, the info the PSIA gave them on the cult and the devices, that sort of thing, then work out how, and with what, to charge Murray. The date for the main trial will be set then as well, which is likely to be in a few months. Possibly next year."

"What about Václav? Will they want to speak to him?"

"Yes. I'll go and get him again. He cooperated with the RCMP and stuck to his word completely. The poor fellow really does feel very guilty and responsible for what happened, but it's not really his fault. Not entirely, at any rate. Inspector Deveraux told Agent Naito that they're probably going to go for a charge of involuntary manslaughter, which would have a sentence of perhaps seven to ten years. He can do that and still be a fairly young man when he gets out, mages tend to age quite slowly. It won't be pleasant but it will be bearable."

"I'm rather sorry for him, I admit." Nabiki sighed, shaking her head, then got up to turn the laser printer and computer on so she could begin printing her latest assignment.

"So am I. But, what's done is done, we all have to live with the end result. At least Murray isn't going to get away with only seven to ten years, they're going to crucify him. Which makes me very happy." He sounded it. "And a lot of his friends are going to get dealt with, which will probably make a lot of other people very happy as well. All good. If only it hadn't required the deaths of three hundred and seventeen people." There was a silence for a while inside her head, as she added some paper to the printer. "We also heard that Sir Alan and the British authorities are watching the case with considerable interest. They're considering charging Davenport with contributory negligence over the portal device, since he knew where it was months ago and didn't tell anyone, which could have prevented all this from happening in the first place. Sir Alan is extremely miffed about that."

"I didn't think of that, although I should have," Nabiki replied. "But they're right. He's involved in Halleckton as well."

"Not as much as Murray, but he certainly shares some of the blame." Sending the document to the printer from Jun, she watched as pages began extruding from the machine, then turned to make a cup of tea in the small kitchen.
"Oh, while I remember, your mother wants to invite Yori, Chou, and the girls to Nerima for a meal sometime in July, if you're interested." She grinned as he made a sound of surprise. "She wants to thank you guys again for sorting Akane out. We had something of a breakthrough today, which is what sparked the idea." Sipping her tea, she sat at the desk and watched the people walking around down on the campus, telling him about the news report and Akane's reaction to it. When she finished he chuckled for a while.

"Impressive. She's definitely improved out of all recognition. I wonder if I should go and do something about the demonic piglet problem?"

"We could find him and have Ms Aoyama give him a look, just for fun," Nabiki suggested with a grin that would have given Ryoga the shivers had he seen it.

"Hmm. A thought, definitely. Let me consider the problem. But, yes, I think we could probably find a suitable time to visit Nerima and Mom. I'll mention it to Kas and the others, see what they say."

"OK. Right, I have to go, I need to concentrate on today's work. I'll talk again later, then see you Wednesday."

"See you, Nabiki." Disconnecting, the inside of her head fell silent again. She smiled slightly, then stapled the report together and slipped it into an envelope before starting the next one.

"Lady Azumi, she of the silver hair," O'Rourke said with a laugh, walking up to the group of girls with his squad-members in tow. Lieutenant Kent gave him an odd look while Silva snickered. Pedersen sighed a little. Azumi turned and looked at the small wiry man with a raised eyebrow.

"Sir Black Night. We meet again." She smiled at him.

Grinning, he stuck out his hand. "Hello, Azumi. How are you?"

"Well, thank you, Corporal," she replied, shaking it. Her friends were watching with amusement. "And you? Recovered from our little adventure?"

"More or less. I'm still having nightmares, to be honest, but after what we saw..." They exchanged glances, and complete agreement.

"I understand. It was... unpleasant. I'm afraid I didn't handle it well when I had a chance to relax at home. I was quite ill." He studied her with slight surprise but nodded at the look in her eyes.

"Ah. First time?"

"No, I've been quite ill before." She gazed steadily at him, until his widening eyes were joined by snorted laughter, then grinned. "Yes, it was the first time I've been involved in that sort of... destruction. Not nice."

"My first time I had to get so drunk I couldn't remember two days afterwards. Not the healthiest approach but it kind of helped." He smiled at the silver-haired girl, who returned it, looking considerably less cold than she normally did. "I threw up a lot as well, but at least by that point I could claim it was the alcohol." This made her snicker.

"Face saving at it's best." Glancing at the others, she asked, "How are the rest of you?"

"We're fine, I think, Azumi." Kent looked around at his colleagues, who nodded. "Where's Yori?" Behind her, Chou nodded at the closed doors to their right.
"She's in with the panel at the moment. We had to show them some proof that we were telling the truth about our abilities, which caused something of an upset. One of the judges needed to go and sit down for a little while." She smiled gently. He laughed, as did his men.

"I'm not surprised. Some of the things I saw you ladies do in Halleckton made me want to go and sit down for a while. The major read my report three times and still didn't believe it until we showed him some of the photos Silva took." He looked at them curiously. "I couldn't help but notice that they didn't show anything that could identify any of you." Aiko grinned while Chou nodded, looking amused.

"That's basically the point."

"I expect the way several of you rather fade from our ability to recall when you're not around is much the same idea?"

"Indeed."

The lieutenant laughed lightly. "Impressive security. Magic is remarkable."

"It certainly can be." The blonde smiled at him. "I expect you're here for the same reason we are, to relate your stories to the panel?"

"Yes. We wrote very comprehensive reports, which I think your PSIA got as well, but the judges seem to want to hear it again directly from us and also ask some questions. From what I know building this case is proving quite complicated."

"We've heard that there are a considerable number of people high up in the financial world who seem to have had the rug pulled rather abruptly from under them," she said. "Not to mention several government officials and law enforcement people who really should have known better."

"Yes, I've been following it with some interest. I think that the political fallout from what happened will go on for a long time. Probably for the best in the long run but in the short term there are going to be all sorts of strange things happening. At least one bank in the US has gone under very suddenly in the last two days, I've heard, as a direct result of all this." She sighed a little.

"I heard about that. I expect a lot of people are going to be badly affected by the actions of these people. It's very regrettable."

Lieutenant Kent sat on the bench she was standing next to. "It is. But, we didn't know it was going to happen, we were simply doing our jobs and saving lives, and even if we had known we couldn't have done anything differently." Chou sat next to him and crossed her legs at the ankle, staring at her boots.

"No, I suppose we had no choice in the matter. We did what needed to be done. But it brings home how some actions can have repercussions you didn't expect."

"That it does." She looked around after a second or two.

"Yori is finished, she's coming out. I expect it will be my turn next." The door opened and the short woman emerged from the chamber, talking to a tall man next to her. He shook her hand, then looked at a notebook he had in his other hand.

"Chou, please." The blonde stood, causing him to look at her. "Thank you. We're ready for you, could you come this way, please?" He waved her through, then closed the door again.
"They seem to want to keep it secret," Tamiko observed, watching this. O'Rourke looked at her with a small private smile.

"I expect they don't realise that's difficult with you people." She grinned briefly.

"Most likely not. Thank you for that, by the way."

"No problem." Glancing at Yori who was leaning against the wall deep in thought, he asked, "So, can you tell us what happened in there?" She looked up, then around at the other soldiers, smiling at them in recognition.

"Sorry, got a bit lost there. Hi, guys, nice to see you again." She seemed to recall what he'd asked.

"Oh, it's fairly simple. They just wanted a recap of what I personally did, along with any thoughts I had on what the cause was for various parts of it and if there was anything I could think of that I could have done differently." She snickered a little. "I think that at least one of them might be slightly put out that I made a very large hole in the landscape. He seemed to think it was just the tiniest bit excessive. Showing them the video we had the MoD in the UK send over of the demon in London changed his mind when he realised there were nine of the damn things running around under that place and six more on top."

The girl shrugged a little. "It's not really a complicated procedure. They've all read the reports, they seem to just want confirmation of everything and to meet the people involved to see if we seem to be trustworthy and competent. I think it went well."

"Did they ask any personal questions about you all?" Silva asked. "I assume you wouldn't be very keen on answering things like that."

"One of the judges did ask a couple of personal questions, but I told him they weren't relevant to the discussion. We had a bit of a staring contest. I won." She grinned as did he.

"I can see how that might happen," the soldier said in an amused voice. "I think that at least one of them might be slightly put out that I made a very large hole in the landscape. He seemed to think it was just the tiniest bit excessive. Showing them the video we had the MoD in the UK send over of the demon in London changed his mind when he realised there were nine of the damn things running around under that place and six more on top."

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"Did they ask any personal questions about you all?" Silva asked. "I assume you wouldn't be very keen on answering things like that." Yori chuckled, looking at him.

"One of the judges did ask a couple of personal questions, but I told him they weren't relevant to the discussion. We had a bit of a staring contest. I won." She grinned as did he.

"I can see how that might happen," the soldier said in an amused voice. Fumiko giggled, making them both look at her.

"I'm surprised they didn't need another recess after that," she explained. Yori laughed.

"He did need to stop and drink some water before his voice stopped squeaking," the girl said, looking like the memory was one she enjoyed. "They stopped asking irrelevant questions at that point and just got on with business."

They talked for another ten minutes, before the doors opened and Chou came out with the clerk. The soldiers noticed without surprise that all of the girls looked at the door several seconds before it opened. "Aiko, please? You're next." The petite brunette stood, following him inside with a small smile on her face. Chou looked at Yori, who nodded after a second.

"Yes. Cut them some slack, they're new to this and worried," she explained. Yori laughed.

"I could see that. Oh well." Azumi watched from where she was leaning on a statue of some important dignitary, O'Rourke next to her. They had been idly talking about the differences between Canadian and Japanese culture, passing the time. The disguised Nabiki found she enjoyed the company of the compact man, he was intelligent and quick-witted, and as a bonus seemed to have a sense of humour very similar to hers. The various movie quotes he came out with she had considerable fun trying to match with appropriate ones.

Agent Naito was yawning slightly, looking tired. Tamiko, sitting next to him, poked him in the ribs
"Tired, Agent?" He glanced at her, yawned again, then nodded.

"I tend to be whenever I'm involved with you lot. I don't know how you do it. This jumping around time-zones is throwing my sense of time completely out the window."

"Hopefully, this is the last time for a considerable while that it will be needed," she replied, grinning. "Trust me, even we feel it after a while. We just have more stamina than you."

"Than anyone, as far as I can see." He yawned again.

"You need some coffee. Pity Aiko's inside or she could get you some from that place in New York." Tamiko smiled at him. "But I saw a place just outside that looked OK. I'll go and get some." She looked around at the others. "I could do with one as well. Anyone else?" In the end everyone wanted coffee, so she and Pedersen wandered off to get it. When they came back it was just in time to see Aiko come out, smiling slightly, while the clerk looked around.

"Tamiko, please?"

"That's me," she said brightly, swigging her coffee down rapidly and tossing the cup into a trash receptacle. She followed him in.

"How was it?" Naito asked the brunette as she took a seat next to him in the place Tamiko had vacated. She was still smiling.

"Not too bad. They wanted a demonstration of teleportation, though, so I jumped around the room a couple of times, then when they wanted to see something more impressive took them to the middle of the Sahara. That convinced them it wasn't a trick. The younger one looked pretty ill for a few seconds, but I have to admit he recovered nicely." Naito laughed, then looked slightly embarrassed.

"Aiko, you should be very polite to foreign officials," Chou scolded her mildly, making her grin.

"I was. I politely made them feel horrible, and very hot. Don't worry, they got better." Everyone laughed at this.

When it came to Azumi's turn, she went in with a slight feeling of trepidation tempered with the knowledge of what had happened to the others. To comply with the spirit of the enquiry Ranma and Kasumi had insisted that they not relay anything directly about what was happening inside the chamber while it was happening, or record it, but they'd discussed it outside, which was acceptable to the panel. She also knew the names and faces of the three judges who made up the panel. Sitting in the chair the clerk guided her to she studied the two men and one woman sitting behind a long desk opposite, as the clerk took up his position to one side.

"Hello, Azumi," said the woman in the middle, smiling at her. "Thank you for agreeing to meet us. We're grateful about it, especially as you've come all the way from Japan for this. Even with the extraordinary ability of your colleague Aiko, we do appreciate it's the middle of the night from your point of view." Azumi nodded, keeping her normal neutral expression, but saying nothing.

"Now, we've all read the reports submitted by Yori, Chou, the Army team members, and Agent Naito of the PSIA. I think we have a fairly good idea of what happened. We would just like to hear, in your own words, what happened after you entered the town of Halleckton on the night of the thirteenth of June this year."

"Certainly, your honour," Azumi replied politely. She began recounting the story, trying to keep it as accurate as she could while condensing it to its essentials. When she got to the underground bunker, one of the other judges raised his hand, stopping her.
"Excuse me. I just wanted to clarify that. You detected the presence of the three survivors in that bomb shelter, the...," he referred to his notes for a moment, "Johnson family, by ear? From across the road?"

"Yes, your honour. I heard someone cough, which led me to believe that there was a survivor in the vicinity. When Corporal O'Rourke and I investigated I determined that there were three people some distance underground in the area of the garage. While I cleared debris from the area, the corporal entered the house to search for another entrance. In the end we found there was only one entrance, the one in the garage under the remains of the rear wall. Once we opened it we were able to enter and retrieve the survivors, who luckily were unhurt although very hungry and rather dehydrated. I gave them water and called Aiko and Private Pedersen to evacuate them to CFB Trenton, which they did. The corporal and I continued searching, finding three more survivors and a significant number of fatalities."

"Thank you. And I also believe that you were shot by Mr Johnson, when you opened the door to the shelter?"

"Shot at," she corrected, a small smile on her lips. "The bullet did not make contact."

"Why is that?" he asked curiously.

"I caught it before it hit me." He stared, then glanced at his colleagues, who also looked impressed, although the woman reached over and tapped the one of the folders in front of him.

"Page fifteen, half-way down," she said quietly. He opened it and looked, then nodded.

"I see. Remarkable. Out of curiosity, what would have happened if you had failed to catch the bullet?" he asked. She shrugged.

"Not a lot. I'd have had a hole in my coat and a bit of a bruise."

"Remarkable," he repeated, studying her. "Thank you. Please continue."

Azumi went on with her story. They looked impressed and slightly horrified when she got to the point covering the demon in the dining hall. Once she had finished with the final evacuation from the mansion with the mage and Murray, before Yori destroyed the entire site, they sat and looked at her for a long moment in silence. Eventually the woman nodded, making a few more notes.

"Thank you, Azumi. That was very clearly and concisely explained. It clears up one or two things from the reports that I personally had some questions about." She looked at the other two judges.

"Do either of my learned colleagues have anything further they would like to ask?" They shook their heads.

"No, I'm satisfied with what I've heard," the younger of the two judges said, closing the folder in front of him. He nodded to Azumi. "Thank you."

"In that case, I think we're finished with this witness. Azumi, thank you once more, and may I also extend the thanks of the Canadian judiciary for your participation in stopping this horrible issue, you and your colleagues have undoubtedly prevented a much larger tragedy, at considerable personal risk. We do appreciate that, believe me."

Azumi stood, then smiled slightly. Making a shallow bow, she replied, "Thank you all. It was an honour to help." The judges nodded to her, then the one in the middle gestured to the clerk.

"I think we will break for lunch at this point. If you can inform Agent Naito of the PSIA that we would like his participation when we get back, let's say at one PM, which gives everyone slightly
more than an hour, please?” He nodded then led Azumi out. She sighed quietly, relieved that it was over and pleased that it had gone so smoothly. The judges really did seem merely to want to meet the people involved and to hear their stories first-hand.

"How did it go?” O'Rourke asked.

"Not too bad,” she replied, glancing at him. "It's like Yori said, they're trying to understand everything. I think they're getting to grips with it.” The clerk was speaking quietly to Naito, who nodded, then shook his hand, before walking over to the rest of them.

"We've got an hour until I need to go in, so why don't we get some lunch? When they've finished with me I suppose we could go, that's the last of us.” He yawned. "I have to admit I'm starting to feel it. It's one in the morning at home.”

"OK. What does anyone want?” Yori asked. She glanced at Kent and the other soldiers. "You guys want to come as well?” The lieutenant looked around at the other men, then smiled.

"We'd love it. Where should we go?” he asked.

Aiko looked at them. "Do you like pizza?” she asked with a grin.

"I've never been to Rome,” Silva mused, looking around curiously. The early evening light illuminated the crowded streets surrounding the pizzeria with a golden glow, reflecting from the stonework nicely, making him wish he'd brought one of his cameras with him.

"It's pretty damn crowded but can be nice,” Aiko replied, lifting a slice of pizza off the plate gingerly. "Ow. Hot.” Folding it in half she managed to get most of it in her mouth in one go, making him smile. Yori watched with a grin.

"I can't believe we are in Rome!” Kent also looked around. "It's insane. Just for pizza?” Picking up a piece of his own he chewed and swallowed. "Mind you, this is the best pizza I've ever had.”

"That place in New York is even better but it's closed at the moment, the owner is on holiday,” Fumiko told him, drinking beer from a bottle, then holding it loosely between her fingers as she tipped her chair back on two legs without showing any signs of losing her balance, even though her feet weren't on the ground. He glanced at her, then grinned at the sight. She smiled back.

"Well, it would have to work hard to beat this,” he replied. "It's first-rate.” The rest of the group was too busy eating to join in the conversation, but there were several grunts of agreement from various points around the table. The day was still very warm, a cloudless sky showing deep blue above them. Their table was in front of the establishment, separated from the thoroughfare by a rope strung through polished bollards set into the pavement. They ate happily for a while, Yori waving the waiter over and getting another round of soft drinks at one point. Eventually, contentedly full, they ran out of food.

"This was nice,” Chou said, looking around. Kent nodded.

"It was. Thank you for inviting us. Not the sort of thing I think we normally expect for a meal, but well worth it.”

Naito looked at his watch. "We'd better settle up and get back. They'll want me in about ten minutes.” Glancing at him, Chou nodded, then waved to the waiter, asking him for the bill when he arrived. Studying it, she pulled a bundle of Euros from somewhere, handing him the requisite amount along with a generous tip.
"Thank you," she smiled. Looking pleased he bowed slightly, then left. "Right. Let's go back and let Agent Naito talk to the panel." Shortly after that they were standing in the hallway outside the interview room as if they'd never left. O'Rourke looked around at his colleagues and the women he was pleased to call friends, grinning.

"That was... surreal," he said to Azumi, who laughed.

"It does take some getting used to, I admit. But you find it all very convenient in the end."

"That, I can well imagine." The clerk came and collected Naito, while the rest sat or stood, talking amongst themselves. When he returned, the girls stood.

"Looks like we're off. It was nice to see you again, Corporal. Look after yourself. You know how to get hold of us if you ever need us," she said. Smiling at him she put her hand out. He shook it.

"You take care as well, Azumi. I hope we can meet again some day."

"I'd like that."

They looked at each other for a moment, then Azumi joined the others, vanishing as the soldiers closed their eyes. The clerk, who had politely waited, looked at Kent. "Second Lieutenant? If you could follow me, please." He waved the man into the interview room and closed the door behind them as the three other soldiers sat and patiently waited for their turn.
Pauline looked up as a group of people entered the restaurant, recognising them as the young women who had come a couple of weeks or so ago along with three men. She remembered because the tip she'd gotten was one of the largest in her career. They were all attractive, athletic looking Japanese women, mostly dressed in similar, very good, silk outfits. She smiled, getting up to welcome them, while wondering if they were some sort of act or something, due to the way they dressed. The tallest one, a blonde woman, smiled back.

"Welcome back, Ladies," she greeted them. "A table for seven?"

"Yes, please, Pauline," the blonde said in a gentle voice, making the waitress pleased that she'd remembered her name. "Could you bring us all a round of beer as well, and one Coke? Oh, and a couple of jugs of water."

"Certainly, Miss Chou." She'd been racking her brains trying to remember the woman's name, finally managing it, causing the blonde to smile.

"Just Chou. Thank you." Pauline led them to the relevant table, then brought the drinks. She was startled when all of them except for the petite women with black hair picked up their beer bottles, looked at each other, then with grins all popped the caps off with their thumbs, a feat of strength that made her gape. Chou looked up at her.

"It's become something of an in joke," she explained, an explanation that didn't much help, but the waitress nodded even so. She brought them the menus then left them to it, while she served her other tables. The other waitresses smiled at her as they went to and fro, dealing with the crowd. They were quite busy in the early evening, even for this time of year, none of the staff had much time to stop and talk to each other. When she went back to take their orders, she had to fill three pages on her pad with the requirements, something remarkable for only seven people. They particularly seemed to like sashimi. Nodding to them, she smiled and went to give the order to the chefs.

Gakushi, the head chef, was carefully preparing a dish, slicing the fish incredibly thinly and arranging it on a plate as she stopped to watch, as always very impressed by the sheer skill involved. It was very close to art. He glanced up at her, smiling. "Fugu," he explained, his accent plain but his English good. "Very expensive."

"Isn't that poisonous?" she asked. He nodded.

"Extremely, if it isn't prepared correctly. I'm not licensed to prepare it, you need very specific skills to be allowed to deal with the whole fish. This is from a licensed supplier, I got it in specially for a large party we're having."

"Oh, the Théberge wedding?"

"Yes. They're paying a fortune for this, I need to make sure it's perfect." Smiling, she moved past him as he went back to his task, frowning as he minutely adjusted the position of a couple of slices of unbelievably pricey delicacy. Finishing, he stepped back and studied it, looking for any flaws in
the presentation, then when he was sure there were none, put the dish in the fridge for later. When it was safely stored away he relaxed. That one dish cost close to two months earnings for him, if he'd dropped it the results would have been expensive. And extremely embarrassing. Carefully cleaning his special knife, reserved solely for fugu, he put it away into it's case and returned it to the drawer it lived in, before moving on to the next dish.

Passing by the table full of Japanese women a little later, Pauline stopped. "Do you require anything else?" she asked. Chou looked up from her conversation with the auburn-haired girl on her right, smiling at her, then glanced around the table.

"I think a bottle of the house red would be nice. No, two bottles. And another coke, please."

"Of course. I'll be right back." She headed to the 'wine cellar', in reality a carefully climate-controlled storage unit in the kitchen area. 'Considering how much expensive wine we seem to be going through nowadays we should probably get a real sommelier. Perhaps I should go on a few courses, it would be worth a raise...'. Musing on the idea she held a bottle up to the light, checking for excess sediment, then picked up another and did the same. Opening them and putting them to the side to breath for a few minutes she busied herself with filling another order, before coming back and checking them, then filling a glass with coke. Picking up a tray she expertly put both bottles and the glass on it, carrying it out to the customers.

"Thank you, Pauline," Chou said, looking pleased as she gently sniffed the wine before pouring a small amount into a glass. Tasting it she smiled. "Very nice." The girl next to her picked up the bottle and looked at it curiously.

"Oh, it's one of those Barossa ones. Torbreck. I remember this winery, they're good." She poured wine for herself and the others, except the young woman with the long black hair in a braid, who was drinking the coke. Pauline suspected she was their designated driver. She didn't seem to miss alcohol, though, looking at the wine with a faint air of distaste. Heading back to the kitchen she stopped to seat a couple who had just arrived, then take their orders for starters and drinks, before collecting the trolley with the substantial quantity of food that the table-full of women had ordered, now ready. Wheeling it out she began distributing it.

When she had finished she asked if they needed anything else. Chou glanced around her friends, all of whom were apparently contented, then turned to Pauline. "No, thank you, I think we're fine for the moment." As she smiled and left, the small woman with the black hair raised her glass in a toast, apparently to the silver-haired girl on her right, but for some reason Pauline couldn't make out more than a mumble from any of them. Putting it down to the odd acoustics of the room she went about her business.

The Théberge wedding party had arrived and was being seated with a considerable amount of running around required. There were a couple of dozen customers all in, including the bride and groom, their parents, their grandparents, and considerable quantities of friends. All of them had clearly already been somewhere that provided alcohol, as a result being almost offensively cheerful, which was causing the waitresses to have to try to keep order. It was an uphill struggle. Everyone already in the restaurant was watching, mostly in good-natured amusement, with one or two frowning as their meal was interrupted. Pauline watched for a moment, sighed, smiled, then got on with her work.

Back in the kitchen Gakushi was running around like a lunatic shouting at the under-chefs, directing them in the preparation of the preselected meals. One of Pauline's co-workers came in with a pad, reading off a number of last minute alterations, which made the chef sigh loudly, stare at the heavens, or at least the ceiling, then start a couple of his people making the requested dishes.
"They do still, I hope, want the fugu?" he asked sarcastically. "It would be a shame to throw it away after all that work. And the huge cost, as well." She grinned.

"Yes, the groom and his father both seem very eager for it. The bride isn't sure, I think, though." The woman glanced out of the kitchen as a particularly loud toast echoed around the room. "Although with the amount they're drinking they might not still be awake by the time we bring it out."

"As long as they pay for it," Gakushi muttered, "because I'm not going to."

"Don't worry, Chef, they will. The Théberge family is very wealthy. They own one of the largest energy companies in Australia or something like that. My friend Sue works at a restaurant they had the bachelor party at, everyone there got a thousand dollar tip!"

"I don't want my effort to go to waste either." Gakushi grinned, then dived into the work. Shortly three waitresses were taking huge amounts of food out to the increasingly boisterous wedding party, who at least seemed to be enjoying themselves. Loudly. Pauline helped, then checked on her party of Japanese women, who seemed to find the shouting and laughing on the other side of the room rather funny.

"How is everything?" she asked politely, smiling at them all. There were mutters of appreciation, although she could already tell from the empty plates that the meal was well-liked. Chou smiled back.

"It's wonderful as always, think you, Pauline. Could we have two more plates of the salmon, one of the squid rolls, and one..."

"Two," The short brunette across from her said, holding up the requisite number of fingers.

"...Two plates of the duck, please? And another bottle of this very nice wine."

"Certainly." She picked up some of the empty plates, skilfully piling them up in her arms, then headed back to the kitchen again. Returning with the ordered food a few minutes later, she put it on the table, before turning to Chou. A colossal drunken roar from the party made both of them look over before she could speak.

"They do seem to be enjoying themselves," the blonde woman murmured with a smile. Several of her companions were watching with amused expressions.

"I'd prefer them to keep the noise down a little," Pauline said quietly, sharing a look with the woman. "Is there anything else you need at the moment?"

"No, thank you, I think we're fine." Chou looked around at her friends, who all indicated in one way or another they were content for the moment. The waitress nodded, looking around the room, then decided it was time for a short break. She headed back to the staff room, grabbing a coffee on the way through, then sat with a sigh of relief. The tips would be good, she had no doubt of that, but it was hard work. Massaging her feet having removed her shoes, she slowly drank her coffee, still able to hear the wedding party having noisy fun.

Once she had finished her break she put her shoes back on, picked up the empty coffee cup, then headed to the kitchen. Putting it with the dishes to be washed, she turned to see Gakushi gently removing the fugu dish from the refrigerator, placing it on the worktop and carefully checking to see it was still right. Making the final touches, he stepped back and examined the incredibly expensive special, nodding with satisfaction, before removing his apron and picking the dish up
"Could you get the door, please, Pauline?" he requested. She moved to do what he asked, holding it open as he took the dish out, heading to the table to deliver it personally.

Checking on her tables, she gave the couple she'd seated earlier the bill, accepting and processing the man's credit card, then handing him the receipt. As they left she collected the quite generous tip they'd left, clearing away the dishes and wiping the table down, before going over to the table with the seven women at it. Chou was talking to the short woman with the long braided hair, both of them watching the Théberge party, where the father of the groom was tasting a piece of fugu. He smiled, nodding his pleasure, making the chef smile. Gakushi bowed quickly, said something she couldn't quite make out, then went back into the kitchen, while everyone at the table tried some of the delicacy.

"Savour it," the groom's father instructed. "This dish cost over ten thousand dollars." A couple of the party-goers gasped, while the groom looked pleased. His bride seemed slightly hesitant, but eventually tried a small sliver of the almost transparently-thin slices of fish, chewing carefully, then smiling a little.

"It's not bad," she said. Her new father-in-law looked at her with a raised eyebrow, then grinned.

"Not bad? It's damn good, some of the best I've had." He took another piece. Shaking her head, privately astounded that anyone would pay that much for fish, Pauline turned back to Chou, who looked at her with an expression that suggested she had a good idea of what the waitress was thinking.

"Fugu is nice, but rather too expensive for me," she said calmly. Glancing around the table she asked a question with her eyes, causing a couple of the girls to nod. "Could we have the dessert menu, please?"

"Of course." Pauline retrieved seven menus and handed them out, waiting with her pen poised for the orders. They studied the desserts on offer carefully, then made their choices, which she wrote down, then took the menus back. "I'll be right back," she said, smiling at them all. She'd decided that these young women were very nearly perfect customers, quiet, polite, good tippers, and on the evidence available, bottomless pits.

Nearly at the door to the kitchen, she turned back when she heard a cry of "DAD!" from the Théberge table. Looking over she saw the elder man collapsed on the table, in the process of sliding to the ground taking about three grand worth of Japanese blowfish with him. He was grey, looking horrible even from where she was. Pushing the kitchen door open she called for help, then sprinted for the phone to call an ambulance, while Gakushi and a couple of the under-chefs popped out of the kitchen and stared in horror, hurrying over to where the man was crumpled on the floor. It had all happened in about ten seconds.

As she was dialling, she felt a slight breeze and turned to see that both Chou and the black-haired girl, whose name she had worked out was Yori, had somehow made it from their table to the side of the ill man in about two seconds flat. The blonde carefully stretched him out on the floor while Yori knelt next to him, then did something that made everyone watching go completely silent. Pauline stared, the phone forgotten in her hand, as the short woman slowly passed her hands over the comatose man, hands that were glowing visibly, a pretty violet-purple colour.

"Stroke, it looks like." She moved her glowing hands up to his head, concentrating with an intent look on her face. Everyone in the restaurant heard her clearly. The young woman nodded slowly. "Yep. Haemorrhagic stroke, he blew out a small aneurysm, it's probably been building for years." Glancing up at Gakushi, who was watching in disbelief, she gave him a quick smile. "Don't worry, it wasn't the fugu. There's no trace of tetrodotoxin poisoning. It's just a normal stroke, it could have
struck at any time. Probably exacerbated by the alcohol and excitement." She looked at Chou. "It's a little tricky to repair. Could you keep him running while I do the fiddly work, love? He's lucky, he wouldn't have made it long enough for an ambulance to get here in the first place."

Chou nodded, smiling gently, then put her own hands on the man, a golden white glow building between her fingers. The senior Théberge convulsed slightly, then relaxed. "All right, he's stable."

"Good. Let's see... OK, not too bad. Hmm." Yori stared at the man's head with her eyes half closed, moving her fingertips delicately around his scalp, apparently able to see something no one else could. Everyone watched in silent awe, Mrs Théberge with her hand on her mouth, white and wide-eyed. A faint voice made Pauline tear her eyes away from the scene, glancing at the phone she'd completely forgotten she was holding.

Lifting it to her ear she said numbly, "Thanks, the emergency is over," then hung up on the operator, before slowly moving closer to see what was happening.

"I've repaired the vessel, just fixing the neural damage. He's probably going to have some slight memory issues about the last twenty minutes or so," she added, glancing at the man's wife, who stared at her for a long few seconds then nodded. Yori kept doing whatever she was doing, a minute later nodding in satisfaction. "Right. That's fixed. There's another small artery that's looking a little fragile, though. I'll just sort that one out." There was a pause, then she smiled. "Done. How's he doing?" she asked Chou.

"His blood pressure is too high by far, but otherwise he's in quite good shape," the blonde replied.

"OK. Let's sort that out then we can get him back on his feet." Both sets of hands glowed their respective colours for a while. Eventually Yori rocked back on her heels, looking pleased. "That should do it. Good as new. Right, turn him back on and let's see if there are any issues left."

Everyone watched as Chou gently touched the man's forehead, a small flash of golden light appearing briefly, before he stirred, slowly reaching up to feel where she'd touched him.

"What...?" he mumbled, opening his eyes and looking up at the unfamiliar faces. Yori neatly dived out of the way as his wife collapsed half on-top of him, hugging him and crying furiously, while his son watched for a moment, then knelt down next to his mother.

"What the hell happened?" Théberge Senior asked, looking very puzzled.

"You had a stroke, Dad. You nearly died." The elder man stared at his son, then his wife, who was nearly lying across his chest, holding him and silently sobbing.

"A stroke?" He didn't seem to be able to take it in. "I can remember a toast, then something about some shrimp... The fugu! Did that come out yet? It's very expensive." His son suddenly laughed.

"You're lying in what's left of it, Dad." Looking around slightly helplessly, the man finally allowed his son to help him to his feet while Chou gently took charge of his wife, leading her to a chair and kneeling beside her, talking softly to her. As the older man stood, staring around in surprise, the entire restaurant began applauding.

"I still don't understand, Maurice. What's going on?" Maurice grinned, although there was an edge of barely-passed panic and growing wonder to his expression. He pointed to Chou, then swung his finger around to point at Yori, who was watching looking satisfied.

"They saved you. I have no idea how, but they knew exactly what was wrong, how to fix it, everything." Staring at the blonde beside his wife, who smiled back with a slight nod, then the
shorter woman who grinned at him, the man shook his head.

"Could someone explain this to me again?"

It took some time. Practically the entire wedding party took this as an excuse to start talking, mostly at cross-purposes, not to mention loudly. Eventually Yori clapped her hands sharply, the sound like a gunshot, making almost everyone jump.

"Hey! Quiet down, one at a time, OK?" Everyone stared at her, subsiding slightly. Maurice, into the more or less silent restaurant, explained what he'd seen. The Théberge wife, who turned out to be called Anna, added her two cents to the story. When they were finished, her husband looked at them, then moved his gaze around the table, his guests all nodding one after another.

"It's all true, Jacques," one of the guests, a distinguished-looking older man, said in wonder. "You went a horrible grey colour and just dropped like a stone. The waitress over there," he pointed to Pauline, who was still clutching the cordless phone, watching in silent amazement, "started calling for an ambulance, but before she could even get through the two young ladies did... something. I have no idea what, but it glowed. They saved you."

Jacques stared at him, then looked at Yori, who had walked closer, Chou next to her. "You had a small aneurysm in your brain which let go very suddenly. That caused the stroke. You'd have been dead within around two minutes, if we hadn't been here, I'm afraid. There was no way that normal medicine could have done much, leaving aside the time constraint, the damage was far too deep inside to reach without using our method or something like it. There was another smaller one that we fixed as well. You'll be fine now."

"How... How did you do that? How did you even know what the problem was, and how to fix it?"

The head of the Théberge family looked at them with curious, grateful awe. "Who are you ladies?"

"I'm Yori. Nice to meet you, by the way." She stepped forward, holding out her hand. After a long moment he took it slightly dazedly and shook it. "This is Chou, my partner. We're from Japan, we were just coincidentally here for a meal, because the food is so good." He nodded absently, shaking Chou's hand as well. "As far as the rest goes, basically, it's magic, more or less. We're pretty practised at it."

Gaping at her, he repeated "Magic...?" in a wondering tone.

"More or less. It's a little more complicated but that's easier for people to understand." Maurice suddenly laughed, looking abruptly embarrassed when everyone turned to stare at him, although Yori was grinning. "I know, it sounds nuts, but it's true."

"Yori..." The bride was staring at them, curiosity mixed with stunned amazement in her eyes, although there was growing awareness. "And Chou? Weren't you two on the news recently? That thing in Canada, those names were mentioned on JNN." The black-haired girl glanced at her, nodding with a small smile.

"Yes. We were there."

"You watch JNN?" Chou asked with interest.

"Yes, it's interesting quite often. I'm slowly trying to learn Japanese and it's good practice." She said a few words in that language, making Yori and Chou exchange gazes, clearly trying not to giggle. Chou smiled gently at her.

"That's not bad, dear. But your accent is... unusual. I would suggest you keep practising." The
woman nodded, looking mildly amused now.

"They called you Magical Girls. I've heard of them before, although I didn't believe it." The attractive brunette inspected them, then turned to look at the table full of their compatriots, who were watching with interest, not looking surprised at all. "All of you?"

"Yep." Yori grinned.

"Wow."

She studied them all, interest in her eyes, as Jacques looked between the various people involved, finally sitting in his chair, shaking his head. "This is... I have no idea what this is, but apparently I owe you two enormous thanks."

Yori shook her head, glancing at her partner, who smiled. "No, you don't owe us anything. We like helping people who need it. You needed it." He exchanged a glance with his wife.

"Thank you all the same."

"You're very welcome," Chou said, bowing slightly, as did Yori. "I hope you can move past this and continue to have fun with your party." Anna jumped to her feet and rushed over, drawing both women into a hug.

"Thank you," she whispered, crying again. The blonde patted her on the shoulder, smiling.

"He'll be fine, Anna. We repaired all the damage, it shouldn't happen again. Enjoy your meal, try not to let this bother you, if you can." Chou looked intently at the woman, who finally nodded, dabbing tears from her face with a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. With one final trembling smile, she went back to her husband, looking at him as if she'd never expected to see him again, which was close to the truth. The two young women watched, then returned to their table, talking in low voices to their friends. Half the restaurant was watching them, the other half was watching the people in the wedding party, who gathered around Jacques Théberge, asking him how he felt and congratulating him on his lucky escape.

Pauline watched for a moment then approached the magical girls. "That was incredible," she said quietly. "That poor man, he looked horrible, then, just like that, he's fine. It's unbelievable."

Yori looked at her and smiled. "I'm just glad we could help. If we hadn't stayed for dessert we'd probably have been gone by the time it happened.

"Oh, the desserts!" the waitress yelped, looking very embarrassed. "I'm terribly sorry, I completely forgot, what with all the excitement." Chou waved it off gracefully.

"Don't be. Events got somewhat complicated there for a while. We don't mind." Smiling gratefully, Pauline went back to the kitchen to collect the dessert selection, glancing at the wedding party as she did. They seemed to be slowly settling down although there were many wondering glances at the table full of magical girls. Inside the kitchen she found Gakushi leaning against his preparation table slowly sharpening a knife, his attention clearly not on the task, but on what had just happened.

"Are you all right, Chef?" she asked. Twitching slightly, he looked up sharply, then slowly smiled.

"Yes, thank you, Pauline. It's just a lot to take in. What just happened."

"That, I agree with you on," she replied, shaking her head. "That was amazing."
"Beyond amazing." Glancing at the knife, he sighed a little, putting it on the table and dropping the whetstone next to it. "So far beyond I don't have the words." Looking at her he focussed on the pad she was holding. She held it up.

"The dessert orders for them." She didn't need to explain who 'them' referred to. With a sudden smile, the chef was all business.

"Right. Let's have a look. They're going to get the best desserts they've ever tasted, that much I swear."

Later, as the seven girls finished their dessert, there were smiles of satisfaction all around. "That was incredible," the girl with the auburn hair said happily. She looked at Pauline who had come out to check on them, accompanied by the chef. "Thank you very much."

Both staff members looked pleased. "It was my pleasure, Miss," Gakushi replied. "After what your friends did, it was the least I could do in thanks." He looked at them for a moment, then bowed deeply and said something in Japanese, causing them both to smile. They responded in the same language. Pauline wondered what they'd each said, deciding to ask later. Straighting up, the chef smiled again, then headed back to the kitchen. Chou turned to the waitress.

"Could we have the bill, please? We're going to have to leave, but thank you again for the wonderful food." The waitress smiled.

"Mr Théberge insisted on paying for your meal," she said, glancing over at the table where the man in question was watching them. Chou followed her gaze.

"Oh, there was no need for him to do that," she protested.

"I think he feels indebted," the waitress said with a smile. "Oh, he's coming over." Jacques Théberge walked over to the table, accompanied by his wife, looking at all the young women curiously, before focussing his attention on Chou and Yori, both of who stood politely.

"Thank you once more. My new daughter has filled me in on some of the things she's heard about you all. It's apparent to me that I'm just one in a long line of people who owe you a lot." Chou started speaking, but he held up his hand, cutting her off mid-word. "I know, you don't think I owe you anything. I happen to disagree. Please let me pay for your meal, it's the least I can do under the circumstances." Glancing at her partner, the blonde smiled and nodded after a moment or two.

"All right, Mr Théberge. We accept your kind offer."

"Jacques, please." He smiled at them both, then their colleagues. "And, can I just say, you do your country and your families proud. It was an honour meeting you. If there's ever anything I can help you with, don't hesitate to let me know. Anything at all." Reaching into his inside pocket he took out a business card, holding it out. After a moment Yori accepted it, looking at it curiously. "My personal number. My family's business is a large one, we are very active in the energy, mining, and aerospace sectors." The black-haired woman nodded, making the card disappear, which caused him to stare for a moment then smile again.

"Thank you, Jacques. I'm very glad we could help." Yori grinned at him. "It's nice to have something simple to do like that. Canada was considerably more complex and tiring." Raising an eyebrow he looked at her for a moment.

"Simple... Hmm. You obviously have a different definition than I do of that word." His face expanded out into a wide grin as she laughed. "Again, thanks. From myself and my family." Anna
stepped forward, hugging Chou, then Yori.

"You're good people," she said softly. "You saved my husband and my happiness. I can never repay that." Chou smiled back.

"You don't have to. But, you're welcome." Glancing around at the other girls, she looked back to the couple as her friends all stood. "We have to go now, but it was nice meeting you both. I hope your son and his wife have a fun honeymoon." Turning to Pauline, who was standing slightly awkwardly to the side, not sure whether she should be there, she added, "And thanks for the wonderful service. We will certainly come back, although hopefully there will be less drama next time. Please give our thanks to the Chef and his people, the food was fantastic. Especially the dessert." The waitress nodded as the woman stepped back, following her friends to the corner of the restaurant away from people. Everyone was watching. "Please look away or close your eyes," she called loudly enough for everyone to hear. Most people, after a short pause, followed her advice.

There was a brilliant flash of light with a multi-coloured after-effect. The people who had not followed instructions blinked, rubbing streaming eyes, while everyone else gaped at the now empty corner.

"Good God," Jacques murmured, exchanging glances with his wife, who looked impressed. "How astounding." After a long moment he turned to the waitress. "I shall certainly recommend this restaurant to my friends." They all looked at each other then began laughing.

Nabiki smiled, drifting in the lagoon. "That place really does do exceptionally good sushi," she commented after a while. Ranma, floating with her head next to her sister-in-laws, nodded.

"It does. I'd agree with Fumiko, it's probably the best I've ever had. They're very nice people as well. Good service."

"Surprising end to the meal, though. That poor man looked terrible before you fixed him."

"I'm glad we were there. He wouldn't have made it otherwise. Even if an ambulance had been parked outside, the damage was too severe for normal medicine to do much if anything." She sighed a little. "I'd love to be able to teach it to people more easily, so many lives could be saved. I feel guilty sometimes, being able to heal so easily while so many other people have medical problems, ones we could probably fix, but we simply don't have the time to sort everyone out."

"You've helped more people than anyone else I know, Ranma," Nabiki replied after a while. "You can't be everywhere and do everything. Neither of you ever hesitate to drop everything and help anyone who needs it, I don't think you have anything to feel guilty about." She giggled a little. "Perhaps you should arrange with the local hospitals to run 'Magical Girl Healing Clinics' every now and then?" Ranma snickered.

"We've actually wondered about that. I don't know how well it would work, I can see absolute chaos as people all tried to pile in if it was a regular thing, since there are a lot of desperate people around who would try anything to get better. It might cause more trouble than it solved." She was silent for a while. "But it might be an idea. I think we'd need more than just the two of us, though. We can heal pretty quickly but it still takes time. We need to get all of you up to speed on it so you could help!"

"I don't have anything like the medical knowledge either one of you have," the middle sister said, amused. "I doubt I could do much, even if I could learn the techniques."
"You might be surprised. Basic healing, like cuts, bruises, broken bones, that sort of thing, is easier than you'd think when you know how. The more complex stuff like internal organs, disease, toxins, all of those, are something you really do need to have some serious knowledge of. But, the scanning techniques allow you to learn more about problems like that than any other method I know." Nabiki heard a splash as the red-head shrugged. "Still, you're right. Kas and I have the knowledge to make the technique seriously effective. Even so, we learn something new every day. Biology is complicated."

She rolled over and dove under the water, leaping out again some twenty metres away like a breaching dolphin with a flick of her tail, laughing, then headed to her wife on the other side of the lagoon, leaving the middle Tendo floating in the middle of it staring at the few clouds in the deep blue sky and thinking how weird her life had become in the last year, yet very glad it had turned out this way. Eventually she stirred into action, swimming off to find the others.

The brunette felt Fumiko approaching her from some distance off, picking her way through the coral, every now and then stopping to examine something interesting. Nabiki was sitting, her arms around her knees, on a fairly flat outcrop of the reef a couple of metres above the unusually calm Pacific, possibly the highest point on the island, staring out over the ocean watching the sun set. She glanced up as the taller woman settled into position next to her, smiling at her friend.

"It's been a good day," she said, raising her voice a little over the sound of the waves breaking below them. Every now and then a bigger one produced enough spray for them to feel.

Fumiko nodded. "More excitement than we expected for a quiet night out but fun. We should have expected it bearing in mind who and what we are, I guess. That meal was outstanding, though, I always thought they were good but they outdid themselves tonight." She glanced over her shoulder as a shout rang out, to see Ranma and Misaki chasing Tamiko and Aiko across the lagoon at high speed, each pair firing little ki balls at the other, laughing wildly. Kasumi was walking along the beach apparently looking for interesting shells. Grinning at the sight she watched for a moment then returned her attention to her friend. "You seem unusually down, considering. What's wrong?"

Nabiki sighed a little. "Nothing, not really. I was just thinking about how much everything has changed in only a year. For the better, definitely, but sometimes it takes me by surprise. It seems such a short time for so much to happen at the same time that it seems like forever."

"Second thoughts?" Fumiko asked sympathetically. Shaking her head, the brunette smiled slightly ruefully.

"No. It's far too late for that anyway, but I've made my decision. I'm not going to second-guess myself. It's just... every now and then it all kind of makes me stop and think." Her friend nodded slowly, glancing at her, then looking back out to sea.

"I know what you mean. I've been doing this for close to seven years now, but even so, I sometimes wonder what the hell I'm doing. How did I end up here? When I was a kid this certainly wasn't what I thought I'd grow up to be. I'm glad I did, though, even with some of the horrors we've seen recently." She shrugged. "Like we've all said at one point or another, the crazy is everywhere and when it gets you, it's got you for life. It's mostly fun, and we're able to keep it away from people that can't handle it as well, which is probably a good thing."

"True. Very true." Nabiki kept watching as the sun set, Fumiko staying beside her. Just as the last of the orange ball dipped below the horizon, there was a bright green flare where it was vanishing, lasting for only three or four seconds before vanishing as night fell. "Wow!" Nabiki glanced at the other woman, who stared back. "I've read about that, but never seen it. It's pretty rare."
"That was impressive," Fumiko agreed. "A good omen, if I believed in that sort of thing." She giggled. "I don't of course, omens and things like that are just superstitions. We use perfectly sensible magic." They looked at each other for a moment before both of them started laughing helplessly.

Sighing in disgust, Cologne terminated her detection spell with a wave of her hand and sat on the roof staring into the middle distance, thinking hard. 'Nothing. They've all faded past the point I can detect them and there haven't been any new ones formed. What the hell was it?' That was the burning question in her mind. Was it dangerous? Hostile? Some accidental effect? Eventually she shrugged, with another sigh, deciding that there was nothing she could do about it. The old woman hopped to her feet and headed homewards to get ready for her next lesson. Akane and Shampoo needed to be taught the Roasting Chestnuts technique for which she needed a good hot fire. The thought brought a smile to her face as she cackled evilly, the strange magical traces pushed to the back of her mind.

This was going to be fun. For her, at any rate.

"This sucks," Akane groused as she watched Cologne bandage Shampoo's hands after treating them with a burn potion she'd prepared. Her own hands had been similarly treated. The ointment numbed the pain remarkably well and she knew from past experience, a considerable amount of it in fact, how effective it was and how fast it worked, but she was still unhappy. Shampoo looked over at her and smiled with one side of her mouth, wincing as the Elder prodded the bandages experimentally.

"But we're learning a special technique, Akane," she replied. Cologne stepped back and studied them, raising her eyebrows.

"Very slowly. It's been three days and the burns are as bad as ever." The old woman chuckled. "Possibly worse." Both of them looked at her unhappily but couldn't deny the truth. "Oh well. I'm fairly sure you'll eventually get it. Probably." Turning, she hopped off, calling over her shoulder, "I think." Her laughter disappeared into the back of the restaurant.

"She's enjoying this, isn't she?" Akane asked bitterly. Her friend nodded, staring after the ancient Amazon.

"Very much. She's got a bit of a sadistic streak at times."

"At times!?"

Shampoo giggled. "Yes. Times she's awake." Both of them looked at each other and laughed for some while. Eventually, though, Akane looked at her watch.

"I'm going to have to get to work. Mr Ito is being very understanding about this, letting me have more time off, but I can't stay any longer." She stood, picking up the small pot of the ointment Cologne had given her and slipping it into her pocket, before waving to the other young woman and leaving the Café. Shampoo sighed a little, got up, then headed into the kitchen to help Mousse.

Masao Naito stared at the thing on his desk, then looked at the man who'd brought it in. "This is remarkable," he said slowly. The other man nodded, also inspecting it with interest.

"It is. The former Mrs Murray wanted Yori and Chou and the other girls to have it. She feels that they would appreciate it and that she owes them something. It was sent to us because she didn't
know any way to get hold of them directly."

"I'm surprised she didn't call Laura Deveraux at the RCMP. She's got their contact details." His colleague shrugged a little.

"I think she's tired of all the police questions, from what the covering letter said. Understandable, under the circumstances." Naito nodded, looking slightly sad.

"That I can well imagine. Poor woman. Finding out that not only is your husband an idiot, technically a murderer, responsible for hundreds of deaths and the destruction of an entire town, but then to find out he's a key member of some international financial cartel that seems to have it's fingers into everything... It must be something of a shock." Looking at the thing again, he admired it, then with extreme care rolled it up and put it gingerly back into the tube it had come in, which went into another box. "I'll see that they get it."

"Thanks." The other agent nodded to him and went back to work as Naito picked up the phone.

"Hi, Miki," Nabiki said, smiling at the other woman, as they both happened to leave their respective rooms simultaneously. She pulled her door shut behind her and locked it.

"Hello, Nabiki. How are you doing today? You seem more cheerful over the last week," her friend replied, doing the same. They turned and walked down the hall together, heading for the stairs.

"Not bad at all. Yes, I'm feeling less... down, I suppose. Lot of things on my mind recently but I think I'm over the worst of it."

Miki glanced at her friend. "As I said, if you ever want to talk..."

"I remember, and I appreciate the offer." Looking back the middle Tendo smiled, then grabbed her friend as she stumbled at the top of the stairs on an oily patch that someone had left.

"Gack!" Miki held onto the arm that had suddenly appeared in front of her, feeling how improbably strong it seemed to be despite looking slender and well-toned, then stared down at her shoes. "Oh, yuck. What the hell is that?" They both looked at the dark stain.

"Bike grease, I think. I saw that girl from down the other end of the corridor wheeling a bike towards her room last night. I guess she must have lubricated it and some dripped. There's more down there, look." Miki leaned against the wall and put her right foot over her left knee, looking at it in annoyance.

"Damn it. These are new shoes, now look at them!" Nabiki handed her a tissue, which she used to clean the worse of the gunk off her sole, before cautiously stepping around the stain and continuing down the stairs. "Thanks, by the way. Nice catch." She grinned at her friend. "You're very quick."

"Don't worry about it," Nabiki replied, smiling. They descended in silence after that, Miki pushing open the door at the bottom and holding it as the middle Tendo exited, following her through afterwards. "So, four days of term left, then. What are you doing after?" the brunette asked the other woman. Miki looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, I'm going back to Kobe to visit my family for a while. John is going to join me for the second week. Then, after that, we were thinking of going away for a couple of weeks. He wanted to visit friends in the UK and show me around. We've got to decide in the next couple of days, the ticket prices will get silly if we leave it until the last minute." She looked at her friend. "What about you?"
Nabiki walked a few more steps before replying. "Back home for a week, maybe two, then much
the same, going travelling. My friends Rika and Maiko have invited me to come with them when
they go and stay with an old friend. I think I'm going to do that. It sounds like fun. I've met him a
few times and it's always interesting."

"That sounds very nice. Oh, look, there's John." Miki waved to her boyfriend, who was talking to
another young man, calling his name. He looked up and his unusually serious expression
lightened, as he waved back, then said something to the other man, who nodded before walking
off.

"Hey, Miki," John said, hugging his girlfriend and giving her a quick kiss. "Hi, Nabiki. How's
things with you?"


"I am. That fucking rapist did it again, two nights ago." They both looked at him, horrified. "Toru
just told me. Apparently it was more serious this time, the girl is in the hospital. She's expected to
make a full recovery but is very scared and upset." He looked at both of them seriously. "Be
careful. This guy is dangerous. Apparently, this time he had a knife, he threatened her with it,
dragged her into the bushes over near the pond, then did... it. She was found two hours later by a
security guard. That one that got stabbed a while back. He called the police and stayed with her
until they arrived. Apparently they don't have much evidence to go on, aside from a vague
description." The young man sighed as both girls exchanged anger-filled glances.

"If I find the fucker I'll take his knife away and cut his dick off with it," John mumbled, looking
furious.

"Don't say things like that, John," Miki said, leaning against him for comfort, shivering slightly.
"You're no fighter, we both know that. They'll get him. Leave it to the police." She looked at her
friend from Nerima, who was standing completely still, looking like she was barely breathing from
fury. The aura of anger was palpable and rather unexpected. "Nabiki? Are you all right?" Nabiki
shook her head a little.

"No. I hate rapists. The entire concept is wrong." Even so, she slowly relaxed, looking less angry
after a few moments. "You're right. Not much we can do, though." This did not match her inner
thoughts, which would have made the rapist start running, very fast indeed, if he could have read
them...

The trio was silent for a little while, all of them busy with their own thoughts, before John kissed
his girlfriend again. "Come on. Let's go and get breakfast, then get to class." Nabiki and Miki both
nodded, following him as he headed towards the nearest decent café.

Naomi stared out the window into the night over Setagaya, trying not to think about what had
happened to her, wincing slightly as she moved and the stitches pulled. Slipping a hand under the
covers she ran her fingers over the dressings, then pulled it out, picking up the magazine she had
been reading. The delicate face of the young woman was more serious than any of her friends
would have expected normally, she was well known as a very cheerful girl, but under the
circumstances she could be forgiven a certain lack of humour. After another few minutes she put
the magazine down again, unable to concentrate on the banalities within. A tear leaked down her
face as she dropped her head to the pillow.

She'd told the police everything she could remember about... him. It wasn't much. In all fairness
she hadn't actually seen much, he'd grabbed her from behind, holding the knife in front of her eyes
and speaking in a low voice that made her shiver even now to recall. She had a vivid memory of the knife, certainly, but of the attacker, not as much as the cops would like. They'd asked a lot of questions, being more sympathetic than she'd been led to believe was often the case, taken some photos of her wounds and gathered what physical evidence they could, before wishing her all the best, promising to let her know if anything happened, and leaving. Since then she'd had several friends visit, messages from others, not to mention word that her parents were on their way back from holiday in New Zealand, hopefully arriving very soon.

A sound at the door to the private room made her glance over. The hospital had put her in this room because they wanted to keep anyone who might upset her away, as well as allowing the police to talk to her without disturbing the other patients. As she watched the door opened and two women came in, the taller one gently closing it behind her. She inspected them curiously. The one in front had remarkable hair, silver, almost metallic, down to her shoulders, and eyes a curious amber-orange colour, something she'd never seen outside perhaps an owl. She was wearing a long leather coat down to her ankles, over her clothes. Naomi thought it suited her.

The other woman was taller, with blonde hair and beautiful green eyes. She gave Naomi a sympathetic warm look that instantly made her feel calmer. "Hello Naomi. My name is Chou. This is Azumi, a friend of mine. You may have heard of her over the last few months." Naomi's eyes went quickly back to the silver-haired girl, who had a neutral, calm expression. She nodded. "Yes. You're that magical girl who's been terrorising all the criminals around here for a while." Azumi suddenly smiled, making her forbidding appearance much less severe.

"Not all the criminals, but a considerable number of them, yes." She moved closer to the bed, indicating the chair next to it. "Do you mind?" Naomi shook her head. Azumi sat, glancing back at Chou for a second, then gazed at the woman in the bed. "We heard about your attack. I'm very sorry something like that happened, it should not have. I know the police are working on it, but I thought I would look into it as well, I might have a little more luck than them." Pulling herself up further in bed, Naomi looked at the girl for a moment, then at Chou behind her.

"Why would you do that for me?" she asked curiously. Azumi smiled again.

"Because it's the right thing to do. Aside from anything else, none of us like rapists at all. If he'd tried anything like that in Minato where there are a lot of magical girls, he'd have been lucky to make it out alive." Naomi abruptly giggled, then started crying.

"I tried to fight him off, but he had a knife. He said he'd do terrible things to me if I didn't shut up. He... violated me. Twice. Then he stabbed me anyway. Why did that happen?" she sobbed. Azumi reached out and held her hand while Chou walked around to the other side of the bed, putting her hand on the crying woman's head. Naomi felt a sudden wave of calmness, finding it much easier to deal with the remembered pain, her crying slowing and stopping. She looked at the blonde. "What did you do?" she asked.

"I temporarily altered the balance of your brain chemistry a little. It works somewhat like a tranquiliser but without any of the negative effect. The result should be you feel less emotional and overwrought for a while, hopefully long enough to get to sleep later. I hope you don't mind, you seemed very upset." Chou sat in the chair on the other side of the bed. Naomi shook her head after a few seconds.

"That's OK. Thank you. It keeps hitting me like that. I know I couldn't have done much, he was twice my size and much stronger, never mind being armed, but I can't help but feel I should have managed to fight him off, or run, or anything really. I still can't believe it happened to me." She sniffed a bit, wiping her nose with a tissue from the box Azumi handed her, picked off the table.
beside the bed. "Thanks."

Chou studied her closely, then nodded, seemingly satisfied with how whatever she'd done was working. "I would like to heal your wounds, if you're all right with that." Staring at her wide-eyed, Naomi finally nodded.

"You can do that?" she asked faintly. Azumi snickered.

"You wouldn't believe how well." Chou shot her friend a quick smile, then gently folded the covers back. Placing her hands on Naomi, she concentrated. The patient in the bed gaped as her hands glowed a pretty golden colour for a few seconds.

"All right. Not much real damage, I think you were lucky, the wounds suggest he was aiming for your liver. That would have been very bad. Luckily he missed." Naomi nodded.

"The doctor said the same thing. I'd have bled out in a few minutes, he said."

"The liver filters the blood, it has a huge blood flow through it. A stab wound there can be rapidly fatal." Chou put moved her hands around, the glow coming back. Both Azumi and Naomi watched, the former with satisfaction and the latter with awe, feeling nothing except a slight sensation of warmth. Less than a minute later the blonde smiled. "All done. The wounds were deep but didn't seem to have hit anything serious. I'll have to remove the stitches, that won't take long." Lifting the hospital gown Naomi was wearing she peeled the dressings off carefully, placing them on the floor, then bent over the three stab wounds on the girl in the bed, producing a pair of tweezers from somewhere. Once more Naomi gaped, as she cut the stitches with a hair-thin thread of golden light that seemed to be coming from her finger, then removed them. Once they were all out her hand went over the wounds, a flash of light came, and when it was removed the skin was completely unmarked.

"Holy crap," Naomi muttered, making Chou glance at her and smile.

"It can be surprising if you're not familiar with our method of healing."

One final pass and the blonde woman sat back, looking pleased. "There doesn't seem to be anything else physically wrong now. I'm sorry I can't do anything for your mental state. The effect on your brain is only temporary, it's too risky to do much more than that."

"Thank you all the same. At least I can get out of the hospital now." Naomi giggled. "I wonder what the doctors are going to say about this?" Both Chou and Azumi appeared amused.

"I suspect it could be quite funny." Azumi smiled. "Now, Naomi, I wanted to ask you some questions, if you don't mind. I know you've already probably gone over all this with the police and are sick of it, but if you could manage one last time, I'd be grateful."

"I don't mind, but I don't know what I can tell you that would help. I was walking past the pond two nights ago, about eleven I guess, coming back from town and heading for my room. I didn't hear anything but suddenly I got grabbed from behind. He was very strong. He put his arm around my neck and squeezed when I struggled, then held this huge knife in front of me, pointing at my face. I screamed but he just squeezed harder." She shivered at the recollection. "He told me to shut up or he'd stick it in me. I was so frightened..." Once again she shivered. Chou put her hand on her shoulder, looking calmly at her.

"Try to relax. He can't hurt you again, trust us. Just breathe deeply for a moment, then go on."

Glancing at her, Naomi nodded, following the instructions.
"He pulled me into the bushes, then used the knife to cut my belt. When he'd got my clothes off he hit me on the back of the head, so I fell over. I was very dizzy but didn't lose consciousness, I think, or I don't remember if I did. The next thing I knew he was... He was..." She couldn't continue. Azumi squeezed the hand she was still holding comfortingly.

"You don't have to tell us about that part. Skip to what happened next."

Naomi waited until she felt less upset, then went on with her recounting of her attack. "He stood up and looked at me lying there. I could barely see him my eyes were so blurry from crying and getting dirt in them. The pain was pretty bad as well. He said something like, "I hope the next one doesn't scream as much," or something along those lines, I can't really remember, he wasn't talking to me, more to himself. When he'd zipped himself up, he walked away, I thought he'd gone, but a minute later he came back, bent down, and just stabbed me three times. He didn't say anything, just stuck that fucking knife into me and walked off."

She started crying again for a few moments during which Azumi and Chou exchanged glances. When she recovered, she added, 'I was there for ages. I tried crawling to find help, but it hurt too much. All I could do was lie there and wait to die. I think I passed out a few times. I remember trying to stop the bleeding with what was left of my skirt, I guess it sort of worked since I'm still here. Eventually I heard footsteps, which at first I thought were him coming back to finish the job, but they went past and started to leave. I yelled as loudly as I could and that security guard came running. He found me, made a temporary bandage out of his shirt, then called the ambulance and the police. That's basically it."

"Mr Hayashi is a good man," Chou said quietly. Naomi glanced at her in surprise.

"You know him?"

"I know of his reputation. He nearly died a few months ago doing his job. He got stabbed as well. In the leg, which could have been very nasty, it only missed his femoral artery by millimetres. Azumi helped him that time." She looked at her colleague who nodded.

"I just happened to turn up at the right moment." A few seconds later, she turned back to Naomi. "Thank you. I'm sorry to have put you through that again. Can you think of anything at all you might have missed the first time? Any vague description would help, all we have to go on at the moment is basically 'a man with a knife'." She smiled a little, and Naomi, despite herself, giggled.

"Sorry. It sounds silly when you put it like that." She thought hard. "He was short. Only about my height. Very strong, even so. But I can't remember much more. I didn't see much more." She sighed. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

"Naomi?" Turning to Chou who has spoken she waited curiously. "If you will allow it, I have a technique that may help. I can use something like what I did earlier, to alter your brain chemistry a little, but in a different way. It induces a state similar to hypnosis, like some drugs do, which would aid your memory considerably, but it only works if you don't resist it. Otherwise you just end up feeling drunk and laugh a lot. Which can be amusing but isn't very useful." The blonde smiled as Naomi laughed.

"OK. If you think it will help." Even having only known the blonde for five minutes or so, there was just something about her that made her feel she could trust the woman with anything. Her reputation, which she had heard of even though she was no fan-girl, reinforced that thought. "What do I do?"

"Just relax. You'll feel very strange for a moment or two but that will pass." The woman reached
out and put her hand on Naomi's forehead. A wave of dizziness went through her, forcing her to close her eyes as the room spun momentarily. Following that was a feeling of deep calmness, as if all her fears and emotions had taken a brief holiday. Her breathing slowed, she could feel her heart-rate drop as well, as she relaxed into the bed. It was an odd sensation but rather nice. A voice sounded, eventually tearing her attention away from what she was feeling.

"Naomi? Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I feel very strange."

"Don't resist it, just stay relaxed. Now, think back to what happened two nights ago. Remember it's over, he can't hurt you, you're safe, but also remember anything else you can about it. Can you do that?"

Naomi was silent for a moment. "Yes. I was walking home past the pond. I heard a noise, faint, coming from my left behind me. Someone walking fast. Then, his arm around my neck." The memories were more intense but less worrying than they had been, she noticed with detached curiosity. "He smelled of sweat, soap, and something else. Something vaguely familiar." She paused again. "Horses. He smelled of horses. Faintly, like he'd showered, but it was there."

"Are you sure?" Azumi sounded intrigued.

"Yes. I tried riding for a while when I was younger, but I turned out to be allergic to horses and had to stop, none of the allergy drugs worked very well."

"Go on."

"He pulled me into the bushes after threatening me with that knife. His voice was quite deep. He sounded older than me, maybe late twenties, early thirties?"

"Could you make out any regional accent? Any distinctive speech patterns?" Chou asked softly. She thought carefully.

"I think he might have had a southern accent, something like Okayama or somewhere around there. Not Osaka, or Kobe, I'm from there and it wasn't the same. But not from Tokyo either."

"OK, good. Now, how about the knife. Can you describe it?"

"Some sort of military knife. Like a dagger. Both edges were sharpened. It didn't look like anything I'd seen before."

"Think hard. How big was it? Was it shiny, or blackened? Could you see any markings on it?"

"The edges were shiny, but the blade was black. About sixteen, maybe eighteen centimetres long. Some sort of writing along the part of the blade nearest the handle, in English lettering. I couldn't make it out."

Azumi sounded pleased. "Very good. Anything else?"

"The handle looked like it was wrapped in leather, black leather."

"Great. Now, what happened next?"

"He pushed me to the ground, then cut my belt, pulled my skirt off, and everything else. He was muttering to himself the whole time."
"Can you remember what he was saying?" Naomi, in her dream-like state, thought back to that night, on some level very grateful that her emotions seemed to be deadened. Otherwise she couldn't have stood the memories.

"Something like 'You owe me. They all owe me. Bitches, never letting me have sex with them, after all I've done. All the same.'" Chou sighed softly.

"What a deluded individual."

"There was a lot of that sort of thing, he wasn't talking to me, I think, just himself. Lots of swearing."

"Did anything he say give any hint as to where he might work, or live, that you can remember?" The voice of the silver-haired girl was intent but calm. Naomi shook her head slightly, trying to remember.

"I don't think so. Just insults and swearing."

"OK." She was silent for a moment. "You can skip the actual attack, there's no need to go over that again. What happened afterwards?"

"He zipped his jeans up, then just walked off, still mumbling to himself. I could hear his footsteps going away, but after a while they stopped, there was a long pause, and he came back. I was lying on the ground on my back where he'd left me, crying. He stood next to me for a while, all I could see were his shoes, then he bent down and stabbed me. I think he was smiling. I screamed and he ran."

Both magical girls said nothing for a while. Eventually Azumi asked, "Can you remember anything about his shoes, and any other details about his clothes?"

"Black jeans, expensive ones. The shoes were... very high end, I think. Something you'd normally wear to an event of some sort, not just for walking around in every day. That's weird, now that I come to think of it. I think he had a leather jacket on as well, I could feel it against my back when he grabbed me."

"Anything about his appearance other than short and late twenties or early thirties?"

"Not really. Dark hair, but it was dark and I couldn't see if it was brown or black, and I couldn't see his eye colour either."

"Thank you, Naomi. That helps a lot. I'm going to stop the technique now, you may feel dizzy again for a moment, so be ready." Chou spoke gently, reaching out and touching her forehead. The feeling this time was much less intense but still noticeable. She gasped slightly as the full impact of her earlier words hit all at once, opening her eyes and staring at the blonde woman, who smiled back. "Relax. It will pass quickly."

"That was... weird. And remarkable. I didn't think I could remember anything that detailed. Before you did whatever it was you did all I could recall about the knife was that it was big and aimed at my throat." Naomi shivered a little. Chou nodded, looking pleased.

"It's a powerful method but it only really works under specific circumstances. Luckily this was one of them."

"I didn't tell the police much of that. They should know." She looked at the two girls, who exchanged glances then nodded.
"I expect they'll come back later for a follow-up interview. You should tell them what you told us, I would think that you'll remember it clearly now." Chou smiled once more, standing up. "Thank you for helping us."

Naomi looked at them in wonder. "You helped me more." Reaching down she felt her abdomen, running her fingers over the unmarked skin with renewed surprise. "A lot more." Chou joined Azumi near the door, both of them smiling slightly.

"It was no trouble. I would advise trying to get some sleep now, your body will need to rebuild it's reserves after the healing. Good-bye, Naomi, and try not to let what happened scare you away from men in general. Most of them are decent people." Azumi opened the door as Chou spoke, looking out, then leaving with one last wave, the blonde woman following. The door shut with a faint click leaving Naomi alone with her thoughts. She fell asleep with her hand still on where the wound had been.

Leaving the hospital still under the influence of the cloak effect her sister was producing, the disguised Nabiki was feeling cold fury. "That poor girl. I want this bastard."

"We'll find him," 'Chou' said comfortingly, putting her hand on her sister's shoulder. "We know a lot more now. A man, probably around thirty, short, strong, wearing expensive clothes and nice shoes, has something to do with horses, most likely from the south, using a specialist military knife with English writing on the blade. Also a very bad attitude towards women, but that we could infer from him being a rapist in the first place. He's escalating fast as well, which is worrying. The first attack, he ran when he was disturbed, not to mention he didn't apparently use a weapon. This one, he tried to kill the girl. I fear next time he'll do a better job."

"There won't be a next time," 'Azumi' growled. "I'm going hunting."

"We'll help if you like," 'Chou' replied, looking very dangerous for a moment. Her sister glanced at her and nodded.

"Thank you. But I want to deal with him myself."

"Of course. It's your territory." 'Azumi' shot the other woman a slight quick smile.

"You make it sound like we're a bunch of leopards hunting an antelope." 'Chou' giggled.

"Oh, my, nothing like that." She paused for a couple of steps. "We're much more dangerous than leopards..." Both of them laughed. "We could simply turn our information over to the police, you know. They could probably track him down with it." The blonde woman looked calmly at her sister, who shook her head.

"They can have him after I've had a word first." She looked back, as 'Chou' nodded, smiling slightly, then glanced back at the hospital. "How much will she remember?"

"She'll recall everything the memory technique brought back, but not very much of what else happened. It will be like a dream, I suspect, when she wakes up. I thought it was best not to leave too many traces of us behind in case we have to do something... significant."

"Good idea. Right, I'm off to do some research. I'll call you when I have a lead on our little rapey friend." Giving her sister a quick smile of gratitude, 'Azumi' ran towards the nearest building, leaped up the side in a blur, then vanished over the roof. Watching her go, 'Chou' smiled affectionately, before heading home.
"Are you all right, Nabiki?" Miki looked at her friend with concern. The brunette had been even more reserved than usual, not sad like she had been a couple of weeks ago when she got back from wherever she'd been, more like she was stewing over something that made her very angry. Looking up from her ramen, the other woman smiled slightly after a moment.

"I'm fine, thanks, Miki. Just thinking about something I need to work out." She shook her head a little, looking momentarily irritated. "I have all the pieces but there's one bit missing, like a puzzle. Annoying."

"Anything I can help with?"

Nabiki sighed. "I don't think so, but thank you for the offer. Don't worry, I'll get it." She cheered up a little. "How did your exams go?"

"Pretty well, I think. At least there won't be any more of those for a couple of months after tomorrow!" Miki grinned. "I like my work but I'll also like being able to relax for a while." Laughing, Nabiki agreed with her. They were still talking when John slid into the booth next to his girlfriend, giving her a quick kiss then motioning to the waitress who nodded and brought over a menu. He ordered quickly, handing it back.

"Where have you been?" Miki asked. "You said you'd be here at five. It's now," she made a show of checking her watch, "half past." Raising an eyebrow she waited, making Nabiki giggle and John look back with amusement.

"Sorry, I got involved with my last class, then lost track of the time talking to some friends. I ran all the way here when I realised how late it was! I deserve a kiss for that." Turning his cheek to her he grinned as she sighed loudly, but kissed him anyway. The eye away from Miki winked at Nabiki, who covered her answering grin by bending over her bowl.

"I'll forgive you. Have you talked to your parents yet?" She glanced at Nabiki. "We thought I'd go and stay with him for a couple of days since he lives closer than my family, then I'd go home until we meet up again."

"I did. They're happy about it, I think my mother is quite keen to meet you. Possibly a little too keen, if you understand. Be warned..." Miki giggled, hugging him for a moment but letting go when his food arrived. He dove in after thanking the waitress. She watched him shovelling food down like he hadn't eaten in days, exchanging an amused look with her friend, then went back to eating herself. "Oh. I don't know if you heard, but that bastard tried again early this morning. The girl managed to run when she spotted him, but it was close. Apparently he chased her for a couple of hundred metres before someone else came by and scared him off. At least they got a better description this time, although whether it will be enough..." Nabiki froze, looking at John, trying not to react in the way she wanted to. The ramen shop didn't deserve what would most likely happen if she did.

"Where?" she asked in a low, dangerous voice. Both her friends looked at her in slight shock, that tone was genuinely scary for a moment. They exchanged a glance while Nabiki forced herself calm, using a touch of the soul of ice, trying not to cause her ramen to freeze in the process.
"Um, over past the computing studies building where it backs onto the park," John replied after a long moment. "About half-past five this morning. She was apparently out for a run before class, good thing in a sense, she could run really fast. Faster than him at any rate." He studied the brunette carefully. "Are you OK? You don't have to be scared, we'll all be leaving here in a day or two. I'm sure the police will catch him pretty soon, before we get back for next term." For a moment Nabiki genuinely couldn't work out what he meant. Why would she be scared? It was Rapey the Dwarf who was going to be in trouble. Eventually she understood his point, nodding with a sigh.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I just really don't like rapists." Miki shivered, clutching her boyfriends arm, making him put it protectively around her.

"Neither do I. I'm glad we'll be leaving soon. I like this university but some of the attraction goes away knowing that there's someone like that out there." Somewhat subdued, the trio continued eating, deliberately changing the subject to something lighter. Twenty minutes later Nabiki made a show of looking at her redundant watch.

"Well, I have to get back and start packing up. I want to be ready to go tomorrow as soon as I've finished the last tests and the paperwork."

"Make sure you come and say bye before you go, OK?" John said. Miki nodded.

"I will. I'll see you guys later." Waving to her friends Nabiki paid up, then left the ramen restaurant. Five minutes later she was standing on top of the computing studies building, as 'Azumi', her coat waving in the light breeze, looking into the small park behind the university.

# Nabiki, based on the information from the police report, the area the attacker was seen in is there. # Jun dropped a glowing outline around part of the park. # It appears he chased the intended victim along this path until she evaded him here. # Another icon blinked in a different colour. # We should check for any traces left which could add to the information we already have from the previous victim. Identification of the attacker may be possible if anything further can be found. The description given by the new victim matches a subset of the data we received previously. # She nodded, unsurprised the SI had already acquired the official police report. It found normal so-called secure computer systems anything but. Even the MoD in the UK hadn't taken more than a second or two to crack, which had proven very useful.

Walking to the edge of the four story building she walked off it without breaking step, landing easily in a manner that even a few months ago would have made her gape. Now, she simply knew she could do it and didn't think all that much about it. A number of students who were walking around enjoying the early evening stopped and stared, though. None of them said anything to her, a couple of large young men scrambling to get out her way as she walked steadily towards the park, something in her eyes suggesting she wasn't in a chatty mood, although she could hear someone saying in awe, "That's Azumi. The local magical girl! Did you see that? She just dropped off the building like she was walking down the stairs." Smiling coldly she left the campus and entered the park, heading for the site the SI had identified.

There were signs the police forensics team had searched the area thoroughly before she got there, which was expected. She was hoping she'd find something they missed. Walking slowly back and forth with the SI scanning the site through her senses, she probed for anything out of place. Stopping at one point behind a large bush, 'Azumi' looked down, then knelt, inspecting the way the grass was pressed flat. 'Someone was lying here,' she said to Jun. 'For some time, I think.' Carefully searching the area, she found nothing, then lay down in the same position she thought the unknown person had been in. It came as no surprise to find this gave a perfect view of the area of the park the attempted attack had taken place in. From the other side of the bush it was doubtful
anyone could have seen anything.

'Definitely him.' Sniffing carefully, she could make out a scent of sweat and some sort of soap, below which was a trace of horse, just as Naomi had said. Asking Jun to enhance her sense of smell in the same way as it could process sight and vision, she gagged a little when it complied. This ability was one she'd worked out very soon after the mugger in the tunnel incident, but rarely used as so many things smelled awful when it was turned on. It wasn't nearly as effective in relative terms as the hearing and vision enhancements, a human nose just wasn't that good, but it certainly made a considerable difference. Idly wondering if Kasumi or Ranma could come up with a form with a better nose, she carefully sniffed. "Ick," she mumbled, wrinkling her nose. The enhanced scents were mostly rather unpleasant.

'Horse, definitely. Several different ones, I think. Some sort of soap, scented with mint, plus that sweaty smell. That's him. At least I'll know him when I find the bastard.'

#I have recorded the scent data, Nabiki. I can provide a positive match should we come across it again.#

'Thanks, Jun. So, he lay here for a while. Maybe an hour or more, I think, considering the grass is still flat hours later. He sees the girl coming, waits for her to go past, then gets up and tries to sneak up and grab her. She sees him and runs for it, escaping after a couple of hundred metres.'

'Azumi' stood, looking at the depression in the grass, then around at the immediate vicinity. There was some small amount of garbage around the place, evidence of students enjoying themselves in the past, but nothing that stuck out as important. 'The police must have searched this area thoroughly anyway, so if there was anything critical it's likely they would have found it.'

#There is nothing listed in the police report.#

'We already know he's pretty careful. Condoms used, that sort of thing. He's not stupid, just depraved.'

#I would suggest the obvious next move is to search the area around where the intended victim evaded the attacker. We may be able to locate his exit path and follow it.#

'OK, let's have a look.' She walked around the bush, following the likely path the attacker had taken, just in case. Nothing seemed useful. Jogging easily through the park she kept scanning, until she arrived at the second site.

#The victim reported this as the point a passer-by caused the attacker to veer off and make his escape. The victim continued in that direction, the attacker fled to the west.# Jun displayed indicators as it spoke to illustrate its words. She nodded slightly, heading in the relevant direction. A lot of bootprints showed the police had done much the same. Annoyingly this made her task more involved, but a little work by Jun managed to come up with a visual filter that could identify and process out the prints that were irrelevant. Once more she was surprised and grateful for how amazingly useful the device was. Walking slowly along she scanned the ground in front of her, for nearly three hundred metres, until a partial boot-print flashed at her as Jun highlighted it.

#This print does not match any of the police-issue ones, Nabiki. The depth and angle suggests the wearer was running. The direction is also correct for a suspect fleeing the crime scene.#

'Good. That helps. Let's see if we can find more.' She resumed walking. Another hundred metres passed before she found another print. The ground was quite hard as it had been warm with little rain for weeks, which made this whole thing very difficult. In all likelihood the police hadn't spotted either print. Their own seemed to taper off a few tens of metres before the one Jun had
located. ‘Same direction, and also running.’ There was another one ten metres further on, from the other foot, then three in a row where a damp patch in the earth showed an underground water source, possibly a small spring.

#This is useful data.# Jun said immediately. #The distance between the prints relative to their size suggests the attacker is approximately one hundred and sixty-five centimetres tall and was moving at a fast run. The depth indicates a weight of between eighty and one hundred kilograms. Without calibration for ground density it is difficult to be more precise.#

'It's still very useful. Thanks. So, short, heavy for his size, Naomi said he was very strong, so probably not fat. Well muscled then.'

#He had also been moving at a considerable speed for a non-enhanced human male for over a kilometre by this point, which suggests an individual with good physical stamina.#

'Possibly he works out, or is an athlete of some sort.'

#That theory fits the observed data.# She continued walking, heading in the direction the man had gone. He had apparently gone in more or less a straight line from the site of the attack, which made her reassess her thought that the man was fairly smart. It didn't seem a bright idea under the circumstances. Eventually she left the park and found herself on an under-used back street, where after some searching faint traces of the same bootprints could be found. Only Jun being able to process her vision and massively enhance the contrast brought out the marks at all. The visual effect was very strange but it made all the tiny differences in shade on the concrete stand out quite nicely.

The prints stopped at a point a single tire track could be seen. #It would appear that the attacker had a motorcycle parked here. He seems to have accelerated away at a considerable speed based on the length of the skid mark,# Jun commented helpfully. #I doubt we can track him past this point.# 'Azumi' muttered irritably under her breath. Looking around she hoped for some sort of security camera Jun could pull images from, but there was nothing apparent.

'Damn. I'd hoped this would be the break we needed.'

#We have derived considerable useful information from this exercise,# the SI said, sounding satisfied. #The attacker is short for a male, well muscled, probably very physically fit, possesses a high end motor-cycle based on the width of the tire track, is involved with horses in some capacity, wears clothing suggesting a high status income, and is smart enough to take precautions to prevent identifying traces being left on his victims, although apparently not sufficiently intelligent to take evasive action when fleeing the scene.#

'You noticed that as well, then?' 'Azumi' asked it with amusement. It replied in much the same tone.

#Yes, it would be difficult not to. He would have appeared to have panicked when surprised by a pedestrian and simply bolted for safety. That is not the mark of a practised attacker, or one possessed of good survival instincts.# Following one last look around in case she'd missed anything, 'Azumi' retraced her steps, keeping an eye out for any evidence they might have missed. Unfortunately there was nothing. When she was nearly back to the point she'd started at, Kasumi called.

"Hello, sister. I was wondering how your search was going."

"Not as well as I'd like but not too bad. He tried it again this morning just after dawn, but
Fortunately the victim managed to escape."

"Oh, my. That's not good. It was months between the first attack and the second, but only two days until the third. This is a dangerous individual." 'Azumi' sighed heavily.

"I know, that's what I'm worried about. For all I know he's already trying again. It's still pretty light out, so I suppose it's not likely, but even so I'm worried."

"What do you want to do? We could try setting a trap for him, I suppose. Some poor defenceless girl walking alone in the dark..." Her sister snickered as Kasumi giggled.

"Wouldn't he get a surprise! No, the problem with that idea is that we have no idea where he'll strike again or when. He might not repeat his attack for weeks, or he might already be doing it now. All the attack sites we know about are within a kilometre of the university but there's no guarantee he attends here or works here. It might just be a convenient place to find young women."

"Indeed. Send me all the information you have and Ranma and I will look over it to see if we can come up with any insights."

"Thanks, sis." 'Azumi' transmitted a file of the entire search, as well as the police report.

"All right, we'll look over it right now and get back to you if we have any ideas. Good luck, Nabiki."

"Bye, Kasumi." Once her sister had disconnected, 'Azumi' looked around, then sighed once more in momentary defeat, heading back to her rooms. A few students that noticed her pointed her out to their friends, talking as she left the area.

"Hello, Nabiki. We were just about to call you. I think we might have located this person." Nabiki grinned in triumph.

"I think I did as well. You're talking about Shigeo Yasuhiro, aren't you?" She dismissed most of the sub-windows cluttering her visual field, leaving the one with data on the person in question.

"Indeed we are. He fits the description perfectly. An active athlete, he is an accomplished rider, who takes part in international equestrian competitions. He's twenty-nine years old, is know to collect European militaria, which fits the knife although it's rather a silly mistake to use something so identifiable, and MLIT records indicate he has a late-model Kawasaki motorcycle registered in Okayama prefecture, although he now lives in Setagaya. From a well-off background, his parents are quite wealthy. And, a very interesting addendum is that he attended Nihon University College of Commerce, graduating with a reasonable degree in Business Studies five years ago."

"That's him. Your SI is as good at ignoring security measures as Jun is." Kasumi giggled.

"Nao is remarkably effective, yes. Sometimes I feel a little guilty. The SI units are clearly designed for intelligence work amongst other things." Nabiki nodded, getting up off her bed and looking out the window into the darkness, illuminated by street-lights and a few still-lit buildings.

"I came to that conclusion some time ago. It works out very well for me personally. Anyway, we probably have the right person. It should be easy enough to confirm it. I want to deal with this before he strikes again, assuming he hasn't done already. Jun is monitoring the traffic cameras around this entire area, if he uses his motorcycle we've got him. Do you think we should wait for that to pan out or go looking for him?"
"Aiko and Ranma have already gone to check his address, in case he's there. If he is they'll call you before doing anything. When they get back we'll meet you with the others on the roof of your building, we can be ready to move if he turns up there. I suspect he may well do. That type of person is unlikely to be able to handle failure, so since he didn't manage to complete his attack this morning, I suspect he might try again tonight."

"I kind of thought that seemed likely. OK, I'm on my way up." She disconnected and left her room, activating the bracelet on the way in case anyone saw her. It was nearly two AM so most of the residents were asleep but there was always the possibility, which she wanted to avoid, so she wouldn't have to answer any questions. In the end no one seemed to be about. On the roof she walked to the edge and looked over, wondering where this Yasuhiro man was now and what he was doing. A few minutes later she felt some familiar ki signatures appear behind her. 'Yori' walked over and joined her, looking at the university campus and the buildings beyond it.

"We'll get him, don't worry," she said, putting her hand on her sister-in-law's shoulder. "We've got the right man. There's enough evidence in his apartment to prove that. These attacks are only three out of probably six or seven, he's got various trophies that show he's done it before." Nabiki glanced at the other woman, shimmering into 'Azumi' in the process.

"All we have to do is find the bastard."

#That is now easy, Nabiki,# Jun interjected, sounding pleased. #The motorcycle registered to Mr Shigeo Yasuhiro just passed a traffic camera five kilometres to the south-west, heading in this direction at just under the speed limit. He will arrive at the university in less than five minutes assuming he does not divert from his current course.# A terrible grin slowly crossed 'Azumi's' face, matched moments later by six others as she passed the message along. Seven young woman turned to face west, waiting patiently for their prey to arrive.

Shigeo slowed down as he reached the outskirts of the university, looking around carefully for anyone who might be watching. He couldn't see anyone, but he circled his chosen point twice before he felt comfortably sure he was unobserved. The large bike was surprisingly quiet at low revs, a feature he took full advantage of as he pulled into a back alley heading down behind a row of houses on the north side of the campus, one street over. When he found a suitably dark corner away from street-lights he stopped, backing the bike in and putting it on it's stand, then turning the ignition off. Taking his helmet off he listened carefully until he was sure it was all quiet.

Getting off the bike he locked his helmet to the back, then started walking towards the university, keeping a wary eye out for pedestrians. Once or twice he stopped and melted into the shadows as someone passed. Unobserved, as far as he was aware, he entered the grounds of the university on the opposite side to the park he'd nearly been seen at that morning, just to be careful.

He didn't see the two women watching him from a short distance away, although to be fair, even in full daylight he would have missed them as well. As he entered the grassy campus, working his way from shadow to shadow, they ghosted completely silently after him.

He gave the area around the pond in the middle of the campus a wide berth as well, in case anyone was watching. The grounds of the university were quite extensive, so even by avoiding the areas he'd struck in before he still had plenty of possible hunting areas. He wasn't in a good mood, the aborted hunt that morning had left him irritable and edgy all day, causing a few of the small number of friends he had to comment on it. One of them had commented enough that he felt obliged to punch him in the face, which had led to a bit of a scuffle. Which in turn led to the blackened right eye he touched every now and then with a wince.
Hearing someone walking towards him along the path, Shigeo stopped dead, then quickly moved into the deepest shadow he could find. The person, dressed in the uniform of the university security department, walked slowly by, looking carefully around and occasionally pointing his flashlight at things. Pulling back further into the shadows of the small outbuilding he was standing behind, Shigeo waited for the man to pass, mentally urging him to get on with it. Eventually he did. Waiting another thirty seconds to be sure he wasn't coming back, the dark haired man looked around then continued in the opposite direction.

The two invisible women had been joined by another one, but he was unaware of this. They conferred without moving their lips, then split up, one circling around in front while the other two continued following their target.

"What do you think? We could certainly try a trap now, he's clearly looking for a suitable victim. Or would you like to just jump him? He's got no idea we're here." 'Azumi' was standing on top of the business school watching the figure of Shigeo through three different sets of eyes. Beside her, Tamiko and Aiko had the same view. Fumiko was over on the computer studies building also watching.

"Not sure. I want this meeting to be one he never forgets, that much I am sure of, but I'm in two minds about the best way to do that." She looked over the edge of the roof, watching the man through her own eyes for a moment. "He seems to know his way around. Do you think he's looking for a particular type of woman, or just one on her own away from people?"

"None of the women he attacked looked much like each other, so I suspect he's merely trying to find someone in a place he can attack without being caught." 'Chou's' voice sounded mildly irritated, which her sister knew covered a deep anger. "Personally, if you really want to scare him properly, I think it might be a good idea to give him what he wants."

"Something feminine, weak, and good looking? An easy target?"

"Precisely. Would you like to play the part?"

The middle Tendo grinned in a manner that would have made a hungry tiger become an instant vegetarian. "Oh, so very much."

The clicking of high heels on the path coming at right angles to the one Shigeo was following made his ears perk metaphorically up. Stopping, he listened carefully, then looked around. A short distance away was a small maintenance shed. Hurrying over to it he inspected it for a moment, finding that tonight was his lucky day, as the door was unlocked. Opening it he peered inside, risking a small amount of light from a tiny flashlight he had in his pocket next to his favourite combat knife. The shed was, except for a rusty lawnmower and a few rakes hanging from the walls, empty. Perfect. Closing the door as gently as he could he went back towards the path, picking a spot behind a large tree. His black clothing and leather jacket blended in to the shadows very well if he stood still, which he did, waiting and watching.

The sound of the heels got closer and louder, until a young woman came into view around the corner. She was walking quite fast, looking around nervously, clutching a purse to her chest. When she walked under a street light he saw she was about his height, something that annoyed him, with a large chest that bounced with every step, a short skirt, and those shoes. She looked like she'd been on a night out. Looking around he couldn't see anyone else anywhere in the vicinity. It was his lucky night. This was going to be easy.
As she passed he quietly stepped out behind her, falling in twenty metres back. She kept walking, not noticing that there was anyone around for a while. Suddenly, she stopped, listening. He faded back into the shadows of a tree in a practised move. The girl looked over her shoulder, listened some more, then started walking again a little faster. He followed, speeding up slightly. She seemed to hear something, abruptly looking over her shoulder at him with wide eyes. With a shriek of terror she suddenly bolted, making him curse under his breath and give chase. The girl was surprisingly fast but with those shoes it was a foregone conclusion. Overtaking her he grabbed her by the shoulder, spinning her around and grabbing her other arm, squeezing unmercifully. She screamed.

"Shut up, bitch!" he snarled, reaching into his pocket and removing the knife, flicking the sheath off onto the ground with a quick flip of his wrist. He held the blade up to her eyes. "Or I'll cut your tongue out." With a gasp of fear she went completely still, staring at him in horror. Satisfied, he stepped back. "Don't move. We already know I'm faster than you." Keeping one eye on her in case she tried anything, Shigeo quickly knelt and picked up the sheath, putting it in his belt, then grabbed the girl again, who seemed almost catatonic with fear. "Come on. Time for fun." He started dragging her back towards the maintenance shed, which seemed to spark some resistance, as she began struggling and crying.

Once more he thrust the knife at her, snarling in anger. When she only struggled harder he sighed and prodded her in the ribs with the tip, not pressing too hard as he knew from past experience how easily the dagger could penetrate flesh. He didn't want to kill her before he had his fun. Necrophilia was sick.

She stopped struggling instantly, making him smile. "That's it, little girl. You stay quiet and we can get this done soon. Come on, let's go." This time she offered little resistance. Pulling her over to the shed he opened the door, pushing her inside, then followed, closing the door behind him. There was a long silence, before the screaming started.

Any witnesses would have been surprised by the tone of the screams, which sounded wrong. They would have been more surprised when the door burst open and Shigeo, jeans around his ankles, scrambled out backwards on his rear, staring in total horror into the shed, which was illuminated a leaf green colour from inside. "Get away!" he shouted in complete terror. "What are you?" Sliding backwards he managed to get to his feet, hopping and stumbling, until he kicked his jeans off and sprinted away, naked below the waist except for his boots, which somehow in his terror he'd managed to pull through the legs of his jeans. What followed him out of the shed wasn't the young woman he'd taken inside, except in part, as she had not possessed nearly as many tentacles, or teeth that size, never mind the glowing red eyes. The thing laughed in the voice of an amused young woman and ran after him, surrounded by a green aura.

"Shigeo, love, come back! We only just started! Shigeo!" He screamed and ran faster. How did it know his name? What the hell was it? Charging past several students who watched in bemusement as a terrified half-naked man ran by, he looked frantically around for some avenue of escape. Somehow, he had to evade that thing and get back to his bike.

'A demon. It has to be a demon,' he thought as he ran. 'I thought those things stayed in Minato. Why is it here?' A call of Shigeo! came from somewhere behind, making him dart to the left and run as fast as he could, summoning up reserves of strength he didn't realise he possessed. Pelting past the library he headed for the business school, which would then leave him with a clear path to where he'd left the bike. Just as he went around the right side of the library building, two women walked out of the entrance and across his path, nearly making him run into them. They stared at him, then smiled horribly, and changed. Shigeo gaped, urine spattering his boots, before he screamed in a voice that would have done a tortured soul proud and ran like the wind, his heart hammering in his
ears.

Three cries of Shigeo! went up behind him, making him nearly lose control of his bowels as well as his bladder. Three glowing things chased him, green, orange, and purple auras flaming.

Lights were coming on in the dormitories as students looked out their windows to see what was going on, what with all the screaming and so forth. They gaped at the sight, talking amongst themselves, wondering what on earth was happening.

By the time he reached his bike, there were seven of the unholy creatures hot on his tail. Panting, exhausted, terrified, and covered in his own bodily fluids, he staggered around the corner of the alley and headed towards his bike, his keys in his hand, luckily having been in the pocket of his jacket which by some miracle he was still wearing. He thought he might have lost them, at least temporarily, as he hadn't heard one of them call out for a few minutes. Moments before he reached his bike he suddenly hit something that bounced him onto his back on the ground, rolling around in agony as he held his nose.

"What the fuck?" he almost cried. This was too much. Crawling towards the bike, his pride and joy, he found he couldn't approach closer than a couple of metres. Some invisible wall prevented it. Hammering on it and shrieking obscenities, he didn't hear the footsteps behind him until the voice spoke.

"Hello, Shigeo Yasuhiro. You've been a very bad person." Jumping to his feet with a yell, he whirled as fast as he could in his exhausted state. Behind him was standing a young woman with silver hair, wearing a long black leather coat. Arrayed behind her were six of the slavering monsters, tentacles reaching out for him. He fainted.

When he came around, he saw she was still standing there looking at him expressionlessly, although the things were gone. She took a step forward. "That was quite rude. You upset my friends. You really don't want to do that."

"Who... are you?" Shigeo gasped out, feeling like the entirety of the world as he knew it had been pulled out from under him in the last half hour.

"I'm someone who does not like rapists. I'm someone who will make your life a living hell unless you confess everything to the police. Everything. Do you understand me? I know about what you did to Naomi. I know about what you did to Akemi. I know about what you tried to do to Sora. I even know about the little mementoes you have in that locked box hidden under the floorboards at the back of your spare bedroom closet. You will confess, and you will accept what happens, or I and my friends will visit you again. Over and over. Forever." By the time she stopped talking he had soiled himself again. There was something in the way she spoke that made him believe every word.

"Trust me, you don't want to make me do that. Or my friends. They're much worse than I am. So much worse..." She smiled, which was the most horrifying thing he'd ever seen.

"Stand up." He did, after some effort. "Turn around." Once more he followed the instructions without any thought of disobedience. A strong slippery something wrapped itself around his throat, while two more held his arms out to the sides. He gibbered in terror, knowing they belonged to nothing human. "I think, as a gesture of how serious I am, you should watch your bike very carefully." The voice was so cold he could literally feel the chill around his feet. Staring at his prized motorcycle, he saw a glowing yellow sphere of energy fade into view around it, at the point he'd hit something invisible. It slowly began to contract.
As it contacted the bike, there were some crunching noises. They continued steadily as the sphere of energy shrank slowly, crushing the bike smaller and smaller. The woman, or whatever she was, behind him, spoke in a cold conversational tone as he stared in disbelief. "This could easily be you. Think about that. Think long and hard, then decide how you will spend the rest of your life. However long that is." By now the remains of the bike were a spherical mass of metal and plastic only half a metre or so across. The golden sphere stopped contracting, there was a pause, then a marble-sized ball of bright green light came past his left shoulder with a whine, entering the larger golden ball, which erupted into a brilliant flash of light with a bass thump like the footfall of a god. When he could see again there was nothing left except a glowing spot on the ground.

"Good-bye, Shigeo Yasuhiro. Pray we never meet again." The world flickered and he suddenly felt sicker than he'd ever felt in his life. Dropping to his knees he puked until he thought his colon would come up. Dimly heard voices eventually resolved into someone asking him if he was all right. He looked up, tears in his eyes, to see a pair of policemen staring at him in shock. Behind them was the Setagaya district main police station.

Corporal Yonai was very surprised when the half-naked man who they had just found in front of the station, looking like he'd been thrown out of hell for being too filthy, fell prone and clasped his feet. He exchanged a glance with his colleague. He was more surprised when the man shrieked, "Please arrest me! Please! I raped seven women and tried to kill the last one. Don't let them get me. The monsters, keep them away. Please..." He trailed off into incoherent whimpers. The corporal looked up, feeling something out of place, to see the figure of a woman with silver hair standing on the roof of the parking structure across the road, smiling in a peculiar manner, her long coat rippling around her in the wind. Turning to his companion, he opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head.

When he looked back, the woman was gone.

When they appeared in the middle of the practice room in the apartment building, six people stared at the seventh one in silent wonder for a long few seconds. Nabiki looked back, smiling slightly. "What?" she asked, amused. Ranma glanced at Kasumi, who shrugged a little. Walking over to the middle sister, he put his hands on her shoulders, looked at her for a moment, then hugged her hard.

"I'm so proud."

She giggled, pushing him away. "Idiot."

"That was absolutely brilliant. Better than anything I've come up with so far. I can do the terror part pretty damn well, but the psychological warfare...? I bow before the master." He did precisely that, followed a moment later by the others. Misaki spoiled it by laughing. Shortly they were all screaming with laughter, leaning against each other.

"How the hell did you think of that?" Fumiko asked, when they finally recovered.

"I used to read horror stories when I was young," Nabiki said, grinning. "Lovecraft, King, Smith, lots of them. It probably had an unhealthy affect on my impressionable mind." This set them off again.

"Kas has done some pretty awesome things with the illusion, so have I, but what you came up with was incredible." Ranma shook his head, sitting cross-legged on the floor, while inspecting Nabiki admiringly. "I'm going to have to remember that. I bet I can top it with some work." He grinned. Kasumi laughed.
"She's going to be very good when she manages to work it on her own. We may have created a monster."

"We created seven of them earlier. Shigeo seemed impressed."

"That's one way to put it." Nabiki laughed. "I have a feeling that he's not likely to re-offend. Ever." She got up, smiling to herself. "That was more fun than I thought it would be. Thanks for all the help, you guys. I couldn't have done it without you."

"No problem, Nabs, any time, you know that." Ranma smiled at her. The others added similar sentiments.

"Don't..." she began.

"Call her Nabs," everyone else chorused, then broke down laughing once more. She watched her extended family with admiration and pride.

"...Yasuhiro has confessed to seven serious sexual assaults, attempted murder, carrying an offensive weapon without a permit, and possession of narcotics. Charges have been laid against him for all of these offences, but the date for a trial has not yet been established as he is currently undergoing a psychiatric examination to determine his competence to stand trial. Sources indicate that while there is little doubt that he did indeed commit these crimes due to plentiful evidence found both on his person and at his residence, he appears to be in a fragile mental state and may not be fit to stand trial for some time."

"The same sources tell us that he claims to have been chased for a considerable time around the Nihon University campus by up to seven horrible tentacled monsters from hell, led by a demon queen, which, while a colourful quotation, does not seem to be backed up by any evidence. There was a disturbance on the campus at approximately half past two this morning, with multiple witnesses stating they saw Mr Yasuhiro running, screaming, through the middle of the university grounds, but there is no clear description of what, if anything, was chasing him. Police have asked their counterparts in Minato to enquire if any of the magical girl groups could possibly look into the possibility of demonic involvement, as the apparent local Setagaya magical girl, Azumi Ito, could not be contacted." Nabiki giggled furiously as she watched the local news on her internal viewer, making a couple of students near her look at her with odd expressions.

"Sergeant Tetsuo Harada, who is the unofficial magical girl liaison officer for a large part of the ward of Minato, has told us that he requested the help of Yori and Chou, two magical girls who have something of a reputation for troubleshooting unusual problems, having even helped the governments of the UK and Canada in recent months. They investigated and he passed on their message that they could find no evidence of demon activity in the area. Citizens can rest easily knowing that they are safe." This caused her to almost slide out of her seat with hilarity, trying desperately to keep the laughter quiet, although the lecturer glared at her. Miki looked over with some concern, her friend had been acting oddly all day, although at least she seemed in a much better mood than had been the case the last few days.

"Miss Naomi Okuma, a student at the university and the last victim of Mr Yasuhiro, left hospital today after making a miraculous recovery from the serious stab wounds she received during the assault. Her parents returned early from a vacation in New Zealand to be with her last night. Mr Okuma has praised the hospital for their remarkable work, although Doctor Shinko, the surgeon in charge of her case, has expressed considerable puzzlement about how quickly she seems to have healed. Multiple tests to determine the reason have been inconclusive."
Reports of a loud explosion on a street to the north of the campus have been put down to students with a large firework. Police say they found no evidence that could be used to charge anyone, and that it was unconnected with the Yasuhiro case. Still giggling, Nabiki turned the TV feed off as the reporter went on to a story about some technology company going into administration. Turning her attention back to the final class of the semester, she grinned as the lecturer handed out the results of their last test, on which she had topped the class, Miki coming second. She was in an extremely good mood. Leaving the class with the other students, she waited for the other woman to join her.

"What the hell was so funny in there, Nabiki?" Miki asked when they'd made their escape from the building. Nabiki chuckled.

"It's kind of hard to explain. Maybe one day I can tell you, but for now, just take my word that something really damn funny happened to me recently. She shook her head, grinning. Miki looked at her, sighed a little, then smiled.

"At least you're in a better mood. I was getting a little worried." Nabiki, in an expansive frame of mind, put her arm around her friend and smiled back.

"Thank you, Miki. You're a good person. I'm glad we've become friends after all this time."

"So am I." The other woman waved to her boyfriend, who was leaning against a lamp-post waiting for them fifty metres away.

"Hi, Miki. And Nabiki, as well. How did your test go?" He grinned at them.

"Very well. I came second and Nabiki came first, of course." His girlfriend put her arms around him and kissed him while the middle sister watched, smiling. "Although she did go insane during the last part of the lecture and start laughing like an idiot." Miki glanced at her friend with a sly smile. "Yes, like that." John watched them with amusement.

"I wasn't insane, merely very amused," Nabiki replied haughtily, her nose in the air, then giggled. "Sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Well, you seem in a good mood, which I suppose is worth a little temporary craziness," John said, grinning. "Come on. Let's get our last pizza for this term. My treat." They headed off to the restaurant, laughing and talking together.

"I heard that they caught that rapist last night," Miki said, as she finished a medium pepperoni pizza with extra tuna. "Or, more accurately, he turned himself in. He seems to have had a breakdown of some sort. Guilt, perhaps."

John looked pleased as well as irritated. "Serves the fucker right. Pity that Azumi girl didn't get to him first, though, she could have sorted him out, I'm sure. Toru told me in stats class that people saw her looking around in the park the other day where that other girl got attacked, the one that got away. I guess she was looking for clues." He shook his head in wonder. "She apparently dropped off the roof of the computer studies building and just walked away when she landed! That's about twelve or thirteen metres. A normal person would be pulp after a fall like that."

"Magical girls are magical," Miki replied, listening with interest. "One day I have to get her autograph. She's amazing." Nabiki chuckled.

"Obsessing again, Miki." Her friend giggled at her.

"I can't help it. Keep an eye out for other magical girls when you're with your friends. You seem to
have a knack for getting them to sign things." Rolling her eyes, Nabiki laughed again.

"I keep telling you, I only know a couple of them, vaguely. It's not like my phone has all their numbers." Internally she was giggling again. It was true, the SI had the numbers. "But I'll keep an eye open. Just in case."

When they finished the meal, the three of them left the restaurant, grouping on the street outside and looking at each other. "I'll miss you, Nabiki," Miki said suddenly, stepping forward and hugging her friend. "Take care of yourself, and I'll see you in a couple of months." The middle Tendo smiled, hugging the other girl back, then doing the same to John.

"Same to you guys. Have fun travelling, send me a post card if you go anywhere interesting. And take photos."

"We will." He looked at her fondly. "I hope you have fun with your friends. Are you going back to Nerima first?"

"I'm going to stay with Rika and Maiko for a day or to to unwind, then go home for a week, then we're off. Perhaps a month or so, I think. It's going to be fun." Stepping back, she smiled at them both. "See you around." She waved, as they turned and walked towards the dormitory, before heading in the other direction. When it was apparent she wasn't being observed, she called Aiko, who appeared moments later next to her.

"Hi, Nabiki. I saw the news report, it was pretty funny. Ready to go?"

"I think so. I packed everything into the ki pocket this morning." Nodding, the short brunette led the way into an alley, which erupted into a flash of light.

"Oh, my god," Captain Uehara said quietly, looking at the thing on her desk. "Is it real?"

"Yes. There's a certificate of authenticity with it." Sergeant Harada was also inspecting it curiously. "I have no idea how much it's worth other than 'one hell of a lot.'"

"If it really is an original it's probably priceless." The captain shook her head in admiration. "I hope they appreciate it."

"They will. I think Chou probably knows more about this sort of thing than most people. Yori, I don't know, but she always surprises me."

"Have you called them?" The sergeant nodded.

"Yes. They were in the middle of something, but said they'd be over soon. Any moment now, I'd think." Ten minutes later there was a knock on the door, which opened to reveal Yori, Chou, and Azumi.

"Hello, Sergeant. Captain. You said you wanted to see us, Sergeant?" Yori stepped into the room with the other two girls. Chou immediately stopped, staring at the Captain's desk with her eyebrows raised to the point they disappeared into her hair.

"Is that...?" She moved closer, bending over the desk. "It is! It's real." One slender finger came out, not quite touching it, then moved back. "Where did this come from?" Harada watched her, grinning.

"Agent Naito sent it over this morning. It was sent to him by Sara Whitworth, the former Mrs
"It's nice, but why is this such a shock?" she asked curiously, looking around at the various people in the room. Chou glanced at her, then at the desk, on which sat an obviously very old scroll that covered most of the surface.

"That is an original Ike No Taiga painting, dating from approximately 1760. It's nearly two hundred and fifty years old. There are ones like it in museums all over the world. I'd say this is a precursor to one called 'True View of Mount Asama', which is in a private collection and is nearly priceless. Several of his works are national treasures. It's difficult to even think of a value for something like this." She looked at Harada. "We can't accept this. It should be in a museum."

He smiled. "Mrs Whitworth insisted that it be given to you. She sent a covering letter with it." He handed the envelope to her. She opened it and pulled out the contents, reading them quickly, handing each sheet to Yori as she finished it. When they had both read the letter they looked at each other for some time. "What you do with it is up to you, of course. You could donate it to a museum if you want, I suppose she wouldn't mind, especially as she has already done that with several other valuable works her former husband acquired, but she did say she wanted you to have it."

Chou stared at the painting for a long time. Eventually she smiled. "We'll look after it very carefully," she said reverently, gently touching one corner of the ancient paper. With one last glance at it she rolled it up delicately, slipping it into the shipping tube Harada handed her. The tube vanished to wherever she kept things, making him sure it was safer now than in any museum in the world. "Thank you, Sergeant. Very much." He grinned.

"I didn't do anything. Thank Mrs Whitworth."

"We will, trust me."

"I do." They smiled at each other. Captain Uehara cleared her throat, making them look at her.

"Right, if that's over, could you all go away and leave my office to me?" she asked, although she was smiling. "I have a lot of work to do."

"Of course, Captain. It was nice to see you again." Chou bowed a little, smiling, then followed the Sergeant out of the office. Yori waved, grinning, leaving with Azumi, pulling the door shut behind her. Captain Uehara laughed softly to herself, shaking her head, as she reached for the next report.

"Magical girls. So strange."

Seven pairs of eyes inspected the painting hanging on the wall of the practice room, right in the middle, opposite the windows overlooking the park. "It's beautiful," Aiko finally said. Kasumi nodded slowly.

"It is. Such a wonderful, thoughtful gift."


"It's safer than any painting anywhere else in the world. I put a preservation spell on it and linked it into the ward system. You couldn't damage it with an anti-tank missile now. I'm not taking any
chances with it. It's been entrusted to us, we need to look after it for future generations." Ranma put his arm around her, smiling tenderly.

"It will be safe here. Perhaps we can also lend it to museums occasionally, so other people can appreciate it. It's been locked up in a private collection for fifty years, it's time it was seen more widely." His wife nodded, leaning against him. They studied it in wordless contemplation for some time, then went for lunch.

Akane grinned triumphantly. In her hands, still smoking slightly, were a couple of dozen chestnuts, nicely roasted. Her hands were essentially unblemished even though she had grabbed the nuts from the fire while it was blazing, moving so fast it didn't have time to burn her. Shampoo had managed the task some twenty minutes earlier. They looked at each other, while Cologne nodded approvingly. "Took you long enough, but you got there in the end. The boy got it faster, but he was remarkable." She chuckled. "To be honest, it took me nearly as long as it did you, Shampoo. And I was pretty fast at learning when I was your age. All right. Do it again."

Their grins vanished and the two girls sighed, reaching for the bag of fresh chestnuts, as Cologne cackled and threw some more fuel on the fire.
"She seems to be getting quite good," Nabiki said to Genma, who was standing watching Akane and Shampoo spar, as were the afternoon class of advanced students. They were taking bets on which of the girls would win their match. The martial artist nodded slowly, intently inspecting the two young women as they bounded around the yard.

"She is indeed. I'm very impressed how your sister has turned her life around in the last year. Since those two magical girls fixed her... brain parasites," he still had difficulty saying that phrase, looking somewhat disgusted, "she really has come on much further than I would have expected." He looked at her for a moment. "I understand from Soun that you are going travelling with those two friends of yours in a few days. Going anywhere interesting?"

"I think it will be interesting, yes. They're going to visit an old family friend and invited me along. I've met them before, nice people. Then, perhaps go somewhere else for a while. We're going to play it by ear. I expect to be back in three to four weeks." She smiled at him, making him look slightly nervous. "Don't do anything silly while I'm gone."

"I am more than twenty years older than you, Nabiki," he replied, seeming slightly offended. "I would hope that by now I knew how to live my life without doing anything silly." She laughed gently.

"So would I." While he was rolling that around in his head, sure he'd somehow been disparaged but not quite sure how, she nodded to him, took one last look at her sister and the Amazon, who seemed to be heading to a tie, then went back into the house. Genma followed her with his eyes for a moment then shrugged and went back to watching the two women fight.

Entering the kitchen the middle sister smiled at Nodoka, who was preparing a late lunch. "Would you like some help, Auntie?"

"That's not necessary, Nabiki, but thank you anyway. I'm nearly done. You could set the table, though, if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course." Quickly and efficiently performing the task, she was soon done.

"Thank you, dear. It will be about five minutes. Would you like to call the others?" As she spoke, there was a knock on the door. They exchanged glances then laughed. "Or you could see who that is." Grinning, Nabiki headed to the front of the house, opening the door to find Ukyo and Konatsu standing there looking pleased, yet slightly nervous.

"Hi, Ukyo, Konatsu, how are you two? I haven't seen you for weeks. Sorry about that, I seem to be busy all the time. Come in." She stepped aside and waved them inside. "We're just about to have lunch. Care to join us? I think Auntie made enough."

"If it's no trouble, Nabiki," Konatsu said quietly. "We wouldn't want to be a bother, we can come back later."

"It's no trouble. Come on, let's go into the living room." She led the pair inside where Nodoka was placing food on the table. The older woman looked up and smiled at the sight of the okonomiyaki chef and the male kunoichi.
"Hello, you two. How nice to see you."

"Thank you, Nodoka," Ukyo said, uncharacteristically quiet. She was normally a very confident and outgoing woman but at the moment she looked positively shy. The elder Saotome woman looked at her curiously.

"Would you like to stay for lunch?" she asked. They both nodded. Nabiki was already setting two extra places. "Sit, please." Both of the visitors sat down, while Nabiki called out into the yard for the others. Moments later Soun came in, followed by Akane and Shampoo. Genma arrived a little later having dismissed the class for an hour's break. They all looked surprised to see the two sitting at the table, but all welcomed them.

"Hi, Ukyo," Akane said, grinning at the long-haired brunette. "Sorry I haven't been around much the last few weeks, I've been with Shampoo all my free time learning and practising. We were saying just the other day we should stop by and say hello, and get some okonomiyaki."

"Please do," Ukyo replied, smiling back. She glanced at Konatsu, who made a slight nod back. Looking around at the other occupants of the room, she took a deep breath. "Konatsu and I are getting married." There was dead silence for several seconds. Eventually, Nabiki grinned.

"I thought that would happen eventually. Congratulations." With the sound of her voice, the floodgates opened, a babble of voices coming from everyone else there. While they were talking, she quickly commed both Ranma and Kasumi, allowing them to watch and listen in on the proceedings, then waved her hands. "Quiet, you guys. Let them speak." Ukyo smiled thankfully at her.

"We wanted you all to know first. Even my father hasn't been told yet." She looked at Nodoka. "Mrs Saotome, we were hoping you might be able to help us arrange everything. Neither one of us knows much about it, and we don't really have anyone to ask. My father is... difficult, and Konatsu doesn't have anyone he trusts." Nodoka looked very surprised, but after a moment smiled broadly.

"My dear, I would be honoured to help. Do you have a date and a location in mind?" The two visitors looked at each other again. Ukyo held Konatsu's hand.

"As soon as possible. I know it will take a while to get everything ready though, so we were thinking perhaps about six weeks from now?" She looked at her intended, who nodded. "We haven't thought of somewhere yet. That's one thing we'd like some help with." Nodoka nodded thoughtfully.

"Six weeks is tight, I think, but it should be possible. We'll have to give a suitable location some thought." She pondered the thought for a few more moments. "I'm sure between us we can come up with a nice location. You want your marriage to be something memorable." Looking around, she waved at the table. "Come on, let's eat, and discuss it." They all sat and began eating, Akane and Shampoo talking happily to the couple while Nodoka served, clearly thinking carefully about the task in front of her. Genma and Soun were discussing the whole thing quietly, while Nabiki watched and listened.

"How nice for them," Kasumi said to her. "I wish we could attend. I've always liked both Ukyo and Konatsu."

"It's a shame, I agree, but it would be difficult I think." Ranma chuckled slightly sadly. "Of all the people still in Nerima I kind of miss Ukyo. I've known her for a long time. Konatsu is a good man, though, he'll look after her and she him. I think they'll be very happy."
"I'm slightly surprised there was no announcement of an engagement for a while first, but I guess they may well have kept that quiet," Nabiki replied, watching as Shampoo hugged Ukyo, looking very pleased for her. "It's weird, I knew this was pretty likely to happen at some point, but looking at the three women who were chasing you so hard for years together like that is... odd." The martial artist laughed inside her head.

"You're telling me? It's damn surreal! But I'm glad for them."

"Did you tell Nodoka about when 'Yori' and 'Chou' said they could come for an afternoon, sister?" Kasumi asked, sounding amused.

"Not yet. I was going to at lunch, but this seems to have become more important. I'll tell her later. Right after we get back, correct?"

"Yes. I think that would probably be best. The weather will be nice, hopefully nothing serious will be going on, and it means we have time before we go to arrange for people to cover for us while we're away. We leave in four days, it would be a little complicated to get away before we go."

"OK. Pity the others can't come as a group."

"Unfortunately we can't simply remove six of the most effective community defenders for three weeks all at the same time, it would leave our areas under protected. Tamiko and Fumiko will come for the second week, then swap with Aiko and Misaki for the third. We can get back quickly if something critical happens, but we still need someone on the ground to hold everything until we could return."

"I've talked to some other groups I trust, not that there are all that many. "Ranma sighed a little. "But there are some. One or two are very competent. They'll be on standby in case the girls need help, but I don't expect it to get that bad. There are a few mages around who could help out in a pinch as well, and one or two demons I'll ask. Minato will be safe enough from external threats, but if something odd happens, the internal damage could be... interesting... to say the least. Some of the people I trust to help like us, but not each other. Life can be pretty complicated around Minato sometimes." Both Tendo sisters giggled.

"This would be a lot easier if we worked in an office or something," Nabiki said with an internal grin. He snickered a bit.

"Probably. But not as much fun."

"Uthryyl has taken some time off from his business as well, to match when we'll be there. He sounded quite pleased about that. Apparently he hasn't had a vacation in twelve years. We're a convenient excuse, I think." Kasumi sounded like she found this very funny. "He said he knows some very interesting places that we would find fun. Some on his world, some on others. His people do a lot of portal travelling so we could end up almost anywhere. Bring your camera and lots of film."

"I'll buy a few dozen rolls tomorrow. I got a nice medium format Pentax SLR the other day, it was just released. I've been wanting to try it out. The thing is heavy and pretty damn big but the images are amazing."

"In a few years you'll probably find it's obsolete, what with the way those new digital cameras are starting to come out with good results." Ranma sounded interested. "I've seen some quite impressive ones recently."
They're still a long way off film resolution and colour quality," the middle sister replied. "It's going to be quite a while before they can beat a six by seven medium format slide for quality." She paused, then asked curiously, "I just thought of something, do portals cause problems with film?"

"No. They don't seem to really affect anything. Some really sensitive electronics apparently get a little upset, but only for a while. They're safe."

"Good. It would be annoying to come back with loads of film that didn't work." She finished her meal, pushing the plate to one side and picking up her cup of tea, while half-listening to the conversation that the rest of the people around the table were having. "I should probably get back to talking to everyone before they think something is wrong. I'll let you know what happens about all of this, OK?"

"Thanks, Nabiki. Talk later."

"Goodbye, sister." Both of them disconnected. Nabiki redirected her full attention back to the conversation in front of her.

"I think the first thing to do is to work out a list of people you want to invite, Ukyo," Nodoka said, making notes on a pad she had retrieved from the book-case in the corner. "Once we have that we can pick a location the right size and look into everything else. I don't know if you want to hire something spectacular or just make it quiet." Ukyo and Konatsu looked at each other.

"We were thinking, fairly quiet, but nice. Somewhere up in the mountains, perhaps. As far as people, well, all of you, obviously. Cologne and Mousse, I suppose, I've had my problems with them but I still think they're basically good people." Shampoo looked pleased, as Akane giggled. "Um, Sayuri, Hiroshi, my father, the waitresses from the restaurant, my grandmother..." she was ticking names off on her fingers. Nodoka wrote them all down. Konatsu added a couple as well. By the time they were finished, the pad had about thirty names on it. Looking over it the elder Saotome woman smiled.

"This isn't too bad at all. Fairly small, which makes it easier. And cheaper." Ukyo laughed.

"We can afford it. The restaurant is doing pretty well and we've been saving up for quite a while now." She smiled at her fiancé. "This has been building for some time." Nabiki looked at them, amused, she'd suspected as much for a couple of years.

"I'm very pleased for you both," she said. Raising her teacup she grinned. "A toast to the happy couple." Everyone laughed and followed suit. "I'll be back by then. Don't get married until I am, OK?" This led to them asking where she was going, then how her life was doing, and Akane's training, which took up a large amount of the afternoon in explanations amid considerable good humour.

Later that night she helped Nodoka clear up after dinner. "I'm very pleased for Ukyo and Konatsu," Nodoka said, closing the door to the dishwasher and turning it on. "And honoured that they would ask me to help. I hope I can do them proud."

"I've got no doubt about it, Auntie," Nabiki replied, smiling. "I'm sure it will work out well. I'm glad it will happen after I get back, I wouldn't want to miss it." Wiping the counter down she glanced at the older woman. "Oh, by the way, I managed to contact Yori." Nodoka turned and looked interested. "She was quite pleased about the invitation. Unfortunately she and Chou are very busy at the moment, so they don't have any spare time for around a month, but after that she said they'd be very happy to come over for an afternoon some time. It works out well, I'll be back
"Ah, very good. I'll have to work out a menu. We can pick a date closer to the end of the month. I suppose we'll probably be into August then, perhaps the first week. It will be quite hot, but we could put up some big sun umbrellas for shade in the garden." The older woman thought for a moment. "Yes, it should work out very nicely." Glancing at Nabiki who was just putting the saucepans away, she added, "Perhaps you'd like to invite Rika and Maiko as well?"

The middle Tendo didn't miss a beat, having expected something like this to come up sooner or later. "I'll ask them, certainly. After we get back I think they were going to visit their families, though, so they may not be able to make it."

"All right. It would be lovely if they could but that time of year is always difficult, everyone is trying to do different things. Did Yori say whether her friends would be able to come as well?"

"She thinks they can. They'll let us know later. I think magical girls are a little like doctors, always on call, though, so you never know if some of them might need to suddenly leave." Nodoka smiled, laughing gently.

"Yes, I understand. Those ones more than most if everything I've seen on the television over the last few months is to be believed." She shook her head in wonder. "Such remarkable young ladies. I'm very glad to have met them."

Cologne grinned as she spotted Nabiki walking towards her down the street carrying a back-pack in one hand. "Hello, Nabiki Tendo. I understand you're off to see the world." The middle sister laughed at the comment.

"Not quite, Elder, it's only a three week trip, maybe four, but I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

"Heading to the station, I suppose?" the Amazon enquired, falling in beside the brunette. Nabiki nodded.

"Yes. I'm meeting Rika and Maiko in a couple of hours, we're staying overnight at their apartment, then leaving first thing in the morning." She glanced at the ancient woman. "Akane seems to be very pleased with the special techniques you've taught her. She keeps playing with the speed techniques, seeing what she can use them for." Giggling for a moment, she added, "I wouldn't recommend brushing your teeth with that method. It's quick, but the friction burns seemed painful." Cologne stared, then nearly fell off her staff with laughter.

"Oh dear," she said weakly when she'd recovered. "I've never heard of that one before. New students always push their limits but that's... different." They grinned at each other. "Your sister has become a good student. I do wish we could have laid hands on her some years earlier, she could have been exceptional, I suspect, but she's still likely to become very good. More slowly than certain people we both knew, and nothing like as good as that, but then, no one is. She actually beat Shampoo fair and square the other day, which impresses me considerably. My great-granddaughter is very skilled even if a little rusty."

"That is impressive." Nabiki smiled slightly. "I've watched them sparring and even I can tell she's gotten much better. But I also know how good Shampoo is. I'd never have thought a year ago that Akane would ever be able to take her on without being in one of her funny moods."

"Neither would I, I admit. I'm pleased to be proven wrong. She's pushing Shampoo to improve as well, which is very satisfying. One day I think it might be in her best interests to spend some time
in our village, there are things she could learn there that may well stand her in good stead."
Cologne fell silent while Nabiki shot her a curious side glance. That certainly wasn't something
she'd expected to hear. The old woman almost sounded like she was actually fond of her sister.

"Elder, if you don't mind me asking, what is the situation with the Amazons?" She was very
curious, even having learned over the years that Cologne, Shampoo, and Mousse seemed to prefer
Japan to China. "I know you're the ranking elder there, but you've stayed here all these years, even
after Ranma vanished. Shampoo told me some of why she and Mousse seem to like it here, but I've
always wondered..."

Cologne was silent for a few more meters, although she was smiling very faintly. "It's complicated,
Nabiki, like everything to do with my people. I love and am loyal to my village, but I have to admit
that I was getting very irritated with them before the first time Ranma showed up. Some of the
ruling council are... far more difficult than I'd like. Being several thousand kilometres away is a
positive relief." She looked at the woman beside her. "Not that I said that, of course."

Nabiki giggled and shook her head. "Said what, Elder?" Smiling, Cologne nodded.

"Exactly." She paused for a moment. "I came to rather enjoy Japan, or more specifically, Nerima.
It's a pleasantly insane place that reminds me of some of the things I got up to when I was a lot
younger. The modern world is so different from what it was when I was growing up, even taking
into account the cultural differences, but at the same time it's a lot of fun. It makes me feel young
again." She cackled for a moment. "Like I was a mere hundred and fifty years old."

Stopping for a moment, Nabiki studied the ancient woman, then grinned. "I hope I even make it to
your age, never mind manage to be so active." Laughing, she resumed walking.

"Now that the boy has been missing for close to five years, there have been a few people on the
council who said I should go back, but several more who want me to keep looking." Cologne
sighed a little, while Nabiki listened to the very rare event of the old woman opening up. Unique,
in fact, in her experience. "I'm just as happy to stay here for the moment, although to be honest, as
you did some time ago, I've stopped actively trying to find him. If he hasn't turned up by now with
all the resources we both brought to bear, he won't, except possibly either by accident or of his own
accord. Assuming he's even still alive, I hope he is, I admit. Despite being a nuisance I rather liked
him. I've never met anyone who could learn like he could." She sighed again. "I made some bad
mistakes all those years ago. We all did. I wish we had done otherwise, things might have turned
out very differently, but it's far too late now. Oh well."

"If he did by some miracle appear some day what would you and your people do?" Nabiki asked,
knowing it was a slight risk but desperately curious to find out directly from the source. Cologne
didn't reply for some time.

"I don't know. If it was just me, I might well just wish him all the best. Looking back on it I can see
how badly he was treated. It was not honourable, our intentions were... selfish, I suppose. But, it's
not just me. Shampoo is still, deep down, somewhat obsessed with him. Several in the village
would try anything if they thought they could get him, I fear, although after that night..." She
trailed off, looking worried. "I fear that would be a bad mistake." Nabiki nodded, sighing.

"That's more or less what I thought. Thank you for being honest with me, Cologne. It's something
I've wondered about for a long time."

"You've matured well, Nabiki. You do your family proud." The Elder stopped, looking at the
Metro station fifty metres away, then the brunette woman. "Have fun on your travels. Take care, I
expect I'll see you on your return." With a nod, she bounded away, leaving Nabiki to enter the
"Interesting," Ranma said slowly, going through a kata with his wife, while Nabiki stood with her back to them, admiring the painting on the wall again. She eventually turned to the pair.

"Isn't it? I've never seen her that chatty. She's changed as much as anyone. Teaching Akane seems to have given her something to do she missed in some way. I think she really did like you, you know, despite everything." He sighed, folding into a position that still made her wince to watch.

"To be honest in some ways I liked her as well. Not as a friend, like you and the girls, or Uthryyl, more like a respected teacher. And I do respect her. I may have a hell of a lot more power and know a lot of things she doesn't, but there's no denying she's still got the best part of three hundred years on me. You learn an awful lot of things over that sort of time." He snickered a little.

"I can't say I miss her all that much, she was a pain in the ass at the best of times, but like she said, I wish things had been handled differently. I think, if it hadn't been for the whole Shampoo thing, learning from her would have been a real joy. Except for the pain..." Kasumi giggled, glancing at him, then blurred into a high-speed exercise with no warning, making him grin and respond. Shaking her head in amazement at how phenomenally good they were, inwardly sure she'd never be anywhere near capable of even a fraction of it, Nabiki watched for a while, before heading up to the roof garden to enjoy the evening.

Feeling a familiar ki signature in the undergrowth, she made her way to where Tamiko was sitting on a bench looking out over the city with a smile on her face. The auburn-haired girl glanced at her then went back to staring out over the roof-tops. "Hi, Nabiki," she said quietly.

"Hi. You look pleased."

"Not so much pleased as content. I was just thinking back on the last year or so, thinking how much everything has changed. You finding Ranma and Kasumi, all of us moving in here, the demon bombs, that sort of thing. Big changes in a small amount of time." The middle sister nodded slowly, gazing out over Tokyo with her friend.

"Too big?"

"No. Not at all. Almost everything that happened is something I wouldn't have any other way. I think that goes for all of us. I could have done without Halleckton and those fucking portal bombs, but even there we met some very nice people and did things I, personally, am rather proud of. Meeting you is something I'm extremely pleased about as well, as is you joining our insane lifestyle." She grinned at her friend. "All the extra training, the way we seem to have integrated into the same group, I love it. Like you said a while ago, and Ranma has said, we're a family. But every now and then it kind of shoves itself in my face, so I have to think about it for a while."

Nabiki sat for a while, thinking about the other woman's words. Eventually she stirred. "I understand. I feel the same way sometimes. There have been times I woke up in the middle of the night wondering, 'What the fuck am I doing?' She giggled a little, sounding almost worried. "It still hits me on occasion. When we got back from Canada was the worst. Took me two weeks to decide whether I should just run like hell, or stay. I knew if I stayed, that was it. It was the only chance I'd ever get to back out." She shrugged. "I stayed. No regrets, not really. Like you said, there are good and bad points, but the good ones far outweigh the bad ones. If I fell over dead tomorrow, I'd have no regrets about the last year."
"Hopefully that's not going to happen," Tamiko giggled.

"It would be an awkward start to a holiday," Nabiki agreed with a grin. Her friend looked at her, then put her arm around her shoulders and hugged her for a moment.

"I'm very glad to have met you, my sister. Let's go swimming. The others will be up later."

"So, what's the plan?" Nabiki asked Kasumi, as they lay in the shallow end watching their friends swimming around and talking. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, I think. Ranma has spent most of today sorting things out with various people who needed to know we'd be away for a while. I talked to a few as well, there are some people who are, well, terrified of Yori." She laughed. "Chou is slightly less scary. Everyone who needs to know is aware that we won't be around except in an emergency. Also how to get hold of us if it is an emergency, like a medical problem. They know we'll drop everything and come back under those circumstances, but won't be happy if it turns out to be nothing serious."

Nabiki giggled. "I can imagine no one really wants an annoyed Yori looking for them because they interrupted her holiday."

"Not even slightly." The sisters glanced at each other and grinned. "Tomorrow morning he's going to tell Sergeant Harada and Agent Naito as well. They can contact us if it becomes necessary through one of the others. The SI systems can call between close worlds, so the people here can relay phone calls to us. I've asked Nao to set it up so it's automatic. It thinks we should arrange to get a relay system installed here to make it easier in future, apparently the makers could supply one if we contact them. I suppose we should do at some point, I'm very curious about them, I admit. There may also be some useful upgrades we could acquire."

"I'm damn curious about these mystery people as well. Jun has run every test it could come up with and is pretty sure it's not compromised, something I think it probably true, but I'd still like to talk to them." Nabiki shook her head slightly. "I still find the circumstances of getting the SIs very strange. But I guess that's basically normal for us."

"Very true." They lay in silence for a while, just relaxing. "I even talked to Ami, you remember her?" Nabiki nodded, slightly surprised.

"I thought her group and you two weren't exactly friends." Kasumi smiled slightly sadly.

"Not entirely. Ami is actually a very intelligent and very responsible person, who is somewhat trapped in a situation I don't think she completely enjoys. I really must find out the details one day. She's dropped hints every now and then, the story sounds very odd, even by magical girl terms. There's something not quite right about it but I can't put my finger on what. I suppose I don't have enough information." She sighed a little. "Poor girl. She has considerable power and more common sense than any of her friends, but sticks with them due to loyalty more than anything else. I get the impression there's something she doesn't like about it all but I don't know what. Not yet. Anyway, I trust her, even if I don't feel that way about the others, mostly, and I asked her to help if it becomes necessary. Hopefully it won't, there isn't any threat I know about at the moment, but we may as well get everyone ready if something does go peculiar."

"It's kind of weird that basically you two are the only thing keeping a lid on this insane ward, to the point that you're worried about going away for three weeks in case the end of the world or something happens." Nabiki glanced at her sister with a small smile, which the older woman returned.
"It is a little strange, but that's essentially the way things have worked out. Not what we intended, but there you have it." Kasumi laughed for a moment. "I'm not expecting anyone to really take the opportunity to start trouble because we're not around, mainly because the others could now do a fairly good job of shutting it down, but also because they know very well that we'll be back." Her grin turned dangerous. "That would be unpleasant for troublemakers."

Her sister chuckled. "I can well imagine. I suppose there isn't much likelihood of anyone interfering with the building either?"

"No, very few people outside this room even know about it, aside from being an insanely powerfully warded building near the university. There isn't much reason to risk poking around from the point of view of anyone who can tell the wards exist, which is only a fairly small number of magic users in the first place, they hide their presence quite well, and trust me, the system can look after itself. It may not currently be allowed to act outside the building, but inside, I don't know of anything that could really last very long if it needed to do something. We put a very large amount of time into making sure of that and the system has a simply appalling amount of energy stored away. Unless we get hit by an asteroid or something like that, nothing could scratch it, and even then I suspect it would survive. The strength of the wards is just astounding now, since we added you all to it the whole system has grown exponentially."

Nabiki nodded, feeling the system lurking at the back of her mind. It was always there, watching protectively over everyone it counted as it's own, a feeling she rather liked. Not intrusive but ready at a moment's notice to do something extremely final if it was attacked. Even she could tell it seemed to have become far more complex and somehow 'larger' in the last few months.

"Have you had time to look at that subsystem you deactivated a while back?" Kasumi shook her head.

"Unfortunately not. It's irritating, but not really vastly critical at the moment. I'd rather make sure we get it right even if it takes a while than risk it going wrong. The system has so much power that 'wrong' would be very wrong indeed. We need to be extremely careful to make sure we don't make a mistake, the results would be catastrophic in that case. It's grown rather larger than we ever planned for, which makes it much more complicated. We'll start looking at it when we get back, I think."

Smiling at her sister, Kasumi pushed off and ducked under the surface, disappearing. A few moments later her currently female, currently mer-form husband let out a yelp of surprise and a cloud of bubbles as she disappeared below the water, making Nabiki laugh.

Sergeant Harada looked around as a familiar figure fell in beside him, grinning. "Hi, Sergeant," Yori said, looking pleased to see him.

"Hello, Yori. I haven't seen you for a few days. How is Chou? Got that painting hung somewhere nice, or hidden away safely?" The black-haired girl snickered.

"She's fine, thanks, she passes on her best wishes to you and your wife. And we've got the painting up where we can all enjoy it. I must arrange to visit Mrs Whitworth and thank her at some point. How are you? And your wife, Emiko, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's her. We're both fine. The baby is doing well too, the latest scans came back showing nothing is amiss."

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet? Do you even want to?" Yori smiled at him. He grinned.
"Too early to tell yet. She's only about five weeks along." He glanced at her with an amused look. "I suppose you could probably tell." The girl nodded, smiling.

"Yes, the gender of a child is fairly easy to determine through reading the ki. Any time after about three weeks will work."

"Amazing. I think we'll wait to find out, although we might change our minds later."

"Fair enough." They walked along for a little while. "We're going away for a little while. Partly a holiday, partly meeting some old friends. I wanted to let you know so you wouldn't get worried if you didn't see us around." Yori looked at him for a moment. "We've arranged cover for us while we're away, and we can be reached in an emergency and would come back immediately in that case. The number on my card will still work. If I don't answer one of the others will, Aiko and her team will be around most of the time. I've talked to several of the other groups as well, if anything bad happens they'll fill in until we get back." She grinned. "I made it very clear that any damage would cause me to become irritated and would be dealt with appropriately." Harada chuckled.

"I'd pay good money to see that. OK, I understand. Thank you for telling me. From what I saw on the news and Agent Naito told me, I'm not surprised you girls want to get away for a while. You deserve it, considering everything you've done and continue to do for us."

"Thank you, Sergeant, that's very nice of you to say. We do what we can and we like this place." He laughed a little.

"I can't see why you'd stay if you didn't. How long are you going for? Anywhere interesting?" Yori looked at him, amused, then nodded.

"It should be interested. Visiting Uthryyl for a while at his home, then wandering around a little. Probably for about three weeks but it might be longer. No more than a month." He looked at her, his eyebrows up.

"Going to one of the demon worlds? Amazing. Say hello to Uthryyl for me, he seemed a decent fellow when I met him during that serial killer unpleasantness."

Yori nodded. "He is, a very good person, and a good friend. I'll tell him you said hi. Could you do me a favour and pass this on to Agent Naito, please? He should know in case he needs us. Hopefully he won't but you never know."

Sergeant Harada smiled at her. "Of course I will. Have fun, look me up when you get back." With a nod she stepped back, then from a standing start jumped three stories straight up and disappeared over the roof of the library next to them. He watched her go with an amused look then went on his way.

"Nabiki, are you ready yet?" Kasumi's voice came down the hallway from the practice room. Dropping her camera bag into her ki pocket having just double-checked she had everything, Nabiki left her room and headed towards the back of the apartment.

"Yes, sorry, I just needed to be sure I packed all my film. I suddenly thought I might have left some of it back in Nerima, it's all here though." She stopped next to her sister, who was inspecting the portal in the middle of the room carefully, before nodding, satisfied. "Everything OK?"

"Yes. We made some slight efficiency refinements to the portal spell and I was just checking how it was working. By the looks of it it's reduced the power requirements by exactly the predicted amount. Very pleasing." Kasumi smiled at her. Ranma walked around from the other side of the rip
in space-time, looking at it, then nodded.

"Yep. Not bad at all, Kas. Good work."

"Thank you, dear."

Aiko and the other three girls appeared a few metres away, then walked over. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"I think so." Kasumi hugged each of them in turn. "We'll see you two in two weeks, and Fumiko and Tamiko in a week. Take care, call if you need us."

"We'll be fine, Kasumi. Go and have a nice week with just you three." The short brunette grinned at her friends. "I'll make sure the roof garden is watered and trimmed as well."

"Thank you." Kasumi looked pleased.

Ranma looked at his friends, smiling. "Try to keep a lid on this nuthouse, guys. See you later. Come on, Nabs, demon worlds await." Kasumi giggled and stepped through the portal, vanishing with a slight crackle. Nabiki followed Ranma as he did likewise, grinning with excitement.

"Don't call me Na..."

The portal hung in the air for a few more seconds, then disappeared with a pop. Aiko laughed, turning to her friends.

"Come on. Let's go swimming again." Misaki pulled out an apple and munched it as they went up the stairs to the pool.
"bs..."

"..."

"...Holy shit..."

"..." Nabiki gaped, turning in a complete circle, then looking up. Ranma and Kasumi watched her with amusement, as did Uthryyl, who had been waiting for them. Eventually she lowered her gaze to her sister and brother-in-law, wearing the widest grin they'd ever seen. "Wow." Kasumi giggled as the brunette went back to gaping, eventually having to gently urge her in the direction of Uthryyl, who smiled at her.

"Welcome to my home, Nabiki. May your stay here be a memorable one." He was speaking the trade language, which Ranma had insisted they use whenever possible during the trip, to improve her fluency in it. She knew a fair amount of it now after about two and a half months of study but he felt she needed some immersion in the language to make it second nature, which she agreed with, knowing it was a good method.

The middle sister nodded slowly, still staring around. "I think it already is," she mumbled in the same tongue.

In front of her was a cityscape, but one quite different from anything she'd seen before. All the buildings were quite recognisably buildings, some fairly large, although nothing like as big as some of the ones in Tokyo, lights beginning to come on as they appeared to have arrived at the equivalent of later afternoon or early evening. The site the portal had deposited them in was some distance up the side of a small mountain or perhaps a large hill, on the outskirts of a wooded area that stretched out of sight. As a result the view out over the alien city was superb. The sun, low on the horizon, was noticeably redder that the one she was familiar with, and slightly dimmer, enough that she could look at it with a little squinting, while a few degrees off to the side and slightly higher in the sky was a brilliant blue-white pinpoint of light.

The overall effect was light that was more or less the same colour as she expected, casting shadows that had two distinct edges, very close together, one somewhat blue and one slightly red. She inspected the ground and her shadow, waving her hand around, then looked back to the setting sun. Or was it suns? Ranma noticed her experimenting and laughed. "The main sun is a red giant, this world is much further away from it that we are from our sun. The little blue one is a white dwarf, orbiting around it. The planet orbits around both of them."

"Weird." Nabiki thought back to some of the science programs she'd seen in the past and science fiction she'd read. "Is that stable? I'd have thought it would be a kind of complicated orbital path." Some of the words she used she picked carefully, as her vocabulary wasn't enormous yet. Jun made a very good dictionary though. It helped her understand most of what was said as well, although speaking it was more of a problem which only practice would solve.

Uthryyl nodded, looking impressed. "Very good. Yes, it is stable. We're far enough away from them both that we orbit the common centre of mass in a fairly circular path, more circular than
your home planet does. The year is considerably longer as a result. About twenty-one times as long, in fact. The day length is a little more than thirty Earth hours long, though, so not too far off what you're used to." She nodded, listening with interest. "The common centre of mass is roughly half-way between the two stars. Even though the red one is much larger than the little blue one the masses are nearly the same. The extreme long term stability isn't ideal, but by the time something goes wrong enough to be a worry we'll probably have left anyway. It's something my species has been aware of for a very long time. That's going to be a hell of a long way in the future, though, we're not too worried. Far past the lifespans of anyone around now by millions of years."

"OK. So, do you have very long winters and summers?"

"Well, technically, yes, but the variance is much smaller than your world has, only a few degrees. The axial tilt isn't as much either, so the temperature is fairly similar and constant around most of the planet except right at the poles. This is about as warm as it gets, ten or so years from now by your system it will get a few degrees cooler. You probably wouldn't notice since it happens so slowly." Nodding again, the middle Tendo went back to looking around. The foliage was in some ways similar to the sorts of things she was familiar with, but in many ways not at all. There were lots of strange smells in the air, odd noises that seemed to be caused by things similar to insects and birds, but which looked nothing like the ones she knew, and a distant sound that was the sum total of the noises of the city some ten or fifteen kilometres away, further down the mountain, clearly built along a fairly impressive river.

The colour of the plants was a much larger range than she was used to, green ones that wouldn't have looked out of place in her sisters garden mixed with deep red ones, bright yellow-orange ones, and even some that looked a dark blue-black. Staring at some very attractive bushes a few metres away, which had glossy red leaves and green flowers, she thought for some reason they looked vaguely familiar. Kasumi noticed the direction of her gaze and giggled.

"If you're thinking you've seen that one before, you have. I have a small one in one corner of the garden. It smells a bit like strawberries when it's in bloom." Nabiki nodded, realising that she had indeed seen the plant in question. It was an amusing thought, a plant from a completely alien world was quietly growing on the roof of her sister's building. "It's not poisonous, but the chemistry of it is different enough you couldn't eat it, or rather, you could but you wouldn't enjoy the taste at all. Insects leave it alone as well for the same reason. But it's very pretty. Quannyr gave it to me a couple of years ago. Surprisingly it seems fine with the climate back home."

The trees beyond the smaller bushes, which were laid out in what was clearly a garden, followed the same variant colour schemes, looking more like a deciduous forest back home in the autumn than anything else. A grass-like plant covered the ground, rather more mossy than real grass, a distinctly pink colour although rather deep in colour. It looked a little like cotton candy. Bending down she felt it, finding it was soft and springy, like a very well manicured lawn. Smiling, she straightened up with a shake of her head. "Amazing. This is much more like a real alien world than that dead one. Aside from the sky that could have been any desert on earth. This..." She looked around with a smile. "This is wonderful."

"We like it," Uthryyl said with a grin. "Come on, let's go inside." He led them to the large house that they were obviously standing in the garden of. It was perhaps three times the size of the Tendo Dojo and house combined, with grounds that were fairly extensive. A stone wall surrounded the entire place, disappearing into the woods on two sides, presumably joining up somewhere inside. The house itself was also largely constructed of stone with parts made of an almost black, yet clearly not painted, wood that glistened in the fading light like it was wet. When Nabiki touched the nearest piece curiously she found it felt like it was varnished, although she had a suspicion that wasn't the case.
Overall she was somewhat surprised how normal everything looked. The style of the house was very different than the traditional Japanese one, or the common Western styles that were omnipresent back home, yet wasn't so far away it stood out as 'alien'. Just different, not to mention rather attractive. The materials looked somewhat exotic yet still recognisable, even as the plants were clearly plants, just not earthly ones. Even the way the front door mechanism, some sort of lever arrangement, worked seemed sufficiently normal that she wasn't surprised to see Uthryyl operate it just like a standard doorknob, although he lifted rather than pushed down.

The effect, though, taken as a whole, was definitely something that made it clear she was a very long way from home. Even so, she found it warm and welcoming in a way she'd have been hard-pressed to explain. Standing to one side the demon waved them inside. "Come in. Please, make yourselves comfortable. My home is yours, as I believe the saying goes on your world." He touched a plate on the wall making lights come on down a hallway leading to the interior of the house. Nabiki inspected the nearest one, seeing it was some sort of transparent globe that seemed to be evenly glowing, not in the fashion of a filament light bulb, or even a fluorescent one, but more like it was filled with a luminescent mist. It reminded her of the power storage sphere that the portal weapons had been build around.

Curiously holding her hand a couple of centimetres from it she found she could feel the tell-tale sensation of low-powered magic in operation. Uthryyl saw what she was doing and chuckled. "Yes, it's powered by magic. A simple light spell, contained inside the sphere to make it stable long-term. Unlike the power batteries you'd probably seen these are made of a polymer, it's much tougher, but it can't handle the same power the synthetic crystal ones can. Cheaper, though."

"Weird. Magical light bulbs." She smiled at him.

"Basically. It's an old system, we've been using them for hundreds of Earth years. They last a long time, twenty or so of your years at least, but not forever. It depends how brightly you run them, of course. Brighter makes them burn out faster, more energy causes more wear."

"That's possibly the first logical thing I've ever seen magic do," the brunette said with a giggle. He shrugged.

"Sometimes it does follow the same sort of rules as physics, sometimes it doesn't. Magic is very strange in many ways." Moving past them, he led them down the hall to the end, into a large room with a huge, flawless, one piece window overlooking the city in the valley below. "This is the heart of the house, really. We like to sit here in the evening and admire the view. The dining room is off that way, the kitchen past it, various workrooms and the like on the ground floor, then upstairs is the accommodation. We've got enough rooms for about a dozen or so guests plus the three of us. It's a large house and rather old, my grandfather built it when he was quite young. That was a long time ago. We've expanded it here and there over the years. My family is smaller than the previous generation was so we're sort of lost in it, but I'd never leave, there's too much history in the place."

Kasumi looked around with a smile. "I know what you mean. The Dojo is a bit like that. Not as old but it's been in the family for several generations." Walking over to the left wall she admired some paintings hanging there. "These are new." Uthryyl joined her, looking at them.

"Yes, my wife got them a few months ago. A friend of hers painted them as a gift for her birthday. She's very talented indeed, quite a lot of her paintings change hands for significant sums now."

Nabiki moved over to have a look at them. While the colour was a little strange, to her eyes at least, the talent involved in what seemed to be some sort of watercolour technique was very evident. The results were close to photographic but with a slightly dreamy effect that was very attractive.

"I can see why. I suspect something like this would fetch a good price back home, just on it's own
merits, although the provenance as a genuine demon-painted artwork would probably add to that."
She grinned at Uthryyl who laughed.

"My wife would hang me with my own innards if I sold them." He looked thoughtfully at her for a
moment. "But that's an interesting idea. I hadn't thought of art trading. Your world puts as high a
value on it as mine does. Hmm. Might be worth looking into. Thank you for the idea." Nabiki
giggled.

"I should probably ask for a commission."

"If it works we should be able to come to an arrangement." Uthryyl snickered at her surprised look.
"I believe in rewarding good ideas, especially if I make a profit from them. That way you get
more." Patting her on the shoulder with one scaled hand he turned, waving them to follow. "Come
on, let me show you to your rooms." Nabiki watched his tail disappear around the doorway, staring
in slightly shocked surprise, then shook herself and followed, a smile growing. Kasumi and Ranma
brought up the rear grinning at her.

Climbing stairs that made her stumble for a moment, because the treads and risers were at slightly
the wrong spacing for what she was used to, she followed the merchant to the top floor of the
house. "Down that hall are the family rooms, the other way is the guest accommodation. This is
your room, Nabiki. Ranma, Kasumi, you can have your usual room.

"Thanks, Uthryyl," the martial artist said, walking past with his wife to the next room along.
Nabiki watched them for a moment then went into the room the demon indicated, looking around
with interest. Again, it was surprisingly normal in most respects. The bed was obviously a bed,
although when she prodded it the mattress appeared to be some sort of gel filling with a smooth
cloth wrapped around it, a little like a cross between one of the memory foam beds she'd seen
recently and a water-bed. Various items of furniture around the room were more or less
recognisable for function as well. There were a couple of chairs which had odd looking backs,
something she worked out were for people with tails, a thing that was some sort of chest of
drawers, a mirror on the wall, pretty much all the items one would expect in a bedroom practically
anywhere back home.

Inspecting the chest of drawers she looked puzzled, seeing it was only about ten centimetres deep,
which seemed very shallow for useful storage. When she pulled out one of the drawers, though, it
came out over half a metre, making her wonder if it was build into the wall. Uthryyl, who was
watching her from the doorway, laughed slightly. "It uses a subspace storage method a bit like
what the SI uses, but not as effective. Essentially about eighty percent of the space inside it is
folded away so it doesn't take up a lot of real room. Very useful technique, that spell gets used all
over the place. We have somewhat higher ambient magic here than your world does so spells of
this sort and the lighting one are much more easily powered. In your world you'd probably need to
be a good magic user to justify it, here anyone can buy an appliance using the method."

"Do you pipe magical energy around like electricity, then?" Nabiki asked curiously. He grinned.

"The method is quite different but the effect is similar. Raw energy is pulled from the environment
by a collector system, which is the complicated part, then sent over an energy link to nearby
consumers of it. Most houses or buildings have one. I did look into seeing whether it would be
possible to sell them on your world, unfortunately the way they work isn't fully compatible with
your universe. I don't know if it would be possible to redesign them, but if it was it would be a very
complicated and expensive job, so I dropped it." He shrugged a little. "I might revisit it one day, if
the demand was there. A mage can power any of this stuff themselves, of course, but even here
most people aren't mages, in the same way in your world most people aren't mechanical engineers
"Cool," the middle sister said, closing the magical slightly-larger-on-the-inside than it was on the outside drawer again. Though as she thought about it she realised that description wasn't really accurate, it was just that a lot of it wasn't in the same reality she was at the moment. Which was ever weirder when you considered the idea. "To be honest, I suspect that right now, more traditional technology would be more saleable at home. Most of our world doesn't really know about or believe in magic."

"Yes, it's something I find interesting. Even the worlds I visit that are more or less completely tech based usually know magic exists, they just don't use it much or at all. Sometimes because the inhabitants simply can't, or because they don't want to for one reason or another. Most worlds use both in various proportions. Worlds like yours, tech based but with an almost separate magic culture that doesn't overlap all that much are unusual. He looked amused for a moment.

"Although, I wouldn't be surprised if recent events may go a long way to making the walls between those two systems break down to one degree or another. Ranma has kept me updated on what happened with the portal bomb plot, something I'm very happy to see is now over, even though the fall-out will probably go on for some time."

Looking at her for a moment, he stepped inside the room and closed the door. She looked back, wondering what he was doing. "While I have a moment, Nabiki, can I ask how you're doing with all this?" He seemed concerned, an expression she found oddly easy to read from his quite inhuman face, his ears slightly back like a worried dog. The thought made her momentarily smile. "I know how you were upset back when you and your friends were destroying my firing range. From what I've been told of the end game of the portal plot, you were dropped in very deeply very quickly. That can't have been easy."

Sighing a little she sat on the bed, noticing absently how comfortable it was, making her almost feel she was floating. "It was... very hard. When we got back and I had a moment to let myself realise what had happened, I had a bit of a breakdown. Something I'm still embarrassed about even though the others didn't make anything of it. It kind of hit all at once, if that makes sense."

The demon nodded. "It does, more than you might realise." He paused for a moment, watching her, then sighed himself. "When I was very young, probably about your age or a little older in your terms, I was involved in a small war. Only a battle, according to the people who weren't there, but as far as we who were are concerned, it was bad enough. I won't go into the circumstances, it was a very long time ago and it's not relevant now, but I was fighting for a couple of weeks. Several friends and colleagues were injured, some badly, and a few died." He shook his head. "I had nothing like the power even you possess, never mind Ranma or the rest of your friends, but you don't need much power to kill. Only a weapon and the will to use it. We had that, to my great regret."

She watched and listened, unsure where he was going. "At the time we thought we were doing the right thing. It may even have been true. The main thing is that people died. I handled it pretty well, I thought, considering how young I was and the fact I'd never been involved in anything like that. I had quite a lot of training, the support of our small military, that sort of thing. But afterwards, when I had time to think about what I'd done, what I'd seen... it hit me very hard. I ended up requiring a form of therapy, I suppose you'd call it, for a couple of years to get over what I'd seen and done. Several other people I know needed more than that. And we were supposedly trained soldiers."

"You, despite the training you've had recently from probably the two most lethal warriors I've ever even heard of, have only been doing this for a few months, yet got dropped into a situation worse than the one I had my first time out. True, you weren't being shot at, but the deaths, the whole
scenario, was horrific. I've seen the pictures. To be honest, being shot at would probably have been easier, it gives you some control over the situation, because you can shoot back. You were basically doing clean-up after a massacre. I am full of admiration for how well you handled it, and the fact that even when you were offered a chance to back out, you didn't take it. That takes a very special type of person. Very few people could do it, either your species or mine." Walking over to her he put his hand on her shoulder, looking down at her.

"I understand some of what you went through, and I fear will go through in the future. From what I know of you, you will handle it very well. But if you ever want to talk about it, to someone outside your group, come and visit."

After a long pause, she nodded slowly. "Thank you, Uthryyl. That means a lot." She grinned at him. "I see why Ranma and Kasumi like and trust you so much." The demon laughed, releasing her and stepping back.

"I like and trust them as well, more than most people I know. I know I can count on them in a tough situation, which is something you can't say about everyone you meet, not to mention how many times they've helped me just out of friendship. I'm a trader, I deal with more people than you'd believe, and one thing I've learned over the years is that you can't buy the sort of respect and relationship we have with each other, you have to earn it. They are very good people, as are Aiko and her girls, and you. Meeting 'Yori' years back was a very good thing."

Standing, Nabiki smiled a little. "It's been difficult coming to grips with how much my life has changed in the last year, I have to admit, but meeting people like you, Onkra, Quannyr, Aiko and the others... That's worth it all." After a moment she added, "And I owe you more thanks than I can really express for getting the comm units for us. Jun is one of the best things that ever happened to me in more ways than I can think."

#Thank you, Nabiki,# the SI commented quietly, with a pleased tone in its voice.

'I mean it, Jun. I'm very glad indeed that we ended up together.'

#As am I.# The machine fell silent again.

"I'm glad I could. They've made a big difference to our own lives as well. Their designers are remarkable people, as is their work."

'I'd like to meet them one day. Or at least talk to them." The merchant smiled.

"That can probably be arranged. I don't know if it's possible this trip, they are difficult to contact, I would imagine on purpose, but not impossibly so. I'll look into it. Right, let's finish showing you around and we can go get something to eat."

Quannyr and her daughter had been in the city, it turned out, the elder demon working and the younger one visiting friends. They arrived back a couple of hours after Nabiki and the others came through the portal, in a vehicle that looked somewhat like a car but seemed to be sitting about ten centimetres off the ground with nothing obvious holding it up. It was virtually silent. Looking out the window at it after they had greeted and been greeted by the other two people, Nabiki wondered out loud how it worked. Onkra came over and glanced out, then turned to her with a smile. "We used to use a levitation spell, but most ground vehicles nowadays use a type of gravity repulsion system that is pure tech. A company from one of the high-tech worlds imports the units to here and a few other worlds. Wheels like on the ground vehicles of your world haven't been used much for a long time, although they still are for some very large cargo vehicles because the energy cost is
Nabiki shook her head in wonder. "Things are going full on science fiction again. That's one of the strangest thing about everything I've learned and seen in the last year, how something that everyone at home refers to in supernatural terms is more like some futuristic alien space-travel movie in some ways. Anti-gravity, levitating cars, travel between worlds, it's all amazing." The young female demon laughed.

"I know what you mean. I've watched quite a lot of movies on your world, it's something you do really very well indeed, such incredible imaginations, and it always amuses me how the makers of those things seem to split alien worlds into ones that are basically very low tech but with everything magical, or incredibly high tech with no magic at all. In reality almost everywhere is a mix between both of those. We use more magic in everyday life that most of your world does, but we also use a lot of technology, some of which you'd instantly recognise, some of which is more advanced." Glancing out at the levitating car she smiled a little. "We certainly didn't invent it all, though. A lot of both are bought in, which means we have access to things your world doesn't. Most worlds do that, they have done for a long time. It's quite rare to come across one that doesn't have a thriving interworld trade."

"I would think that your family is quite interested in changing that status with my home," the middle sister mused, turning away from the window.

Onkra nodded a little. "I think so. I know dad has been trading in luxury items for quite a while, but he's talked about expanding into other things at some point. One thing that has kept it down to a small amount of trade is how much more complicated it tends to be to create portals to your world outside the Minato area. No one seems to be able to work out why. Oh, you can do it, certainly, but the amount of energy needed makes it a nuisance. It depends on where you start from, as well. Starting a portal from your end is easier than from outside inwards."

Ranma had wandered over and was listening as Onkra spoke. "I've always wondered about that. I know that we didn't seem to have too much difficulty creating portals in the UK or Canada, but you could feel the difference." The demon girl nodded, sitting down next to where Nabiki was standing.

"Dad told me about your spell being weird. He seems to think it's a lot more efficient than the normal one, so in your case the difference is probably a lot less, but for most people, it's considerably simpler to aim for Minato or the surrounding area. If it wasn't for the way all those magical girls tend to jump anything coming through a portal on the spot we'd more than likely have looked into expanding the trade earlier." She grinned toothily at him. "You and Kasumi at least seem to have managed to make that much less of a problem."

Ranma grinned back and bowed, laughing. "You're entirely welcome." Straightening up, he added, "I know Uthryyl has certainly been expanding the chocolate trade a lot in the last year or so. When we met he was only coming about twice a year and was in and out in a day or so, so far this year he'd been about six times that I know."

"Seven," the merchant said, coming over followed by his wife and Kasumi who were deep in conversation. "The last time was for about a week. Your friend Yoshi is being very helpful, we half-filled his warehouse the last trip. We had to hire in half a dozen locals to help move the cargo through the portal. If I could spare the power to make the portal larger we could simply drive the trucks through, but that's a bit difficult at the moment. Even so, business is good."

"Leave some chocolate and coffee for the rest of us," Nabiki giggled. He snickered.
"Oddly enough, that could be a problem at some point. It's an expensive luxury item, of course, more so here than back in your world, but business is expanding so much I can foresee a time when we could take the entire output of the growers. That clearly isn't sustainable. I've been trying to think of some way around that, but the bottleneck is simply the fact that the plants don't grow acceptably anywhere else but your world."

"I've heard that the people who actually grow the coffee beans and cocoa plants get very little of the profit from them, which is enormous, they're often very poor and live in very deprived areas. That's where the plants grow best. There are groups back home who are trying to change that but it's an uphill struggle."

Uthryyl sighed a little. "I was told about that a while ago. It's not all that uncommon, actually, I know of other cases in different worlds where something similar happens. But I'm not sure how it can be changed. We're happy to buy the stuff, although I admit I'd be happier if everyone down the line got a decent profit from it. That's only fair."

Nabiki studied him with interest. The demon seemed genuinely sincere. "Perhaps it would be possible to set up a company that could grow coffee and chocolate specifically for you?" she mused. "If you paid the growers directly, you could most likely not only funnel more profit to them but get the stuff cheaper yourself, with less middlemen. The knock-on effects would in the long run probably improve the lot of everyone, except possibly a few wholesalers." Uthryyl looked at her with an odd expression.

"That... is a very interesting idea, Nabiki." He thought for a while. "A very interesting idea indeed. I'm not sure about the process of setting up a company on your world. The process is different everywhere, of course, but being from somewhere so... non-local... could be a problem. It bears investigating, though."

"Talk to Yoshi about it," Ranma suggested. "He's already running two businesses I know of, pretty successfully as well. He'd know about the process in Japan. I guess one method might be to set up a Japanese company to handle the import-export part, then use that company to buy or otherwise set up coffee and cocoa growing companies in the appropriate places." Uthryyl nodded thoughtfully.

"Not a bad idea. He's already my local buying agent. Involving him would be the obvious first step. Yes, that's something I'll look into. Thank you, Nabiki, that's two potentially profitable ideas in your first evening here. Keep them coming!" He grinned at the middle sister, who laughed.

"It's not like I've been trying to think of ways for you to make a profit, but thanks."

"You certainly have the instincts for it." The demon looked pleased. "Keep it up and I suspect we'll have to start paying you a retainer." She giggled, not sure if he was serious. Ranma smiled at her.

"Hold out for fifteen percent," he advised. Uthryyl looked shocked.

"Fifteen percent?! Do you think I'm made of money? Five is more than reasonable."

"Fourteen and a half," Ranma said with a grin.

"I could go to six and a half." Nabiki watched them both with a raised eyebrow. Kasumi looked at her and smiled, while beside her, Quannyr sighed a little.

"Six and a half! Are you mad! That's almost an insult, my friend. My client here would never consider less than thirteen." Ranma crossed his arms, appearing annoyed. Nabiki tried not to laugh,
the inanity of the situation well recognised by her, especially considering their previous history with each other. Uthryylcocked his ears forward and gasped in shock.

"Thirteen! Insanity." His daughter snickered, leaning against the wall and watching with amusement. "Seven. That's more than fair."

"Twelve."

"Nine!"

Ranma leaned forward, glaring at the merchant, who did the same back. "Ten. That's the lowest she can go." After a long staring contest during which the middle sister could see the edge of the martial artist's mouth was twitching with amusement, Uthryyl growled and nodded, sticking out his hand.

"Ten." They shook on it, then laughed. Nabiki chuckled.

"Idiots."

Turning to her, Ranma grinned menacingly. "Right, now we need to negotiate my commission."

She gaped at him, as Kasumi broke down in fits of laughter. After a moment a cold smile crossed her face.

"Three percent."

"Fifteen..."

Sitting at the table Nabiki snickered at the look on the martial artists face. "Seven percent? How the hell did you get me to agree to seven percent?" Uthryyl clapped him on the shoulder, highly amused.

"My friend, both of us met our match today."

Ranma chuckled, while his wife smiled at him. "Apparently so."

Tucking into her g'rargh stew with enjoyment, the middle Tendo felt pleased with herself. It had been a fun few minutes. The alien meat was accompanied by a number of vegetables which were an odd mix of nearly familiar and almost totally unrecognisable, plus carrots. That had made her stare, but they really were carrots. Quannyr looked amused when she held up a three-tined fork analog with a piece of orange vegetable on the end and raised her eyebrow.

"That was one of the first things in recent years we imported from your world. Unlike cocoa and coffee plants, carrots grow here very well and are considered something of a delicacy."

"I made quite a lot from importing seeds for a while," Uthryyl chuckled. "Went into partnership with a few growers, took a percentage of the sales, that sort of thing. Generally, if you're the first to import something from another world you can get a limited duration monopoly on it, during which no one else is allowed to infringe on the sales. A bit like a patent, in terms you'd probably be familiar with. It lasts one of our years and can't be renewed. After that anyone who wants can jump in, assuming the people on the other end go along with it." He finished his plate as well, looking satisfied. "The trick is to persuade the people on the world you're trading with to trade with you exclusively, which means building up a trusted relationship. That's the only way to do it properly. With the carrots, they grow so well here we didn't need to import them for long before we were self-sufficient, which changes the equation a lot."
"So what's the situation with the coffee, chocolate, ice cream, that sort of thing, that you get from Tokyo? Were you the first there?" Nabiki was finding all this very interesting. He shook his head regretfully.

"I wish. No, we've been doing that for a long time. There are a few people who do it, from various worlds, but I pay well, set up local agents, a number of other business tricks that no one else seems to have tried, or possibly thought of. The end result is I have about eighty percent, maybe eighty-five, of the business through Minato to quite a number of worlds. It's very lucrative. Most of the other traders are more specialist, dealing in very specific markets for high prices, which makes up for the lower volume. It seems to work out pretty well."

"It sounds like plants are a very good source of trade goods," Kasumi said, also looking fascinated. Uthryyl nodded.

"They are. One of the best, actually. Biotechnology is very profitable for a number of reasons. Electronics, magitech, mechanical things, those can usually be made locally for less than importing them if you have the infrastructure, the materials, the knowledge, and so on. They're portable. For instance, those fusion generators you were asking about, Nabiki, could be made on your world. Not at the moment or in the near future, there are a lot of other technologies you don't have that are required first, but it's basically just an engineering problem. Plants, and a lot of animals, have normally evolved under very specific conditions and don't travel well or at all. Coffee and cocoa are two very good examples. They only grow properly in a few areas even on their native world, and badly anywhere else as far as anyone can tell. And trust me, people have tried for a long time. A few other plants produce the same compounds but in very small quantities and not very high purity, so they're not commonly cultivated."

He picked up an odd looking mug with a smile. "Jamaican blend, one of my favourites." Drinking from it, he nodded in satisfaction, then put it down again. "It would in theory be possible to synthesise both of them, but they're very complex mixtures of compounds where even tiny differences can make very obvious changes in taste. Despite the price it's cheaper to import them by a long way."

"The carrots were a lucky find, they are one of the fairly small number of plants from your world that do well here and a few other places." Quannyr poured her husband some more coffee, then looked around quizzically. Onkra held out her mug as did Ranma. Filling both, she put the pot back on the table. "There are a few plants from here that grow well on your world, like the Pitheer bush I gave Kasumi. It's only ornamental but it is pretty and has a lovely scent."

Nabiki thought for a while. "So, if one wanted to import things to our world, as an idle idea, one might well be able to pay for them in certain plant products?" She smiled a little. Uthryyl laughed.

"You have the right instincts, definitely. Yes, I would think there are many plant byproducts that would be anywhere from reasonably profitable to extremely lucrative from your world. It has a very large variety of life, more than many places, and surprisingly large numbers of compounds that people want for one reason or another. As I told you some while ago, I've been keeping an eye on your biotech and materials sciences, some of the things I've found out about that you're doing are fairly impressive. One or two are remarkable. There is likely to be some very good trading possibilities there soon. I'm one of, if not the, largest traders between your world and anywhere else, a status I'd like to keep. So far most of it has been outbound trade, mainly precious metals going the other way, but it might be time to try expanding."

"What sort of things would you be looking for?" Ranma asked. The trader thought for a moment.

"Hmm. OK, an example would be drugs of various types. There are some classes of chemical
compound that are narcotics, or even poisons, to some species and valuable therapeutic medicines to others. For instance, a world I know has a species that is based on a triple helix DNA-equivalent, unlike the double-helix one both of our species uses. They have a very nasty disease that causes progressive neurological shut down over a period of years, something that so far has eluded a true cure, although they've been looking very hard. There is a drug that is quite effective at treating the symptoms for this disease, keeping it at bay for most of a normal life, but they find it very expensive to synthesise. Finding a plant that could produce it, or a close precursor, would be extremely valuable to them. That drug is a good example, actually, to a lot of species it's a remarkably potent narcotic with some very addictive properties. Quite unpleasant. Yet to them it is a valuable and sought-after medicine."

"I remember you said that there were regulations about transferring potential or actual narcotics or toxins between worlds," the middle sister said.

"There are, but it's still possible presuming there is a legitimate reason for it. Obviously, illegitimate trades take place as well, that sort of thing is impossible to stamp out completely anywhere I've ever been, but it's not a large problem generally. You can arrange a license to transfer otherwise banned substances or products if you can show a good cause for it. I've got quite a few exemptions like that between various worlds myself." He shrugged a little. "Mostly for drugs, a few specialist things that I found a buyer for and that I was comfortable with."

"This drug you were talking about, do you have any information on it?" Kasumi asked curiously. "I know a fair amount about pharmacology, it's one of the subjects I've found very interesting doing my medical training. Perhaps I could look it up when we go home, you never know, it might be one we already know about. There are a very large number of plant-derived medicines in the books."

Uthryyl nodded, looking interested. "Yes, I've got a selection of data on it and a few others I know are potentially profitable. I was planning on looking up an honest and open-minded biochemist on your world at some point in the next couple of years, so I started researching things that might be worth a look. Here, I'll sent you the data." Moments later all three of them got a file of information. Nabiki opened it and had a quick scan through the contents, finding a large amount of chemical information including molecular diagrams, notes on which species the various drugs were useful on and which they were dangerous too, and a lot more, most of which was beyond her comprehension. Kasumi nodded thoughtfully, with the expression that everyone with an SI recognised as someone communing with one.

"Very interesting." She fell silent for a moment, then looked somewhat surprised. "Very interesting." Uthryyl stared at her.

"That tone of voice intrigues me," he commented with a look of interest.

"I recognise one of these compounds, or something very like it. The second one. Come to think of it, the fourth one is vaguely familiar as well." The trader exchanged glances with his wife, his ears cocked forward.

"Do you now. That is interesting. Is it something you know is produced on your world?"

"Yes. The second one, definitely, it's an opiate. Hang on a moment, let me..." She nodded after a moment. "Nao has the reference for it. It's called Thebaine, it's derived from a type of poppy." Kasumi saw the three demons looked blank. "A flower. There are a lot of different types, most of them produce at least small amounts of alkaloids like this, some produce very large amounts. They're grown commercially for the production of a number of compounds, most of which are used as analgesics or anaesthetics. Or, as you said, very potent and addictive narcotics. That particular
compound isn't used directly but is a precursor to a few drugs."

She went back to reading the file. "I'm sure the fourth one is also a plant alkaloid. I think it's something closely related to a compound called Nepaline, a very lethal poison derived from a plant called Aconitum. There are a number of different species that produce various amounts of it, all of them are extremely toxic. It's not Nepaline, but it's close. I'd think one could be converted into the other fairly easily. The rest I don't recognise and Nao doesn't have any information on them, but I'll check when I go back."

Uthryyl was looking ecstatic. "Kasumi, that is very interesting indeed. If you're right about even those two compounds, that is an extremely profitable trading opportunity right there. We'll need to look into it as soon as possible. If it turns out that they are the right chemicals and can be supplied in reasonable quantities, I could arrange import and export licenses and start negotiations with the end users."

The eldest Tendo raised a cautioning hand. "Don't immediately rush into it. Thebaine is a strictly controlled drug all over our world, there would be a lot of negotiating required to buy it, assuming it's possible in the first place. The main producer of it is Australia, I know a lot of poppies are grown commercially in Tasmania, an island off the south coast of the country, but I'm not sure how we'd look into being allowed to purchase it. I suppose it would pay to talk to that nice Officer Graham at the ASIO, he'd probably be able to put us in touch with the right people."

The trader was nodding, clearly taking mental notes. "And the other one?"

"Well, that's not actually regulated, as far as I know, there's no large scale use for it since it's so remarkably poisonous. I seem to recall some traditional Chinese medicines use Aconitum, but only in very small amounts. I'd have to look it up. The plant is grown as an ornamental one, I have some in the garden, but you really don't want anyone to eat it, or ideally, even touch it. But it is very pretty."

"I should have talked to you about this a long time ago," Uthryyl said slowly, looking at his wife again. "You clearly know more about biochemistry than I realised."

"We are both very practised healers and training in medicine," Kasumi said, giggling slightly. "You tend to pick up a lot of biochemical knowledge like that, even if you're not actively studying it. It's not my primary field but I've taken a number of courses in the last few years that covered quite a lot of this sort of thing. Ranma has as well, from a slightly different viewpoint."

"We can get data on an awful lot of drugs and compounds through the university computer system, including some new and experimental ones, then send it to you, if that would help," Ranma suggested. "You could see which ones are something you'd be interested in. I would imagine it should be possible to arrange commercial contacts for the most part, especially if the companies are in Japan."

"That would be... very generous and helpful," the merchant replied, looking slightly overwhelmed. Ranma waved a hand.

"Don't worry about it. We've been friends for quite a while, we help each other out, this is just more of the same. You've done as much for us."

"Even so, thank you very much. If this all works out the way it sounds like it could, I'm quite serious about cutting you all in on it. The profit would be more than enough to go around." He grinned after a moment. "I should have talked to you about business like this some time ago. You've only been here a few hours and we've had several potentially lucrative ideas. In three
weeks, we could end up owning the planet." Everyone laughed at that. "Oh, yes, Nabiki, on that subject, I researched the fusion reactors we were talking about." She looked at him with interest.

"And?"

"Well, the first thing to realise is that there are several types of reactor design I can get. Some aren't really suitable, either they require exotic fuels that are hard to source outside their own worlds, have by-products that are a pain to deal with without the infrastructure, or are simply too big to go through a portal. In the end, the small design those railguns use seems like the best bet. They're a somewhat old design on their originating world, but as a result the technology is stable, reliable, and well-understood. The downside is that they use a fusion fuel, an isotope of helium, that is in very short supply on your planet. The upside is that the waste is very clean."

Nabiki nodded, listening carefully. "My research showed that your own people are aware of the possibility of this particular fuel cycle, but also know how difficult it is to obtain, not to mention how hard it is to design the hardware to use it. From what I can find out your people are probably about fifty to seventy years from being able to duplicate this method of power generation natively. But, it is something you know about and would eventually get to, which means the paperwork about exporting it to you is much easier. It's not introducing something completely new, just jump-starting the process. An entirely new alien technology would be more complicated to export to you, although not impossible for the most part."

"What about the SI units?" Kasumi asked with interest. "They're clearly a very long way past any of our own world's technology."

"Personal imports of small amounts of high tech is fine, generally. Especially to people of your reputation." She looked slightly embarrassed, causing him to grin. "You'd be absolutely amazed what you could get if you needed it. Selling them on the open market would possibly be a problem, but it wouldn't arise as we couldn't get the things in the first place. Their makers only sell to very specific people, as you know." He shrugged a little. "Other worlds have different rules, so you could quite possibly get even things that we ban through someone else, but you'd have to go some way off the beaten track. The trading treaty worlds like this one have a fairly unified set of rules. Personally, I prefer it that way, it's much more civilised."

He looked back to Nabiki. "The fuel is something I can get in significant quantities. Several very high-tech worlds mine and refine it from gas giants, they use it themselves in huge amounts. It's not vastly expensive in those terms. So, that part is easy enough, and of course an ongoing commercial possibility. The reactors are quite efficient, even the small one that was running the railgun you played with had a continuously rated output of around ten megawatts. It's intrinsically fail-safe, and small enough you could pick it up and walk off with it." He looked at her for a moment, then around at Kasumi and Ranma. Grinning, he added, "Not the best choice of words in your case, you lot could probably pick up this house and walk off with it." Ranma chuckled. "But it's not big. About so high," he held a hand approximately a meter off the floor, "And about the same across. I left it in the bunker when we installed it, it was easier, but it only took two of my people to get it inside and connected."

"Jun, what does that power output mean in terms I'd be familiar with?" Nabiki asked the SI. She certainly wasn't technologically inept by a long way but she wasn't an engineer.

#A typical household in your home country would use approximately three to ten kilowatts continuously depending on number of inhabitants. A reactor of the power output specified would provide enough energy to run over one thousand such households. Based on information I downloaded from your internet it would take approximately seventy thousand such reactors to

"What about the SI units?" Kasumi asked with interest. "They're clearly a very long way past any of our own world's technology."
provide the entirety of the electricity usage of Japan. Obviously, larger output versions would require proportionately fewer installations.#

'Thanks.'

"The largest one we could easily fit through a portal, disassembled into it's main components, would be one with an output of about eight gigawatts. From what I could find out to replace all the electricity requirements in your country with these reactors would need less than a hundred that size. That includes all the energy you generate domestically and also import." Uthryyl looked at her, smiling. "The SI units are very good at finding out these things." She laughed and nodded. "So it's possible, and even fairly simple with large units, to replace all your energy requirements. The fuel required would be around ten metric tons a year, which isn't very much. The world I'd use to supply it from produces thousands of times that much every year, they sell it all over the place."

"It definitely sounds possible," Kasumi said, sipping her coffee. Uthryyl nodded.

"Most certainly. I would have to arrange some import and export licenses, talk to the manufacturers, things like that, but it could be set up in a few months, perhaps a year worst case. The bigger difficulty would be at your end. As I said when you first raised the thought, there are some very large and powerful entities in your world that seem quite happy with the way things are at the moment as they make enormous profits from it. You might have an uphill struggle with them, I'm afraid. I've seen it before, the issue isn't uncommon. A new, disruptive technology causes friction between the new companies and the old, entrenched ones. It's something to be aware of."

Nodding slowly, Nabiki thought about his words. They certainly seemed plausible, from what she knew of the politics of energy. Oil, coal, nuclear, issues with unstable countries in the Middle East, much of it made the news almost every day. Still, the more she thought about it the more it seemed like something that could genuinely help people on a scale being a magical girl probably couldn't, and quite directly as well. Cheap clean energy was the cure to a large number of the world's problems from what she could work out.

"It's a bit overwhelming, to be honest," she said in the end. "Having a potential world-changing thing like this just sitting there. I think we would need to get some advice from people back home." Looking at Ranma she smiled as he nodded.

"I would have to agree. But, now that Nabiki has raised the possibility, I also agree it's probably a good idea in the long term. There are some very worrying things being found out about pollution from our existing energy sources back home, I can see it getting bad in a few years or decades. This might be a fix. I'll talk to a few people I know when we get back, see if they can suggest the best way to go about it."

"Fine. I'll continue with the paperwork, it's fiddly but doesn't cost much, so as and when you want to proceed we're ready." Quannyr looked at him for a moment.

"Who will continue with the paperwork, husband?" Uthryyl glanced at her and grinned.

"I meant to say, my beautiful and intelligent wife without whom I would be nothing, will continue with the paperwork..." The demoness laughed, nodding to her husband.

"Nice save." Kasumi giggled, exchanging glances with Ranma, who was grinning. Nabiki watched with amusement, thinking how normal all of this was despite the alien environment. The people of this world were indeed just basically people, even if they looked a bit weird. Something that she had to force herself to even notice these days, she was surprised and amused to note.
"The big question is how to pay for all of this," the brunette said, looking around the table.

"Well, if Kasumi is right and the plant compounds she recognised are indeed available in commercial quantities, that wouldn't be a problem. They're very valuable, more so than a lot of fusion reactors and helium-three. In fact, one of the worlds that produces the fuel has a number of requirements for some fairly exotic chemical compounds, if your world could supply them you'd have the perfect relationship right there. I don't think it would be a massive problem." The merchant picked up the coffee-pot and looked inside with disappointment as it was empty. Quannyr smiled and took it from him, going to get some more.

"Do a lot of worlds have some form of space travel?" Nabiki asked, "You mentioned mining gas giants. I'm familiar with the concept, it's something I've read in any number of science fiction books, but I'd think it needs quite a major infrastructure."

"Worlds that use magic in significant amounts often don't bother with space travel as portal travel is a lot easier, and fills many of the same requirements." Uthryyl accepted a refill from his wife as she returned, looking at her gratefully. She filled everyone's mug before retaking her place beside him. "On the other hand, some of the high-tech, non-magical worlds are pretty good at it. You remember I said portals can only be generated through magic?" Nabiki nodded. "Some worlds don't have any mages, or ones powerful enough to do a portal spell, which is very high level, so that option isn't available. That often leads to developing some form of space travel. Resources on any given planet are limited and high-tech worlds for some reason often have larger populations than magic based ones, so the problem is even more serious. Energy is normally the most immediate shortage, which space-based industries can solve, in several ways. It generally grows from there."

"Do any of them have faster than light travel?" she asked, a question raised from watching a lot of TV programs as a child.

"It's possible, although not easy. Even your own people are aware of at least one theoretical method though they currently have no idea how to build a machine to do it. It requires a certain amount of negative mass, something very complicated to arrange." Jun popped a graphic up without being asked, about something called the Alcubierre drive, a theoretical method proposed a few years ago by a Mexican theoretical physicist.

#This method is one know to my database, Nabiki. The mathematics are not quite complete but the theory proposed by the physicist Miguel Alcubierre is indeed practical. There are currently nine species listed as using a variant on it for a space drive.# She looked at the diagram and read the text with interest, then dismissed the graphic, with a mental note to look into it again at some point. It sounded interesting.

"Amazing. I can't believe how many things that were just stories suddenly seem to be real," she said, looking around. "I mean, I'm having dinner in an alien house on an alien world! That's just bizarre."

Onkra, beside her, laughed. "I've been to parties in alien houses several times," she said, glancing at the middle sister, who giggled. "They're weird, those aliens."

"I know. Very strange people." The two very different young woman grinned at each other.

When the meal was over they all sat and talked for a while, before Ranma looked at his wife and sister-in-law. "I suggest we should probably get an early night. It's going to take a little time to get used to the longer days here. I'd like to be up early tomorrow so we can show Nabiki around, then see what we should do next." He glanced at the trader. "You told me you have some interesting ideas?"
"Oh, yes, quite a few. I think you'll like them. A couple of days around here, there are a lot of places you haven't seen before and that I think Nabiki will find very interesting, then perhaps go and look in on some other worlds I know. There are a few friends I'd like to look up on the way, a couple of them you know, some you don't." He grinned, looking pleased. "I don't think you'll be disappointed."

"Sounds good. In that case, I'm off to bed. Kas? Coming?" His wife nodded, standing as he did, then they both left with a smile to the people left. Nabiki watched them go, before looking out the window again at the alien city in the distance. Onkra followed her gaze and laughed.

"You'll love it. It's a lot like Tokyo in some ways, and completely different in others. I'm looking forward to showing you around." Smiling in anticipation, the middle Tendo stood.

"He's got the right idea. I am a little tired. Thank you all for the meal, and the opportunity to see all this."

"It's not a problem, Nabiki," Quannyr assured her. "We've been looking forward to this for some time. Have a good night's sleep and we'll see you tomorrow." Nodding to her hosts, the brunette headed to her room, closing the door and looking around, before yawning. Puzzling out the bathroom operation took a few minutes, but soon she was in the strange bed, finding it amazingly comfortable, almost as if she wasn't on a real surface, but just floating in the air.

'I have to get one of these', she thought to herself with a grin, reaching for the activation plate beside the bed and turning off the lights in the ceiling in the way Uthryyl had demonstrated earlier. Lying in the dark, listening to the odd noises from outside of alien life wandering around in the bushes and muttering to itself, she could hardly believe where she was.

#Nabiki, since arrival on this world I have connected to the equivalent of your internet and downloaded up to date maps, topographical and terrain data, and other relevant information. I have also established a link to the location services available, consisting of a high-resolution timing based satellite service and a planetary space-time distortion mapping service. The combined accuracy of both these methods in conjunction with inertial measurement systems is approximately plus or minus one hundred micrometres in all three planes, with equivalent repeatability. Rotational accuracy and repeatability is approximately one half arc-second in all three planes. Is this acceptable?

'More than acceptable, Jun. Thank you.' The middle sister idly studied a map of the area, zooming out to a few dozen kilometres around the house. She noticed that the information was at least as detailed as the GPS maps of Tokyo, showing down to individual street addresses, both in the written form of the trade language and Japanese. 'Very impressive, in fact.'

'Thank you, Nabiki. I have also taken the liberty of synchronising a clock to the local time and date system. Would you like me to display it in addition to the Tokyo time clock, or in place of it?'

'In addition, I think, Jun.' Another clock appeared below the normal one she kept running off to one side.

'The local time is based on decimal hours. There are ten hours to a day, each hour consisting of one hundred minutes of one hundred seconds. The resulting seconds are approximately nine percent longer than an Earth second. It is a very logical system." The voice of the SI was approving, making Nabiki giggle.

'Did you have much information on this world before we arrived?' she asked curiously.
There is a considerable amount of data on many well-travelled worlds in my database, Nabiki. This world is one well known to my makers. The inhabitants of it have been utilising portal travel for a considerable time, several thousand years in your terms, both for trade and research. Their species has a somewhat longer written history than your own although the time they have been truly sentient is approximately the same. From what I have learned I suspect that the main reason their technological civilization is considerably older than your own is that they arrived at a common consensus of governance covering the entire planet much earlier in their history. Without constant wars, while progress was slower than it would otherwise have been, it was also not reset on a regular basis. In addition this world is less prone to the tectonic upheaval and other natural disasters that have curtailed some of the great civilizations of the past on your world.

'So essentially, they learned to work together and didn't get washed away by tidal waves every now and then?' she asked.

Precisely. There does not appear to be a vast difference in ability between your two species, despite appearances you are surprisingly similar mentally and in physical capability. More so than some species by a considerable margin. They are longer-lived on average and somewhat stronger physically, but in neither case outside the range members of your own species reach. As Uthryyl stated, the ambient magic level of this world is substantially higher than your own as well, which has led them to be more aware of magic and as a result utilise more of it in their civilisation. Your world, while well aware of magic in parts and capable of some extraordinary feats using it, has never embraced it to the level this one has. You chose a different path based on physical technology, as have many other worlds.

Nabiki considered its words for a while. 'So, if you have all this information, do you have the plans for making the fusion reactors Uthryyl is talking about?'

'I do have constructional and theoretical data on a number of power systems, including one I believe is most likely the one Uthryyl has referred to. However, as he also stated, while it would in theory be possible for your world to produce such a device, in practice it would be extremely difficult at this point in time. There are a large number of other facilities required to complete the manufacture of this type of technology which your world does not yet possess. Leaving aside the issue of obtaining the helium-three isotope required for fuelling a reactor of this type, I would estimate it would take your home-world a minimum of thirty-five to forty years and enormous and costly effort to build the necessary infrastructure to manufacture it at a price low enough to be feasible as a practical power supply. Laboratory models could possibly be created in a mere twenty years, approximately, although this would be of little practical use to anyone other than research scientists. It would be far preferable, and very considerably cheaper in the long term, to purchase the units ready-made from an existing manufacturer.

'Interesting. Thanks, that's useful information.' Thinking about what it had told her, she fell asleep.
Chapter 55

Fumiko looked around, ducking slightly as a lump of masonry flew overhead, sighing in annoyance. She glanced at her sister, who looked back with a shrug. "One day. They've been gone one day." She ducked again, as a blast of magic whistled past, then irritably sniped a famous magical girl off the roof of a building down the road with a quick ki shot, smiling grimly as the girl with long black hair plummeted to the ground with a shriek of rage and terror, her uniform smoking in a perfect circle in the middle of her chest. "They're going to be furious." She turned to the younger girl standing to one side, who was looking around in stunned amazement, one hand on her hip and the other running through her short blue hair. "You do realise that, right? They're going to be absolutely, frothing at the mouth, furious about this. Your friends are going to be lucky if they just get the shit kicked out of them. You all know this area is off-limits."

The girl nodded, a heavy sigh escaping her lips. She watched as Aiko teleported behind a blonde in the same uniform she was wearing, lashing out with a series of ki-enhanced pressure points down her spine in a blur of motion and looking pleased when the girl dropped without a sound, before teleporting away again as a different girl took a shot at her, then gasping as her lightning attack blew her unconscious friend half a dozen metres down the street. The blue-haired girl winced. When Aiko appeared behind the taller brunette and dropped her with the same attack she smiled somewhat maliciously.

Fumiko, her sister, and the blue-haired young woman all turned to glare at the small demon hiding behind them, whose appearance had triggered the free-for-all currently wrecking half the street. It looked guiltily up at them and shrugged. "Sorry. I just wanted a cappuccino. These lunatics appeared out of nowhere, shouted all sorts of silly things, then started shooting magic at me. What was I supposed to do but run?"

"You could have run in the other fucking direction," Fumiko grated. It shrugged again.

"I didn't know Yori was out of town, or I would have." Shaking her head irritably, the magical girl turned back as Tamiko jogged up, the limp body of a familiar twin-pony-tailed blonde over her shoulder.

"She was pissing me off," the auburn-haired girl explained, looking peeved. "Wouldn't shut up about love and justice, all the time she was blowing holes in the Indian restaurant trying to hit me with that stupid attack of hers. I like that restaurant. She's a terrible shot, she nearly hit Mr Singh. Loads of power, no aim, and a ridiculously slow wind-up. I can see why she annoys Yori so much." She dropped the girl to the ground slightly less carefully than might have been expected, frowning. "They're going to be furious, you know," she added.

"They're going to be furious, you know," she added.

"We've just been through that." Fumiko shook her head. "Come on then, let's get these idiots shut down properly before the rest of them turn up and cause even more problems. It's my turn to shout, I think." She glanced at the blue-haired woman. "Are you going to help, or do you want to stay out of it?"

"May as well help, I suppose, I don't want Yori of all people any more annoyed with me than I can avoid," the girl replied morosely. "God, sometimes I wonder why I stay with these lunatics, I really do." Heaving a sigh, she followed as Fumiko and her two friends stomped off to deal with the others, muttering to themselves, picking their way through a number of wrecked vehicles, two of which were on fire. Several bystanders were taking notes and exchanging cash, while Sergeant Harada inspected the scene with mild astonishment, before going on his way. In the distance the
black-haired girl helped her blonde compatriot to her feet, both of them swaying slightly and looking somewhat ill.

Behind them, the demon watched, shaking his head. "Seems a bit of an over-reaction to me," he said to no-one, then headed for the nearest coffee-shop.

Blinking at the unfamiliar ceiling it took the middle sister a couple of seconds to work out where she was. Lying in the astoundingly comfortable bed she was reluctant to rise, but eventually got up, heading to the bathroom to perform her ablutions. Once more the differences between what she was used to and what was available stood out, amusing her in some ways with how similar it was for the most part then finding something weird. The sink was obviously a sink, for example, but the water entered it from the front, not the back, and via some form of plumbing that didn't seem to rely on pipes. It just seemed to come out of shiny slick surface as if it had holes in it, which it didn't. Even with these different methods, thought, she found she got used to it very quickly, not thinking much about it after the first few minutes.

One dressed she went downstairs and looked around curiously. Following noises reminiscent of cooking in action, she entered the kitchen near the rear of the house, finding Uthryyl and Quannyr both engaged in preparing a meal. The trader looked up and smiled, his inhuman face alight with pleasure."Good morning, Nabiki. I trust you slept well?"

"Amazingly well, thanks, Uthryyl. I really should get one of those mattresses you have for myself, it's the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in." She grinned. "That's probably another trade opportunity. Humans like their sleep." Laughing, Uthryyl nodded, reaching for a coffee-pot from which enticing scents were coming and holding it up.

"So I gather. Kasumi has mentioned it in the past. I think I'll look into it. She also tells me you like a good strong coffee in the morning?"

"Oh, very much so, thank you." Grabbing a mug from the pile of them on a side table she held it out, watching as he filled it. "Thanks."

"If you want it sweetened that jar there has something very similar to what you'd think of as sugar, although it's from a different source." He pointed. Walking over she lifted the lid, sniffed, then experimentally tipped a little into her hand and tried it. There was a slightly odd taste to it but not one she found objectionable, more tart than anything else, as if it was sugar with a little lemon juice mixed in. Finding a spoon-like implement she added some to her mug and stirred it, sipping the resulting drink with an approving face.

"That's pretty good. Where does it come from?"

"It's processed from the sap of a tree." He was watching her with interest.

"Ah. Yes, we have something like that back home. Mostly from North America, called maple syrup or maple sugar. I've never much liked it but a lot of people love it. This is nice, though." Drinking some more she worked out how to hold the alien mug to account for the different shape of her jaw from the one the makers had designed it for.

"Your sister and her husband are in the back garden practising," Quannyr said, looking up from where she was making some form of bread. "Or possibly on the roof, they were up there a little while ago." She laughed. "Very active people. I'm still amazed when I watch them in action. And very impressed. Even without the magic and this... ki..., whatever that is, they are remarkably powerful." She inspected Nabiki curiously. "I know how much you've learned about the energy
manipulation skills they have, are you also learning the physical ones?"

"Slowly. Ranma and Kasumi are so far past anyone else sometimes they don't seem to realise how much more difficult the rest of us find some of it," the middle Tendo replied, smiling. "Aiko and the girls are much better than I am but still have a long way to go. I'm just a rank beginner. Although in the last year, or more accurately I suppose about the last six months, I have learned far more than I ever thought I would."

"Don't put yourself down, Nabiki," Uthryyl advised. "I've seen many recordings Ranma or Kasumi passed on, it's clear you have a very large talent for this sort of thing. I have no doubt it will take a considerable amount of time to reach anything like the level either of them possesses but I have no doubt you can do it eventually. You certainly have the best teachers you could possibly ask for."

Somewhat embarrassed, Nabiki looked at her coffee for a moment before meeting his eyes. "Thanks." She paused. "You've seen the recordings?" Nodding, he and his wife both laughed a little.

"A lot of them, yes. Some are very impressive indeed. I especially like the most recent one where you dealt with that exceptionally nasty person perpetrating the sexual assaults at your university. That was just inspired." The demon snickered, going back to chopping vegetables. "I hope the justice service in your country deals with him appropriately. If not, you could always arrange to send him here. We don't approve of that behaviour at all."

Curious, she asked, "What do you do to rapists here?" Quannyr growled under her breath, making both the others look at her for a moment.

"Sorry. I find even the concept... upsetting."

"It's not nearly as common as it is in your world here," Uthryyl said, after another glance at his wife, who was clearly irritated by the thought, "Our species are not driven in quite the same way in such matters. On the other hand, when it does happen, we take it very seriously. Forfeiture of all assets in restitution and an extensive incarceration are the starting penalties, along with treatment for obvious mental issues. Personality death and rebuilding is the last resort, in cases involving extreme violence or death. It's treated in a manner only slightly less severe than deliberate murder."

He shook his head slightly. "I'm rather surprised how lightly some cultures on your home-world take such things."

"So are a lot of people there," Nabiki said, finishing her coffee. "Believe me, there are a lot who would quite like to see people of his type dealt with more severely or even permanently. But the arguments against that are also valid. Aside from anything else, you'd have to be completely sure that the crime was exactly as it appeared. A miscarriage of justice is bad enough when it involves jail, it's not something you can do much about if an innocent victim ends up dead. Not that there was any doubt about that bastard."

"It's a good point. We have methods that for our species at least can tell with essentially complete accuracy if a person is being truthful. They're reserved for the legal system, as they're moderately hazardous, more so than daily use would warrant, but such techniques do tend to reduce massively such outcomes as those. Not completely eliminate it, unfortunately, there are rare cases where everyone involved is completely truthful yet the whole truth eludes the courts, but that's extremely unusual."

"It sounds like you still have crime, then, even with a society that in many ways is more advanced socially than back home." Nabiki refilled her mug and added some more tree sap sweetener. Uthryyl nodded, putting his knife down and dumping the sliced vegetables into a large pot.
"Oh, definitely. This is no utopia. I don't know anywhere that it. With free will, you will always get some form of crime as people work out how to game the system. It's basically inevitable. The types of crime vary, though. We have a lot less sexual assaults, muggings, that sort of thing, than you do, although it does happen. Fraud, petty theft, that type of crime, we have plenty of that. It's a pain but easy enough to deal with. There are always people who would rather take something than earn it, in every civilization I've ever encountered. Yours is by no means the worst, in fact it's probably better than average." He snickered. "Fraud always amuses me in some weird way. Some of the cases I've heard about involved more ingenuity and hard work than earning the credit honestly would have done, which makes me wonder what the point was."

"We have those as well," she replied, giggling. "Some criminals really don't seem to be able to think their ideas through from end to end first." Thinking for a moment, she asked, "So, if I was wandering around that city down there and someone did try to jump me, what should I do?"

Uthryyl started slicing some carrots. "Try to avoid causing any major damage, much as you do at home, but if someone offers you violence our laws permit sensible responses to it. The right to self-defence is an absolute, as is the defence of an innocent bystander. Attacking someone without reason violates many rights, but if they start it, their rights are immediately suspended. We tend to frown on wildly disproportionate responses, for instance someone stealing a small amount of cash hardly deserves to be killed or maimed, but a show of force to discourage them is fine. If they try to kill you, well, in your case they deserve what happens next." He grinned at her. "Especially as I know full well that any of you would only actually kill in the most extreme of circumstances. Our world is quite aware of Yori and her friends, they're well respected here, having helped out on more than one occasion, and as a colleague and friend you will be given the same respect."

His wife looked up and smiled. "Don't worry, Nabiki, it's very unlikely that anyone would try anything violent anyway. Crime rates here are quite low. Some worlds are very different, you'd have to be on your guard, but most places allow a sensible right of self-defence. You of all people will have very little to fear."

"I'm not afraid or worried, really, I was mainly curious." Nabiki finished her second mug of coffee, putting the empty vessel back on the table. "I'd better go and see what the others are doing."

Smiling at her hosts she wandered out into the garden, looking around with interest. The early morning light showed the dual-edged shadows even better than the late evening had, giving a rather odd but really quite pretty effect. Walking around for a while with her camera out she inspected everything curiously, finding yet again a mix of things that could clearly be identified, even if only in context, and some things that just made her stare.

She was kneeling down watching with fascination as something she'd thought at first was a plant contentedly munched on a flying thing that had strayed too close, realising that the flying thing seemed in fact to be some sort of self-propelled seed, when she felt a familiar ki signature behind her. She finished taking a photo of it, then stood, turning to her elder sister. "It's strange here, but really cool," she said, greeting Kasumi with a smile. The older woman laughed.

"Isn't it? This is one of the nicest worlds I've been to. Very pleasant people, by and large, a sensible culture, and lots of things to see and do. Onkra wants to take us to a place she knows up in the mountains where there are a lot of waterfalls and things she thinks we'll like. Sometime in the early evening, she says the light is better then. Ranma is showing her some basic moves at the moment, she seemed interested and you know what he's like." She shook her head slightly, smiling. Nabiki laughed at this.

"You say that as if you're not exactly the same, sis. You love it as much as he does."
"Well, yes, I suppose that's true." The elder Tendo giggled, putting her arm around her sister. "I'm so glad we could show you this. I think you're really going to enjoy this holiday. Now, come on, we need to practice, you've been slacking off recently."

"Hey!" Nabiki glared slightly, incensed. "I haven't been slacking off, I've been busy. Degrees don't award themselves to you, you know." Her sister grinned. Laughing, they both headed off to where they could hear Ranma instructing the young demoness.

When they got nearer, Nabiki stopped and watched as her brother-in-law studied the alien woman as she very slowly went through a basic kata, stopping her frequently and carefully guiding her movements, thinking once more how good a teacher he was. The sheer skill was matched by seemingly endless patience for a student making mistakes, which were corrected without censure. She glanced at her sister to see her watching with clear love and affection in her eyes.

"Yes, that's it. Now, slowly to the next position. Yes, very good. The next one... stop. Like this." He demonstrated as Onkra watched carefully. "See? Rotate here, bend here, thrust like this." He did the move very slowly, then faster. She nodded, copying him exactly. "Very good indeed. Next one... and the last. All right, that's the first sequence. Now, do it again, the same speed, but try to make each one flow into the next. They link together, see? Each position leaves you set up for the next one. It should be smooth and comfortable, not jerky or forced." He demonstrated again, rippling through each motion one after another in a graceful series of arm and leg movements that formed one continuous whole.

"You're incredibly good at that, Ranma," Onkra said admiringly. "So smooth and fast. I'll never be able to do it like that."

The martial artist chuckled. "I've been doing this my entire life, Onkra. You get good at anything if you do it that much. You pick it up quickly, I suspect you'd be better than average, but it takes time, like any skill. OK, try again, don't worry about speed, just go for accuracy and smoothness at the moment. Speed comes later." She nodded, resetting to the beginning stance and trying again. He watched critically, looking pleased. "Very good. We're going to have to work out a series of katas that use your tail as well, it's not something these moves use, but it's a shame not to make use of all your limbs." Stepping back he watched as she went through the motions again, visibly more smoothly than before.

"Great. Practice that for a few minutes and I'll show you the next one." She nodded, concentrating on what she was doing, as he turned to the two Tendo women. Nabiki was just finishing a roll of film, taking the final shot of Onkra concentrating on the exercise, looking serious.

"Trying to produce the first non-human magical girl?" Nabiki asked with a giggle, lowering her camera. Onkra shot her an amused grin but kept practising, while Ranma laughed.

"No, not really, I'm just helping a friend. She's got good instincts, I think, she'll be good at martial arts if she keeps it up." He looked at the demon girl as she practised, nodding with satisfaction. "Very good, I suspect, but it will take time. I can get her started, though."

"Do her people have martial arts?" Nabiki asked.

"Oh, certainly, practically every species has, but here there are a fairly small number of people who practice them, none in this area as far as I know. I've meant for a while to look some of them up and learn them, it would be very interesting to see how they compare to the ones I already know. Like I told Onkra, having a strong tail like that would change quite a few of the moves in some fascinating ways."
"What are you teaching her?" the middle sister asked, watching as the woman went through the sequence yet again.

"No particular style yet, it's sort of a hybrid exercise from Anything Goes, incorporating some Tai Chi, Aikido, and a couple of things I worked out myself. This is one of the basic exercises, it's got several moves that are counters to a number of standard attack scenarios." Watching Onkra, he called a halt to what she was doing, returning to her and demonstrating the next set. She nodded, asking him to repeat it a few times, then slowly tried it herself. Soon, after a few corrections, she was performing the set slowly but fairly smoothly.

"Come on, Nabs, you should learn these moves as well, they'll complement what I've already shown you." He waved her over. Sighing, but also smiling, she followed instructions. For once she allowed him to get away with the nickname, although glaring at him in a way that made him smile, to make sure he knew it was a favour.

By the time Uthryyl and his wife came out to find them a couple of hours later, Onkra and Nabiki were sparring in the middle of the lawn, using only the moves Ranma had told them to practice, while he and his wife were keeping an eye on them. At the same time they were also sparring at considerably higher speed, working on a style incorporating a tail, one of which each of them had generated using the illusion spell. When, after some discussion, they had produced the tails, both Onkra and Nabiki had stopped, stared, exchanged glances, then shrugged and gotten back to what they were doing, although Nabiki did spare a moment to take a shot of their activities. Kasumi and her husband, as Uthryyl came around the corner of the house, paused what they were doing and discussed their efforts for a moment, before starting again in a completely different style.

The merchant looked at his wife who gazed back, then grinned. "You should have realised something like this would happen, dear," she said, watching her daughter practising her new hobby. She knew the young woman well enough to realise this was something she would probably keep at until she fell over.

Uthryyl watched as well, sighing. "Yes, you're right, as usual. Where those two go chaos is never far behind. At least she seems to be enjoying herself." He sipped the mug of coffee he was holding, smiling a little. "I wonder how long it will be before she's running around on the roof as well?"

"Quite a while, I suspect, she doesn't have the background they do, but I certainly wouldn't put it past her. You know what she's like." Quannyr looked very amused. Rolling his eyes, her husband muttered something along the lines of knowing all too well, then chuckled.

"OK, enough of that, you lunatics. We have some food ready then it's time to show you all around," he called. Kasumi glanced over, ducking a blow from her husband's tail without looking, making him grin, then nodded. Onkra and Nabiki finished what they were doing and bowed to each other, laughing a little, before walking over. They watched as Ranma and his wife also completed whatever it was they were attempting, looking pleased with the results, before joining the others, their extra appendages shimmering away in the process. Uthryyl shook his head in amused wonder.

"That spell of yours is quite remarkable," he commented. "I don't think you realise how unusual that sort of shape-shifting actually is."

"You've mentioned it before," Kasumi replied, looking pleased. "I'm very happy with it, it's very flexible and efficient now."

"That's sort of what I mean. You and Ranma do the most extraordinary things without seeming to realise they are extraordinary. I know mages who can do a shape-shift, or illusion as you insist on
calling it, but nothing like as fast, as completely, or as undetectably. Or, for that matter, more than once or twice a day. You lot use it as easily as closing your eyes, which is just incredible." The demon shook his head again. "Even after knowing you for years, it surprises me."

Kasumi looked at her sister, who shrugged, and her husband, who grinned. "We like surprising people."

The demon laughed loudly. "That I'm well aware of, trust me." Inspecting them, he grinned, finishing his coffee. "Very strange, the way you operate, but very effective as well." Glancing at his daughter slyly, he added, "If you can teach her any of this stuff I'll be impressed. We could do with another decent mage in the family." Onkra looked somewhat irritated.

"Dad, I'm not bad, you know, I can help with the portal spell after all. That's not easy." Uthryyl snickered.

"I know, but you don't seem to have applied yourself to your studies as much as you should have, other than that and a few other things." He shook his head sadly. "No drive, young people these days." Crossing her arms and laying her ears back, the tip of her tail twitching from side to side, his daughter glared for a moment, while the three visitors exchanged grins with his wife, who rolled her eyes for a moment. This sort of teasing was clearly not unusual.

Reaching out and poking his daughter on the shoulder, Uthryyl laughed. "Don't look like that, you know I don't mean it. But I'll be interested to see if you stick with this, I know how many other things you've found as hobbies in the past." He looked at Ranma, who was grinning, sighing slightly. "So many things..." Onkra gritted her teeth, then after a moment began laughing herself.

"OK, dad, you made your point. Let's go and show them around, instead of teasing me." She glanced at Nabiki, who looked back, amused. "He's not entirely wrong, unfortunately," the young demon commed her privately. "But I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of hearing me say that." Nabiki snickered as she followed them around the house.

"Fathers like teasing their children whatever world you're on, I guess," she replied. Shrugging, Onkra nodded a little, with a slight smile.

"Yours does it too?"

"Oh, yes. Not as much nowadays, but he's not above a small practical joke now and then."

Arriving at the vehicle, she inspected it from close up. It bore a distinct resemblance to an Earth vehicle, although in a rather futuristic way, looking sleek and aerodynamic, with a glossy dark blue finish, and no apparent windows. More like some sort of advanced concept vehicle like things that she'd seen on TV than anything else, although still recognisable as a vehicle, even though the lack of wheels looked somewhat strange. It was currently resting on the flat surface of the driveway. "Cool," she muttered, walking around it looking at it curiously. "How fast does it go?"

"In ground mode it's limited to approximately two hundred kilometres an hour, in your measurement system," Uthryyl replied after checking his figures with his SI. "Flight mode is faster, about twice that, although the altitude is limited to six kilometres. It's not really a sports model, or a true aircraft, the aerodynamic properties aren't quite right for long distance flight. The power cells hold enough charge for about three thousand kilometres in flight mode, perhaps fifty percent more in ground mode." Nabiki stared at him.

"It flies?" she managed in astonishment. He chuckled.
"Of course. It's an anti-gravity vehicle, technically it's always flying. Altitude is mainly a function of power. The limitation is to keep it out of the way of higher-speed true aircraft. This thing doesn't get much lift from the body shape, the gravity repulsor is what keeps it up, so it's not as efficient as a true aircraft, but the power storage is large enough to make it useful for medium range hops. Long distance travel would normally use either a real aircraft or teleportation, assuming you can afford the magical energy. Teleportation is quite power hungry."

"Aiko jumps around all over the planet like it's the easiest thing in the world," the middle sister commented. He nodded, looking amused.

"Indeed she does. That's as remarkable as Ranma and Kasumi's magic, to be honest. The spell she uses it like nothing I've ever seen before. If it could be easily duplicated it would be worth more credit than you can imagine, but I can't make heads or tails of it. The efficiency is... well, it's unbelievable. I'd love to know where it came from originally."

Ranma laughed a little. "So would we. The artefacts that went along with them becoming magical girls are pretty weird. Unique, as far as I can tell. No mage I've ever shown any of them to has recognised them, although the one thing they all agree on is that they're amazingly old. Completely different from our magic, but also completely different from everyone else's, although vaguely based on the standard method. Dramatically more efficient though." He shrugged slightly. "I doubt we'll ever find out where they originate. But I do have high hopes of duplicating the functionality of the teleportation at some point fairly soon, it's the most useful of all the spells they have. Pretty much everything else we can already do one way or another."

Uthryyl half-smiled, half grimaced. "Well, I'll be impressed if you can do that, but it just moves the problem, your method of magic is even worse than whatever it is that they use. At least theirs is recognisable as magic, not like that weird offence against nature you came up with." He laughed as Ranma grinned. Nabiki listened with amusement, running her hand over the finish of the vehicle and wondering what it was made of. It didn't feel like metal, more like some sort of advanced plastic, or even a ceramic. Quannyr touched a place on one side causing a door to open, popping out a few centimetres then swinging up and out of the way along the curved roof. She reached inside the vehicle and prodded a control that made the rest of the doors, two on each side, do the same.

"Come on, everyone get in," she said, sliding into the driver's seat. Bending down Nabiki peered inside, then hopped in the other front seat, grinning at Ranma who had made a move for it too late. He smiled back, changing direction and getting in the back. Peering rearwards, the middle Tendo saw that there were two rows of seats behind the front ones, the rear-most having space for three occupants while the middle set could take two. It was reminiscent of a people-carrier from back home. Interestingly, from the inside the entire top surface appeared to be transparent, a slightly tinted view of the exterior perfectly visible.

"That's a good trick," she said admiringly.

"The material has a one-way transparency spell on it," Quannyr noted, putting her hand on a panel in the middle of the alien dashboard. Something beeped and a number of displays lit up with alien symbols, one or two on what would have been the windscreen on a car from home. After checking that everyone was inside she poked the relevant control and the doors closed. "The computer is more than capable of doing all the driving, and in flight mode or in the city regulations say that it has to unless you're a trained pilot, but I like driving on manual in the country. It's fun," she explained, touching another control that made something a little like a steering wheel crossed with a light aircraft yoke slide out of the panel in front of her.
The outside view dropped a little as the vehicle raised itself some twenty centimetres off the
ground, although the occupants couldn't feel anything. Twisting one of the control grips made the
air-car rotate about it's axis until it was pointing in the other direction, then she accelerated hard
down the driveway. Nabiki watched in astonishment as the world shot away rearwards, surprised at
how quickly the vehicle reached what looked like a fairly high speed. Jun, without being asked,
popped up a discreet position and speed indicator off to one side. They were moving at just over
one hundred and forty kilometres an hour, she saw. Again, there was no sensation of movement,
which she found quite disconcerting. "How does it compensate for the inertia?" she asked
curiously.

"Anti-gravity control implies gravity control as well, which in turn implies inertial control,"
Uthryyl said from behind her. "The gravitational reference frame inside the vehicle is isolated from
the outside world by the repulsor system. From our point of view we're not actually moving, in
quite a real sense. The car is in relation to the outer world, but everything in it is actually stationary
relative to the car."

"That's... pretty damn amazing," Nabiki finally managed, watching as Quannyr pulled off a close
to ninety-degree turn at over a hundred kilometres an hour onto a larger road which the one to the
house joined, heading away from the city. There were a few other similar vehicles on the road but
the traffic was very light compared to what she was used to.

"These newer vehicles are a considerable improvement over what we used twenty or thirty years
ago," the merchant said. "Before we started importing the gravity repulsor systems we were using
a levitation spell, which worked well, but needed more power which made it expensive to operate,
and didn't compensate for motion anywhere near as well. The vehicles needed safety restraint
systems like your do, for instance. We've pretty much switched entirely over to the tech-based
vehicles now, they're just more convenient in almost every way. One of the cases where physical
technology is superior over magical technology for everyday life. Sometimes it goes that way,
sometimes the other. They complement each other pretty well here."

"Are they manufactured on this world?" Kasumi asked, interested.

"The vehicle itself is, but the drive system is bought in as a sub-assembly," the trader replied,
glancing at her. "It's basically cheaper and more convenient. The infrastructure needed to
manufacture them is sufficiently complex that we'd need to make a lot more than we do to make it
cost-effective, so we just buy them complete from a world that turns them out by the tens of
millions a year. It's pretty common. No point duplicating effort if you don't need to."

"Can you repair them if something goes wrong?"

"Oh, certainly. They're amazingly reliable to be honest, but we have full service manuals and spare
part manufacturing capability. We certainly could make them if we wanted to, but like I said,
there's not really any point in doing so. But spares, yes, that's easy."

Nabiki looked over her shoulder at him. He and Onkra were sitting in the seats immediately behind
the front ones while Ranma and Kasumi were in the back, looking out at the view with interest.
"What's the power source?" she asked curiously.

"It's electrically powered, there are some very high-density batteries built into the floor. They use
that subspace pocket spell like the drawers you were looking at last night to pack in a lot more
capacity than would otherwise fit. I said it got used all over the place." He grinned at her. "In this
case we can put in enough storage capacity that it would otherwise mostly fill the cabin, which
would be a little counterproductive."
"So you plug it in at night or something?"

"More or less. The charging is through a wireless induction system from underneath. The driveway has a matching charge point where it was parked. It only needs to be charged every few weeks unless we do a lot of driving, but normally it gets parked there and topped off every night."

Impressed, Nabiki nodded. "Very clever. There's certainly a number of technologies there that I'm sure would be marketable at home. The batteries, for sure." Kasumi giggled from the back.

"It sounds like you're making a shopping list, sister. If you try to introduce everything at once, you'll cause chaos on our world." Her voice was very amused. "We've considered the same ideas from time to time, but I think your first idea, of the fusion reactors, is probably a better one to start with. If you really want to change the world, you should probably do it one step at a time." Nabiki laughed, looking over her shoulder again at her sister.

"We may have to set up a company to introduce new technology. I'm really beginning to think it should be done, the more I see. There are so many things here I've come across already that would make such a difference at home. I had no idea it was like this. It's like walking into a particularly good science fiction book." Kasumi smiled at her happily.

"I hoped you'd like it. Without experiencing it you'd never have believed me, though. Wait until we go to one of the really high-tech worlds, that will blow your mind."

Beside her Ranma laughed. "You have no idea." He glanced at Uthryyl who was listening with a grin. "Are we going to visit K'nn four?"

"Of course. I mentioned you'd be around, or more accurately, that 'Yori' and 'Chou' would be around, to S'th'kx, who was insistent that we visit him. He wants to thank you for your help last time. So does his son." The merchant looked at Nabiki, who was now very curious. "S'th'kx is the owner of a small asteroid mining company on one of the K'nn grouping worlds, which are a set of fifteen planets in three separate realities linked by portals. Half of them are very high tech, the others are more agrarian, around the technological level of here. They use magic, but mainly for things that technology just doesn't do as well or at all, like portals, some very good security systems, healing, things like that. Most of the day to day things are tech based like your own planet, but I'd guess about a century or so more advanced for the most part."

From the rear of the vehicle, Ranma laughed a little. "It's a pretty wild place, to be honest. K'nn four is like Tokyo on some sort of hallucinogen, it's absolutely frantically busy most of the time, people running around all over the place. Most of them are decent people but there are a lot of criminals, just because the population is so high. S'th'kx had a problem, or more accurately, his son had a problem, he got involved with some people who were a little like the Yakuza back home, but not quite as dangerous or professional. Bad enough, though. It was a mistake, he didn't know what he was getting into until it was too late. Things went a little weird. Luckily, before anyone could really get hurt his father found out, then mentioned it to Uthryyl, who asked us if we could help out."

"I assume you could," Nabiki commented. He nodded, grinning.

"Yep. They weren't actually very good at being criminals. There was some sort of robbery planned, which Th'kx'ng was supposed to be a diversion for, but his father got him to tell us what was going on. We... intervened." He chuckled darkly. "There were a number of people who seemed very surprised. The local law enforcement was a little taken aback as well but in the end quite grateful. We were careful to keep it all nice and peaceful, we didn't want to cause any real trouble, but they seemed fine with it. We even got offered jobs." He laughed, as Kasumi beside him giggled. "Had to
turn them down, but they said we were welcome to come back any time we wanted and stop more
criminals. I got the impression they were a bit overworked and underpaid."

"They are a very pragmatic species," Uthryyl explained to Nabiki. "Once they saw that 'Yori' and
'Chou' not only knew exactly what to do but were very good at it, they decided that they were fine
with it. More or less retrospectively deputised them, to be honest. It was very funny."

Kasumi laughed lightly. "It was a bit more than 'more or less', Uthryyl." She handed him a small
item that he took with interest, then looked very surprised by.

"Ah, is this what I think it is?" he asked in slight shock. She nodded with a small amused smile.

"If you think it's a K'nn level two peace enforcement authorisation, then yes, it's what you think it
is."

"Good grief. I didn't know they gave you this. That's... very impressive." He handed the small
token to Nabiki when she indicated she wanted to see it. The thing seemed to be made of some sort
of metallic plastic, about two thirds the size of a credit card, and had 'Chou's' picture somehow
floating inside in a sort of full-colour hologram effect, with a small crest of some kind below it and
a block of alien symbols to one side. After inspecting it curiously she handed it back to the
merchant who returned it to Kasumi.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It gives us authority to do more or less what we do at home, in an official capacity as an outside
skilled security consultant. Like a private security firm, essentially, although allowed to carry
weapons. In our case the weapons are built in, which made the situation slightly unusual but not
unprecedented. They classify us as combat mages, which is the nearest they could come to what
we really are." Ranma looked amused. "We can intervene in crimes with full authorisation,
although we have to call in the legitimate law enforcement to do the actual arrest. That's level one
peace enforcement, it requires a pretty comprehensive knowledge of the law just like a policeman
at home."

"Weird. I didn't know you had such a reputation in so many places," Nabiki said, twisting around in
her seat to look at her sister and brother-in-law, both of whom seemed fairly pleased. "Mind you, I
suppose I should have guessed. Everywhere you go, something weird happens." She giggled a
little. "I guess I'm part of that now as well."

"You've known that for a while," her sister laughed. "We didn't expect to get these, it was a real
surprise, but they genuinely were serious about wanting us to work for them. I think this was sort
of an encouragement. It's come in handy once or twice although we haven't been back to any of the
K'nn worlds for close to a year now."

"It's also something you'd find quite effective in a number of other worlds," Onkra commented,
glancing at them for a moment. "From what I know the K'nn law enforcement system has some
sort of reciprocal arrangement with a few other places. Although I don't know the details." Her
father nodded thoughtfully.

"That's correct. There are at least half a dozen worlds I can think of where that authorisation would
get you considerable respect. Most of them are high-tech worlds but a couple are magic-based.
K'nn peace enforcers are considered very highly skilled. Quite a lot of them leave to earn more in
other places after they finish their first contracts," he mused. "That also explains some of why they
always seem overworked."
Quannyr turned off the main road and onto a smaller side road that wound through some incredibly pretty mountain scenery, making Nabiki and the other two turn to the windows and watch with interest. The middle sister pulled her camera out of her ki pocket and reloaded it carefully. Uthryyl watched with interest. "Chemical imaging?" She nodded.

"Yes. I expect it's very old-fashioned around these parts, but it produces amazingly good photographs."

The merchant chuckled behind her. "Electronic imaging systems are vastly more common, certainly, but there is a thriving artisan culture using various chemical imaging systems on several worlds. The results are very pleasing to the eye even when the resolution isn't as high as the electronic equivalents, a result of it being an analog process, I believe. By the size of that device and the film I would assume the images are quite large?"

"It shoots ten six by seven centimetre shots per roll with this 120 film. 220 film is twice the length and gets twenty shots, but it costs about three or four times as much, so I decided to use the shorter one. It means I have to reload more often but that's not really a problem. It's slide film, producing positive images."

"Interesting. I'd like to see the results." He laughed for a moment. "Where are you going to get the film processed? I would think that it would cause a certain amount of confusion at home if you hand a number of rolls of images of alien worlds to a photographic technician." Nabiki looked over her shoulder at him, grinning.

"It would be very funny to see their expression when they checked the film. But it's not a problem, there's an automatic processor machine in the university I can use that will develop them. I've used it before, it's much cheaper than using the normal processing services, I just have to reimburse the cost of the chemicals used. I'll have to make sure it's late at night when there's no curious people wandering around but that shouldn't be an issue. I can use the high-resolution drum scanner there as well to convert them into digital images, although the file size will be huge. Not that Jun really has a problem with that. From what I can make out it's storage capacity is essentially unlimited, for all practical purposes."

"When you do that, I'd appreciate copies of the images," Uthryyl told her.

"Of course. I'd be happy to let you have them." She raised the camera and composed a shot of the valley they were passing through half-way up the side of, focussing on a small cluster of buildings on the far side. The floor of the valley, some eight or so kilometres across, was mostly flat with a small river winding through what looked like fields of some sort of crop. Taking a few photos she lowered the camera again. "I'm beginning to wonder if I brought enough film."

"We can always get you a nice electronic camera, there are many places where they can be obtained," Quannyr said, glancing at her with a smile. "From ones that are very similar to the one you have there in operation to completely unlike it."

"That might be interesting," she replied, intrigued. "I'd certainly like to see what's available."

"Tomorrow we'll go into the city and look around, we can find an imaging specialist there and you can see what's on offer. If nothing looks suitable you can wait until we hit one of the tech worlds."

Nodding with a smile, Nabiki took a few more pictures, finishing the roll, reloaded the camera, then put it away.

"Where are we going, anyway?" she asked curiously.
"There's a lake on a plateau near the top of the mountain that gives an amazing view out over a large amount of countryside," Quannyr replied. "It's a wonderful place for swimming, something we enjoy as much as you do, I suspect, while the general area is beautiful. The waterfalls Onkra was talking about are some distance from it, in the outflow. The main one is over a kilometre tall, the total drop is something like twice that. People go there because it's so pretty. They also... Do you have a sport on your world where people jump off high places with a wing structure strapped to them?"

From the rear of the vehicle, Kasumi said, "Yes, it's called hang-gliding. It's quite popular in some places."

"Well, they do that as well. Even with levitation spells, anti-gravity vehicles, all that sort of thing, some people like just using some thin metal, composite, and fabric to cheat gravity." She shook her head for a moment in wonder. "I find it a little strange, to be honest, but they seem to like it."

Nabiki grinned.

"That sounds like fun." The demoness gave her a sidelong glance, then chuckled.

"Somehow, I'm not surprised you'd think that."

They drove on in silence for a while, everyone enjoying the view, while Nabiki pulled out the camera and took some more photos. The road had been steadily climbing, according to Jun's display they were now some four kilometres above local sea level. She inspected the trees lining the road, which had the occasional other vehicle passing in either direction, seeing that they seemed to be a different species that the ones behind Uthryyl's house, presumably something akin to conifers, in earth terms, due to the altitude. Storing her camera away she just enjoyed the view and the trip. It was oddly relaxing.

"You know," the middle sister said after a while, "One of the oddest things about all of this is how... normal... it all is." Quannyr glanced at her for a moment.

"How do you mean, Nabiki?" She could feel everyone else listening from behind her, as she tried to express her thoughts.

"It's... Well, it's kind of strange. Here we are on a completely alien world, or at least one which is in a different universe or something, with people who, no offence intended, are totally unlike anything at home, yet somehow so much of it is just... normal. I mean, you presumably evolved under totally different conditions, yet we can eat pretty much the same food, understand each other perfectly, want most of the same things out of life. I'm in a car, I suppose you could honestly call it, which is admittedly a flying car with magical spells on it and some futuristic alien drive system, yet it's clearly recognisable as a car, with similar controls as back home, on a road that's obviously a road. You even drive on the same side as we do in Japan. There are a lot of things that jump out as very obviously alien, which is what I expected, but the weirdest bit is how many things don't look strange at all, beyond a certain unfamiliarity." She looked at the alien woman next to her, who was listening with her ears cocked slightly in her direction, then over her shoulder at the others. "I don't seem to have any trouble now working out your body language most of the time, for example. Clearly that works both ways. Your house is different, yes, but even there I could probably find something more unusual somewhere at home. That city below your house is obviously a city, pretty much like back home except in the details." She shook her head helplessly. "I take it so much for granted, now, but when I step back and look at it the whole thing doesn't make any sense. A childhood of science fiction shows on TV kind of pushed the idea that all the aliens would look more or less like humans, but clearly that was because of the limitations of special effects rather than any real probability. Most decent hard science fiction I've read has
suggested that true alien life, if we ever met it, might well be so alien we would have absolutely nothing in common, to the point we might not even recognise each other as intelligent."

She sighed a little, peering out the window as they passed another vehicle. "You know, some sort of super-intelligent methane breathing jellyfish floating in the atmosphere of a gas giant, or something based on cryogenic superfluids. But here I am, driving along with my friends, that despite having scales and tails, and damn big teeth, are more or less very much like me. We even understand a lot of each other's cultural references. It's... odd." Quannyr smiled slightly. Behind her, a deep chuckle came from her husband as he leaned forward into the gap beside them.

"You're not the first one to notice that. Our species are particularly close in most respects, that's true, and you'll likely meet some much more alien people in due course, they certainly exist, but portal travel does seem to connect species that are surprisingly similar in many ways. Despite physical differences, mentally a lot of them are remarkably compatible. No one knows why. There was a philosopher many years ago, Kreese, or Craze, something like that, who got quite worked up about it all. He seemed to think there was something very annoying going on, as if there was a guiding intelligence behind it that was just out to be a damn nuisance. God as a practical joker, in essence." Nabiki giggled at the thought. "Wrote a load of books on the subject, but not many people took him very seriously."

"It's a thought, certainly," the middle sister said, still looking amused. "So, tell me, my alien friend, from your non-human perspective, is there a God of some sort behind all this?"

Uthryyl laughed for a moment, while his wife grinned. "I could say yes, but that would just be wrong. To be honest, while there are more religions out there than you might believe, I don't subscribe to any of them, although some people do. The ones that do, of course, always say theirs is the one true truth. I've never seen any evidence of this. God as a prick is as good a theory as any of them, to be honest, but I'm pretty sure in fact that there is no guiding principle behind everything. It's much too chaotic for that. Oh, don't get me wrong, there are some entities that are pretty damn close to being deities for most purposes, but even they don't really know any more about the origins and purpose of the multiverse than the rest of us. They just like to say they do." He snickered for a bit. "Some of them are pricks as well." The trader shrugged slightly, his ears indicating amusement.

"No, it's all rather weird, in most ways. But that's life. One theory is that portals tend to connect similar-ish worlds, which in turn tend to produce intelligences that are in some way understandable by each other. I have no idea whether it's true. It certainly is true that most of the places I've been, even if the life there is really quite strange, normally have a species you can talk to in one way or another. Sometimes they can be difficult to truly understand, but surprisingly often you can get to grips with it. The civilisations that use interstellar travel tend to come into contact with the really alien life. Some of that is exactly what you were talking about, extremely alien indeed. I'm not sure about gas-giant jellyfish although it wouldn't surprise me all that much, but I've certainly heard of things at least as weird."

"It's somewhat odd, Nabiki, but it seems to be true. I've met several different friendly species from a number of worlds over the years and most of them are generally quite easy to get along with," her sister's soft voice said from behind the trader. "Uthryyl's people are probably the easiest, but even some of the physically quite alien species are remarkably compatible mentally and socially. S'th'kx's species are basically insects, they look a lot like very large, rather pretty beetles of some sort, but they're very nice to talk to and have a very similar outlook on life to us. You'll like them." Surprised, Nabiki considered the idea for a moment.

"Very weird. It sounds interesting, though."
They drove for another half hour, eventually arriving at the shore of a lake some eight or nine kilometres across, with a sandy beach around most of it. The air was noticeably thinner at this altitude, but she'd found out from Jun earlier that the atmosphere on this world had somewhat higher oxygen levels than at home, compensating for it to a large degree. The mountain continued up for some distance, a small cap of snow visible on the top, but it clearly wasn't reachable by road past this point. Nabiki felt a slight power surge from behind, turning to see that Ranma and Kasumi were now ‘Yori’ and ‘Chou’. She looked at them quizzically.

"We should use these personae in public, even here, as we're know like this in quite a few places. Around Uthryyl's house it's fine to be whatever you want, the house wards will keep unwanted attention away, and in the car is fine as well because no one can see inside." 'Yori' smiled at her sister-in-law. "But other places, just like at home, we're Yori and Chou. You should probably be Azumi, I think, it's surprising how word gets around." Nabiki nodded and activated her own illusion.

"Fair enough. This is something I'm completely used to now anyway," the silver-haired girl said with a grin. "It feels normal. Which is weird when you think about it." 'Yori' snickered, as Uthryyl laughed.

"You're all weird when you think about it," the merchant quipped. 'Azumi' giggled.

Driving along the shoreline Quanyrr eventually stopped about half a kilometre from where the ground started to rise again slightly, although it clearly dropped off somewhere beyond that as nothing but sky could be seen from the car. Shutting the power off she opened the doors and hopped out, then stretched for a moment. 'Azumi' and the others climbed out as well. The day was coming up on local noon, very warm but not hot, actually quite pleasant to the humans. Looking around curiously 'Azumi' could see a few other vehicles of various colours and types parked near the shore, with a number of the demons wandering around. She smiled slightly, turning to Onkra.

"What is the name of your species, anyway? I never did ask. It seems rude to call you 'demons' since you're clearly not." The young alien woman laughed.

"The name we use that is the equivalent of 'human' in our own language is D'sage. This planet is called Fwetna." She looked very amused. "In the common language it means... Dirt, or Ground. Or... Earth." 'Azumi' stared for a moment then burst out laughing.

"Oh, that's brilliant. Is that something that other species use as well?"

"It's not uncommon." Onkra giggled in her own way. "The name of your planet tends to be very old, therefore primitive, and primitive cultures do seem to refer to the world as 'the Ground', or 'the World', or something like that. Some worlds get nice fancy names, deliberately, or get named after their orbital position from their star or something like that, but that's usually ones that have been fairly recently colonised. The ones someone evolves on is more often than not referred to by a very limited set of names if you go back far enough."

"Fantastic. So, I assume in some ways D'sage means human?"

"Sort of. You could certainly translate it like that if you wanted to, without being horribly wrong."

"So we're both 'Humans', from 'Earth'." 'Azumi' shook her head with humour.

"Exactly." They stared at each other for a moment, then laughed again. Still chuckling, the middle sister turned to inspect the lake, walking down to the water's edge. Bending she investigated the water temperature, which was cool but pleasant. "It's drinkable, but it tastes a bit odd because of
dissolved minerals," Onkra said, having followed her. "The source is the permanent snow-cap up there. On the other side it drains into a small river that eventually ends up going over the edge a few kilometres away, dropping a very long way. Only spray makes it to the ground unless it's rained very hard recently, but it's very pretty from above."

"How deep is it?" 'Azumi' asked. The young D'sage woman shrugged a little.

"I'm not sure. Most of it is pretty shallow, I know that, but I've heard there are some quite deep bits in the middle. Nothing dangerous lives in it although there are a lot of things you'd probably call fish."

"What do you call them?"

"Well, it translates out to... fish." Onkra grinned. "There's only a certain number of things you can call something like that." 'Azumi' looked amused. "They live underwater, they swim, they eat smaller ones or plants."

"Sounds like fish to me." She shaded her eyes and looked over the lake, noticing a few small water craft of some sort moving around on it, one or two at very high speed, leaving a tail of water high in the air. They seemed to be the alien equivalent of jet-skis or something similar, although they were very quiet. "That looks like fun."

"They're a lot of fun, actually. Quite primitive, it's a hull with a big battery, a powerful motor, and a pump, not much more than that, but they're fast and very manoeuvrable. Do you have anything like that at home?"

"Yes, extremely similar, only they're powered by internal combustion engines. Very noisy. These are nice and quiet." 'Azumi' watched as a pair of clearly very young D'sage on one of the electric water craft shot past in the shallows, leaving a huge rooster-tail of spray, shouting with enjoyment. She laughed. "This is another amazingly familiar sight. You'd find something pretty damn similar at home at the beach in a lot of places. Your people and mine really are very much alike in lots of ways." Glancing at Onkra she smiled. "I'd love to know why, but I can certainly accept it as something that happens."

Onkra made the gesture that her species used as a shrug, looking amused. "You're a lot more open-minded than some of your people. We've had some really quite unpleasant interactions even in Minato once or twice, although I have to say that the people there are a lot more laid-back about visitors from other worlds in general than you'd expect from a world that doesn't officially do much portal travelling. More so than some places I've been with Dad that do it all the time. It's very odd."

'Azumi' snickered. "I can remember one of the more spectacular interactions with... difficult people. I doubt they'll come back soon, not after what 'Yori' said. And did." She shook her head in amusement. Even after a year it was something that she found funny, the expression on the magical girl's face when she got an angry Yori's head to the nose. Onkra laughed for a while.

"That was very funny indeed. Those girls are very annoying. They certainly haven't bothered us since then, though." She looked around, waving to a couple of people she knew, then turned back to 'Azumi'. "Come over here and have a look at this," she said, heading away from the lake up the slight rise on the side away from the mountain. 'Azumi' followed, as they walked about six hundred metres to the top of the low hill, some sixty to seventy metres higher than the lake. Once they crested the rise, the middle Tendo stopped dead and stared.

"Wow," she finally managed, looking at the sight in front of her.
I never intended this to be a cross-over, but in some ways it's creeping in like that. I like Ami, I have to admit, so she may well be around on and off. Be warned, though, if you're the sort who cares, I'm going to be even less respectful of the purity of the SM universe than I am of the R1/2 one. I'll go where the story takes me. Wherever that is.

;)

Misaki sipped her tea, watching four sulking magical girls clearing away a large amount of debris, two of them grunting with strain as they pushed a crushed car onto a flat-bed truck while the driver grinned. They were all filthy, their nice skimpy body-armour/perverted clothing covered in soot, oil, and dust. Every now and then they cast evil glances at the five young women sitting around a table at a miraculously undamaged café down the street, eating a decent meal and keeping an eye on them. She giggled a little, picking up an iced bun and disposing of it in two bites.

"Your friends seem annoyed," she said to the young woman next to her, who followed her gaze for a moment then smiled unpleasantly.

"Tough. I told them, again, this was a bad idea. They ignored me, again. Maybe this will knock some common sense into them for once. They've been getting more and more over the top for ages now, I'm not surprised Yori finds it irritating. I'm in the middle of it and it drives me nuts sometimes." She sighed, resting her chin on her hand and nibbling on a french fry while watching her friends work. "They, we, started off so well. But they've gotten lazy and arrogant. It's really annoying. They're my friends, I want to support them, but..." She shrugged one shoulder, reaching for another fry. "It's getting difficult. Sooner or later someone is going to get killed if it keeps on like this. I understand why Yori doesn't want us around, if I was in her shoes I wouldn't want us around. It's only her intervening in a couple of cases that's stopped things turning to tragedy."

Fumiko exchanged a glance with her friends. "Can't you explain it to them like this? You clearly see the problems, and I know for a fact that you're very smart. You remind me a lot of a friend of mine. Surely you could make them see sense. We serve the community, all of us in this game, so blowing half of it up isn't on."

Ami sighed, rubbing her eyes with one hand. "You'd think, but no. I've tried. Over and over. None of them seem to be able to see it. There are... reasons... I suppose. Not good ones, but real." She didn't look very happy, causing the others to study her for a moment. "They're terrified of Yori and Chou both, which generally at least keeps them away from here. Yori scares the hell out of me as well, I know on paper she's not technically the most powerful person around, but I seriously wouldn't want to get her angry enough to decide to take steps to stop them permanently. I'm pretty damn sure she could, even with all of us against her." She shivered slightly. "The readings I've got in the past from her are... horrifying. My computer is supposedly the most advanced system on the planet, but it gets extremely confused when I've tried reading her power levels and magic output. Chou is nearly as bad. The results don't make any sense, not least because every time I try the output goes up. A lot." She noticed Fumiko look oddly at her, then glance at her sister.

"Does Yori know you've been probing her? She takes her security more seriously than anyone I know, by a long way. It might not make her very pleased."

"Oh, she knows, that much I'm sure of. Half the time I try I get nothing at all, as if she doesn't exist, the other half the time I get something completely terrifying. She just grins at me when the
others aren't looking. It's not a nice grin either, like she knows something I don't, and wouldn't like if I found out." Fumiko nodded understandingly.

"One of your bunch mucks around with time, doesn't she?" Aiko asked. Ami looked at her in astonishment.

"That's supposed to be a secret. How the hell did you find out?" Aiko simply looked at her for a moment. "Oh. Yori. I wonder how she found out." She didn't seem terribly surprised.

"She's had practical experience with time travel, apparently. Not overly impressed with it, though, or people who use it. She's said it always ends badly one way or another."

"Why am I not surprised." The young woman sighed again. "She seems to have had a ridiculous amount of experience with some very strange things. It makes her even more dangerous. The rest of the team won't come here on a bet, after what happened the last time." She shook her head for a moment, lowering her voice to an unhappy mumble. "Big bad immortal guardian of time, my arse. She's scared shitless of Yori, she can't read her at all. Or Chou. She won't even talk about it these days, just changes the subject. I'm really not sure I trust her much any more." The others looked at each other, then Fumiko shrugged.

"Um, OK..." She paused, looking at the blue-haired girl carefully, before continuing. "Yes, I'll agree Yori has had some very odd experiences, her life seems... somewhat chaotic. But that goes with the abilities, you know that as well as we do."

"True. All too true. But in her case it's taken to ridiculous levels." Ami glanced around her table companions.

"Are you all really as close friends of hers as you seem?"

Aiko nodded slowly. "Yes. We've all known her for years, Chou nearly as long, and we trust them both absolutely. It goes both ways. In a very real sense we're family." The blue-haired girl looked around at them then glanced at her friends, who were in the process of heaving a badly damaged truck towards another flat-bed recovery vehicle, looking royally pissed off at having to do the work.

"Don't they scare you?" she asked.

"No. We have enormous respect for both their abilities and their intelligence, but they don't scare us. Not like that. Although, I would agree, you very much do not want either of them really angry with you." The brunette studied the other woman, then glanced at her friends for a moment. "You truly have no concept of what they could do if they had to. I don't know what would push them to that level, but I'd want to be on another planet if it ever happened. Assuming I wasn't helping." Ami stared at her for a moment, then dropped her eyes with another shiver, at the raw truth she saw in Aiko's face.

"Who and what the hell are they?" she asked quietly. "They're so unlike everyone else, it's frightening when you think hard about it. Half the demons they meet are terrified of them, which is even weirder than it sounds because it implies they've heard of them somehow, while the other half greet them like long-lost cousins. I know the government seems to trust them as well, I've heard some really strange things about them and people in high places who trust them implicitly. The entire area here seems to know them personally, which is just strange, and again, everyone trusts them. They've been in the news quite a bit recently all over the world, doing something no one wants to talk about, but it's clearly impressed several foreign governments a lot if what I've seen on TV is true. Now, apparently they've gone on holiday through a damn portal of all things! Holiday,
on a demon world? What's *that* all about?"

Tamiko giggled a little. "You wouldn't believe us if we told you. And if we did we'd have to kill you, as the saying goes." Staring at her the blue-haired girl looked blank for a moment, then smiled slightly.

"Do you think you could?" The red-head suddenly went completely serious for a moment, making her companion look worried.

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "Yori has taught us an awful lot recently." Ami stared, a slightly horrified expression crossing her face, until Tamiko giggled again, breaking the spell. "But we wouldn't. We like you." Glancing at the other four, who were leaning against the truck they'd just loaded the damaged vehicle onto, she grinned. Raising her hand she casually fired a small ki sphere that popped against the backside of the girl with the long black hair, making her yell in surprise and pain, then swear vigorously, turning to glare at the source of the shot.

"What the fuck was that for, bitch?" she yelled, outraged.

"Stop slacking off!" Tamiko called back, grinning nastily. "There's two more cars and that van, plus all the bricks over there to move. Then you can rest." All four girls glared at her, but as she raised a hand with another ki ball growing in it, paled a little and hastened to fulfil their task. Ami couldn't help but snicker.

"I shouldn't laugh, but it was very funny. So was you yelling at them, Fumiko." She looked respectfully at the taller girl. "Yori rubs off in unexpected ways."

Fumiko grinned. "It was fun, I have to admit. But I wish I hadn't had to." Her face fell. "Yori is going to pop a gasket when she finds out about all this."

The blue-haired young woman looked apprehensive. "Do you have to tell her?" she asked. Fumiko looked around at the damage surrounding them, the crushed cars, cratered street, broken windows, and the collapsed building three doors down where a particularly good bookshop had been until a few hours ago, then returned her gaze to the other girl, raising an eyebrow. Ami sighed. "I know. Stupid question. It's not like she's not going to find out one way or another. Hell, she probably already knows, somehow."

"If she did she'd be here doing something unpleasant, I think, so you're all safe for the moment." Misaki motioned to the waitress for a refill, then looked back at the girl. "Although, sooner or later she'll find out. Hopefully, enough time will have passed that she's just mad as hell, not homicidal. She's more than reasonable but really, *really* doesn't like people breaking the district she lives in. And she's not at all impressed with your friends. Last time really was close to the breaking point for her." Noticing Ami shiver again, she smiled. "Don't worry too much. She quite likes you, and Chou is fond of you as well. She'll keep Yori from doing anything permanent. Probably."

"Oh, thanks, that's a *huge* comfort," the other girl snapped. Grinning slightly Misaki sipped her new cup of tea, turning to watch the other team sweat. There was silence for a while as they slowly ate, thinking their own thoughts.

Eventually, the blue-haired young woman looked at her companions. "What *did* Yori do in Canada? I can't find any real details about it no matter how much I look, but I'm really curious." The others exchanged glances for a moment. Eventually Aiko nodded slightly.

"You remember that demon portal terrorist thing? I know the details weren't spread widely, but I'm pretty sure you probably picked up the overall idea. Yori talked to you when she was gathering
information right back at the start, when she worked out what was going on." The other girl nodded.

"I know something about it. It sounded horrific. But they shut down the cult here over a year ago, right? I heard Yori and Chou blew up the mage and destroyed the portal weapons, while government agents rounded up the cult members."

"It's a little more complicated than that." Aiko paused for a moment, then told a slightly edited version of the story to the young woman, who looked more and more horrified as time went on. When she finished, Ami stared wordlessly at her for a long moment, then swallowed hard.

"Oh, my god," she mumbled. "That's all true?"

"Yes. Unfortunately. It was pretty horrible, at the end. Halleckton is something that I'm going to see at three in the morning for a long time." Aiko sighed, lost in her own thoughts for a moment. "A long time."

"And that crater on the news a while ago? Where that Murray guy had a mansion? That wasn't some huge pile of hidden explosives?"

Fumiko smiled slightly. "No, it was Yori making a point, while getting rid of quite a lot of very nasty demons at the same time."

"It was huge! Hundreds of metres across, from what the news said. Do you have any idea how much energy would be required to do that?" Ami looked appalled, pulling out her computer and prodding it for a moment, paling at the result it gave her. "In solid rock as well. The reports say the entire lake is nearly eight degrees warmer than normal, just from the residual heat. She did that all by herself?"

"Yes, she did." Fumiko studied her for a moment, then added, "If you want to really get worried, she wasn't trying particularly hard." The girl stared at her in horrified disbelief. "I've seen what she can do when she puts her back into it. Not something you want to be in the same country as."

"Holy crap." She stared some more. "Holy crap. No, I really do not want to piss her off."

"You don't. Smiling slightly, Fumiko finished her salad, pushing the empty bowl into the middle of the table to join the others.

"And she's teaching you all these techniques as well?"

"Some of them. A lot of what she can do we may never learn, she's in a class of her own, with only Chou, and possibly Azumi one day, to keep her company there, but we've learned a lot."

"Azumi. That's the new girl, right? From Setagaya? I've heard some weird things about her. If she's a friend of Yori's, that would explain quite a lot of it. Apparently half the time she just stares at the criminals and they run away. Yori is the only other one I know who can do that." Tamiko laughed, waving for another plate of fries to the waitress.

"Azumi is... quite worrying, on several levels. She's got amazing potential. Not as scary as Yori can be, but... Well, she's a friend of mine, but she can be very creepy." The red-head glanced at her friends, who nodded slowly. "Not as creepy as Ms Aoyama, but bad enough."

"I've heard of Ms Aoyama. One or two rumours are going around about her. Something about her being some sort of agent of doom, or something. Possibly literally." The other girl looked worried. "Even the government spooks are scared of her. Who is she?"
Tamiko raised an eyebrow, looking at Aiko, who seemed amused. "No one is sure," she replied in the end, in a low voice. She glanced around carefully, then leaned closer. "But she isn't human. She... knows things." Ami leaned in as well.

"Things?"

"Things." Tamiko gazed seriously at her. There was a long pause.

"What sort of things?" Ami asked slowly, looking more worried.

"All sorts of things. Things you wouldn't believe. So be good. Yori could blow your head off without even trying. Ms Aoyama..." She shrugged a little, leaning back in her chair. "You might prefer Yori."

With an involuntary shudder, Ami looked around at the others, who nodded soberly.

"Not someone to mess with, trust me," Fumiko said, looking quickly away, her face twitching in what the blue-haired girl took as mild fright.

"I'll bear it in mind," she finally replied, not at all comforted by the conversation. She went back to watching her team-mates clear up their mess, while behind her the other four at the table exchanged looks of momentary hilarity, talking silently to each other.

Onkra giggled. "It's pretty impressive, isn't it?"

"That's an understatement and a half," was the awed response from her friend.

They were looking out at probably thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of square kilometres of plains, from a point nearly four kilometres up. The air was astoundingly clear, allowing a view of the distant ground that finally disappeared into a blur at a range she found remarkable. *How far away is the horizon, Jun?* she asked curiously.

#From this altitude, presuming the ground in front of you is near sea-level, the optical horizon is approximately two hundred and forty kilometres away. Your unaided vision is resolving details out to close to half that range if they are sufficiently large. The clarity of the atmosphere is very high, this world has few of the sources of pollution that cause haze or smog on your world, which improves visibility considerably.#

'Thanks.'

The plains visible in front of them were a patchwork of large-scale colour changes, obviously corresponding to different vegetation. Some parts were clearly artificially manipulated, neatly laid out fields on a large scale, multitudes of different colours corresponding to different crops, nearly the entire spectrum from bright red to a deep purple represented. Some of them were neat grids, similar to what she knew from home, while others were done as huge round areas divided into wedges like a colossal pie chart. These cultivated areas were scattered amongst other zones that looked more random and natural, in the colours she had come to associate with trees on this world. Some of the wooded areas were large enough to classify as true forests. At the far right, the land became uneven and wrinkled, full of hills, all of which appeared forested.

There were numerous clumps of buildings, small towns and one or two cities, visible right out to the horizon, with one very large one at the extreme limits of visibility off to the right, far, far out across the plain, all interconnected with roads along which some traffic could be seen moving. Small dots in the air appeared to be air-cars in flight, although none were near them. The city...
below Uthryyl's house was some distance away to the left, just peeking around the side of the cliff they were standing near the edge of. The land dropped from where they were standing on top of the ridge in a gentle slope for a few hundred metres then abruptly fell away vertically, something that wasn't visible directly in front but could be seen as the edge of the mountain curved away in both directions for a long way, forming the edge of what looked like a vast circular depression. 'Azumi' looked to one side, seeing how the drop was completely vertical for nearly half the total distance, then became a series of hills and valleys that evened out into the floor of the plain.

'It appears that this mountain range is part of the ring wall of a very large, very old impact crater, Nabiki,' Jun commented. 'The information I have on it is that the structure is several dozen million earth years old, much of the wall having eroded away over time, but this section was left because it was created from much harder rock. The D'sage decided that the evidence suggests the impactor came in at a low angle, heading almost directly at where you are currently standing, pushing up a somewhat higher ring wall than would have otherwise happened in such hard rock. Traces of the original body have been found, mostly as metal rich areas in rock that otherwise would have been unlikely to contain such elements. These have largely been mined out as ore veins over the years. Your world has evidence of similar events, the Sudbury basin in Canada being the most obvious one, albeit somewhat smaller than this. Halleckton is inside it.'

'Is that why there are so many mines around that area?', she asked.

'Yes. The entire area is very metal rich. Backfilling with magma is the source of the majority of the metals in that case.'

"The entire plain out there is the floor of a huge crater," Onkra said, confirming what Jun had just told her. "It's very, very old, and very fertile. After it was formed it flooded for millions of years, forming an inland sea, which eventually dried up. The end result was a huge amount of nutrient-rich topsoil that's almost flat. For a long time most of the crops on this continent were grown here. Some people think this area is more or less the origin of our species. We've certainly found evidence that it's been inhabited for longer than almost anywhere on the planet. The city in the distance is the capital, Krentak. The smaller one that's visible from our house is Sirtha, it's a prosperous trading and manufacturing hub, but much smaller." Jun brought up a couple of windows showing information on both the cities, including population, distance from their location, and basic maps. 'Azumi' looked at them with interest for a moment then dismissed them.

"It's one hell of a view," she said, admiring it. Pulling out her camera she used half the roll taking a series of panoramic shots from left to right, then changed the lens for a telephoto one and got a couple of shots of both cities. Krentak was so far away even with the long lens it was barely visible, but she could make out some very large buildings that put the ones in Tokyo to shame. Several of them must have been in excess of two kilometres tall. Jun's data suggested it had a population of over five million people. Having changed the film she put the camera away again.

"This entire area is popular for tourism and sports. There's a lot of wildlife, all sorts of interesting animals live in the forests and mountains, some of them pretty large. Mostly not dangerous but there are one or two large predators that could be a worry if they were in a bad mood. Not around here, though, more further in. You more or less have to go looking for them," Onkra pointed to one side. "Those guys there come up here all the time for the flying." 'Azumi' followed her finger, looking at a group of people standing around a number of machines easily recognisable as some form of hang-gliders, with a few vehicles parked nearby. "A friend of mine does it, he says it's fantastic. He's always trying to get me to give it a go but I haven't tried it yet." She squinted, then waved. One of the figures waved back, calling something unintelligible. "That's him there, actually. Let's go and watch."
They wandered over to the collection of people and equipment, being joined soon after by 'Yori' who had wondered where they'd gone. The two Earth people inspected the flying machines while Onkra greeted her friend. "Cool, aren't they?" the martial artist said, as they watched one of the young people get strapped in to a glider by a couple of assistants. Unlike the hang-giders that 'Azumi' had seen before, where the pilot basically hung underneath in a harness, these ones strapped on to the limbs and body, with control linkages to the wings and tail. They looked more like a cross between a light aircraft and a giant bat than the delta-wing kites or parafoil designs she was familiar with.

"It looks like the control system is done by moving your arms and legs, and in their case, tails, to drive the surfaces directly," she added, kneeling down to closely investigate a bright yellow glider that was next to them. "They seem to be made of some sort of very thin fabric over a composite skeleton of some type. Carbon fibre, perhaps? Something like that." Glancing at the owner of the machine for permission, she gently lifted one wing-tip. "That's amazingly light. The entire thing can't weigh more than about fifteen kilos. I'm surprised it's strong enough to take the stresses involved in flying."

Running her hand carefully over the wing surface, 'Azumi' nodded slowly. "It's certainly a lot more advanced than anything I've seen before. Someone I know tried this for a while back home, she said they were made of nylon fabric like a parachute, with an aluminium structure. Nothing like as light as this." They turned to watch as the pilot, fully attached to his glider, ran down the slight slope towards the edge of the cliff, into the light breeze. He was airborne within fifty metres, swinging his legs up behind him where they locked into the structure. Delicate movements of his limbs made the aircraft turn and head along the slope, gathering lift until it soared out over the edge, spiralling higher in the air rising up the face of the cliff. They watched with interest as the pilot circled around several times before heading out over the plain, joining a small group of gliders some distance higher.

'Yori' shaded her eyes and squinted. "Some of those aren't gliders, they're some sort of flying animal. Big, too." ‘Azumi' followed her gaze, trying to make out the shapes.

"They look like pterodactyls or something like that," she answered. 'Jun, what are those?'

*I am unsure, Nabiki. There are several species in my database that meet those parameters but none are native to this world. A closer view might allow positive identification.* It paused, then added with distinct amusement, *Or you could ask Onkra, I would expect she would know.*

'Azumi' laughed slightly.

'Now, that's getting far too common sense.' She looked toward her friend, who was approaching accompanied by the young male D'sage she had been talking to. "Hey, what are those things?" she asked when the woman was close enough, pointing. Both of them looked up for a moment.

"They're called Mountain Soarers. Technically they're a species of flying animal from a different world, they're sort of an accidental import. Apparently, quite a long time ago, someone brought some back for a zoo, but didn't take as much care as he should have to prevent them escaping."

Onkra grinned. "They escaped. By the time anyone realised where they'd gone they'd bred, there were dozens of them. The things seem to thrive in this environment. Some attempts were made to catch them but they always missed a few. In the end everyone kind of gave up. They're quite nice to look at, they live off animals that are very prolific breeders and eat crops, and they don't seem to cause any real ecological damage, so no one minds too much. The glider fliers use them to work out where the good thermals are, and the soarers themselves don't appear to mind gliders flying in the same area."
"If anything they seem to enjoy it," her companion said, in the trade language for their benefit. He looked amused. "I've seen them come up and join us in thermals if we got there first, they use us as much as we use them. I think they're reasonably smart, nothing like sentient but at the level of an effective predator. We get on well, by and large." Holding out his hand he added, "Hi, I'm Jyrron. Onkra has told me a bit about you, friends of the family visiting from an unaligned world, I believe?" 'Azumi' shook his hand with a nod and a smile, as did 'Yori'.

"That's right. This is my first time here. I'm Azumi."

"Yori. Pleased to meet you, Jyrron." The young man looked at the martial artist with his ears cocked forward alertly.

"Yori. I know that name." After a moment's thought he nodded. "Definitely. You and your partner Chou have a reputation as being extremely dangerous magic users and fighters, I seem to recall. Something about a kidnap, wasn't it, the last time you were here?" The middle sister looked at 'Yori' as she grinned.

"Yep. One of your politicians lost track of his wife, some rather unpleasant people seemed to be keen on a reward for returning her. Or they'd send her back in pieces. He wasn't happy, at all, and we were called in through a chain of people ending up with Uthryyl who is a good friend. We sorted things out." Her grin grew teeth. "Quite permanently."

"I remember. It was on the news for a while. External security consultants, they called you. There were a number of other cases as well. You both definitely have very impressive reputations. Healers as well, wasn't it?"

"Amongst other things. We have a number of useful skills." Jyrron laughed for a moment.

"So I gather." He glanced at Onkra who was smiling. "You seem interested in the gliders."

'Azumi' nodded. "We have something like them at home, but constructed differently and controlled in a somewhat different manner."

"Have you ever flown anything like this?" He looked them up and down for a moment. "No tails, which would make our control system difficult. Although I guess we could program the computer assist to bypass that part." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, that should work. Fancy a try?" 'Azumi' looked at her companion, who was staring at the gliders with an interested expression.

"You'd let two people who you've never met before try one of these things just like that? What if we crash it?" Jyrron smiled.

"That would be difficult. They look pretty primitive but they're more advanced than you might think. There's a fairly smart flight computer that can take over in the event of pilot incapacitation, or if it realises you're doing something dangerous. If we put it in teaching mode it does most of the work, you just tell it where to go. If it all goes horribly wrong there's also a backup antigrav recovery system that will get you down safely, although the power pack is very small, so it's basically a controlled fall with a soft landing. To get back up here we'd have to come and pick you up in a car." Not completely sure, but intrigued, 'Azumi' finally nodded.

"OK. I'm up for it. How about you?" She glanced at 'Yori' who grinned happily.

"Always ready for new experiences."

"Great." Jyrron glanced at Onkra, who nodded eagerly.
"Damn right. If they're going to try so am I."

"All right. Come on over here, we have a couple of spare gliders as backups, and I can borrow another one easily enough." They followed him back to the group of people setting up another glider and pilot for launch. Shortly 'Azumi', 'Yori', and Onkra were listening as he explained the function and use of the controls of one of the gliders. "It uses wing warping, which twists the wing-tips, to control direction. The tail surface bends like this to make turns smoother," he demonstrated, "and also to climb and descend."

"How does it move the control surfaces?" 'Yori' asked curiously. "I can't see any actuators."

"The material covering the wings changes shape when an electrical current runs through it. The computer reads the desired movements from the input controls and generates the right outputs to perform the action. The batteries are in the spine part, here, they store enough power to operate it for nearly a full day, with a reserve for the antigrav for one trip from maximum altitude to ground level at a fairly slow speed. Slow enough that you'll just walk away with no damage, although it might sting a bit when you land." 'Azumi' shared a glance with 'Yori', who seemed amused.

"What would happen if we fell from this sort of altitude without the antigrav?" she asked privately.

"You'd reach terminal velocity in a few hundred metres, after that it doesn't really matter how far you fall. For us, me and Kasumi certainly, it would be nothing particularly interesting. I've hit the ground moving much faster than that before with no ill effects. On me, that is, what I hit didn't enjoy it." 'Yori' smiled. "By now, I doubt you'd have any issues either. Aiko and the girls certainly wouldn't. Don't worry about it."

"OK."

Returning her attention to Jyrron's demonstration, she listened as he explained how the control harness translated motions of the pilot's extremities and shifts in bodyweight into control inputs for the flight system. He explained the basics of flight and the sorts of thing the computer would expect and more importantly, allow.

"It's pretty simple, actually. Most people get used to it in a few minutes, and are reasonably good in an hour or so. The computer will intervene less and less as you get better at it, but at first it will be doing most of the work. Right, let me just set these two up for you poor tail-less freaks and we can get you in the air." His expression was one of sly amusement. Onkra whacked him with her own tail, making him jump, then laugh. A few minutes work on a small control panel and he nodded in satisfaction, checking the display. "That should do it. The flight computer will compensate for a partial control input." Picking up a set of goggles he looked dubiously at them for a moment.

"These aren't going to fit, though, our heads are nowhere near the same shape. This is where the instrumentation overlay comes from that gives you your airspeed, altitude, heading, that sort of thing, and the communications. Hmm."

"I can easily interface to the flight system and produce a far superior instrument set, Nabiki," Jun said, sounding pleased. "Obviously, the communications are easy."

"The instrumentation and comms aren't a problem," 'Yori' said, smiling a little, having clearly received the same advice from her SI. "We have our own methods of dealing with it." Jyrron looked at her for a moment then shrugged.

"Fair enough. Aliens are weird." He grinned. "Right. Who wants to go first?" A quick game of rock, paper, scissors later, and 'Yori' stepped forward, looking pleased. Jyrron and a colleague quickly strapped her in place into the orange glider. "OK, try the controls." She moved her arms and legs slightly, watching as the wings and tail shifted. "That seems to work. All right, remember what I told you. Run into the wind until you get lift, that won't take long, then as soon as you're in
the air swing your legs back so the harness locks them in. After that, the flight computer will take you to a safe altitude and release some control. Is your alien system getting the instruments?" 'Yori' nodded.

"Yep. Artificial horizon, airspeed, heading, everything looks good. Comm check." Her voice suddenly came out of the communications interface his companion was holding, making the other man jump and stare. "That works." The D'sage man looked at her for a moment.

"I wish I knew how you were doing that. Right, are you ready?" 'Yori' nodded again. He and his helper balanced the glider structure until she was orientated correctly, then released it as she began sprinting down the slight hill towards the cliff edge. Seconds later she was in the air, her legs clipped up behind her. A shout of joy came clearly towards them as the glider soared over the edge of the cliff, circling higher. Jyrron watched carefully for a moment, until he was sure that everything was going to plan, then turned to 'Azumi'. "Your turn."

As she watched the ground abruptly drop away thousands of metres below her Nabiki gasped in awe and excitement, her 'Azumi' face glowing with a huge grin. 'This is amazing.' she thought to herself. Returning her attention to straight ahead she watched the overlaid instruments Jun was providing, seeing how fast the altimeter was ticking upwards as the flight computer gained height, circling around in the lift generated by the upwelling air from below. It levelled off at a little under nine hundred metres higher than she'd started at, gently circling to the right, heading away from the cliff. She looked around, grinning at the incredible view.

'Why have I never done this before?' she wondered, even as she knew she'd never have dared try something like this before she'd gained the abilities she now possessed. There was something very comforting about knowing that even if the alien technology did fail, a very unlikely eventuality, she would basically bounce. The thought amused her considerably.

#The flight computer is accepting manual input now, Nabiki,# Jun informed her. With a nod she experimentally tried flexing one wing-tip, yelping in surprise at how quickly the glider turned in the appropriate direction.

'Gack. That's very sensitive,' she told the SI.

#I can reduce the control gain if you wish, to damp out sudden movements.# Jun replied.

'That might be a good idea for the moment.' Trying again, she found the response was much less vigorous this time. 'Better. Now, let's see if I can get the hang of this...' Half an hour later she was circling back towards the cliff, slightly lower than the altitude she'd started at, having made rapid progress with the controls. The computer had intervened several times in the first few minutes, but for some time hadn't had to do anything. Jun had slowly increased the control gains back to where they had started. 'This is incredible fun,' she commented to the SI. 'I just wish I could use my camera as well.' Overflying the lake at a few hundred metres, she looked around trying to spot her sister and the merchant and his wife.

"Isn't this amazing, Nabiki?" Onkra commed her.

"Damn right. I could do this all day. Where are you?"

"Behind you to your left and slightly higher, out over the cliff," the young alien woman responded. "The green and blue glider." Circling around she scanned the area, until Jun dropped a designator over one aircraft.
"Got you." She watched with amusement as Onkra pulled off a perfect loop. "Not bad." Swinging around and heading out towards her friend, she spotted 'Chou' looking up at them. "Hi, sis," she commed, waving one hand, then yelping when the glider rolled hard to port. "Whoops. Forgot I need that hand to fly."

"Be careful, sister," the older woman's voice came, a giggle in it. "That looked exciting."

"It's amazing. You really have to try this," Nabiki said. "I want one of these things. Or a flying form. This is so much fun."

"I've been working on that, actually. I have some ideas. There are a couple of things I need to work out, but I think I'm close to something practical and fun as well."

"The sooner the better." Nabiki laughed out loud, diving the glider and looping it, then rolling out of the loop at the top, before resuming her flight towards Onkra. Behind her, her older sister laughed, walking along the shore of the lake with Quannyr and Uthryyl. When she reached the place her friend was circling around in, she fell in a few tens of metres away, turning her head to grin at her.

"This was a damn good idea. That friend of yours is very generous to let us play with his gliders," she said.

"Jyrron is a nice guy," Onkra replied. "I've know him for a while, he's tried to get me up in one of these things several times. Now, I'm wondering why I waited so long. This is fantastic fun. I'm going to have to get one myself. I wonder how much they are?"

"We should look into it. I could certainly see them being popular at home." Onkra giggled.

"Another thing for your shopping list. Nabiki Tendo Interworld Import/Export sounds like it's going to be busy."

Snickering, Nabiki replied, "I don't think it's quite gone that far yet, but I really do think I'm going to have to look into something along those lines at some point. There are so many cool things here that could make a real difference at home, some of them so simple. We can do this already, pretty well, but these are easy and safe for beginners. That's a damn good selling point." She laughed for a moment. "Although I don't know how I could explain where they come from. Alien technology is probably even more difficult to explain than demon magic."

"These are pure tech, no magic at all as far as I know," the other woman said. "The antigrav is probably the only part your world couldn't already make with some effort. Although I think the electronics are probably more advanced by a couple of decades than what you make at the moment." The pair had settled into a steady glide away from the cliffs, which were now some ten kilometres behind them. Looking back, Nabiki slowly started to make a wide right turn, Onkra following, until they were heading back. A moment later a familiar bright orange glider moved neatly into formation on her other side. 'Yori' grinned at her.

"Fun, isn't it, Nabs?" she asked.

"I'll let that one slide because, yes, it is huge fun," she smiled back. "I want one of these for Christmas." 'Yori' chuckled over the comm.

"So do I."

The three of them swooped and circled for a while longer, in the lift from the cliffs, until Onkra suddenly said, "Look to your left and slightly higher." Nabiki and 'Yori' both turned their heads.
"Holy shit! That thing is a lot bigger than I thought it would be." 'Yori' sounded impressed. The Mountain Soarer had slid up behind them very gently, none of them noticing it until it was only fifty metres away. It had a wingspan of close to ten metres, not far off that of the gliders they were flying, and was inspecting them curiously. Nabiki could feel no threat from it, only interest. It seemed to be concentrating on the two non-natives. Moving slightly closer and dropping to the same altitude with small motions of its wings and tail, it kept looking sideways at her, as she looked back, trying not to make any sudden movement that might scare it off. Wishing she could take a picture she settled for recording everything.

The flying animal was clearly an animal and not a bird. It had seven limbs, a long tail slightly like the ones the D'sage possessed, forelegs and hind legs, both with taloned paws on that looked slightly catlike, and a pair of wings that were somewhat bat-like, only covered in fine fur. They sprouted from roughly halfway down it's body, between the fore and hind limbs. The body shape was vaguely reptilian, mainly due to the tail, although the head looked more like a cross between a fox and a frog, with large wide-set eyes, small pointed ears folded back against the wind, and a large mouth which was lined with small teeth, visible when it yawned. The colour scheme was interesting, a slate-grey underside with a darker topside, deep blue markings similar to the rosettes of a leopard visible in the fur. The wings were covered in a lighter coloured fur, almost smoke-grey, and much finer than on the body.

Overall it was quite impressive, not least because of the size. It moved slightly closer to Nabiki, looking her over carefully, then slid over to do the same to 'Yori'. The motions were accompanied by surprisingly little wing movement. "Are you as close to that creature as it looks from down here?" her sister suddenly asked, making her twitch a little.

"Possibly closer," she replied. "It's huge! And seems to find us very interesting." The middle sister opened a visual link to the other woman, showing her what she was looking at.

"Oh, my. That is quite a large animal. It seems very curious." The soarer had moved closer to Nabiki again, looking at her closely. It made an odd yipping noise, which made her grin.

"Friendly enough, I think, though. I can't work out if it's just interested in us, or wants something. It's looking at me like a dog after a snack." 'Chou' giggled.

"Perhaps you should have brought something to feed the wildlife with," she said. Nabiki laughed.

"That would be difficult, my hands are otherwise occupied."

"That wing structure is interesting," her sister said, sounding intrigued. "Like a bat, but... different, somehow. I wish I could get a closer look at it." Nabiki stared at the animal, trying to gently move closer without frightening it off. "Oh, that's better. Thank you." There was a long pause. "Can you get above it?"

"I'm not sure. It might not like something higher than it, I think that's considered predatory in flying things. I'll try it and see what happens." 'Yori' and Onkra watched with interest as Nabiki gently applied a little up elevator, gaining altitude and losing speed to position herself above and behind the animal. Surprisingly, it didn't react, although it was clearly aware of her. Eventually she was about ten metres higher and perhaps twenty behind it.

"Well done. Yes, that's interesting indeed. Thank you, Nabiki."

"Why the interest, Sis?"

"It's a surprise." 'Chou' giggled, then dropped off the link. Wondering what her sister was up to,
"Wow. That thing can really move when it wants to," Nabiki said to her friends.

"They are extremely good fliers," Onkra replied. "I remember reading about them a while ago, they've been known to reach speeds of nearly three hundred kilometres an hour in a dive, in your measurement system. Apparently they come from a world with considerably higher gravity than ours, their bone structure is immensely strong and their muscles are very powerful. In this gravity, they can fly very easily indeed, for hours if not days."

"Impressive."

"Hey, you three, are you ready to come back yet?" Jyrron's voice suddenly intruded on them. He sounded amused. "We're going to need the gliders back eventually."

"We're enjoying ourselves," Onkra retorted, laughing. "Why didn't you tell me how much fun this was?"

"I've been telling you that for a long time, Onkra," he said, chuckling. "It's not my fault if you wouldn't listen." She giggled a little.

"OK, we're coming back. I'm getting hungry anyway." She peeled off from their formation, heading rapidly towards the collection of vehicles near the edge of the cliff, and the people surrounding them. Nabiki grinned and followed, as did 'Yori'. She laughed as Onkra shot low over the heads of the people on the ground, making one or two duck, pulled up into a loop, then circled around to make a neat landing a hundred metres from the edge of the cliff. As she passed overhead she could see the young woman grinning.

Making a somewhat less enthusiastic approach, the middle sister landed close by, followed seconds later by 'Yori'. Jyrron and a couple of friends came over, smiling, to help them release themselves from the flying machines.

"Thank you, Jyrron," 'Yori' said, shaking the young man's hand. "That was immense fun. I'm going to have to look into getting some of these things and taking them home." He grinned at her.

"I can give you the name of a dealer in Sirtha. They're locally manufactured, and not all that expensive."

"Thanks." They talked for a while as 'Azumi' and Onkra chatted to the other pilots, then shook hands once more. Waving, the three of them headed back to the lake.

"That was a hell of a way to waste a few hours," 'Azumi' said with satisfaction. "Just that was worth the trip." Onkra nodded, smiling happily.

"I can't remember the last time I had so much fun. And that soarer? I've never seen one up close like that. They're very impressive." Heading down the lake side of the ridge, they looked around, then headed for where the vehicle was parked.

"Kasumi? Where are you guys, we're back on the ground, near the car." Nabiki looked around, trying to feel her sister.

"We're down near the lake. We were about to go swimming." 'Chou' sent her a data ping with her
location, which Jun dropped into a map, highlighting their position.

"OK, got it. We'll be there in a minute." Shortly they walked up to where the others were, noticing that 'Chou' was wearing a swimsuit now. She turned and smiled at them.

"Did you have fun? It certainly looked like it." 'Azumi' nodded, grinning widely.

"So much fun. I have to get one of those things." Her elder sister gave her an amused look, as if she knew something the other woman didn't.

"I may have to try it myself," she said quietly. More loudly, she added, "We're going to swim for a while. Are you coming in, or has the flying been enough excitement for one day?"

"Oh, I think we could manage," 'Yori' commented, smiling. She looked around, then shrugged, unconcernedly disrobing and pulling on her own swimsuit which she produced from ki space. None of the D'sage in the area paid any attention beyond a casual look. Most of them were either nude or wearing very little as well. Body modesty obviously wasn't much concern amongst them. 'Azumi' smiled a little, remembering years back when Ranma had first arrived, showing little concern for her female body being seen even then. Obviously nothing much had changed in that respect.

"Pity we can't use the mer-forms here," she sent to both her sister and her sister-in-law, who both looked at her, before exchanging glances. "I know you don't want to give away the existence of the illusion spell."

"We've kept it a secret, mostly, because it's a tactically useful thing to have in reserve, and we didn't want to give anyone the right idea about us. Back home that's something of a concern, still. Here..." 'Yori' glanced at 'Chou', who shrugged a little. "If you would like to use it, it shouldn't cause much of a problem. If anyone asks we can always say that Azumi is a limited shape-shifter of some sort, which is kind of accurate after all. It doesn't necessarily imply anything about either of us, since no one other than Uthryyl and his family knows we're related."

"Are you sure? I don't want to be the one to give away classified information," 'Azumi' snickered.

"It should be safe enough here, sister," 'Chou' replied. "We should probably avoid it at home wherever possible, in case people link Ms Aoyama and Azumi slightly too closely, although there your personae are so clearly different it's probably unlikely. Azumi is a bit worrying, but Ms Aoyama is... deeply unsettling." She smiled a little.

"All this secrecy really is a pain," 'Azumi' sighed. "Although I do understand the reasons."

"If we have to we can certainly make sure people see Ms Aoyama and Azumi in the same place at the same time, which should settle any lingering doubts if they arise." 'Yori' looked amused. "I'll have to be Azumi, though, I don't think I could pull off a convincing Ms Aoyama to anyone who's met her before. I'm nowhere near creepy enough. Terrifying isn't the same thing."

"Thanks, Saotome," 'Azumi' sent, giggling. "Really, I mean it, thanks. That's one of the nicest things you've said about me." 'Yori' laughed delightedly.

"And it's from the heart."

Onkra was watching them all with a smile, guessing from their expressions that they were all talking together. "What's going on?" she queried, amused. They all looked at her in eerie synchronism, making her laugh.
"We were just discussing what I'm allowed to show off in public," 'Azumi' replied. She grinned, then looked around. They were standing on the beach near a small jetty-like platform jutting out into the water, which the water-craft users were using to launch their machines from. It was about fifteen metres long, ending in water that was clearly several metres deep. No one was on it at the moment, so she started walking towards it, followed by a curious Onkra, while her parents watched.

"Allowed to show off? What's that mean? And why are we being secretive about it?" the D'Sage woman asked curiously. "Where are you going?"

"Swimming," the spoken reply came.

"With your clothes on?" Onkra looked askance at her friend. 'Azumi' grinned, then broke into a sprint, running down the jetty and leaping off the end, in a neat arch ending up in a perfect dive. What entered the water wasn't the figure that had left the ground. Onkra gaped for a moment, while Uthryyl burst out laughing and Quannyr giggled, then ran to the end of the jetty and looked into the water. A head popped up, mer-'Azumi' grinning at her. "Um, wow?"

"Come on in, it's nice," her friend said, giggling, then flipped over with a flick of her tail and disappeared, popping back nearly a hundred metres away in a ridiculously short time. "Come on!" Onkra shook her head, turning to look at her father who had walked up beside her, still laughing.

"Aliens are weird," she said with a wry smile.

"Oh, yes, that they are. Good fun, though." Glancing at her he suddenly thrust his arm out, neatly pushing her in, then looked around innocently as if he couldn't understand what all the shouting was about, before walking away looking amused. Quannyr and 'Chou' nearly fell over giggling, 'Yori' was rolling around in the sand howling with laughter, while Onkra thrashed about swearing.

"Dad! That wasn't funny," she yelled, several bystanders putting the lie to her statement by grinning widely.

"Want to bet?" he called over his shoulder, heading back to his wife and friends. She muttered darkly to herself, treading water, then began swimming back to the jetty. 'Azumi' suddenly appeared beside her, totally at home in the water, looking very amused.

"He's definitely not above teasing you, is he?" she asked rhetorically. Onkra kept swimming, reaching the edge and hauling herself out to sit on it, dripping wet.

"No. Now, what do I do to get him back?" She looked to the side as her friend heaved herself out to sit beside her, swishing her tail in the water, inspecting her closely, before grinning. "That's amazing. I didn't know you were so good at that shape-shifting spell," she added privately.

"I'm not, not really. It's incredibly complicated, you wouldn't believe it, so Sis set me up with a number of preset forms. This is one of them. I'm studying the spell when I get time, and slowly making sense of it, but it's going to be quite a while before I can do it arbitrarily like they can." 'Azumi' sighed a little. "It's kind of worrying, and a little depressing, how good they both are at such complicated things. I don't know if I'll ever catch up."

"You will. I'm pretty sure of that. So are Dad and Mom. We all have a lot of respect for the way you've progressed in such a short time." Her friend smiled at her. "I'm in awe of it, actually. You took on an amazingly difficult task and have done very well with it. Right, I'm going to change, I'll be right back." Jumping to her feet the young woman wandered off, leaving wet footprints up the jetty. A moment later 'Chou' took her place beside the silver-tailed mermaid, who looked up.
"Hi." She smiled. "This is a wonderful place."

"Isn't it?" Leaning back on her hands, her sister looked around at the scenery, up at the mountains behind them, then out over the lake on which quite a few people were thoroughly enjoying themselves. "Both of us have visited Uthryyl before several times, but we've never come up here. I like it very much."

"You'd love the gliding. And you have to go and look at the view over the edge, you have no idea how amazing it is until you're up there." The younger sister looked around as well, then sighed a little. "It's a pity that Akane and Dad can't see all this." Putting her hand on her sister's one, 'Chou' smiled gently.

"One day. At least you'll have the photos to show them when we can finally come clean about all of this."

"Do you think that will ever happen?"

"Yes, eventually. I'm sure of it. But for now, it doesn't matter. This is a holiday, we don't have to do anything except have fun. So, I'm going swimming." The blonde slipped into the water, heading out into the middle of the lake at a fast front crawl. Her sister watched her go for a moment, then laughed slightly, following at much higher speed with a flick of her tail.

Behind her, Onkra and the others all jumped one after the other off the end of the jetty, soon dispersing out into the water, laughing and calling to each other, everyone enjoying themselves thoroughly.
"Happy now?" Fumiko studied the black-haired magical girl who had spoken, someone who could perhaps be better described as the absolutely filthy, sweating, exhausted, torn-uniformed, and pissed off magical girl, then turned to inspect the street which was much more tidy, although still damaged. She pointed.

"You missed a bit."

The girl stared at her, opened her mouth, went red, then slowly deflated, unable to summon up the energy to do anything else. Sighing heavily and slumping her shoulders she closed her mouth again, walked over the lone concrete block lying half crushed in the gutter, carefully picked it up, then trudged to the skip that was being loaded onto the waste truck and dropped it in. The workmen watched with smiles that were entirely too wide for her mental well-being, full as they were of a certain amount of schadenfreude, a concept she was aware of even if she couldn't spell it. Ami watched, glancing at Fumiko, who winked when her team-mate couldn't see it, covering her mouth to stifle a giggle and schooling her expression to one of appropriate seriousness.

As the girl came back and rejoined her other colleagues who were leaning against the wall of the local bank, looking at least as dishevelled and tired, two of them with their eyes closed and one watching the first girl with a look of horrified bewilderment as if she was trying to work out where and when everything had gone so badly wrong, Fumiko nodded in satisfaction.

"Great. Well done. Now, you remember what I said?" They all nodded, the two blondes not bothering to open their eyes. "Even better. I'm sure Yori will take your cooperation into account when she comes back, although she may want a word as well." As one, they all shuddered and paled, exchanging glances as the eyes of the two team-mates shot open in sudden fright. The tall young woman smiled slightly nastily at the reaction, while Ami had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep a straight face. Producing four bottles of water, Fumiko handed them out, watching with a grin as they all grabbed one each and drained it in seconds. The brunette dropped her empty bottle to the ground, then jumped at the polite cough from Tamiko, who looked meaningfully at it, then her. Sighing, she picked it up and flipped it into the skip truck. One of the workmen chuckled without looking at her, which made her glare for a moment.

"OK. Aiko is going to take you all back to your 'secret base', since you're clearly too tired to walk."

Fumiko made little air quotes with her fingers, grinning. They exchanged glances.

"Um, secret base?" The twin-pony-tailed one stared for a moment, then looked at her friends again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, sure you do. On top of a hill? Old man?" She paled, while the others looked worried. Fumiko and her friends all giggled. "We know who you are, and we know where you live." She looked suddenly serious, staring at each of them in turn until their eyes dropped. "So be good, or we'll come and say hi." Turning to Ami while they were trying to think of what to say to that, she held out her hand. The blue-haired young woman shook it. "Take care, Ami. You can visit any time you like. Please leave your friends behind, though." The others all nodded, while the rest of her team shot her annoyed glares. She smiled at Fumiko.

"Thanks. I'm sorry about all this. I'll do what I can to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Please do. It was nice talking to you." Aiko walked over to her, clapping her on the shoulder.
"No lasting effects from the trial teleports earlier?" she asked quietly, glancing at the rest of Ami's team. She shook her head, smiling slightly, fairly sure she knew why the short brunette had taken her off privately and jumped her around for a little while.

"Nope. I feel fine."

"Good." As they walked over to the depressed and dirty girls, she added in a whisper, "Stand off to one side. Out of the way of the vomit..." All six of them disappeared with a flash, while Tamiko started laughing. When Aiko reappeared, they all looked at each other for a moment, then howled with glee.

"Did you record it?" Misaki managed to ask her friend.

"Of course. It was... spectacular." Aiko had a huge grin on her face. "Yori is going to love it." They nearly fell over in renewed laughter, before Fumiko went off to thank the various contractors who were engaged in taking the debris away and already beginning the repairs, still giggling to herself.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" The questioner looked at his friend somewhat dubiously. The other young man was elbow-deep in the innards of his older brother's LakeJet 10 water-craft, fiddling with the power supply.

"How hard can it be?" the fiddler asked, his tail slowly twitching back and forth, betraying his concentration. "I looked it up before I borrowed this thing. I just need to crack open the power control unit, then I can bypass the speed limiter. It can go a lot faster, but Thren locked it down because," he looked up and finished sarcastically, his ears back, "I'm too young to handle that much speed." Shaking his head in disgust he went back to work. "He's only a quarter-cycle older than me but he acts like he knows everything."

"There's a hell of a lot of power in there, it's got all that insulation for a good reason, you know," his friend said, not entirely reassured. "Electricity and water don't mix well. Be careful."

"I am being careful. Stop worrying and hand me that debonder." The young man passed the tool over and watched as his friend ran it carefully around the edge of the secondary isolation layer covering the power control module, a faint hum sounding as it unzipped the molecular bond along the seam. Looking around guiltily he saw they were still unobserved in the little inlet on the shore of the lake, some way from where most people were. A few swimmers were within earshot, but no one seemed to be paying attention.

"OK, got it. Here, hold this." He was passed the cover of the power control module, which he gingerly took. "Don't drop it, I don't want any marks so he doesn't know what I did. I need to put it back the way it was before we go home." Carefully inspecting the inside of the control module, the aspiring engineer compared it with a schematic on his unrolled comp screen, then nodded firmly. "Right. I just need to connect from here..." He made a link with another tool and a short piece of superconducting cable, "to heAAARGH!" There was a vicious crackling snap and a bright blue flash, making the helper jump away with a shout of fright, dropping what he was holding.

"Hells, what did you do, Hryd?" There was no response, except a subsiding sizzling noise and some sparking inside the opened hull of the small water-craft. "Hryd? Are you OK?" He rubbed his eyes, blinking. As his vision cleared he looked around, spotting his friend lying face down in the shallow water a couple of metres away, still clutching the connection tool in one badly burned hand. "Oh, fuck. Hryd!" Scrambling over to his friend, splashing through the water, he rolled the young man onto his back and pulled him onto dryer sand. Quickly checking the vital signs as he'd been taught in many health classes, he swore under his breath.
"Fuck, fuck, fuck, he's not breathing." Pulling out his own comp he waved it over the young man, checking the readout and laying his ears back in fright. "Both hearts have stopped. Oh, hells, Hryd, you idiot." Heaving on his chest over the primary heart, he tried to restart it, mumbling to himself in shock. After a moment he shouted, "I need a healer! Can anyone hear me?" He didn't dare stop the chest compressions to call for the emergency services.

"What's the problem?" a voice said from behind him, speaking Trade rather than Common. He looked over his shoulder, panic on his face, to see an alien female lying in the water a few metres away. He stared for a moment, she didn't look like any alien he'd seen before, although from what he could see she seemed to be from some aquatic species, with a long silver-scaled tail like a fish.

"His hearts have stopped. He got a massive shock from the jetter, he was mucking around with the power pack. I told him not to. He's going to die." Turning his attention back to his friend he hammered on Hryd's chest. "Come on, you bastard, live."

A hand rested on his shoulder. "Don't panic. I've called for help, a healer will be here in a few seconds." He looked around, startled, to see the same alien woman, but she was now bipedal, like him, and wearing clothes. Squatting down beside him she smiled, as he gaped in surprise.

"What's your name?"

"Rosmyr," he responded after a moment, wonder in his voice. He'd never met a shape-shifter before.

"Hello, Rosmyr, I'm Azumi. Don't worry, my friends are very good healers. They're nearly here." She looked up and waved, causing him to look in the direction she was. Two more of her species were sprinting along the beach at an absolutely impossible speed, their motions a blur. Seconds later they slid to a halt next to him, both dropping to their knees. The shorter one gently moved him to one side, as the taller one put her hands on Hryd's chest. Her hands glowed with magic, making him relax slightly, he suddenly felt someone who knew what they were doing was present. Nearly collapsing in relief he rocked back on his knees and tail, rubbing his eyes.

"He's had a severe electric shock, some neurological damage, second degree burns to both hands, muscular tears from over-contraction, cardiac arrest in primary and secondary hearts, no respiration," the alien woman reported. Listening Rosmyr gulped. That sounded bad. She glanced at him, correctly sensing his mood. Her smile was quite unusual but still somehow comforting. "Don't worry. He'll be fine, we know what we're doing." She turned to her colleague. "Can you sort out the neural stuff, please, while I repair the hearts?"

"Sure." The other woman also put her hands on his friend, purple energy collecting around her fingers. He and Azumi watched as the two worked, exchanging occasional words in both Trade and their own language. After a minute or two Hryd stirred, coughing weakly, then opened his eyes.

"What happened?" he mumbled, wincing in pain and raising one hand to his head. The tall alien woman put her hand on him, a small burst of magic coming from it, and he relaxed slightly.

"You made a mistake, I think," she said with a smile. "You received a very large electrical shock straight across your chest. It's a good thing we were in the area." Helping him sit up she glanced at the water-craft, which was still sparking intermittently. "I'd suggest in future leaving work on high energy systems like that to people who are experts on them. There's not a lot of room for error."

"You nearly killed yourself, you idiot, Hryd!" Rosmyr yelled, glaring at his childhood friend. "Don't ever do that again!"
"I can't remember what I did?" the other young D'sage said groggily, looking around at everyone. "I remember taking the cover off, then... it all goes weird. Next thing I knew I'm lying here all wet."

"You were trying to bypass the limiter, I think you must have connected the wrong thing. There was a really nasty sound and a bright flash, it threw you all the way over there.″ Rosmyr waved a hand at the edge of the lake. "Azumi here called for help, these healers are friends of hers. If they hadn't turned up I don't know what would have happened. Both your hearts had stopped and you weren't breathing."

"If your emergency services had come quickly and a good healer had worked on you quickly you'd probably have made it," the alien woman with the blonde hair said quietly, "but I wouldn't guarantee it. There was fairly severe damage to several nerve centres, leaving aside the fact you had no pulse or respiratory rhythm. I know how good the healers are on this world but there was a fairly small window in which to restart you. It's probably a good thing we were here.″ She smiled at him as he gulped. "You should at least disconnect the power before you fiddle with things like that." The other one walked over to the sparking LakeJet and poked around inside for a moment, somehow making the crackling noises stop.

"I'm afraid your power control module is fried from what I can see," she said, coming back to them. "It's going to need work before you can use it again." Hryd groaned and put his head in his hands.

"Thren is going to kill me."

"You nearly did that for him you half-wit," his friend said sourly. "You scared the life out of me. I've never seen anyone nearly die before." They both looked at the two healers. "Thank you both very much for saving him," Rosmyr said with relief in his voice. "He's an idiot but I've known him all my life."

"You're more than welcome," the short alien said, grinning. "It's what we do. I'm Yori." She held out her hand, which he took with a jolt of recognition for the name. "This is my partner Chou. You've already met Azumi."

"Gods. Yori? And Chou?" He stared for a moment, then exchanged an awed glance with Hryd. "I've heard of you both. You're supposed to be the most dangerous magic workers anyone has ever met. And incredible healers." They both looked at each other while behind him Azumi snorted with laughter.

"Our reputation may be somewhat exaggerated, I suspect." Yori looked amused in her alien manner. He stared at her, cocking his head to one side.

"Rescued the Third Minister's wife from a gang of heavily armed kidnappers who had already taken and killed four other people?"

"Well, yes, that's true, but..."

"Captured a group of alien combat mages who took over a small town on the other continent and were holding off a company of the military in the process? Just the two of you?"

"Um, yes, we did do that, I'll admit, but..."

"Healed thirty-nine people, including the K'nn seven ambassador, who were suffering from a very nasty and probably lethal viral infection that no one could identify?" Yori sighed, looking at her partner, who seemed amused. Azumi was laughing quite hard by this
point. "OK, OK, I get the point. You've heard of us. But we're not that extraordinary, really." Rosmyr glanced at Hryd, who looked back with a puzzled expression.

"I'd hate to see what you think is extraordinary, then," he said with a sudden grin. "but I'm very happy to have met you, even if it was this idiot's nearly dying that made it happen." Yori chuckled.

"No problem. I'm sorry about your machine, Hryd. Is it going to be expensive to fix?" The young man stood, aided by his best friend, then walked over and cautiously peered inside the hull, groaning when he saw the charred mess the control module now was.

"Oh, crap, that's completely ruined. Where the hells am I going to get a new one?"

"Tyrkrel Industries LakeJet 10 power unit?" A new voice came from behind, making him turn to see an older man accompanied by a woman his age and a much younger one who bore a definite family resemblance. "I can get you one, I think I have some spares in the warehouse. We used to sell that model in a few places. It's obsolete, but very high quality, and reliable. I'm impressed you managed to damage it." He smiled. "Uthryyl, Sirtha External Trading Incorporated. You might be familiar with the company, especially if you like coffee." Hryd stared for a moment.

"Master Merchant Uthryyl, of course I know your name." He dipped his head respectfully, laying his ears back for a moment. "I'd be very grateful if you could supply me with a spare module. Parts aren't easy to get for this model any more. It belongs to my brother, he won't be happy I damaged it, he saved for a long time to get the credit to buy it."

"It would be my pleasure. I'm sure we can come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement." Uthryyl glanced at the comp still lying unrolled on the ground next to the hull, which pinged as it received a netmessage. "I've sent you the details of my office. Call there tomorrow, talk to Berkra. She'll be expecting you. She can arrange a spare and also recommend someone to install it, who is less likely to require medical intervention afterwards." The merchant grinned slyly. Hryd looked at the ground, embarrassed, while Rosmyr coughed a laugh, trying not to upset his friend. Azumi looked very amused, as did the other two aliens.

"Thank you, Master Merchant."

"Just Uthryyl. No need for formalities, I'm on holiday with my friends and family. Which is, by the sounds of it, lucky for you. Leave the power engineering to the professionals, or get some proper training, all right?" The young man nodded, still looking shaken. Yori poked him gently.

"Cheer up. You're alive, everything else is easy. You going to bring your car over here, or would you like a hand taking this thing back? You're certainly not going to be driving it." The two young men looked at each other, then around at the water-craft. It was fairly heavy, they'd had some trouble getting it out of the cargo hold of the air-car in the first place, and didn't fancy carrying it all the way back. On the other hand, it was a long walk around the lake to retrieve the car and bring it back, which wasn't something they were looking forward to either.

Azumi wandered over and inspected the machine, lifting the rope tied to the front docking ring.
"There's an easy solution," she said, flipping the hull cover shut then picking the entire thing up with ease. Both boys gaped in amazement. How the hells strong were these aliens? Carrying it to the water from where they'd heaved it onto the sand, she waded out to knee depth, then put it down. Moving past it into deeper water with the end of the rope in her hand, she shimmered and changed, making them stare in astonishment as she retook the aquatic form Rosmyr had first seen. Beside him, Hryd swore quietly in shock. Holding the end of the rope she floated on her back, grinning at them "Come on, grab your stuff and get on, I'll tow you back across the lake. Seems like the simplest method."
Uthryyl laughed in a deep voice, while Yori snickered. Chou was smiling as were the other two women. Glancing at each other, the two young men finally shrugged, retrieved Hryd's comp and tools, then waded out to the LakeJet and climbed on board. Azumi waited until they were seated, then rolled over and disappeared under the surface. The rope snapped tight far faster than they expected, the craft shooting forward nearly as fast as it would have done under it's own power, making them both swear in surprise and grab anything available to hang on.

"How is she doing that?" Hryd called over his shoulder to his friend. Holding on as the LakeJet bounced over the waves, Rosmyr laughed.

"Magic, I guess. It's incredible. She must be unbelievably strong." Looking over his shoulder he saw that the merchant and his companions had jumped into the lake as well and were swimming after them, a considerable distance behind, although Yori and Chou were both making remarkable progress in their own right. "These people are amazing," he said in his friends ear. "Maybe you should electrocute yourself more often if we get to meet people like this." Hryd turned his head and glared, making the young man laugh. "It was a joke."

"Not a funny one. I'm still tingling all over and not in a good way."

Shortly they began to slow as they neared the other side of the lake. Azumi's head popped up beside them. "Where do you want it?" she asked.

Pointing, Hryd said, "Over there, the red one, please." She nodded and disappeared again, as they slewed sideways and headed in the correct direction. Moments later she resurfaced, tossing them the rope. Rosmyr caught it and coiled it up.

"I'll push from here." She was as good as her word, quickly running the machine aground in the shallows, then shifting back to her bipedal form, wading out of the water as they climbed off. Pulling the LakeJet up on the sand she waited for Hryd to bring the vehicle closer, then lifted it into the cargo hold, which swallowed it easily due to the subspace storage it used. Rosmyr reflected once more on the rather odd fact that the internal volume of the hold was actually large enough you could in theory get another vehicle the same size inside it, assuming it would fit through the rear door. Thinking about things like that made his head ache. Magic was very weird.

"Thanks, Azumi," Hryd said, smiling at her.

"No problem," she replied. Turning, she watched as Yori and Chou both reached the shore behind them nearly neck and neck, the merchant and his family still only half-way across the lake but making steady headway. She waved, then returned her attention to the two young men. "Try not to do something like that again, Hryd, you got lucky this time. You might not be, next time."

He nodded soberly, his good mood evaporating. "I know. It was a stupid thing to do. I wish I could remember exactly what it was I actually did, though." Flexing his hands he looked at them for a moment. "Still tingles a little, but bearing in mind what happened..."

"They looked horrible," Rosmyr said, remembering the burned meat appearance with a shiver. "I've never seen healing that fast or effective, there isn't a mark left."

"They're pretty damn good at healing, to be honest," Azumi said with a smile. "Better than anyone else I've ever met. I guess you're going, now?"

"I think we should. I've kind of lost my enthusiasm for here for the moment." He glanced at his friend, who nodded, looking glum.
"Me too. I just want to put the car on autopilot and get some sleep. I'm still going to have to figure out what to tell Thren." Hryd sighed.

"Tell him the truth, that's normally the best thing." Azumi looked at them both seriously. "Trust me on this, once you start telling things that aren't completely true, even for good motives and when it's actually necessary, it becomes very difficult to stop. In the long run, if you can, be truthful. It saves a lot of trouble later."

"It's good advice," Chou said behind them, as she and Yori walked up. "Tell your brother what happened, Rosmyr can verify it. Uthryyl can get your machine fixed, I'm sure, and while your brother will probably be angry, with good reason, he'll also probably be grateful that he still has a younger brother in the first place." She smiled gently at him, making him feel calmer than he would have expected.

"OK. You're right, I guess." He studied her and her colleague for a moment with an odd expression. "Thank you both very much."

"Like I said, it's not a problem," Yori replied, while Chou smiled again. "Try not to repeat the performance, you should always try not to make the same mistake twice. It's best to make new, interesting ones!" She laughed, as they both grinned. With another slightly awed look at the three aliens, they climbed into the car, waving, then closed the doors. Hryd told the computer to take them home, before swivelling his seat around with a sigh as the vehicle lifted off.

"So, what do you want to do next week?" his friend asked after a long moment, then ducked as the young man nearly hit him, grinning.

"I think I've had enough swimming for the moment," 'Azumi' said, as they watched the air-car rise a hundred metres, before turning and silently zipping off towards Sirtha. The two boys had obviously decided they wanted to get home as fast as possible. 'Yori' snickered.

"That was a pretty impressive towing exercise," she said, looking over her shoulder and waving for a moment as Onkra reached the shore. "You took off so fast they nearly fell off."

'Azumi' laughed. "I have to be honest, I'm still surprised sometimes how strong I've become over the last year. Even in mer-form. I was genuinely amazed how easy it was to pull that thing. I could probably have gone faster but I was worried the rope would snap."

"Probably not, it's some sort of mono-molecular material, I think, I've seen it before here. Almost unbreakable. You could probably moor an aircraft carrier with it. Mind you, I imagine the front would have pulled off their jet-ski thing first." 'Yori' looked after the now-vanished car. "That kid got lucky. The voltage in that battery pack should have flash-fried his brain, it must have been a very short contact. The amount of insulation he had to remove was impressive. So was the lack of common sense in actually removing it."

"His friend seemed to feel the same," 'Chou' said, smiling. "I have the feeling that young Hryd is prone to doing things that he hasn't thought out well beforehand. Perhaps this will make him think more next time."

"Hopefully." Giggling, 'Azumi' turned as Onkra walked up looking amused.

"I can't believe how fast you pulled that thing!" she said, laughing. "You should have seen their faces! Perhaps we should rent you out for a couple of credits a ride, we could make a fortune..." 'Azumi' burst out laughing.
"I think I can probably earn a living doing something other than being a waterpark attraction," she managed, shaking her head in good humour. "It was kind of fun, though."

"I'm really hungry now," the D'sage woman said, smiling. She looked around as her parents came over. "Why don't we head back to the waterfalls, it'll be the ideal time to see them in about an hour and a half or so, and stop somewhere to get some food?" Looking at her mother she added, "There's that restaurant in the small village before you get to them, I remember it was very good."

Quannyr nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it is nice. I think they'd like it." Uthryyl clapped his hands, looking pleased.

"A plan, then. I could certainly eat. We should have brought some food with us, but it was sort of spur of the moment, I didn't intend to stay here so long. I'm glad we did, though, if only for that poor lad, he'd have had a hard time of it otherwise." Drying themselves off and changing, Onkra waved to a couple of friends of hers, then they all piled back into the car and drove back the way they'd initially come, talking and laughing, as the three visitors resumed their true appearances.

A little way from the lake, Kasumi suddenly said, "Quannyr, can you slow down, please?" The woman glanced over her shoulder while doing exactly that, pulling over next to the road.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to get a better look at that." She pointed. 'That' turned out to be a mountain soarer, which was bounding around in a field beside the road, flapping it's wings and making odd noises, apparently after something in the long undergrowth.

"What on earth is it doing?" the eldest Tendo said. Uthryyl watched for a moment. "It's a very young one, look at the size. I think it's tried to catch something and it all went wrong." He laughed, pointing. "Yes. Look, there, you see it?" There was a small ball of fur about the size of a cat darting around in the bushes, which the soarer was clearly interested in. "That's a quillit. They're a bit like an omnivorous version of a squirrel from your world, only nowhere near as cute. Nasty things. They breed like crazy, eat damn near anything, and are extremely bad tempered, not to mention resilient. We had some nest under the house once, we had a hell of a time getting rid of them. They were into everything. Hardly any poisons work on them, they're quite magic-resistant as well, so you basically have to hunt the things down and shoot them. " The soarer yipped, pouncing on the quillit like a giant cat, then looking annoyed as far as one could ascribe that emotion to an animal as the smaller creature evaded it.

"Why doesn't it run away?" Ranma asked, watching with amusement. The soarer really did look quite pissed off. Crouching in the long grass-like ground covering, the end of it's tail waving slightly, it fixed its gaze on the bush its prey had vanished into, then with a flap of its wings dived into it. The quillit shot out of the other side of the bush, running in a large circle, to end up behind the predator where it viciously bit its hind leg, provoking a loud yip of pain. He laughed. "Oh. I see. It's vindictive and has sharp teeth." Uthryyl laughed, nodding.

"Yes. They're a pain, sometimes literally. You'd think something that size would run from a larger animal that wants to eat it, but the damn things are stupid and fearless. People have been killed when they stumbled over a large nest, they tend to attack anything they think is a threat. Most people who live in the country would be perfectly happy to see them all drop dead. The fact that mountain soarers seem to love eating them was a major factor in the authorities deciding to leave them in peace when they got introduced. It's a cheap, low tech way of keeping the little bastards under control."
Nabiki was taking photos of both animals, smiling at the antics of the flying predator. The animal was clearly quite frustrated at it's inability to catch the quillit, which was still darting around like a mad thing, occasionally biting it. "If Misaki sees one of those she'll want it for a pet," she commented.

"Which one?" Kasumi giggled.

"The soarer, I hope," Uthryyl said, shuddering. "You really don't want an infestation of quillits." After a moment, Kasumi opened the door next to her. "What are you doing?" he asked curiously as she shimmered into 'Chou', even though there was no one around. She glanced at him.

"I want to get a closer look at that soarer," she replied slightly mysteriously.

"Do you think it will let you?" her husband asked.

"I suspect so," the blonde said, smiling, then whipped her hand out and neatly shot the frantically bouncing quillit between the eyes with a tiny ki ball, which dropped it in it's tracks, stunned and twitching. "I'll just introduce myself." Everyone watched in surprise as she slowly walked over to the semi-conscious quillit, keeping her eyes on the soarer, which had stopped dead and was watching her warily. She made sure to approach from upwind, watching as it sniffed, then stared as she knelt and picked up it's intended prey. Moving closer, she stopped again, gently tossing the stunned animal in front of the soarer, which watched it land, then looked back at her.

Switching it's attention between something it wanted to eat and something it was curious about, after a moment it slowly moved forward, reaching out a paw and tapping the quillit experimentally. The smaller animal twitched, making it draw it's paw back sharply, then after a short pause, slam it down hard. There was a distinct crunch. Everyone in the car watched as 'Chou' moved nearer, very slowly, making little squeaking noises like someone calling a cat. The soarer cocked it's head on one side, inspecting her curiously, before scooping the dead quillit up and flipping it into it's mouth, chewing with an air of contentment.

"She's good with animals," Onkra commented, fascinated, as 'Chou' reached the soarer and put her hand gently on it's head. "They don't normally let people get that close, although they're not particularly scared of us." It sniffed her carefully, but otherwise didn't react. After a moment she ran her hand along its neck and onto its back. Ranma laughed a little, quietly.

"She's good with everything. Kas can calm anyone or anything down, amazingly effectively." There was respect and love in his voice. They all watched as his wife stroked the soarer, which peered over it's shoulder at her, shifting slightly under her hand, but stayed put.

"The fur is amazingly soft," she commed them all. "Like rabbit, or mink." Touching the wing which was half extended, she felt it curiously. "This is even finer. I've never felt anything like it on an animal. Quite remarkable."

"What are you doing, sis?" Nabiki asked curiously.

"I want to check something," came the mildly uninformative and secretive response. They could see her hand was glowing gently. The soarer shifted again, apparently now leaning against her, seeming quite content to stay in one place. After a minute or two she stepped back, smiling as it nearly tipped over, before righting itself and looking mildly offended that it's new friend had moved. Squatting down she ran her hand down it's hind leg where the now-deceased quillit had bitten it, leaving a wound that was bleeding slightly, greenish blood matting the fur. Her hand glowed again. "No real damage, but it must have been uncomfortable," she reported. The animal turned its head on its long neck to watch, resting it on her shoulder. Her other hand came up and
stroked it, making it close its eyes in pleasure. Nabiki got the impression that if it had been a cat it would have been purring by now.

Eventually she stood, gently pushing the soarer's head off her. It yipped quietly, looking at her with big eyes. Nabiki took another photo, grinning. "You seem to have made a friend," she said.

"Indeed. It's very warm and seems quite relaxed." Stroking it again for a moment, her sister turned around and walked back to the car, the soarer watching with apparent disappointment as she left. When she got back into the car and closer the door, they all watched as it stared at the vehicle for a moment, before leaping into the air and flapping it's wings sharply, quickly gaining altitude. Soon it was just a dot, heading back towards the lake and the cliff. "What a beautiful animal," she commented, smiling happily.

Ranma looked curiously at her. "Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked. She nodded.

"Yes." There was a long pause while they all exchanged glances.

"Going to tell us?"

"No." She looked mischievously at him. Inspecting her for a moment he sighed, then smiled.

"OK, be like that."

"I will. Thank you." Nabiki laughed, glancing at Onkra, who looked amused. "We can go now, Quannyr. Thank you for stopping." The elder woman gave her friend a curious glance but restarted the vehicle and pulled away. Leaning back in her seat Kasumi smiled serenely, while her husband and sister watched her, then exchanged glances. Ranma shrugged with a small smile on his lips. Shaking her head Nabiki turned her attention to reloading her camera, wondering what her sister was up to.

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"This is very nice," ‘Chou' said, looking around at the small restaurant. It was definitely recognisable as such, even with the odd chairs and a somewhat unusual layout. The building was build half-underground, into the side of the mountain, the window on the end of the room looking out towards Sirtha over the edge of the cliff. ‘Azumi' followed her gaze, nodding agreement.

"The food is excellent as well," she said. To her pleasure she'd found the menu included g'rargh, which she was eating in the form of a salad.

"I haven't been here for a while but it's nice to see it's still as good as ever," Quannyr commented, smiling. "It used to be owned by an old friend, but she sold it years ago and moved to Krentak with her husband when she got married. The new owners had quite a reputation to live up to but they managed magnificently."

Onkra looked out the window at the setting suns, which were nearing the horizon. "We'll have to leave soon, to catch the light at the falls. It will take about half an hour to get there, unless we fly."

"No need to rush," her mother said. "I like driving in ground mode, it's surprisingly relaxing. Flight mode is quick but boring." She smiled. "We'll make it, don't worry. We can always come back, anyway." Onkra nodded, resuming eating. They finished their meal fairly soon, having a round of coffee after, then got up. As Uthryyl paid, the others headed for the vehicle.

"Not many people around," ‘Yori' said, looking curiously about her. "I haven't seen any other vehicles for a while, and there were only half a dozen other than us in there."
"It's a quiet time right now. There was a big holiday a little while ago, the place was full then, but now most people are back to their normal lives. The lake is different, it's always got people there, especially in nice weather, but around here it's a bit seasonal." Quannyr smiled at the human woman. "It's nice, actually, while I like the city I also like to be able to go somewhere without so many others around."

"I can understand that. I grew up on the road, there weren't many people around a lot of the time. It's nice to have neighbours, but sometimes you want to get away." Yori laughed. "Mind you, not many back home 'get away' quite as far as we seem to."

Giggling, 'Azumi' nodded agreement. "You can say that again. I'd never have believed a couple of years ago I'd be holidaying on the other side of a portal! Dad and Akane would never believe it." She pulled out her camera and took a photo of the restaurant and the surrounding area, then put it away again. Uthryyl joined them as they climbed into the car. Soon they were on the move again. Kasumi leaned back and sat in silent thought, her eyes closed, as she had done for most of the time since meeting the soarer. The others occasionally looked at her, wondering what she was thinking about, but didn't ask.

Fairly soon, they turned down a small road off the main one they had been driving along, heading back the way they'd come earlier during the day. There were no other vehicles on it, as Quannyr drove at quite high speed, clearly enjoying herself on the winding route. The road wound through very crumpled topography, making sharp bends around outcroppings of rock, a view off to the right intermittently opening up through the trees and showing the plains below the cliff, which they were quite close to. Eventually they reached a point where the ground levelled off, a river becoming visible close to the road.

"That's the outflow from the lake," Onkra said, pointing. "We're actually fairly close to it now, we've gone more or less in a circle around that mountain back there, but aside from by air there isn't much of a practical way back more directly. The river is full of rapids, it's about three hundred metres lower here than the lake is, so you can't go back up it in a boat." Her mother followed the road for another kilometre, eventually stopping when it basically ended in a clearing in the woods. "We walk from here, it's not far." Everyone got out, looking around at the forest. Onkra pointed.

"That way." They followed as she walked down a path through the trees. "Not a lot of people come here, it's kind of out of the way, but it's pretty spectacular," she said over her shoulder. Looking around with interest, 'Azumi' dropped back a bit as she stopped to take a few photos of interesting plants. Changing film again, she walked on, the sound of her family and friends fading in front of her. She shook her head slightly.

'\textit{This is so weird, it keeps hitting me when I see something odd, I'm on a different damn world! An alien planet!}' A grin worked it's way across her face. Stopping again, she stared at a brilliant green and blue insect-like creature that was walking slowly across the path in front of her, making a high-pitched squeak every now and then. It stopped when her shadow fell across it, freezing motionless, then when nothing happened, resumed walking. She took a picture, leaning as close as she could without disturbing it. The thing slowed as it spotted another, smaller insectoid on a tree near the path, changing direction and carefully sneaking up on it, freezing into immobility every now and then. The middle sister watched curiously as it approached it's apparent prey, eventually stopping twenty centimetres away. There was a long pause, while the first creature studied the second one, before with a suddenness that took her by surprise, it reared back on it's back four legs and shot the front pair forwards, covering the distance in an implausible way as they extended. As the legs made contact with the target, a sharp snap sounded, accompanied by a bright flash like a spark.
"Good grief," she mumbled, watching the targeted insectoid drop to the ground, smoking slightly.

'It would appear to have discharged a considerable voltage through it's prey,' Jun commented, sounding interested. 'An unusual but clearly effective hunting method.'

'Unusual is right. I've heard of lightning bugs, but that's a little more real lightning that you'd expect. I wonder how it generates the electricity?'

'There was a burst of a variant of magic when it produced the discharge, Nabiki,' the SI replied. 'I believe it uses ambient magic to create an electrical discharge. Fascinating.'

'Very.' She watched as the hunter began dismantling it's victim, shaking her head in wonder, then resumed walking. After a few minutes she rounded a corner in the path, then stopped dead.

"Oh, my..." Words failed her for a moment. The source of the distant roar she'd been hearing for a while suddenly became clear. Moving closer to the edge of the path, which was a few metres away, she stared in awe.

The river carrying the outflow from the lake emerged from the forest to her right, winding along through the trees, glinting in the evening light, travelling through a wide channel carved out of the rock of the cliff. Just ahead of her the ground dropped away into nothingness for thousands of metres, only a low, clearly artificial wall between the path and empty air. The others were standing next to it looking over, silently. She slowly walked over and looked out at the plain, a similar but slightly different view from what she'd seen before at the lake in front of her, then looked at the river.

The channel it ran it was narrow but deep where it went over the edge, a huge flume of water shooting fifty metres out before it arced over, dropping into the depths with a rumbling thunder that made the rock tremble. A fine mist blew back in the slight breeze, dampening the rock around them slightly.

From where they were standing the setting suns were on the other side of the waterfall, causing the amazingly clear water to light up brilliantly, refracting the colours into a constantly shifting rainbow of intense illumination. The red star was exactly on the other side, seen through the water from where her friends were standing, while the blue one was slightly above it, casting a glow across the surface. Jewel-like drops sprayed out into space, little beads of light that took her breath away.

It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Slowly approaching the edge, she simply stared at it in wonder. Stopping beside 'Yori', the other woman glanced at her, then returned her eyes to the waterfall. No one said anything for some time.

"Thank you, Onkra." 'Chou' finally broke the silence. "It's incredible."

"Isn't it? I can never understand why people aren't here by the hundred, just watching." The young woman smiled. "It's something I could watch for hours. The sound is amazing as well. You can feel it right inside your head." This was certainly true, the subsonic rumble of the falls made one's entire body vibrate from this range.

"After a heavy rainstorm it's even more impressive," Uthryyl said quietly, barely audible above the sound of the falling water. "The flow goes up five or six times in some cases. You wouldn't believe the noise."

Shaking herself out of the mild trance of fascination she'd fallen into, 'Azumi' raised her camera and
took a number of photos, even while knowing they'd never do it justice. This was one of those things you really had to experience for yourself. Walking closer to the wall she peered over the edge, despite herself shivering a little at the incredible sheer drop. It still seemed impossible to her that she could actually survive it if she jumped over the edge. Old thought patterns were very difficult to shake, so the sight of a close to two kilometre sheer cliff was somewhat awe-inspiring.

The water fell for hundreds of metres, becoming finer and finer spray, until it was just a fog rolling down the ring wall far below. She could see a number of silver threads at the base of the drop where the water recombined into small streams, which eventually themselves joined and became a fairly large river that headed out across the plain towards the horizon, a few lakes scattered along it's length. It looked like it joined the much larger one Sirtha was built on thirty kilometres or so away.

"Absolutely amazing," she mumbled, taking some more photos. When the camera took the last shot on the roll she put it away, not bothering to change the film. The spray would have made it awkward anyway.

As the suns set, the red one dropped under the arch of water while the blue one shone through it, the colour of the spray changing to shades of blue. Long shadows were slowly creeping across the plain far below, cast by the mountains behind Krentak away in the dim distance. Where they were standing was still well illuminated being so high up, although the light was gradually fading.

Looking at her sister, she grinned abruptly. "Thanks for bringing me. Things like this are..." she shook her head, unable to think of the words. The older woman smiled back, putting her hand on her shoulder.

"You're welcome. I'm very glad you can see all this." 'Chou' looked around at them all, then her smile turned very strange.

"Time for my surprise, I think, this is a good place for it, there's no one around." They all looked at her quizzically.

"I'll be right back," the elder sister added, before turning and diving over the edge of the multi-thousand metre cliff.

Ami looked around at four sets of resentful eyes set in filthy faces, then sighed a little. "Getting very cosy with them, weren't you?" one of her friends asked in a darkly suspicious tone of voice. "Why didn't that bitch make you help us?" She looked at the girl with long black hair and sighed again.

"Because I'm not the one who blew up half the street going after one demon, one very small, completely inoffensive demon, who was after a fucking cup of coffee you fucking idiots!" Her voice rose completely unexpectedly to a scream of rage. They all took a step back in unison, shock on their faces as the normally quiet and inoffensive young woman literally crackled with fury, more power rolling from her than any of them had ever realised she possessed.

"You goddam idiots could have killed someone today if they hadn't stopped you. I told you not to chase that guy in the first place, and I told you again not to chase him into Yori's territory! You know what she's like about things like that. And after seeing what happened today, I agree completely. You're all a bloody liability. You kill someone, especially in her area, and she'll hunt us all down if it takes the rest of time. You don't have a damn clue what she could do. None of you. I have some idea and it totally terrifies me." She shook her head tiredly, lowering her voice. "She's more dangerous than you can possibly believe. Chou as well. Fumiko and her friends are nowhere
near as powerful, but *Yori* trained them. They took all of you down without even trying. None of us stand a chance if she ever gets mad enough to do something permanent. So think about that. *Very hard indeed.*" The blue haired girl looked at the other four, an expression of disgusted exhaustion crossing her face.

"I'm going home. I've had enough of this crap for one day. To be honest, I'm *this* far," she held up one hand with her index finger very close to her thumb, "from saying fuck off to the lot of you. What the hell happened to us? We used to be careful and professional, nowadays most of you just go blundering around like a bunch of super-powered children. I'm getting *very* tired of it. Do anything like this again, I'll..." Unable to think of a suitable continuation to the thought, she swore under her breath, turned, and stomped off, nodding to the old priest who was unashamedly eavesdropping from outside the door, making him twitch. She didn't seem surprised to see him. He watched her go, shaking his head, then went back to sweeping the floor.

"*Holy shit!*" 'Azumi' screeched, diving forward and looking over the edge in horror. "Kasumi!" 'Yori' grabbed her as she nearly followed her sister over the edge.

"Careful." The other woman looked over as well, as did the three D'sage, shock on their faces. 'Chou' was already several hundred metres down falling along the cliff edge twenty metres out in a perfect skydiving position.

"*Don't worry, sister,*" she commed, amusement in her voice. "*You'll like this.*" They all watched, her female husband suddenly grinning widely, as she shimmered and changed.

'Azumi' gaped, then slowly began smiling, as her sister spread her wings and soared.
She lay in the bath, steaming both literally and metaphorically, having scrubbed the dirt off a little while earlier. It had taken some considerable effort. Muttering to herself angrily, she put her head back and reflected on the events of the day, trying to work out what to do about it. Certainly, a direct retaliatory response was out, that bitch Fumiko and her friends were too fast and too skilled, as much as it pained her to admit it.

"It's all Yori's fault," she muttered. "Ever since she turned up things have gone weird." Shaking her head, she sighed.

"Your friend Ami seemed very irritated," a voice came from the door, making her jump, sloshing water around. "And I couldn't help but notice that you and your other friends were very dirty. Interesting day?" She glared at the back of her grandfather, visible outside the door as he swept the hallway.

"It's not something I want to talk about, Grandfather." The old man sighed slightly.

After a long moment, he replied, "Yori is not someone you want to annoy, my child. Listen to young Ami. She is very clever and very responsible." He looked over his shoulder for a moment, meeting her eyes, before resuming his task. "You and your friends are becoming careless. One might go so far as to say dishonourable in your actions." She stared in total shock.

There was an even longer pause. Eventually, she said in a small voice, "You know?" He chuckled as he worked.

"I may be old, but I'm neither stupid nor senile. Not to mention I'm a priest. It should go without saying that I'm sensitive to magic. Your and your friends reek of it. I've known for a long time. Ami knows that, she worked it out quite a while ago. Smart young lady." The girl stared some more.

"Why didn't you say anything?" He shrugged.

"It wasn't my business. You were all doing good works, defending people from horrible, dangerous monsters. An honourable thing to do even if you were very young and scandalously dressed." He grinned at her for a moment over his shoulder. "Not that I mind the clothes personally, you understand." She glared for a moment, as his grin disappeared. "But recently, you've all become... sloppy. Arrogant. Despite what you may believe, you're not assured of a win every time, just because of your abilities or some perceived superiority. Yori knows this very well. That's why she doesn't win, because she knows and accepts that she might not. She would prefer to talk out a problem, but when it becomes necessary, she will fight absolutely ruthlessly. She also knows, no matter how powerful you are, if you treat people badly, ultimately, you lose." He sighed, sweeping further down the corridor, his voice coming around the corner.

"I am somewhat disappointed that you and your friends have lost sight of this. It leads to a place I'd rather not see you go."

"How the hell do you know Yori so well? How do you know her at all?" the girl demanded, climbing out of the bath and hastily drying herself, throwing some clothes on, then following the old man down the corridor. He shrugged again.

"We've talked. Several times. She's a nice girl, as is her friend Chou. Who is, I think, a lot more..."
"I don't understand. How could you have talked to her? How did you even meet her?"

"She's dropped by occasionally to talk, and have a cup of tea. Chou has as well. Incredible people. Yori is a wonderful little energetic bundle of raw chaos, she makes me wish I was about fifty years younger. Chou is the most serene person I've ever met. She'd have made a wonderful priestess in another life. Or perhaps a goddess." He laughed. "So would Yori, a goddess of war, perhaps. Or chaos." Glancing at her granddaughter as he put the broom away, he added, "It would be far preferable for everyone if you girls would settle your differences in an adult manner. She is a very reasonable person. Apologise, mend your ways, and move on. That's my advice." She was staring at him in bewilderment. "Tea?"

"Thank you," she said automatically, then shook her head. "Hang on. Why has she dropped by?" She stared suspiciously at him. "Did she tell you about us?" He snickered.

"Of course not. She would never betray any of the magical girls like that, she takes her responsibilities far too seriously. I already knew anyway. She knew I knew, somehow, but has never said anything about it directly. They both just like meeting people, I think, and I suspect they initially simply followed you home."

"What responsibilities?" the girl asked. He looked at her for a moment, before leading the way to the kitchen.

"I'm surprised you haven't worked it out. The magical girls protect the community. Yori and Chou protect the magical girls." Putting the kettle on he rummaged around for some tea, getting the pot ready. His granddaughter looked even more confused.

"Protect the magical girls? Who from?"

"Themselves, mainly. Your group are responsible for most of the really spectacular... incidents... in recent times, but quite a few of them have been overenthusiastic. If that sort of thing went on unchecked, eventually there would be a backlash, which would hurt everyone. The girls perform an essential task, there's no real possibility of getting rid of them from what I know, but it would become very difficult if everyone hated you all. Yori prevents this. Very skilfully, actually. I'm not even sure she really realises what she's doing in that respect, but that is the end result." He filled the pot and waited for the tea to steep before pouring them both a cup.

"Without her and Chou, and these friends they're clearly training to help them, there would be far larger problems. I don't know all the details, I suspect I can only see a small part of it, but I'm certain they're necessary. I'm also certain they're going to change the world somehow, for the better. The government trusts them, the community trusts them, even a lot of the demons trust them. I wish you girls would. Or at least, keep your excesses far enough away that she and her friends don't feel they have to step in. Eventually, as patient as she's been, you will push her too far. I don't want to see that happen. I'm quite fond of you." He smiled at her, over his cup. She stared back, trying to assimilate all the things she'd suddenly found out.

"We could take her," she finally said. "We're extremely powerful. You have no idea." He shrugged slightly, sipping his tea.

"Probably not. But I can tell you that raw power doesn't win battles in many cases. Intelligence
does, although luck certainly helps. She may not be as powerful as you and your friends, though I wouldn't want to put money on it, but I am certain she is both smart and lucky. I have no idea of her background, but whatever it is, it produced the most dangerous warrior I've ever encountered. You can see it in her eyes if you look for it. Leave her alone, she will leave you alone. Go after her, she may well still leave you alone, once she's stopped you. Go after something or someone she feels honour-bound to protect..." He looked at her for a moment.

"You will lose, quite likely permanently. The only way to defeat her would be to kill her, which you might find almost impossible. Even if you succeeded, you would have to kill Chou as well, probably all her friends, and I suspect quite a large number of otherworldly allies who would not be at all happy. She has a lot of friends, some very weird and dangerous ones, both here and in other places. No matter your abilities, you would have a very stiff uphill battle with no guarantee of success. And it's all pointless. She means you no harm as long as you act responsibly. Do that and she'll leave you in peace." Finishing his tea he rinsed the cup in the sink, dried it, then put it back in the cupboard.

"Ami is right. You all need to go back to being what you were when you started. Someone I can be proud of. Think about it before you try anything rash." Smiling at her in a kindly manner as she sat at the table, not sure what to think, he patted her on the shoulder. "It's late. Don't stay up too long. I'll see you in the morning." She watched the old priest head off to bed, her thoughts troubled.

Staring out at the evening light of an alien world illuminating a vast expanse of plain stretching out of sight in eerie colours, 'Azumi' watched her older sister climb with steady beats of the enormous wings she currently possessed, thousands of metres above the ground. Circling higher, she waved, then dropped into a vertical dive, a faint scream of joy reaching them as she shot downwards at huge speed, pulling out into a loop followed by another climb. Her heart still hammering from the shock of seeing 'Chou' do a neat swan dive over the edge, even though she knew that she'd have survived the fall regardless, the silver-haired girl stared in wonder at the aerobatics.

After a long few minutes during which no one spoke, simply watched in amazement, the flying magical girl flapped her way up to their level again, flaring out to a neat landing on the wall as easily as if she was descending the stairs, then furled her wings and hopped down onto the path. She looked from face to face, all of them wearing a mix of expressions that were difficult to decipher.

"What?" she said with a grin. "I said I'd be right back." 'Yori' suddenly laughed, stepping forward and hugging the taller blonde with a look of loving exasperation.

"I'm a bad influence on you, love," she said with a chuckle. 'Chou' giggled.

"Never. You're the best influence I could have asked for." Glancing at the others, she grinned again. "Sorry if you were a bit worried but it seemed like an amusing idea."

"Sis..." 'Azumi' stopped speaking again, simply shaking her head for a moment. Eventually, she tried again. "You are completely insane. Totally, completely, fish in a tree insane." Her sister shrugged a little.

"You may have mentioned that once or twice before." Sighing and giggling at the same time, the disguised Nabiki walked over and hugged her sister as well.

"Please don't do anything like that again for a while," she said, "I don't think my heart could take the strain." 'Chou' smiled at her gently, clearly still very amused.
Uthryyl, who had been standing with his hands on the shoulders of his wife and daughter, suddenly started laughing, having overcome his shock. "Yet again, you people have managed to surprise me." He inspected her with respectful awe. "Incredible." Onkra looked at him, then at her mother, before shrugging a little.

"Your friends are very strange, Dad," she said, laughing. He nodded.

"Yep."

Stepping back, 'Azumi' inspected her sister's latest form. It was quite impressive. Based on the normal 'Chou', she had a tail which was reminiscent of the mountain soarers, and wings that were also similar, although not identical, to the wings they had. Her neck looked slightly longer as well. Moving away for room, 'Chou' spread her wings widely, showing they had a wingspan of some six metres and were attached half-way up her back, starting over the hips and running up to about the shoulder blades. Her clothes had shifted to allow this. She folded them again then turned around, so everyone could get a better view, opening them out a little.

The wings were somewhat bat-like, although fur-covered, with a different bone structure than a bat would have. Folded, they reached well above her head and almost all the way to the ground. Her tail was long enough to reach the ground and have the last fifteen centimetres rest on it. The appendage seemed to be slightly flattened from side to side, terminating in a wider part orientated vertically like a sharks tail. Turning around to face them again she smiled. "What do you think?"

"It certainly seems to work," 'Yori' said with interest, reaching out and curiously feeling the fur on her wings. "Why the fur?"

"From examining the soarer, and things I've read about aerodynamics, I think it's controlling the airflow over the wings and making it more efficient," her wife replied. "They seem to fly very well so I thought it was worth experimenting with. It seems to be quite effective." She giggled. "It also looks good and feels nice with the wind blowing over it." She moved her tail around to show them. "This works well for directional control in addition to the shape of the wings. It didn't take very long to work out how to use it."

"How much of the soarer anatomy did you copy?" 'Yori' asked.

"Not as much as you might think, I'd worked out most of this already, but seeing them and scanning that one filled in the last holes I had. They have a remarkably high bone strength and muscle density, the tensile strength is enormously higher than any other animal I've come across, although they're also quite light. The cellular machinery is extremely efficient as well. Quite remarkable. It must be an adaptation evolved for their original high gravity world. The other impressive bit is the oxygen transport mechanism, which has considerably higher efficiency than most creatures I've studied."

"So what other changes than the visible are there?" Uthryyl asked, listening intently. She glanced at him.

"I added three cervical vertebrae to the neck, while slightly slimming them all down. That makes it much more flexible so I can do this." She tilted her head back to the point she was looking straight up, in a manner than made the watchers feel a sympathetic ache, then lowered it, before twisting it around to look directly behind her like an owl.

"Ick. That looks pretty freaky," 'Azumi' said faintly. Her sister rotated her head back and grinned.

"I know, but it's necessary to allow for looking straight ahead or above you when you're flying in
basically a prone position. I should probably add it to the mer-forms for the same reason. My lung capacity is larger as well, using the higher efficiency soarer mechanism, and I've upgraded all the muscles, tendons, and bones as well. It adds a certain strength increase and improves the resiliency considerably." Uthryyl exchanged a glance with Quannyr, who looked impressed.

"You worked out all of this yourself?" he asked, sounding slightly shocked. The blonde smiled.

"Nao helped with some of the calculations and ran a lot of simulations. That speeded things up a lot. My dear husband helped with some of the original biomechanical work, but I've changed a lot of it recently. The soarer scans added the bits I couldn't quite decide on and gave me a few ideas I'd missed before." She laughed. "I wanted something useful, practical, and fun. Any idiot can turn into a duck, but that's not at all interesting." The merchant looked oddly at her as 'Yori' and 'Azumi' exchanged glances, then started laughing like idiots.

"I don't understand the reference, I'm afraid," he said.

Giggling, Yori looked at him. "I'll tell you later." She turned back to her wife. "The lower mounting for the wings was clearly correct," she said, walking around the blonde and studying her.

"Yes. All the pictures of humans with wings coming out of their shoulders in mythology get it wrong from an aerodynamic viewpoint, that position isn't stable or practical. This works well, though." Extending her right wing she folded it around and poked her sister with the end of it. 'Azumi' stroked the appendage, marvelling at the incredibly soft, short fur on it. Her sister had chosen a colour scheme similar to that of the soarer she'd examined, only based on darker and lighter blonde colours, with a distinct golden tinge.

"Very nice, sis. Very nice indeed." The blonde grinned.

"So." She looked at her husband and her sister. "Would either of you like one as well?" They glanced at each other for a moment.

"Yes, please," they chorused, then laughed.

Twenty minutes later 'Azumi' looked over the wall again, seeing how dark the ground far below was getting. The suns were now behind the distant mountains for most of the plain, the far left side lit a deep violet-blue colour from the light of the small blue star, the red one having set at ground level. At their altitude, nearly four kilometres up, they still had another fifteen minutes or so of light left. The far-distant city of Krentak was ablaze with lights of every possible colour, while Sirtha was lit somewhat less impressively but still visibly. Patches of light spread out as far as the eye could see in front of them, widely separated small towns glowing in the evening dusk. She took a deep breath, stepped up onto the wall, spread her wings, and with one last glance over her shoulder at the faces of her friends, fell forward into space.

"EEEEeeeeeet!" The descending yell made Onkra and her family rush to the wall and look down, just in time to see the silver-haired girl pull out of a dive two hundred metres lower, shooting off into the distance with a shout of triumph. Some way further out her sister and sister-in-law circled, waiting for her. Laughing, the D'sage woman glanced at her father beside her. He looked back, a grin on his face, as he shook his head.

"You don't need to say it."

Quannyr giggled as she watched them, then went back to staring at the three flying people chasing each other in mid-air, faint laughs blowing back towards them.
"Hi, Nabiki. How is your holiday going?" The middle sister truly had no idea what to say to her younger sister for a long moment.

'Oh, hi, Akane, things are wonderful, I'm flying five kilometres above an alien world on the other side of a portal with wings and a tail our older sister made with magic, under my own power, and by the way you're phoning me across god knows how many dimensions courtesy of some alien magical technology. How was your day?' Nabiki giggled hysterically inside her own head, thinking this, watching as 'Yori' did a barrel roll out of sheer delight. What she actually said was, "Oh, hi, Akane. It's going very nicely, thanks. How are things at home?"

"Pretty good. I beat Shampoo again today, although it was close. She's very good indeed. Cologne was actually complimentary about it! You have no idea how weird that was. My life seems to have become quite strange over the last few months, but I like it." Nabiki had difficulty breathing for a moment, she was laughing so hard. Luckily none of this came across the link.

"That's very well done, sis. Not bad at all. Was Shampoo annoyed?"

"Kind of, but in a good way. She was muttering something about having to up her game for next time, although she was smiling. I think she's really pleased. I know I was."

"How's dad?"

"He's fine. He asked me to say hi. So did Nodoka. Dad and the Saotomes have gone out for the night, some sort of party with some friends. I don't think they'll be back until very late." According to her clock display it was about eleven PM in Tokyo, which she had to remind herself was in a different reality at the moment. Nabiki shook her head in amused disbelief.

"OK. Tell them I said hello. I'm going to have to go, some people are waiting for me."

"All right. Have fun, don't do anything I wouldn't." Akane laughed, then disconnected. When Nabiki recovered from a fresh bout of laughter she turned around and headed back to the waterfall, a couple of kilometres away and nearly eight hundred metres lower, activating the low light vision as she did since it was now quite dark. Jun was providing an entire suite of virtual instrumentation, giving her exact positional information, altitude, heading, everything you'd expect in a light aircraft. The weirdest thing of all, though, was the fact that essentially she was the aircraft, something that made her giggle wildly for a moment.

"Maybe you should fly back," Onkra suggested, laughter in her voice, as she waved to her friend.

"Perhaps I should. It's only about twenty kilometres by air," she replied, looking at the map Jun had provided without being asked. Her sister giggled at her over the comm.

"You can if you'd like to, Nabiki. Ranma and I are going to go back with the others, but since you're, um, out as a shape-shifter," she laughed for a moment, "it wouldn't be a problem if anyone sees you."

"Will there be any problem with air traffic, or anything like that?" she asked curiously.

"No, you're fine," Uthryyl said. "There isn't a lot of traffic around the mountains except over the lake, and the SI can read the transponders of anything you might miss otherwise." Jun, as he spoke, overlaid another display on her vision which tagged several air-cars several kilometres away, a couple of much faster aircraft at extreme range, and both Ranma and Kasumi heading back to the cliff.

#I can emulate an aircraft transponder should it become necessary, Nabiki,# the voice in her head
told her. "I would suggest, in the interests of security, that this function not be used unless it is required." She nodded.

'Agreed. Thank you.'

"You are, as always, very welcome," the SI replied, sounding satisfied and pleased. She smiled.

"OK, I'll fly back. Meet you there. Are you going to go by air?"

"Yes, I think so," Quannyr replied. "I'm quite tired now, so I'll let the computer do the work. If you get there first, your SI can access the security system and unlock the house. We've given you all access."

"Thanks, Quannyr. See you all soon." Waving, she wheeled around with a slight change of wing shape, levelling out heading for their house, then increasing her angle slightly into a faster dive. Flapping her wings a few times she accelerated, feeling the evening air flow over the huge expanse of fur-covered skin, grinning at the odd but nice sensation. She saw to her surprise she was moving at well over a hundred kilometres an hour.

'I wonder how fast I can really go?', she mused, then decided now as as good a time as any to find out. Flapping harder she climbed, reaching over a hundred and fifty, then aimed at the house from six kilometres out and half-closed her wings like she'd seen the mountain soarer do earlier that day, dropping quickly into a vertical dive, the air screaming past her ears as her wings and tail allowed her to maintain the attitude. At two hundred and ninety kph she lost her nerve, pulling out slowly some fifteen hundred metres up. 'Wow,' she thought, shaking slightly with adrenaline. 'That was... exhilarating.'

'I would estimate that was not your maximum speed, Nabiki,' Jun said. 'My readings of your biometric stresses indicate that you could quite easily reach close to twice that if you exerted yourself fully and powered the dive. The aerodynamic parameters of the form your sister designed are not suitable for efficient flight much above that speed, although you could most likely manage it briefly. Your enhanced strength and durability would prevent any damage, but you would struggle to maintain stable flight."

'I'd need goggles or a helmet or something like that as well, I could barely see what I was doing,' she replied. 'The wind in your face at that speed is impressive.' Her hair whipping around her ears had made a surprising amount of noise. Without the vastly higher toughness and strength she had gained over the last year or so, even what she'd tried so far would have been impossible. She was very glad, though, that she could do what she was currently doing, a childhood dream had finally been realised. Grinning hugely she resumed her flight towards Uthryyl's house, only a couple of kilometres away now.

Touching down lightly in the back garden, she folded her wings and walked towards the door. She'd felt the house wards recognise her as she'd approached, a feeling similar to back home but hugely less powerful. As the reached the door it clicked and unlocked. '#I have negotiated with the house security system, you are recognised as an authorised guest,' Jun reported. She nodded, entering the house, turning on the lights as she went. Rounding the corner into the kitchen she felt an unexpected jolt, looking up to see her folded right wing had banged into the top of the door-frame. She grinned, having once more become so used to a different body she'd taken it for granted.

Turning off the illusion she shimmered and resumed her normal appearance. Laughing, the middle sister went into the kitchen and turned on the alien coffee machine Uthryyl had shown her earlier that day. By the time the others came in a few minutes later she was sitting in a chair looking out
the window at the night scene of Sirtha, smiling to herself, sipping a cup of very good coffee with tree sap sweetener. She looked up, good-humouredly saying, "What took you so long?" Quannya grinned at her.

"We had to walk back to the car. But you must have been going very fast even so."

"I managed to hit two hundred and ninety kilometres an hour in a dive, although Jun thinks I could probably go quite a lot faster."

"That's damned impressive," Uthryyl said, looking at her with astonishment. "I'd never have believed it. What can you do in level flight?"

"I'm not sure. I got to about a hundred and fifty in a slight climb, but I wasn't going all out. It was fairly easy."

"**Damned** impressive."

"The only real problem is the wind makes my eyes water. I probably need goggles." Kasumi looked at her, then frowned slightly.

"Hmm. I'm sorry, I missed that. I'll have to work on a solution, although I suppose goggles would be a usable temporary fix." She thought for a moment, then nodded. Nabiki suddenly found herself wearing a slightly tinted set of goggles very similar to the skiing ones she had at home. Kasumi giggled as her sister reached up and pulled them off, smiling.

"That would do it." She looked at them, then flipped them towards her sister, watching with amusement as they evaporated half-way. Onkra giggled.

"I'll add it to the preset. I need to do some modifications to the others as well at the same time." Kasumi sat beside her sister, beginning the delicate pattern modifications, while Ranma watched for a moment, smiling, then wandered off with Uthryyl and Quannya. Onkra got a cup of coffee then came back and sat down to watch.

"How many of these preset forms do you have now?" she asked curiously, glancing at the eldest Tendo to ensure she wasn't disturbing her, reassured by her smile.

"Six, including the flying Azumi. Two mer-forms, one Azumi, one me, Ms Aoyama, Normal Azumi, and Horsegirl Azumi."

"Wow. I'd like to see the other ones." Nabiki smiled, looking at her sister, who was still working.

"When Kasumi finishes." Her sister looked at her and smiled.

"Would you like me to add a flying Nabiki form as well?"

She thought about it for a moment, then shrugged with a grin. "Why not? It might come in handy at some point." A few minutes later the older Tendo nodded.

"All right, all the modifications are done and linked in, and the new form pattern is ready. Just do the same linkage as before, you know the procedure." Shortly Nabiki smiled as she felt everything settle down. Onkra was watching intently.

"That's the weirdest magic I've ever seen," she said slowly. "Nothing like what we use, and so complicated! How do you keep track of it, Kasumi?"
The older sister smiled a little. "It took a lot of practice, and trial and error. We were working on it for several years, but it's been worth it, the system is amazingly flexible and powerful." She studied the D'sage girl for a moment. "Do you find it gives you a headache when you look closely at the spells?" she asked curiously. Onkra looked slightly puzzled.

"Well, it's certainly difficult to look at, like it's not all in the same dimension we are, but not to the point it hurts. Although I recall Dad saying it made his head hurt to watch you work. What does that mean?"

"I'm not completely sure, but it is interesting," Kasumi replied, clearly thinking hard. Nabiki watched them both without saying anything. After a minute or two, her sister nodded slowly. "Hmm. That may be another useful data point." She looked at Onkra, who was very curious.

"We've been slowly coming to the conclusion that our method of magic and the more common ones aren't really compatible, in some subtle but real and very fundamental way. The more experience a mage has with the other methods, the more trouble he or she seems to have with ours, to the point that they can't even fully visualise it. We're not sure why yet. Our system requires a mind that can work in multiple dimensions simultaneously, as far as we can work out, which seems to be quite rare to start with, and something that gets... filtered out, perhaps? Or blocked, something like that, by the action of learning the normal methods." She waved a hand vaguely, looking slightly puzzled.

"One seems to preclude the other, as if they were mutually exclusive, even though the energy is compatible. By the time the mage is experienced, I have a very strong suspicion that something about their minds has altered to the point that they literally can't understand or use our method. It's very odd. Not to mention annoying in some ways, as for the most part our method is provably superior. It's far more energy efficient, for a start. But it is more difficult to learn initially. It's a pity, quite a lot of our system would be very useful to teach to others, the ki/magic fusion that allows us to heal so effectively being the obvious thing, but I fear that a lot of potential users of it will never be able to learn it. We need to catch them early, at exactly the right point in their development magically. And even then it's likely that only a small percentage of people could learn it properly."

She studied Onkra for a moment, then looked at Nabiki. "We got you started accidentally, more than anything. Aiko and the girls were deliberate, we really hoped we could teach them, and it worked very well, but they weren't really mages to start with, just using a large number of very unusual spells. It's possible the same might apply to some other magical girls, or it might not. One day I'll have to look into it." She smiled a little ruefully. "Assuming I can decide which of them I'd trust with such powerful techniques. Some of them are... difficult." Nabiki laughed, knowing who she was talking about.

Looking back to Onkra who was listening intently, Kasumi continued, "I'm very interested in the fact that you seem to be able to look at our magic without any problems. That's unusual for someone who is formally trained in alternative methods of magical control, as far as I've seen so far."

"I'm not particularly well trained, to be honest," the woman said, looking slightly embarrassed. "I can work a number of spells fairly well, some quite high-energy ones like the portal spell for instance, but I'm hardly a general-purpose mage. Dad is much better than I am although he's not really a mage either, and Mom is pretty good as well." Kasumi nodded slowly.

"It's something to think about. Between us Ranma and I know a lot of very good mages, and without exception all of them find our system inexplicable, if not impossible. Several swear blind that it's got nothing to do with real magic at all." She giggled a little. "Which is clearly wrong, it's
definitely using the same energy at it's lowest level, at least in part, but to them it reads as something completely different. We can see it, they can't. So it has to be magic." She inspected the D'sage woman closely for a moment. "At some point, I may have to see if you have any ability with our system. It's possible that we could teach you some of it, which would be very interesting. If you continue with the martial arts, that may trigger some level of ki control, which could well catalyse the process. It's more or less what happened with Nabiki although not quite in that order. It gets complicated very quickly."

"Can D'sage control ki?" Nabiki asked curiously, as Onkra thought about what Kasumi had said. The elder sister glanced at her, then shrugged after a moment.

"I can't see any particular reason why not. It's basically conscious control over your own life energy. In theory, any sentient creature could probably get some control over ki eventually, although the evidence suggest that the ultimate level is highly variable. Some people would have a fairly low ability, some very high, like most things in life. Our family shows definite talent in that direction, looking at the three of us, yet poor Akane is never going to reach the level you're already at after only a year or so. We've talked about this before. The fact that our magic seems to work in a synergistic relationship with ki control, almost exponentially boosting both of them, is something we never expected but changes a lot. Even so, you will always be far more powerful than Akane, even if she could learn the system, which is by no means certain. She may well not have the right type of mind." The elder sister looked at Onkra.

"You, on the other hand, might."

Looking surprised, yet intensely curious, the merchant's daughter nodded slowly. "Very interesting. I think I'd like to learn anything you could teach me. The martial arts look fun even though I'm realistic enough to know that I'll most likely never reach the level you people have, and the magic would be amazing. The healing, and the shape-shifting, more than anything else."

"Don't sell yourself short," Kasumi said, smiling. "Ranma thinks you show promise in the Art, as do I. It's a long process, but you just have to keep at it. Either of us would be happy to teach you whenever you have time, either us coming here or you coming to our home. Keep practising the exercises, as much as you can, and you might be surprised what happens." She laughed a little as Onkra looked thoughtful. "Nabiki was."

"You have no idea how surprised," the middle sister said, grinning. "I still have trouble believing it even now. I just flew off a mountain!" She shook her head in mild disbelief as Onkra giggled. "It's nuts, but so much fun!" Jumping to her feel she moved into the middle of the room, shimmering into 'Azumi'. "OK, you know this one," Onkra nodded. "This is the horse-girl version," she continued, changing again, then spinning on the spot on one hoof, waving her tail.

"I like that one," Onkra said, looking up as her mother came into the room and stared for a moment, before smiling.

"It's fun. I spent a day or so like this when I was learning to hold the spell, it still surprises me how quickly I got used to it. I more or less forgot, which was a surprise when I looked in the mirror." Nabiki giggled as her friend laughed. Kasumi was watching with a satisfied, rather proprietary air. "Then we have the flying form." She changed again, half-spreading her wings, which was all she could manage without banging into something indoors. Onkra got up and walked around her, gently feeling the fur on one wing, which was a silver-grey colour with darker markings patterned after the mountain soarer, as both Kasumi and Nabiki found it attractive.

"It looks even more impressive in the light," she said, admiringly.
"I have to agree," Quannyr said, sitting beside Kasumi and watching. "It suits you, somehow." Nabiki grinned.

"I wanted to be able to fly since I was a little girl. You wouldn't believe how much fun this is." She reverted to the normal Azumi, then sat on the floor, before shimmering into mer-Azumi. "This is great as well. I love swimming and like this I'm so amazingly good at it." She flexed her scaled tail, looking at it with approval. Shimmering again she became mer-Nabiki, the scales shifting to a deep gold colour. "This would certainly confuse people in the swimming pool at university," she added, snickering. The others laughed. "But it might be difficult to explain."

Changing back to her normal body, she hopped to her feet, then tried the flying Nabiki form, extending her wings a little and looking at them with interest. She hadn't specified any colour, so Kasumi had made the fur a lustrous brown similar to her hair, with darker, almost red stripes woven into it like something from a tiger. "Hey, not bad, sis. I like it."

"I can always adjust the colour and patterning if you want," her sister said. She shook her head. "No, this is fine. Thanks."

"If you need the goggles, there's an extra node you can trigger. Do you see it?" Nabiki looked 'inside' at the magic patterns, quickly identifying the part her sister meant. Prodding it with a tendril of power made the same goggles as earlier instantly appear on her face. She smiled.

"Fantastic. That should help." Taking them off she looked at them, then deactivated the subroutine generating them, watching as they vanished. "Very impressive."

"I'll work out a modification that will mean we don't need them, but for the moment that should do." The elder Tendo looked satisfied.

Onkra was tallying the various forms. "There's one you haven't shown us. This Ms Aoyama." Nabiki looked at her, raised an eyebrow, then changed again.

The woman in the suit carefully adjusted her sleeves, brushing a small particle of dust from her shoulder, then looked at the D'sage woman through her sunglasses. A distinct chill filled the air. Slowly glancing around the room, pausing on Uthryyl and Ranma who had just entered, she performed a very slight 'smile' as she returned her gaze to Onkra, who shivered.

"Ms Onkra. How gratifying to meet you." She looked the woman up and down for a moment, before adding in an expressionless voice, "You would appear to be mildly distressed. Can I aid you in some manner?" Onkra looked worried, while Ranma chuckled. Uthryyl glanced at his wife, both of them looking impressed and somewhat nervous. After a long pause, 'Ms Aoyama' shimmered back into the form of Nabiki, who giggled.

"You should see your face," she said, amused. Onkra shook herself, staring at her friend, then blinked a couple of times.

"That... was very worrying indeed."

"Nabiki is very, very good at the being incredibly creepy act," Ranma said, dropping into a chair with a smile of approval. "Horrifyingly good. And steadily getting better. She almost puts the wind up me sometimes." Grinning at him, the middle sister bowed slightly.

"Thank you. High praise indeed, considering the source."

"Gods. That was horrible," Uthryyl said, looking quite worried. "I could feel the cold even before I
came into the room. You'd terrify anyone, Nabiki." She looked pleased. After a moment he grinned. "I may have to borrow you when I have a difficult debtor." Nabiki laughed, while Ranma leaned back, crossing his arms and frowning.

"I'm not sure I can allow that. I need her myself." Uthryyl studied him narrowly.

"Five percent."

"Fifteen."

The women gazed at the two of them and burst out laughing.

Watching the suns rise, two thousand metres above Uthryyl's house, Nabiki grinned happily, carefully holding her camera. She had used half the roll already, taking shots of the house, where her sister and, at the moment, sister-in-law, were sparring, while keeping an eye on Onkra as she practised the next set of katas she had been taught. They had all risen early, still adjusting to the longer day, Uthryyl's daughter eager to continue her new hobby. After a quick breakfast, Nabiki had immediately shifted into the flying Azumi form, laughed like a lunatic, and powered up into the clear air, watched by the others.

"How's it going, Nabs?" the red-headed martial artist asked, a giggle in her voice.

"Fantastically. If you call me Nabs I may have to drop something on you," she giggled back. "I need to work out how to reload this camera in flight, though." She looked down at them through her goggles, playing with something Kasumi had snuck in that she'd only just discovered, vastly better eyesight with a telescopic function like a hawk, which allowed her to zoom in several times and clearly make them out. Ranma was looking up at her with a grin. She waved, watching the red-head wave back, then duck a blow from her wife, laughing. Shaking her head she flapped a few times, rising higher, circling slowly. As the suns rose she could feel the warmth increasing, feeling very pleasant on her wings.

Soon she found a thermal, discovering that the air was rising rapidly as the ground warmed, allowing her to simply glide effortlessly, still gently climbing. 'I could spend the entire day doing this,' she thought happily. 'It's amazingly relaxing. Even better than swimming in some ways.'

'I would advise remaining below eight thousand five hundred metres, Nabiki,' Jun said. 'Based on your current physiology above that level you will encounter discomfort from lower air pressure, although it would not be hazardous to you. Rising above ten thousand metres would begin to be the danger point.'

"That's far higher than you'd be able to go unaided at home," she said to it. 'Nearly as high as Mount Everest, I think, which is close to the absolute limit without external oxygen.'

"That is partially true. There are a number of factors at play. The atmosphere of this world has a higher oxygen content by a significant amount, while the atmosphere itself is deeper by a few percent. This creates a more favourable pressure gradient at such an altitude. Additionally the form your sister designed is much more efficient at processing and storing oxygen than an unenhanced human, or even you in your normal enhanced form. I would expect that at ground level you would easily be able to hold your breath for several minutes with no great problem in this form. You would also probably be able to function quite well at seven or eight thousand metres even on your own world."

It paused for a moment. 'I would like to suggest that you ask your sister to retrofit the oxygen
processing and structural upgrades to your other forms as well, it would be a tactically sound move. Use of all advantages available should always be a priority in my opinion. The so-called illusion spell that your sister and Ranma developed opens many possibilities that should be explored for their implications during battle.#

Nabiki laughed. 'You're always thinking about things like that, aren't you, Jun?'

#Your security and safety is my primary purpose, Nabiki. I would be remiss in my duties not to mention it.# The SI sounded amused. She giggled again.

'Fair enough, and thank you. I'll mention it to her, assuming she hasn't already thought of it.'

#It is likely that she has. Your sister and Ranma both have impressive tactical and strategic abilities, which the addition of an SI has only improved.# It fell silent for a moment. #We have company,# it suddenly announced, with a slight note of amusement, indicating something behind her, but not sounding alarmed. Looking over her shoulder, which was remarkably easy with the modified neck, she grinned. Thirty metres back and slightly higher, two mountain soarers had fallen into formation, inspecting her curiously. She slowed slightly, gradually dropping back towards them, watching with interest as they moved further apart to allow her to fit between them. All three exchanged glances, the one on the right yipping at her. She waved to it, which it seemed to find interesting. She took a few photos of them from close range, finishing the roll, putting the camera away when it was done. The two predators looked at each other, then moved ahead a little, before the left one rolled away and dived. After a moments thought she grinned and duplicated the move. A yip behind her made her laugh, looking to see the other one had repeated the exercise.

The next half hour she found enormous fun. Both flying animals seemed to be enjoying themselves thoroughly, obviously playing. They were astoundingly acrobatic, pulling off almost every manoeuvre one could imagine, loops, rolls, dives, even inverted flight for a few seconds. When she moved in front, pulling up into a hard climb, then gliding vertically until she lost speed and dropped into a neat stall turn, she was highly amused to see them both duplicate the move. They showed her a flight move, she copied it, then came up with something to show them. The animals were clearly quite intelligent, picking up everything she tried almost instantly. 'I wonder how smart they really are?' she asked Jun.

#Unknown, but based on their impressive ability to learn, I would expect at least at the level of one of the lower primates of your world. Apex predators are often possessed of considerable intelligence, these organisms would appear to follow this trend, as does your own species. They also seem to enjoy playful, non-purposeful activity, another sign of intelligence. It would be interesting to see if they adopt some of these aerobatic manoeuvres into their normal activities.# She got the impression it was watching the soarers with fascination.

Dropping into a corkscrewing high-speed dive from five thousand metres, she looked behind herself to see both predators following, yipping to themselves in an excited manner. One of them suddenly pulled out, levelling off and staring at the ground intently, before stooping into an enormously fast dive with it's wings nearly shut, reaching an incredible speed that made her watch in awe. Mere metres off the ground it extended it's wings with a crack that she heard from a kilometre up, slowing at a rate that would have knocked most things unconscious from the g forces, then dropped to the ground on top of a pair of quillit it had spotted, the backwash from it's deceleration knocking them several metres. Before they had a chance to recover it had scooped one up in it's mouth, while pouncing on the other, crushing it with a quick blow. Swallowing the first one whole it ate the second, chewed for a moment, then leapt into the air again, quickly climbing back to where she and the second soarer were watching.
'That was pretty impressive,' she said to the SI.

Indeed. The accuracy and speed of the hunting behaviour is remarkable. The immature one Kasumi inspected was presumably not as successful. They are very efficient predators. It is probably a good thing that they seem uninterested in anything larger than the quillit they obviously enjoy.

Over the next few minutes she watched both of the animals locate and devour over a dozen quillit, which seemed to be suddenly very active as the suns rose. It was still early morning, but from the air she could make out activity on the roads around Sirtha, as people began their day. Eventually deciding she was getting hungry as well, she turned around and headed back to the house, both soarers following her. She looked sideways at the one on the right, gliding in formation with her as they seemed to have decided to do, one on either side and slightly behind like an honour guard.

"You can't follow me home, guys, I don't think I can keep a pair of pet soarers, even if Uthryyl wants you in the house." It looked at her, then yipped, making her laugh. They both followed until she started to descend into the garden, peeling off and circling at altitude as she went down. Faint cries from them came as she touched down, Kasumi looking at her then up at the two animals.

"I see you also made some friends," her sister laughed.

"Apparently I did. They're very amusing and much more friendly than I would have expected. Kind of like flying dolphins." She looked up, waving to the animals. A few more yips came, before they started drifting off towards the mountains. "That was a hell of a lot of fun," she added. "I think we both taught each other some interesting flying techniques. They're remarkably agile."

"I saw. We were watching from down here for some time. Did you get some good photos?"

"I hope so. I recorded it as well, I'll send you the file." Nabiki transferred the recording to her sister. "Quannyr's suggestion of getting a really good electronic camera is one I think I need to take up. The film camera produces fantastic results but it's difficult to reload up there. I nearly dropped it when I tried."

"We'll be going into Sirtha later," Kasumi said, "Quannyr and Onkra both want to show us around, while Uthryyl would like to take us around one of his warehouses. Ranma is very interested in that. I think you might be as well."

"Sounds good. When?"

"After lunch, I think. It doesn't take long, apparently, even by road. Now, come on, we need to practice something other than flying, as much fun as it is," Her sister grinned at her. Following her around the side of the house to where Onkra and Ranma were gently sparring, the red-head stopping every now and then to critique the other woman, they watched for a while.

"She seems to be learning the basics well," Nabiki said, impressed.

"Yes. She certainly has some talent for this." Kasumi looked pleased. "Only time will tell how much talent, but at the moment we're both pleased. I hope she keeps it up." Stepping a couple of metres away, she suddenly turned and lunged at her sister with a quickly generated energy blade, who yelped in surprise and instinctively flapped the wings she had grown so used to, hopping several metres into the air, then landing on the other side of the older woman. Kasumi stared for a moment then fell over laughing. Ranma and Onkra both stopped and watched, also heaving with laughter. Nabiki crossed her arms and folded her wings around herself, making them all stare anew
then laugh harder as she looked like an enormous indignant bat.

"Not funny, sis," she said, watching her sister roll around in the grass laughing her head off. After a moment, though, she began smiling.

"Oh, it was, trust me. I was curious to see what would happen but that was fantastic." Her sister looked up at her, a broad grin on her face. "You didn't even think, did you? Just flapped and jumped. It's amazing how fast you get used to your new abilities."

Unwrapping her wings then folding them properly, Nabiki grinned. "I know, it's weird. You're right, it was just an instinctive move. My body knew what to do even if my mind hadn't quite decided. Very strange." After a moment she dismissed the spell, shimmering back to normal. Shaking her head with amusement Kasumi rolled easily to her feet, taking up a stance.

"Enough silliness. Let's go through yesterday's lesson again, then we can try some new moves." Nabiki matched her position, blocking the strike that came at her. "Well done." Smiling, Kasumi took her through the moves for half an hour or so, running at much less than top speed, but still fast enough that anyone who knew Nabiki would have been shocked at her response time. When she finished, the older woman smiled, pleased.

"You're definitely speeding up, sister. That was very good. Now watch closely, this next one is more complicated." She demonstrated very slowly, then faster, while Nabiki studied the moves. Eventually she began duplicating them, her sister stopping every now and then to correct her gently. Onkra and Ranma were doing the same thing a few metres away. An hour passed in enjoyable work, the husband and wife team swapping students half-way through.

Some time later Ranma called a halt to the practice. "Good, both of you. I'm very pleased with your progress. Onkra, for a beginner you're definitely showing progress. You need to practice for an hour a day minimum, more if you can spare the time. By the time we leave you should have quite a few katas to work through. We will definitely keep in touch to check on your progress and teach you more. It might be a good idea to have you regularly come to our home for practice sessions after a couple of months. I'm very interested to see what happens, especially regarding ki abilities." She nodded, looking tired but happy.

"Nabiki, you're coming along very well. A few months like this and you'll be close to where Akane is right now, I expect. You're already stronger and faster, we just need to get the reflexes and the moves in, which is basically a lot of practice. Shampoo could still take you at that point, she's very good, but another year or so after that and she'd have a major problem." The red-head looked very pleased. "That said, against her now, she'd never stand a chance if you were outside at least. You could simply fly away, then strafe her from the air." She laughed at Nabiki's expression. "It was very funny, the way you jumped into the air like that. Combine it with some ki shots and you'd be a damn effective fighter aircraft." The martial artist looked thoughtfully at her sister-in-law. "Come to think of it, we'll have to practice exactly that on the firing range. We'll get the others set up with flying forms as well, then work out some good aerial combat techniques. It could be absolutely devastating."

"You're as bad as Jun," the middle sister laughed. "Everything is combat-related with you, isn't it?" Ranma chuckled, nodding a little.

"I have to admit my life has tended to make that a default thought pattern. I can't help it. But it's saved my life and other's several times, so I'm not too worried."

"Jun suggested that the improvements to oxygen handling and the bone and muscle structure would be useful as a day to day upgrade," Nabiki said, looking at her sister. "It asked me to ask you to add
them to all my presets." Kasumi smiled.

"It's been thinking along the same lines and Nao and myself. I'm working on the best way to weave them in properly. I have already slightly modified the existing ones, but I believe the best results would be to recreate the forms around the upgraded metabolism and structure. It will take a little while to work it all out, but no more than a couple of days." She studied Nabiki closely for a moment. "I have also been working on another idea, which might be of interest. It's going to take some more work to be sure it's safe and practical, but I think it probably is." The middle Tendo looked at her sister, slightly worried.

"It's not going to be quite as dramatic as your last surprise, I hope? You scared the crap out of me when you jumped off that cliff, for a moment I forgot what you are and really thought you were in trouble." Kasumi smiled gently and slightly apologetically.

"I'm sorry, sister, it perhaps was a little over-dramatic." She giggled. "But you really should have seen your faces." Nabiki shot Ranma, currently laughing, an evil look.

"You corrupted my sister, you bastard," she said, making the young woman laugh harder.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she gasped out, watching Nabiki, who smiled ruefully.

"Sometimes it's a little hard on the mental well-being of bystanders." She looked at her sister who was grinning. "OK, what's this brilliant new idea about?"

"Well, the illusion spell changes are temporary at the moment. In the last year we've made it much more power efficient and complete. It makes real changes to the body, the form is as complete as anything the Jusenkyo magic produces, although it's not stable. But it takes much less power these days, you can all hold it indefinitely by this point." Nabiki nodded slowly.

"We told you some time ago how we've been slowly incorporating parts of the Jusenkyo magic, as we manage to unravel it, into the illusion, to do things like produce new mass or get rid of it temporarily, or other difficult jobs like that. Most of is still far beyond us, it may well always be as it's unbelievably complex, but we've acquired some useful routines from studying it. It occurred to me some time ago, though, that we could also utilise some of the ki healing methods and combine them with the illusion spell." Nabiki looked blankly at her, glancing at Onkra, who also seemed unsure where this was going. Ranma was listening with interest, looking pleased.

"Have you solved that problem?" she asked her wife.

"Not quite, but I believe I see how to." She smiled at the red-head, then turned back to her sister. "Using the ki healing we can rebuild damaged or missing parts of the body, to a remarkably detailed level. As we've learned more and more about it, and about how a biological organism actually works, we've been able to take it to the point of being close to healing any conceivable injury and probably any disease. Some poisons are still awkward, but we're getting very good at those as well." She looked pleased, while Nabiki thought about this.

"OK, I've certainly seen some very impressive things that both of you have done, but where is this going?"

"The way we normally regenerate an amputated limb, for example, is to read the ki signature which has a map of what the body is supposed to be, then force regrowth along that map so it rebuilds the missing part. A similar technique is used to repair a damaged organ, which is easier because most of it is still there, just with, for example, a hole in it. Some time ago we were discussing the possibility of changing the ki map, though, then regenerating something based on
the changed information. I've been running a lot of simulations and I'm close to working out the best method to do it without causing any problems."

Onkra gasped slightly, understanding the idea, just as Nabiki also got it. "You could use the illusion shift to create and test a new form, then basically 'heal' the underlying organism into that form?"

"Exactly. A real shape-shift, making a permanent change to the body. Not a transient one like the illusion spell, or even quite like the Jusenkyo curse. There would be no trigger to revert it. The Jusenkyo magic is astoundingly quick and complete, however it actually works, almost instantaneously producing a stable form that is complete right down to the genetic level, but it also can revert back just as fast when triggered the other way. This new technique would be permanent and stable, although we're a long way off making it as quick. It might be possible eventually, but it would be years away. Even so, it could be useful." She smiled.

"For example, the enhanced metabolism I came up with for the flying form could be applied as a permanent modification to your original body. Upgrading a body, not just fixing a damaged one. There are some very interesting possibilities for repairing hereditary genetic defects more efficiently than we can at the moment, as one possible use. We can do it, but slowly and inefficiently at the moment. This would solve that."

Nabiki stared at her sister in awed astonishment. Eventually she said, "Wow. That's... amazing."

"It closes the last limitations we have on the healing technique, if we can make it work," Ranma added, looking at her wife with a pleased expression. "Not just healing diseases, injuries, the sort of things we can do now, but more long-term problems such as some of the nastier neural degenerative issues. They usually have a genetic component, which we could certainly edit out, but it would be a hugely complex job that would take hours. This would take minutes and much less effort."

"I find it remarkable that you can already edit a genetic structure at all," Onkra said with respect. "It's amazingly complex from what I've learned."

"It's certainly not at all easy," Kasumi replied. "We much prefer to use the ki map, it simplifies things a lot, but it doesn't really allow for changes, merely repairs." She shrugged. "Most of the time that's more than good enough, most of the problems we encounter are either trauma or disease. I would dearly like to be able to deal with the rest." She sighed a little. "And to be able to teach more people how to do it. We could save so many lives."

"We'll figure that out one day, love. But I agree." Ranma smiled tenderly at her wife, reverting to male and slipping an arm around her waist. She leaned against him.

"I hope so." They smiled at each other, then she looked back to her sister, who was watching with amusement. "But, what it means in the short term, is that when we work out the last problems and get it tested properly, if you'd like the enhanced metabolism in your normal form, it could be easily done."

"That would be useful if I took up mountain climbing," Nabiki said with a smile. "I was higher than the top of Everest earlier with no issues at all. Jun says that should work even at home. It could be useful."

"Indeed. I'll continue to work on it and let you know when I've worked it out." The elder sister smiled at the younger one, with a suddenly evil expression. "I'll need a guinea pig, after all."
"Um, right," Nabiki said, stepping out of range, then laughing. Kasumi giggled.

"Don't worry, by the time we get that far it will be completely safe." The middle sister thought for a moment, an idea occurring to her.

"Does that mean you could cure the Jusenkyo curse? I mean, sort of... modify the cursed form to be the same as the uncursed one?" Ranma smiled slightly, looking at his wife, then shook his head.

"No. Unfortunately it doesn't work like that. The curse is astoundingly powerful and very persistent. Yes, you could modify a cursed body using this technique, as the illusion spell proves, but it would get overwritten the next time the curse was triggered either way. The illusion technique bypasses that as it's superimposed over the top of the curse, but a permanent change wouldn't. The curse would take priority. Having studied it for so long I have a growing suspicion it was designed to do that, to make it permanent and incurable. Our magic system is different enough that I have a feeling whoever came up with the curse knew nothing about it, so couldn't compensate for it, but most other things have been thought of and neutralised." He frowned slightly. "It's kind of scary, just how complex and complete the curse actually is. Whoever came up with it was... incredibly good, and very, very powerful."

"And lived a very long time ago," Kasumi added. "Many thousands of years, certainly. We still have no idea what the ultimate power source for it is, either."

"It would be very useful to make permanent changes," the martial artist mused. "Evolution is amazingly effective, but it does produce some pretty inefficient designs in some cases. One really good example is the human eye. The rods and cones that convert light into nerve signals are behind the nerves themselves, and the blood vessels. It reduces the ultimate acuity of the eye quite a lot. There are some advantages to that methods, but also some severe disadvantages. An octopus eye does it the other way around, putting the light-sensitive parts first, then everything else. Neither is perfect, but for a lot of purposes the second method is superior. A little redesign, taking the best of both methods, could produce a properly designed eye that would be much better than either. There are lots of things like that in the human body. Systems that work well enough to be passed on through the species, but not as well as they could if you worked on them a little. Evolution doesn't really do best, it just does good enough."

He grinned. "I'm pretty sure we could improve some of the weak spots."

"You may have noticed how much better 'Ms Aoyama's' vision is than your normal eyesight," Kasumi said, looking at Nabiki. She nodded. "I fixed most of what Ranma just mentioned when I designed the final form you have as a preset. It was partly an experiment to see if it worked as well as I hoped it would. The original eyes of that form were based on a domestic cat, with enhanced colour receptors, but I tweaked it quite a bit. Your 'Azumi' eyes are slightly enhanced as well, but not as much. I need to revisit that at some point. The eyes of the mer-forms are tweaked to work well underwater as well as in air. The flying form has added optical parts to allow for a magnified form of vision, based on what birds of prey use, as well as significant resolution improvements."

"I found that out earlier. It works very well."

"I hoped it would. I still have some improvements I'd like to try at some point, then I'll probably fold them all into one design which I'll apply to all the forms, but that will take a little more thought. Added colour receptors, for example, to allow distinguishing more colour variations. Human vision is trichromatic, using three types of cone to resolve colour. Some animals, and even rare humans, use four, giving tetrachromatic colour, while some birds use five or more. That could be interesting to experiment with."
Onkra was listening with fascination, smiling a little. "It's so weird to hear you casually talking about upgrading and modifying people like that," she giggled. "I know it can be done with cybernetics and genetic engineering, some species go in for that sort of thing, but all the other methods I've heard about are much more invasive and complicated. You make it sound like changing a shirt."

Kasumi grinned as Ranma chuckled. "We may take it a bit for granted now. Once you work out the techniques it's remarkably simple to do some of these things."

"Simple isn't the word I'd use, sis," Nabiki laughed. "I still can't believe how complex that spell is. I keep looking at it, trying to work out what's going on, but I'm not much nearer now than I was to begin with. It's absolutely incredible to me that you both came up with it from scratch."

"Most mages would agree with you," the martial artist said, looking very amused. "In fact, most of them seem to think it's impossible." He shrugged a little, grinning. "Clearly it isn't, but it does upset them quite a lot."

"Right, as fascinating as all this is, I'm starving," the middle sister said. "All the flying, then you slave-drivers torturing both of us." She glanced at Onkra who nodded vigorously, before grinning. "Let's get lunch."

"Damn good idea," Ranma said, chuckling, taking his wife by the hand and leading them towards the house.
"It's pretty impressive, Uthryyl," 'Yori' commented, staring around the huge warehouse with wide eyes. 'Azumi' looked at her, thinking 'impressive' was a serious understatement.

The enormous building was several hundred metres long, nearly half that wide, and at least fifty metres high. A vast array of shelves stretched into the distance close to a kilometre away, reaching all the way to the ceiling, piled high with metal and plastic crates, each of them carefully labelled with something vaguely reminiscent of a barcode, only much more complex. Robotic alien anti-gravity forklift-like machines were hovering around the place, passing up and down the corridors between the shelves, moving crates around under the control of a computer system somewhere. When they passed close to one it would either pause until they went past or rise overhead, carefully going around them. She thought to herself it looked remarkably like an alien version of the vast warehouse at the end of the 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' film, with added flying machines. And not so cramped.

The thought made her giggle quietly, as she watched a large cargo lifter move a crate big enough to have a car inside it, taking it off a shelf twenty metres up and flying away with the thing. She wondered what was in it.

"How many warehouses do you have?" 'Chou' asked curiously, watching the machines work. He smiled.

"In Sirtha, five. Two this size, one slightly smaller for perishables, and one about half the size with a seriously good security system for high-value goods like chocolate, coffee, some drugs, and various magitech things. That one might cause even you two some difficulty to get into." 'Yori' looked interested at the idea, glancing at 'Chou', who laughed.

"Maybe later, dear." The black-haired woman grinned while Uthryyl laughed.

"Feel free to try. If you can, I'll know what parts of the system need upgrading."

"Don't tempt me," 'Yori' chuckled. "It's probably very wrong of me but I have to admit I love breaking into un-break-into-able places." Shaking her head, she added, "The MoD in London was pathetically easy. I'll have to give them your details, they need something much better. Perhaps you could sell them one." The merchant nodded, grinning.

"Certainly. I've got a few good systems available for large institutions, some pure tech, some hybrid magic/technological. Give me a name and I'll talk to them."

"The PSIA might be interested as well," 'Chou' said, giggling. "We really must introduce you to Agent Naito at some point. He's a nice man."

"I've got a few more warehouses for long-term storage scattered around the place, mostly in Krentak," Uthryyl said, walking along with them following. "The ones in Sirtha are the current stock being bought and sold. I also own several about this size on K'nn four and six, as they're big customers, and rent space on half a dozen more worlds, including yours now. If Azumi's ideas pan out, I may have to enlarge the capacity there, though." Leading them down the aisle between the towering shelves for a considerable distance, he turned at an intersection and went a little further, then stopped.

"There you go," he said, waving at a dozen crates on the second shelf up. They were cubes
approximately two metres on a side, stacked neatly in groups of two.

"What are they?" 'Chou' asked, inspecting the labels with interest.

"Ten megawatt micro fusion generators similar to the one in the bunker that was running the railgun," he answered. "Next generation, slightly smaller, but otherwise identical output and efficiency. They've been hanging around here for a while now. Too small for most large applications, too big for most private individuals. Ten megawatts isn't much by industrial standards but it's a hell of a lot for a house." He grinned. "Even for your building it would be serious overkill at maximum output, unless you wanted to stick a couple of railguns on the roof. I still have two of those left and about five hundred tons of ammo for them." 'Yori' looked at 'Chou', then both of them giggled.

"No, I think we're good as far as defensive weaponry goes," 'Yori' said. "I'll have to show you the ward system in action some time. The railguns would be rather superfluous, and I think a little antisocial."

"The projectiles do tend to go a very long way if you miss," the merchant said with a grin. "Around a hundred and twenty kilometres or so. Probably not the sort of thing you want in a city. Anyway, that shows you the sort of size at the lower end, plus I'd be happy to get rid of these. I've got about forty of them in long-term storage, and I can easily get as many as you'd ever need from the manufacturers. They still make them, while they're considered old technology they're amazingly tough and reliable, so they get used where people don't need huge amounts of power and want the reliability. Small towns, factories, even some older space stations on the higher-tech worlds. You can cascade them, of course, if you need higher output. Not as efficient as a large one, but if one fails you still have the rest."

'Azumi' looked at the crates with a raised eyebrow. Sitting right there on the shelf was enough power generation capacity for over a hundred thousand houses back home, clean and cheap power she could practically buy off the shelf, literally. "We have to work this out," she said quietly. "It could change an awful lot of things." The merchant nodded, looking at her.

"It will change almost everything on your world, given time. In any technological society, energy is ultimately the single most important resource. Everything else flows from it. Water, food, transportation, light, heat, refrigeration, information processing, medicine, anything you can think of. It all needs energy, and the larger the society the more it needs. There are higher-density power systems around, but fusion is certainly one of the best for your world at it's current state of technology. The only problem at all in your case is the lack of fuel, but I can supply as much as you're likely to require for many years." He pointed at the crates.

"A ton of fuel is about one seventeenth the volume of one of those, and you'd need about ten tons, a hundred and seventy cubic metres, a year for all your power requirements for the entire country. Helium three is pretty cheap, it's widely used on many worlds. The ongoing costs of running Japan would be considerably less than you currently spend on the various methods you use, never mind the lack of clean-up for the byproducts. The fossil fuels are bad enough, but the fission waste is going to be a problem in the future." He shrugged, looking slightly annoyed. "That stuff is just a pain, especially when you take into account the amount you produce because your reactor designs are so old and inefficient. Even with fission there are much better ways to do it. I was quite surprised to find out how primitive the current systems were."

"There are all sorts of international treaties that get in the way of better designs, quite a few of which are known, I believe," 'Chou' said. "It's a real problem with no good solution."

"Well, with enough energy, cleaning up the waste is a lot easier. And I can point you at a place you
can dump it all, on the dead world. No one will care."

"Interesting. That might well be of considerable use," the blonde said, nodding slowly. "It's certainly something worth knowing."

"How much do they weigh in the crates?" 'Yori' asked, studying the boxes in front of her.

"About three quarters of a metric ton, all in. Maybe a hundred kilograms for the packing crate and internal padding. Two people and a small cargo lifter can manage. You could pick it up and carry it away easily." Uthryyl grinned. He looked back at the crates, his tail twitching a little as he thought.

"Here's an idea. Would you like one?" The three women looked at each other, then back at him.

"What do you mean?" 'Chou' asked curiously. He shrugged.

"They're dead stock at the moment. If you like, you can have one for your building. I can have some of my people install it in the basement, or the parking garage, which might be easier. Splice it into your power feed and turn it on. No more electricity bills for one thing. Plus you could get a feel for what they're like to operate. It's all automated, the SI can easily control and monitor it. A hundred kilos of fuel would keep you going for decades."

'Yori' and 'Chou' looked at each other again, taken aback. "That's a very generous offer, Uthryyl. I know you said they're not vastly expensive, but they're not worthless by any means. And what about the export paperwork?"

"For your personal use, that's not a problem. I already told you, you're effectively pre-approved for practically anything, from practically anywhere. Not to mention these things aren't particularly difficult to export even to a non-aligned world. They're sealed units, maintenance free, and intrinsically safe. Even if someone managed to open one up, which would be pretty hard, it would just shut down. You'd destroy it in the process as well, so it wouldn't help you much. It is admittedly a little large for one building, like I said, but you can turn the output down. Most people don't need anything so big even so, but you've certainly got room."

The blonde woman glanced at her husband, who shrugged a little. "I suppose it's not a bad idea. I can't see it would do any harm regardless, and having an independent power supply is certainly sensible. A while ago I did start to look into backup generators, but everything got complicated with the portal bombs and I put it to one side." 'Yori' grinned slightly. "This is a bit bigger than I was looking at but I guess it's better to have too much power than not enough."

"That's practically your motto," 'Azumi' said with a wry smile. 'Yori' chuckled.

"Oh, definitely."

"Right, then, that's settled. When we finish the holiday we can sort one out for you. The crated unit is self contained, it's actually possible to fire it up without removing it from the box, but in your case we'd install it properly. The fuel storage cryostat is included in the unit, so you only need to fill it with liquid helium three and turn it on. Once its running it uses some of the generated power to keep the helium liquid indefinitely, there's essentially no leakage. Very nice design. We can program it for the right voltage, frequency, and number of phases when it's installed, it will wire right into almost anything." Uthryyl looked satisfied. 'Chou' smiled at him.

"Thank you, Uthryyl. I still think it's very generous."

The merchant chuckled. "I'll be glad to see one go to a good home, and get some space back." 'Yori' looked around at the vast warehouse then raised an eyebrow at him. "...Metaphorically."
They began walking again. "They're not all that expensive in the grand scheme of things." Uthryyl smiled. "The SI units were much more pricey." At their inquisitive looks, he added, "They cost more than all the reactors I have in stock. Each."

"Good grief," 'Yori' muttered, slightly appalled. He laughed again.

"Don't worry. It was a large investment, but one that's paid off in more ways than I could ever have expected. Just the increase in efficiency has already paid for them twice over. And I'm more than happy to help my friends, especially considering how much you've both done for me in the past."

"Thank you again, Uthryyl," she said, grinning at him. He waved it off.

"Not a problem. You're all good for business, as I told you ages ago, you're dear friends, and you're teaching my daughter something invaluable." He smiled at them all. "Not to mention that Azumi is going to make us all several fortunes. That much I'm sure of. She has very good ideas." The martial artist and her wife looked at the middle sister, who suddenly felt rather embarrassed.

"That's nice of you to say," she replied. He shrugged, appearing somewhat amused.

"It's true. I've already started looking into the possibilities of trading artwork, or at least begun the research on what would be tradeable between here, your world, and one or two others. It will take some time to get everything sorted but it looks very viable. I'll look into setting up some sort of coffee and chocolate growing organisation when we get back, although that's quite a long term thing. It's probably very lucrative in the end, though, for both ends of the trade." He grinned. "Even the idea about selling mattresses is a good one." 'Azumi' laughed.

"I'll be the first customer. That bed is remarkably comfortable."

"If we can get this reactor import/biochemical export thing going, I think everyone except some oil and gas companies on your world are going to be quite happy. I know I will. The profit will be huge, and best of all people will genuinely be helped on several worlds. That's the best type of business." Uthryyl seemed very satisfied. "I'm sure there will be a lot of other things as well over time, as you've noticed there are lots of little things around that you might like to import, and I can think of a fair few things that would be good exports from your world. Your entertainment industry produces some very good movies, which would be portable to some places. Our people certainly enjoy them. Literature, music, things like that, can be quite desirable, although not universally so. There are lots of opportunities if I expand the business, which I would quite like to do."

Reaching the end of the warehouse he ushered them through a door into a surprisingly small office, which had half a dozen people in it, using equipment that was clearly some form of office computing system, although quite unlike anything they'd seen before, a number of displays hanging in mid air around the room. "Quite a few of my people now have SI units, which is making all this obsolete, but we still use it for now," he said, looking around. A woman looked up, then came over to him.

"Hello, Uthryyl," she said, smiling at him, then looking curiously at his guests.

"Berkra, these are very good friends of mine, Yori, Chou, and Azumi." She looked surprised, clearly recognising at least some of the names.

"Oh, my," she said quietly, making 'Azumi' cover a smile, glancing at her sister, whose eyes twinkled. "I've certainly heard of both Yori and Chou." Berkra glanced apologetically at 'Azumi'. I'm afraid I don't know you, though, my dear," Uthryyl laughed.
"You will, trust me. She's got a real sense for business aside from anything else. We'll be hearing a lot of Azumi in the end." The D'sage woman looked slightly surprised, but nodded.

"That young man Hryd talked to me a little while ago about the power unit for his Tyrkrel Industries LakeJet 10. I pulled one from stock and got it ready. He should be turning up very soon. I've called Gavon and arranged for him to install it for the boy." Uthryyl nodded, looking thoughtful.

"What's the list on that unit?"

"Seventy-eight credits, but we haven't moved one for some time."

"Let him have it at cost."

"Certainly. I've already invoiced him forty-three credits." She smiled. Uthryyl laughed loudly.

"You know me too well, Berkra. Far too well."

The woman giggled. "I've worked for you for a very long time, Uthryyl. You told me what happened to the poor boy, I was fairly sure this would be the result." Berkra smiled again. "Gavon agreed to do it in exchange for the lad buying him lunch. He said it wouldn't take more than twenty minutes."

"Thanks, Berkra. Good job." He looked at his friends, who were grinning, then shrugged. "So I'm a soft touch sometimes." Chuckling, he led them out, nodding to his employees, while Berkra watched them go, a smile on her face.

"Very good woman, that one," he said, once they had left the building. "She's worked for me for nearly fifty of your years and knows me better than I know myself, sometimes. She certainly deserved the SI."

"You are a decent person, my friend," 'Yori' said, grinning at him. "That was a nice thing to do for Hryd."

"I'd have given him the thing but I though it was best to make him pay something, to ensure he takes it seriously. He could well have died if you hadn't been there," the merchant said, his smile momentarily dimming. "But it all worked out. Right, let's go and find my wife and daughter, they're around here somewhere."

Sitting on top of the tallest building in Sirtha, looking out at the view, 'Azumi' sipped a cup of exceptionally good coffee and smiled happily. She looked around the table she and her friends had been sitting at, having a light snack. "It's a lovely view," she said, turning to Quannyr.

"It is," the D'sage woman replied, nodding. "Almost in the middle of the city, and considerably higher, so you can see practically everything. It's even better on a clear night." She waved to someone at a table closer to the middle of the roof terrace, who waved back with a smile. "We come here every now and then. Quite a few people do, it's a popular place, partly for the view, partly for the food, which is nice."

Quannyr studied 'Azumi', who was looking out over the city again. "I hope you're enjoying yourself here, my dear. We've been looking forward to having you all visit for some time. The others have been before, but not for more than a few days, and often running frantically around dealing with problems no one else could." She smiled a little. "It's nice to see them so relaxed." Both of them looked over to where Onkra was pointing out things in the distance to 'Yori' and
'Chou', Uthryyl standing next to them and listening.

"I am, very much indeed," the middle sister said, grinning broadly. "Even without my dear sister's insanity, and the results of her work, it's wonderful. Those gliders were huge fun, as was swimming in the lake, and that waterfall..." She shook her head in wonder. "That is... just astounding."

"It's one of the most impressive natural phenomena I've ever seen, I have to say," her companion replied, smiling at the memory. "I hadn't been there for some time, so it was nice to see it again. Although, I will admit, I nearly had a heart attack when your sister dived over the wall. She has an... unusual... sense of humour."

"Tell me about it," 'Azumi' grinned. "I was terrified for a moment. It took me completely by surprise. The results were worth it, though."

"I noticed you were flying with some interesting companions this morning," Quannyr commented, looking amused. "They seemed very taken with you."

"Perhaps the patterning on my wings makes them feel I'm one of them?" 'Azumi' asked. She smiled a little at the memory. "Whatever the reason, that was a lot of fun. It will be interesting to see if it happens again." She glanced over at her elder sister, who was laughing at something Onkra had said, then sighed a little.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing really, it's just... seeing my big sister there, having fun, with her husband... it brings home how far things have come in the last year and a bit, but also how much further they have to go before things are the way I wish they were." She rested her chin in her hand, stirring her coffee with the odd looking spoon the D'sage used. "Dad is so much better now, he's the father I knew so long ago, and Akane... The difference is unbelievable. But still, we can't tell them. Never mind about me, that's not really important, but I know how much Akane and our father miss our elder sister. Neither of them talk much about her any more, but I know. It makes me feel guilty to see her almost every day while knowing that they're missing her so much."

Quannyr put her hand on the silver-haired girl's, squeezing a little. "I know quite a lot about your situation, your sister and her husband have talked about it in the past, and you've told us as well. You have my sympathies. Family is very important, and it can't be easy holding such secrets from them. But, if it's any comfort, from what I can see the day that you can finally reunite your elder sister with the rest of your family is approaching, even if slowly. Look forward to it and don't dwell on things you can't change."

"It's good advice, thanks. But it's difficult to deal with even so." The middle sister glanced at the older, alien, woman, then smiled a little. "It's her birthday the day after tomorrow. It would have been nice to give her an older sister for it." Her companion laughed slightly. "We don't make much fuss about birthdays in our family any more, we sort of got out of the habit a few years ago after what happened. It sort of broke the family for quite a while. I've arranged for a present for her, since I'm away, which should get delivered today or tomorrow, but I do miss her. Despite all the problems we had with her for so long, she's my sister and I love her very much." 'Chou' and 'Yori' sat down next to her, making her look over and smile at them.

"Don't worry, sister, Akane will be fine." 'Chou' smiled gently. "She's vastly better than she was, from what you've said and we've seen, she is rapidly making up for years of not taking the Art seriously, which wasn't really her fault in many ways, and seems to be enjoying herself. She's made a good friend in Shampoo, hasn't lost her temper in weeks, she even has the respect of Cologne!"
"Which is close to a miracle," 'Yori' chuckled. "I'm not sure I ever managed that."

"Oh, you did, believe me," 'Azumi' said, grinning. "Respect, or was it terror. I get them mixed up." All of them laughed.

"I wish I could send her a present," 'Chou' said, after a moment. "I owe her five birthdays worth." Beside her, 'Yori' slowly got a weird grin. She looked at her husband suspiciously. "Dear?"

"Yes, love?" the short woman said innocently.

"You've done something, haven't you?" 'Yori' looked at her, then gazed out over the city.

"Don't know what you mean." Her wife stared hard at her.

"Why don't I believe that?" she asked.

"I have no idea." 'Yori' snickered to herself. The elder Tendo stared hard, making her giggle harder.

"What did you do, my dear husband?" 'Chou' sounded mildly irritated now. After a few more seconds of giggling, her husband caved in.

"I felt sorry for her. Even with the history we have, I thought she deserved a break. A lot of what happened turned out to be outside her control." She glanced at 'Azumi', who was waiting as impatiently as her elder sister, extremely curious. "I know how much she'd like to be able to do all the things you can do, things she'll probably never be able to do, which I can't help but feel bad about. I can't change that, but I remembered something I got some time ago, that I thought might be something she'd find interesting."

There was a long pause.

"And that is?" 'Chou' asked, intensely curious, after looking at her sister with a raised eyebrow.

"Think back to LA and you'll work it out," 'Yori' said, giggling again. "She should be getting it any time now. Aiko was going to drop it in." 'Chou' thought for a moment, then her eyes widened, a smile growing on her face, before she leaned forward and hugged the other woman.

"That's perfect. Thank you."

"I was planning on giving it to her eventually, but her birthday seemed like a good time, now that she's more or less normal. For Nerima, at any rate." 'Yori' looked smug. Staring at her, then at her sister, 'Azumi' finally snapped.

"What the hell are you two gibbering about?" she demanded. They explained, making her suddenly laugh delightedly. "Oh my god. She's going to love that."

Nodoka looked up as there was a knock on the door. "I'll get it, Auntie," Akane said, turning the television off and getting up. Nodoka nodded, going back to her notebook in which she was going over the preliminary wedding plans she'd worked out for Ukyo and Konatsu.

"Thank you, dear." The youngest Tendo left the room, coming back quickly with an odd expression on her face, which Nodoka puzzled over when she looked up. Behind her was someone she recognised with a slight shock.

"Oh, Aiko, how nice to see you again," she said to the magical girl, standing up to greet her. Shaking hands she looked at the very different clothes the girl was wearing compared to the last
time she'd seen her months ago. "That looks somewhat more practical for your line of work," she said, smiling slightly. The brunette giggled.

"It's much better. The only reason we wore the old uniform was because of some very annoying magic. Chou finally worked it out and managed to turn it off. Something we're all rather pleased about, especially in cold weather."

Laughing, Nodoka nodded understandingly. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Thanks, that would be very nice." Shortly the Saotome woman had produced a pot of tea and three cups, setting it on the table and pouring them each one.

"I saw on the news a while ago that Yori and Chou have been doing something very secretive in Canada associated with that awful Halleckton thing. Were you and your friends there as well?" Nodoka looked curious. Sipping her tea, Aiko nodded, sighing.

"Yes, we were. It was... very unpleasant. I can't go into the details, I'm afraid, but it was something I wish we could have avoided. Unfortunately, it wasn't."

"It sounded horrible on the news," Akane said, looking at the brunette with wide eyes. Aiko smiled slightly sadly.

"More horrible than I want to think about. But it was necessary. We did our job, even though we didn't enjoy it." She sighed again. "Not at all fun. Oh well, it's over now."

"So what brings you here?" Nodoka asked after a moment's silence during which the girl seemed far away. "And did you get the message Nabiki passed on about coming for an afternoon lunch next month?" Aiko nodded, smiling once more.

"We all did, thank you, Yori passed it on. We should be able to make it, although we'll need to know a firm time and date closer to the day." She turned her attention to Akane. "From what we've learned, from... a specific woman who doesn't smile much," the brunette shivered, as Akane went slightly pale, "your martial arts abilities have come on dramatically in recent months. By Neriman standards you've apparently become rather good. I hope you realise that by almost any other standards, Neriman 'rather good' is 'insanely skilled.'" She smiled slightly. "We have somewhat different standards but even so it's impressive."

"I... never thought of it like that," Akane said truthfully.

"It's true. Even a fairly average martial artist from around here is exceptional by the standards of most of the rest of Japan, never mind the rest of the world." She stopped and studied the Tendo girl for a moment. In an apparent change of tack, she asked, "Would you mind having a quick spar with me? I'm curious to see your skill level for myself." Gaping for a moment, Akane nodded apprehensively.

"It would be an honour. I've heard that Yori and Chou both trained you, and they're the best I've ever heard of."

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to do anything other than assess your skill. It won't take long." Aiko smiled reassuringly. She stood up. Akane looked at Nodoka, who looked slightly surprised, but nodded to her, also rising. With a slight gulp the youngest sister got to her feet and lead the way out to the Dojo, where Genma and Soun were in the process of finishing a class. They looked surprised to see Aiko next to Akane. The students recognised the magical girl as well, whispering amongst themselves. Dismissing the class, none of whom left, the two fathers walked over.
"Akane? What's going on?" Soun asked curiously. He nodded respectfully to Aiko, who smiled back.

"Aiko stopped by, and would like to have a spar with me. Apparently," she swallowed, "Ms Aoyama has been talking about me."

Soun stared at her for a moment. "That woman who scared you so much recently?"

"Yes."

"How odd." He looked at Aiko, who smiled innocently at him. "All right. Please don't dismember my youngest daughter."

"Dad!" Akane laughed with embarrassment, while Aiko giggled.

"I'll be careful. I'm quite curious, though. We were told that Akane has improved considerably. Apparently Shampoo has been training her?"

"Yes. That girl is very good indeed, and seems to be a very competent teacher. We're going to be teaching them both soon as well, we may be getting old but we still know a few things they don't." Soun smiled as the magical girl laughed.

"You're not old. I know people over two hundred years of age, and even they think of themselves as only middle-aged. You can't be more than forty-five." She turned to Akane as her father looked pleased. "All right. Change into your practice clothes and let's have a quick match." With a nod Akane disappeared into the changing room that had been added to the Dojo recently to cope with the influx of students, returning quickly in her gi. Both young woman moved to the centre of the floor as the students all stood around the edge, leaving room. Just as they were bowing to each other, Shampoo walked in, looking around curiously, her eyes widening as she spotted Aiko.

Stopping next to Nodoka, she asked in a low voice, "What's going on?"

The elder Saotome glanced at her. "Aiko dropped by and wanted to see how skilled Akane is for some reason. I have a feeling there's something going on but for the life of me I can't work out what."

"Odd," the Amazon woman said, watching with great interest.

Assessing her opponent, Akane tried to work out the best opening attack. Aiko was simply standing there clearly waiting for her to begin, in a loose stance that was obviously ready to react however was required. After a moment she decided on an approach and struck out with her arm, probing the other woman's defences with a blurringly quick attack. Aiko deflected the blow with a slight motion of her own arm, smiling slightly. Stepping to the side, Akane tried again, slightly faster and lower, with the same result. 'God, I thought I was pretty fast now, but I can't even see her move,' the blue-haired girl thought to herself, impressed as hell. 'Oh well. At least I can't hurt her, so I can really cut loose.' With a sudden grin, matched by the brunette, she attacked as hard and as fast as she could, bringing out everything she'd learned from Shampoo as well as all her other moves.

The students gaped at the sudden whirlwind of motion, the two young women exchanging blows almost too fast to see, and far too quickly to count. Occasional thumps from deflected punches sounded, along with the sound of feet on the wooden floor, but other than that the two women fought silently. Soun glanced at Genma, who looked back, an impressed look on his face. Shampoo watched critically, nodding every now and then, making mental notes. "Good, Akane,"
Nodoka heard her say quietly. "Now. Strike! Good grief, that girl is quick." She shook her head in awe. "Very good, Akane, but nowhere near her level." She glanced at the older woman, smiling a little. "She's a magical girl for a reason, I think. The only people I've ever seen better than that are Yori and Chou. And even then I have a feeling she's not going as fast as she could if she needed to. It's damned impressive."

"Even I can see Akane is very good now." Nodoka looked at Shampoo with a small smile. "I think getting close to your level." The Amazon laughed a little.

"Closer, certainly, she's improved amazingly since we started, but I have a large head start on her. Even so, she's becoming very good. Vastly better than I thought she'd become when we started. I'm very glad to see I was wrong." They watched as Aiko suddenly stepped back and signalled a stop. Akane immediately ceased, also stepping back, then wiped the sweat from her forehead with a sign of relief.

"I'm impressed. Genuinely, that was very good indeed, Akane. There aren't many martial artists around here who are much better than that." Aiko inspected her opponent. "How tired are you?"

"I'm glad it's over, but I could do it again if I had to," the blue-haired young woman replied honestly. Aiko nodded thoughtfully.

"Decent stamina as well. Good." She glanced over at Shampoo. "You've trained her very well."

"Thank you. I'm pleased with her progress, certainly." The Amazon smiled at her friend, who grinned back, happy about the compliment from someone she respected.

"You work in a jewellery store, don't you?" Aiko asked, making Akane look at her oddly.

"Yes. I have done for a few years now."

"I heard you foiled a number of robberies."

"I did. Four so far. None of them were very good." She smiled a little.

"How's your temper nowadays, since Yori and Chou got rid of those horrible little parasites?"

"It's pretty good. I can still get angry a little too easily but the overwhelming rage is gone." Akane looked slightly worried, not sure where this line of questioning was going. Aiko suddenly lashed out with a hand moving far too fast to even see, slapping the Tendo girl across the face very hard. "OW! Fuck it, what the hell was that for?!" Akane snarled, putting her hand on her face. Aiko was watching her intently. After a moment she nodded, smiling slightly.

"Sorry. I needed to check."

"Check what, for fuck's sake? That I bruise?" Akane wasn't happy but took a few deep breaths and calmed down.

"I needed to check that. Well done. No loss of temper, aside from being pissed off. Which was reasonable under the circumstances." Aiko grinned. "I am sorry, that must have hurt."

"Damn right it did," Akane grumbled.

"Hey, look, it's Ryoga!" Aiko suddenly said, pointing at the door of the Dojo. Everyone turned to look, Soun and Genma with expressions of sudden fear, while Shampoo looked worried. Seeing nothing, they all looked at each other. The Amazon noticed that Aiko was watching Akane intently
again, then began to think hard. Something odd was going on. That last part was clearly a test, which by the looks of it Akane had passed, going by the satisfied expression the magical girl was wearing. the Tendo girl was staring at the empty doorway with a puzzled look on her face but nothing more.

"Where?" she finally asked, looking back to Aiko, who giggled.

"Sorry, I must have been mistaken."

She studied Akane for a moment, while everyone watched. "Interesting. One last thing. Could you close your eyes, please?" After a few seconds the other woman shrugged and did as requested. Aiko looked around at the audience watching with fascination and made a gesture of silence, then moved closer to Akane without making a sound. Producing a bo staff from nowhere in a move that Shampoo at least recognised as some form of ki pocket technique, she swung it fairly slowly at the youngest sister, who twitched before it made contact. Aiko stopped it dead a few centimetres away from her shoulder, then nodded, putting it away again. Moving behind her, still without a sound, she held out her hand on which a ball of energy formed. Akane, her eyes still closed, stepped away a pace, then looked puzzled at her own actions. Aiko nodded again. Shampoo watched, slowly beginning to understand, while Genma and Soun exchanged glances.

"Thank you. You can open your eyes again." Everyone was watching in silent awe.

"What was that about?" Akane asked curiously.

"Why did you move?" Aiko asked in return. The blue-haired woman looked reflective.

"I... don't know. For some reason I... felt something behind me? Something that might be dangerous?" She shook her head. "It was weird. I have no idea, really." Aiko inspected her, then glanced at Shampoo.

"Would you like to explain it? I think you know." The Amazon walked over to them, appearing fascinated.

"You're testing her ki sensitivity. I've seen something like that before, in our village, when they test the advanced warriors. Not exactly the same method, but the same idea."

"Correct. I needed to know a few things. Yori wanted me to check your fighting ability, Akane," she said, turning to the other young woman, who was listening intently. "She also wanted to know how your temper control was coming on. You were extremely dangerous to other people before they treated you, even before you learned what Shampoo has taught you, because of that horrible temper. If it was still a problem, we needed to know. By the looks of it, though, you really have made remarkable progress. Sorry about the slap, but it seemed the quickest method to check." Akane nodded, rubbing her cheek, on which a red mark was slowly fading.

"Ryoga's mere name no longer sends you into a rage, which from the information we had on you, was a real problem. That's also good. And finally, you're definitely showing signs of learning to control your ki, even if only subconsciously. Your actual ki levels have probably topped out, but you should be able to learn to use what you have efficiently with enough time and effort. I think you'll find the results useful." The magical girl smiled as Akane looked stunned. "OK. So what is all this in aid of, I can hear you wondering." The youngest Tendo nodded wordlessly.

"Yori asked me to pass something on to you that she thought would be something you'd be interested in, presuming you passed the tests." The youngest sister looked intrigued. "We were in LA just before New Year last year and happened to meet someone quite interesting. He works in
the movie industry, we were at a studio looking around, something went wrong, leading to him seeing us in action, so to speak. He was a friend of a friend of a friend, and to cut a long story short, at a party we went to we did a quick little demonstration. When he recovered..." She grinned, while Akane and Shampoo laughed, ",...he gave us each his card along with an offer of work. He seemed to think we would be good at the stunts for some reason." The brunette giggled.

"I wonder why he thought that?" Nodoka asked wryly, as everyone listened carefully.

"No idea." She grinned. "Anyway, for obvious reasons, we can't really take him up on it. But Yori remembered something Nabiki mentioned in passing when they did their demo here for you at Christmas. Apparently you once wanted to be an actor?" Akane nodded slowly, her mind whirling. "Would you be interested in meeting this person? There is a very good chance it could lead to some work in Hollywood, probably in stunt-work and fight scenes to start with, but there is always the possibility of something higher-profile. You're attractive, skilled, by their standards exotic, and from what we have been told, speak English quite well. Those are qualities that should work out well for you."

The Dojo was silent enough that a fly could clearly be heard buzzing against the window. Everyone waited and stared, while Akane seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Aiko grinned.

"She said to consider it a birthday present."

'Azumi' looked at the device she was holding curiously, turning it over in her hands. "It has the highest resolution in it's class," the salesman said, also looking at it. "The light gathering capability is second to none. Storage is sufficient for twenty million full-spectral 3D images before requiring offloading, or fifteen thousand hours of video. The power cells will run it for the full memory capacity between charges, with a little left over just in case. External high-bandwidth link capability can connect to any standard comp with full-resolution real-time streaming. There is a durability spell on it making it close to indestructible, and it has a number of very good anti-theft and security measures in the software. The anti-grav carrier available as an option allows it to be used in follow-me mode, placed at a specific point in space, or fly a specified path. Full multi-axis stabilisation is provided as standard. Camouflage mode allows blending with the background throughout the entire electromagnetic spectrum, for stealth operation." He seemed satisfied he'd remembered the highlights.

"There's a lot more in the manual, it really is a very full-featured little unit. We can provide something rather larger which will exceed a number of those parameters, but to be honest you'd struggle to find something that would beat it in everything. It's a very good mix of quality, ruggedness, and versatility. The image quality is superb, some of the best I've seen. And the cost is very reasonable. There's a solid one-cycle guarantee against damage from anything except high energy magic, or hyper-velocity projectiles. Don't use it in a war-zone, basically." He grinned as she laughed.

"Other than that, the thing is nearly unbreakable. You could drop it from orbit and the memory would survive."

"Impressive." Uthryll leaned over her shoulder, looking at the camera with interest. "What's the speed in the follow-me mode?" The salesman quoted a figure that Nabiki worked out as close to the speed of sound. She raised an eyebrow.

"People use them a lot for aerial tracking shots, like following gliders or small aircraft," he explained. "You can even send it off after something like a soarer or a bird, have it follow it for a while, then come back. They're very close to silent in operation and with the stealth on, basically
invisible to almost everything. The anti-grav carrier will run for about six days on a charge."

"Charging method?" Looking at the merchant for a second, the salesman checked the manual quickly.

"Ah, I thought so. It has a universal input unit that will work from either DC or AC at any normally encountered voltage level, and there is a direct magic conversion system available. Some mages prefer those, they can charge the things for free using their own abilities, or it can use a domestic magic converter."

"Not bad." Uthryyl looked at 'Azumi', who hefted the spherical device thoughtfully. It weighed less than a kilogram and was about ten centimetres in diameter. Turning it over in her hand she found the power control and poked it. The device beeped and a couple of lights came on. Reaching over and taking it from her, the salesman held it in front of her then prodded another control. A different tone sounded, before he removed his hand, the camera staying where he'd left it, emitting an almost inaudible hum. She inspected the floating sphere with an amused grin.

"That's really very clever," she said admiringly.

"I assume your homeworld doesn't have much anti-gravity use?" the saleman asked, looking at her. She shook her head.

"No, none, as far as I know."

"I'll have to check the export restrictions on it, then, anti-grav is moderately restricted. Assuming you're interested in one?"

"How much were they again?" Uthryyl asked.

"With the anti-grav, like that one, three thousand two hundred credits. Without, two thousand eight hundred. The anti-grav unit on it's own is five hundred and twenty, so it's cheaper to buy the set."

"I have no idea how much that really is," 'Azumi' commed the merchant. He thought for a moment.

"In relative terms, probably around two hundred and sixty-five thousand yen from your point of view. It's more complicated than that because there isn't a direct conversion between the monetary systems, but that's close enough to give you an idea."

"Not horribly expensive, but not cheap. My Pentax cost about that."

"Are you interested in it?"

"Very much. But I don't have any credit on your world." Uthryyl grinned at her.

"Oh, you might be mistaken there," he replied.

#Nabiki, Uthryyl has sent you details of an account in the name of Azumi Ito, drawable on the K'nn Interworld Financial Exchange. It can be used on some sixty worlds I am aware of currently. Would you like me to activate it with your personal key?# She stared at the merchant in shock.

"Um, what the hell?"

"I set it up last night. If you have your SI activate it, it will be locked to you securely. Only you will be able to withdraw funds. I've transferred three hundred thousand credits into it." He snickered at the look on her face. "It's an advance on your retainer for art trading, and mattress sales. We'll
have to wait on the coffee plantation idea, but I'll deal with that when it's running."

"What...?" She was still staring in shock.

"Ten percent, minus Ranma's seven percent commission." He chuckled. "I always take
negotiations seriously. Take it, you earned it. We're all going to make a lot of credit from your
ideas. Keep them coming." Across the shop, 'Yori' suddenly looked up from the camera she was
studying, then grinned.

"I should have held out for ten percent," she said, amused.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Nabiki told Jun, 'Activate the account, please.'

Certainly.

There was a short pause. The banking system reports the account is fully active with
no restrictions, currently holding a balance of two hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine
hundred credits, with one charge of one hundred credits activation fee. You may use it
immediately.

Still stunned, Nabiki turned to the salesman, who was waiting patiently, his ears cocked forward
alertly. "I'll take it, thanks." Smiling, he nodded.

"Of course. Would you like the optional protective carry case?" She looked at him narrowly.

"Hang on. You just said it could basically bounce if I dropped it off a mountain. What does it need
a protective case for?" Uthryyl started laughing, as the salesman winced.

"Umm... It keeps the dust off?"

"Thanks, I think I'll take my chances. I will take the magic conversion system, though." He
brightened up.

"Certainly, that's an additional two hundred credits. May I have your account details?" Pulling a
comp from under the desk he unrolled it and waited expectantly.

'Jun? What do I do now?'

Place your hand on the screen, I'll do the rest, Nabiki,# the device said in a mildly amused tone.
#I will simulate a normal transaction to avoid arousing suspicion.# She followed the instructions,
causin the unrolled machine to make a satisfied noise as it registered the details.

"Thank you, um, Azumi," the salesman said, picking his comp up. "I just need to check your export
status to see if there is any problem..." He fiddled with the device and read something, looking
slightly surprised. "Odd. Unaligned world, but you have a class one unlimited export license. That's
very unusual. Oh well, not my business." He smiled at her as she glanced at Uthryyl, who winked.

Nabiki, if I might suggest that you purchase more than one of these devices? I can easily link to it
for real-time video and audio feeds, and also control it directly. It would be a very useful
intelligence gathering tool which may well be of considerable importance at some point.#

'You just want some new toys to play with,' she told it, giggling.

I have no concept of play', Nabiki,# the SI replied, a definite note of humour in it's voice.

'I'm sure you don't, Jun.' She decided that it was correct. "On second thought, I'll take three of
them." The salesman looked slightly surprised, but nodded.
"Of course. If you'll just wait a moment, I'll get them for you." Moving off, he was gone for a couple of minutes, returning with four boxes made of some light polymer, three large ones and a smaller one, a discreet label of each with the name of the manufacturer on it in the written form of Trade. "Could you authorise the transfer of nine thousand eight hundred credits, please, Azumi?"

He held out the comp again. Once more she put her hand on it. The satisfied noise came and he smiled. "Thank you. I hope you find them satisfactory. If you require anything else, please return and we can help you with anything you need."

"Thanks," she said, picking up the boxes one by one and vanishing them. He watched with interest.

"That's a very good storage spell. Where did you get it?" She giggled.

"It's inherent, I'm afraid. Not for available for sale."

"Ah. I see." He looked slightly disappointed, making her smile inside. The way that people of this world simply accepted magic was quite interesting and at times rather funny. Nodding to her he moved away to deal with another customer. When Onkra had finished asking questions about another small device, deciding in the end not to buy it, they left the store, heading towards where Quannyr had parked the car some hours earlier. It was just beginning to head towards early evening, with a couple of earth hours of light left.

Half-way there, Akane called her. Answering, she said, "Hi, Akane. What's up?"

"Biki, I don't know what to do!" She sounded slightly frantic. Her sister smiled internally, having a very good idea what was going on.

"Calm down, first of all, then tell me what the problem is. All I can do is listen, I'm a long way away," which was one hell of an understatement, she thought with a grin, "but I'll try to help."

"Aiko came over and tested me and I passed and she says I could work in the movies in America and she can introduce me to some famous director and what do I do!? the youngest Tendo wailed. "I can't believe it. I don't know what to do, Biki, help."

"Ake. Breathe. In and out, relax, OK?" There was a long pause. Eventually, her sister spoke slightly less frantically.

"I don't know what to do. It came out of nowhere. She just turned up on the doorstep, had a cup of tea, then asked to spar with me. She's so good! Much better than I could ever be. But she seemed impressed. She said that I was good even by the standards of Nerima, and insanely good by most other peoples standards. Even Ms Aoyama thinks I'm good! She told Aiko and Yori. I still can't believe that. Why would she do that?" 'Azumi' grinned as she heard her sister take a deep breath, her voice having trailed off into a squeak.

"You are good, sis. Even I can see that. Shampoo has improved you enormously with her training, but most of it was a lot of very hard work which all came from you. I'm very proud of you." This was indeed true.

"Thanks. Aiko even tested my ki ability. Shampoo worked out what she was doing. It was weird, but she thinks I could learn some very cool things eventually using ki. Maybe even those ki balls that she uses. She doesn't think I'll get much more power, but I should be able to use what I have very effectively if I work at it."

"I would suggest you should work at it, then," the middle sister said, laughter in her voice. Akane giggled nervously.
"I wouldn't know where to start."

"Shampoo probably does. Ask her. Cologne certainly would."

"That's true." The other woman sounded thoughtful for a moment.

"So what happened next?" They arrived at the air-car, Quannyr opening the doors, then they all got in. Nabiki sat in the back where she could concentrate on her sister's voice. 'Chou', reverting to Kasumi, looked at her curiously, nodding with a smile when she mouthed, 'Akane'. Ranma, beside her, was grinning. She dropped the 'Azumi' persona, leaning back in her seat.

"Everyone was watching me, all the students, Dad, the Saotomes, Shampoo, and Aiko. I just froze. I couldn't think what to say. After a few seconds Shampoo told everyone I'd need to think about it and brought me inside, now she won't let anyone talk to me until I work it out."

"She's a good friend," Nabiki said, smiling. "If you go, you should see if she would like to come with you." There was a silence that dragged on for a while.

"I'd like that. It would be hard being in a different country without anyone I knew to talk to. I think she might like it as well. If I could work in the movies, she certainly could. She's better looking and a better martial artist."

"Don't put yourself down, Akane. You're very attractive as well, you turned out well eventually."

"Oh, thanks a lot, Biki," her sister said, sounding amused.

"You're welcome. OK, go on with the story."

"That's basically it. I've been sitting here for an hour trying to think what I should do. I couldn't work it out. Aiko is still here, in the living room with Auntie Nodoka and Shampoo, she's stayed for dinner. What do I tell her?"

Sympathy filled the middle sister. She knew all too well how paralysing it could be mentally to have a sudden drastic change in lifestyle tossed into your path. Akane was less flexible than she was in several ways, and even she had had problems, although admittedly the changes to her own life were probably out at the far end of the scale. She thought for a moment.

Eventually she spoke. "I would suggest that you tell her that you'd like to meet this person. There's no guarantee that you'd be offered a job, after all, and even if you were you don't have to accept it. You could pull out at any point. But I know how much you wanted to be an actor in school, this is probably the best chance you're likely to get. It's more or less been handed to you. Don't turn it down just because you're nervous. You'd never forgive yourself. Go and meet the director, I would imagine that he'd want to see what you can do, then see what happens. Take it one step at a time." Akane didn't respond for some minutes, although she could hear her breathing.

"What do I do if I get offered a job?" she finally asked in a quiet voice.

"Make sure the money and conditions are something you can live with, then take it. It could be the best thing you've ever done. You've never stayed outside Nerima for more than a week in your entire life. A change may well do you good and allow you to grow as a person. Not to mention become rich and famous." Nabiki laughed gently as Akane giggled. "You can always come home to visit. I doubt that even if you get a job in Hollywood you'll be working all the time."

Another pause followed, then Akane spoke again, sounding much calmer. "Thanks, Biki. That's
helped a lot. I'll go and talk to Aiko." She made a small sound of amusement, not quite a laugh. "I can't believe Yori would think of me like that."

"Hey, you made an impression on her. And a car or two, and a building, and the road, and..."

Nabiki laughed. Akane sighed inside her head.

"I'll never live that down, will I?"

"Probably not. But you're basically fine now, so go and see what happens. Just keep your cool whatever anyone says, try not to break anything or anyone, and enjoy yourself."

"Thanks, Nabiki."

"No problem, sis. Good luck. And Happy birthday in advance."

"Bye. Enjoy your holiday. I'll let you know what happens." Her sister hung up as Nabiki smiled. She looked at Ranma, who raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. I hope it all works out." He grinned. "Despite our past, or possibly because of it, she deserves something nice." His wife put her arm around his neck and kissed him, smiling.

Walking into the living room, Akane looked around, then fixed her gaze on Aiko, who smiled, a cup of tea in her hand. "Have you come to a decision?"

"Yes. I'd like to meet this director of yours." The magical girl looked pleased.

"Great. I've called him already to let him know about you, and he would like to meet you as soon as you're available. He sounded very excited." She grinned. "We left something of an impression on him, I think." The youngest Tendo giggled, sitting next to Shampoo, who smiled at her.

"That I can easily imagine. Is he here in Japan?"

"Nope. LA. I'll jump you over there." She looked at Aiko in complete surprise. The brunette laughed. "It's very easy for me, don't worry. You've already been through it twice, you won't feel anything. No sense mucking around with airplanes, and all that expensive uncomfortable time-wasting. I can get you there instantly. One of the perks of the job."

Akane giggled while the rest of the family looked at each other. "They're sixteen hours behind us, so five PM there is nine AM here. That should work out fairly well. We could go today, but I'd suggest tomorrow is better, it will allow you to sleep on it and get to grips with the whole idea. It's a Saturday, but Adrian said he didn't mind. You can meet some other people we know as well. We might even work a barbecue in."

"What about work visas and things like that?" Soun asked. "The Americans have all sorts of rules and paperwork." Aiko smiled.

"Don't worry. If they want Akane enough, they'll sort all that out pretty easily. Hollywood is nothing if not well connected and well off. This is only the first meeting, anyway. I would think there will be several more if this goes well." She grinned at Akane. "I'm quite happy to take you back and forth until you get settled in, if you want. I won't be around for a week or so in about ten days, but before and after that, unless something weird is happening, I can easily do it." She pulled a notebook from somewhere and wrote a phone number on it. "That will get me most of the time."
Taking it, Akane looked at it, then carefully folded it and put it away.

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"You're welcome," Aiko responded. The youngest Tendo studied her for a moment.

"Why are you all doing this for me? It's amazingly generous and must be putting you out."

The brunette was silent for a moment. "It's kind of what we do. We help people where we can. Normally, the way our lives go, that involves some sort of fight. Or worse. It's nice to be able to help someone without any violence." She grinned a little wryly. "That doesn't happen all that often."

Nodding, Akane stared at the table, thinking. Eventually she turned to Shampoo, who had been listening silently along with the others. "Would you come with me?" she asked tentatively. The Amazon looked surprised.

"To America?"

"Yes. For the interview, and perhaps if I get this job, there might be one for you as well. If you want it." Akane smiled a little. "I need a sparring partner if nothing else." Shampoo stared at her for a moment.

"I'd have to ask Great-Grandmother, but I suppose if she's all right with it, it might be fun to see the US." Akane grinned widely.

"Thank you."

"Whatever happens, you have to be around for Ukyo's wedding," Nodoka said, getting up and heading into the kitchen to prepare dinner. "She'd be very upset if you missed it."

"Of course I wouldn't miss it, Auntie!" Akane jumped to her feet and followed the older woman, talking animatedly, all worry suddenly gone now that the decision had been made. Soun glanced at Genma, then turned to Aiko, who was smiling.

"Thank you, and please thank Yori for us. It's a very nice thing you've done."

The magical girl grinned at him. "We try to do nice things when we can. I'm glad we can help. Akane seems to have had a rough time of it for a few years. I hope this makes up for it in some way." Soun listened to his youngest daughter laughing in the kitchen, nodding with a smile.

"I think it will."
Wind whistling in her ears, Nabiki dived at the ground, grinning. Behind her two soarers followed in a line, while behind and above them a small alien camera drone ripped through the air with a faint hum, staying a constant hundred metres back no matter how they turned and twisted. Another one was forty metres off to the right, also holding position in neat formation. She had live feeds from both of them in pop-up windows just out of the normal visual range, but was mainly concentrating on her air speed, which hit three hundred and fifty kilometres an hour before she pulled up hard, spreading her wings widely with a huge roar of displaced air, almost instantly slowing to only a gentle gliding speed.

The g forces were enormous but the form her sister had designed seemed well able to cope, it was a slight strain but not difficult, although she could certainly feel the stress on her wings and body. Both soarers shot past, noisily decelerating a few dozen metres lower, some thousand metres up, then flapped their way back up to join her circling in the thermal they'd been in for the last hour. They yipped at her, looking curious as to why she pulled out of what they clearly thought was a hunting dive so high up, making her giggle.

"Sorry, guys, just practising." Both animals looked at her, then each other, almost visibly wondering why their new friend was so bad at hunting. She giggled again. She'd gone flying again, early that morning, wanting to experiment with the camera spheres and also wondering if the soarers would come back, finding to her delight that they did minutes after she reached altitude. It seemed likely that they lived somewhere fairly close to Uthryyl's house, higher up the mountain. Nabiki had a growing feeling that they were probably a mated pair. Sending one of the cameras off to video them from a good vantage point behind and above, she set another one to one side and slightly in front, Jun easily tapping into them and controlling them far better than their internal processors could. The results were very impressive, making her sure they were a good investment.

"Nabiki, we're almost ready to leave," Ranma said. He looked up at her and waved. Smiling, she sent him a feed from the camera behind her, then circled a couple more times, fixing the scene in her memory. It was another beautiful day, warm and almost cloudless. She'd learned that the weather locally was like this the majority of the time, interspersed with fairly predictable quite heavy rain. A storm was due the next day so it was as well that they were moving to the next destination, although she definitely wanted to come back. Fwetna was a very nice place, the limited amount of it that she'd seen, and the wildlife was a lot of fun. With a grin she waved to the soarers, rolled into a wingover, and dived for the back garden with her wings half-closed. One the way down she noticed with amusement that both soarers were following again.

Onkra looked around, puzzled, wondering where the whistling noise, steadily growing louder and closer, was coming from, then looked up, her eyes widening. Squawking in shock she dived out of the way as Nabiki slammed to a near halt with a huge bang and a burst of wind from her wings, then dropped to the ground, landing easily. The middle sister laughed at the expressions the others had as she folding her wings. Everyone ducked again as a pair of closely separated cracks heralded the arrival of the two soarers, a couple of seconds behind the silver-haired girl, both of them landing behind her and looking around curiously.

"Gods!" Onkra shouted. "What the hells are you doing? You scared the shit out of me!" Uthryyl, once he had gotten over his surprise, was shaking his head and laughing, while Quannyr inspected...
the new arrivals with interest. Ranma grinned, before walking slowly over to look at the soarers, which seemed slightly wary but not too worried. His wife followed, approaching one of them with her hand out. It sniffed her then allowed her to stroke its head. After a moment the other one, which was watching, came over and pushed its own head under her hand, shoving the first one out of the way in a manner that made her giggle.

"Sorry, I got carried away," Nabiki said with a smile on her lips, holding out her hands to either side as a camera dropped into each one, then storing them away. Her friend goggled at her for a moment then started laughing.

"You're at least as mad as your sister," she said, giggling. Nabiki shrugged slightly, unable to deny the accusation. She turned to watch the soarers jostling to allow Kasumi to tickle them under the chin, making satisfied little squeaks. The noises were ridiculously small and cute for such large and impressive animals.

"They seem to like that," she said, smiling.

"I really don't think we can take them with us," Ranma chuckled. "They seem very friendly, though. I'm surprised they followed you all the way down like that."

"I didn't expect it, but they don't seem worried. Quite the opposite." Walking over Kasumi she reached out and touched the slightly larger one, which was a darker colour than the smaller one, although not by much. It yipped and pushed itself into her hand.

"That one is a male," her sister said. "The other one is female."

"Ah. I was wondering if that was the case." She stroked the animal, who closed his eyes in rapture, squeaking happily. She grinned. "They really are very cute. You know, for something the size of a small tiger with a wingspan as big as a light aircraft, that's a voracious predator." Kasumi laughed.

"The description would certainly put you off, I admit, but they are magnificent animals." She kept stroking the female, who had relaxed to the point she was in danger of falling over. Uthryyl and Quannyr walked over, fascinated.

"It's very unusual to get so close to a soarer," the merchant said, tentatively reaching out. The male glanced at him, sniffed his hand, then went back to looking happy. He stroked it gently. "That is amazingly soft fur. Remarkable." Onkra had moved over to the female soarer and was looking at it with wonder from a metre away.

"I can't believe they followed you like that. I don't think anyone has ever really succeeded in taming one, that's why they escaped from captivity so easily. They're pretty smart, for an animal. Normally they're cautious about people, although I wouldn't say scared, they just keep their distance." Gently touching the soarer she smiled.

"These ones certainly aren't tame, they just seem to be friendly," Nabiki replied. "And very playful. I wonder how old they are? They act like young cats."

"They're quite long-lived on our world, I believe," Uthryyl said. "The stresses are lower and there aren't any predators, or as far as I know much in the way of diseases that affect them. I've heard that they can make it to at least fifty or sixty of your years, if they don't have an accident. Luckily they breed relatively slowly, at least once they're established in a habitat. There seems to be some sort of feedback mechanism that keeps the breeding in check so it doesn't exhaust the food supply. The mountains around here have perhaps a few hundred at most. Looking at them I'd think they're mature but only just."
"I imagine they need a considerable territory for hunting," Kasumi mused, looking at the creatures. "They can certainly cover an enormous area very easily." The trader nodded.

"They spread over the entire planet, or the suitable parts of it, quite fast once they got established, but the population density is fairly low. It seems stable long term. Most people are happy to have them here, and in the country areas you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who didn't want them around. Quillit are much worse to have. I'd rather have a soarer or two any day." He grinned. "One of the rare cases where accidentally introducing an alien species into an ecosystem seems to have worked out for everyone. Except the quillit, and no one is worried about those little bastards." Both he and his wife shuddered. "Horrible things."

"As interesting as this is, we should be going," Quannyr said, smiling slightly at the animals. "You should probably find some way to persuade your new friends to leave, Nabiki, before they follow us through the portal." The middle Tendo nodded, looking down at the soarers, both of which seemed perfectly content.

"Any idea how?" she asked after a moment. "I don't want to upset or frighten them."

Everyone looked at the animals, which appeared more than happy to stay right where they were. There was a long pause. "Try turning off the illusion," Ranma finally suggested. "Perhaps they think you're some weird type of soarer and want to stay because of that." She shrugged, then did as he suggested. Both animals stared at her for a long moment, then the female slowly reached its head around, sniffing her carefully. It made an odd noise, looked her up and down, then shoved its head against her leg.

"Well, that didn't work," she said with amusement. The male yipped at her, lying down on the grass, then rolled onto its side and closed its eyes. Everyone laughed.

"They may go if we open the portal," Kasumi said, watching them with a smile. "If not we just have to make sure we don't let them follow us if they try."

"OK. Got the coordinates?" Ranma shook his head at the sight of the animals which seemed to have settled in for the duration. "People say my friends are weird," he mumbled, glancing at Nabiki, who giggled. Slightly smiling, he and his wife quickly open a portal, the blue-glowing aperture appearing with a crackle.

Both soarers stared, the male rolling back onto its feet, then looked at the middle sister. After a moment they relaxed, simply watching with interest. "Weird," Uthryyl said, examining them. He shrugged. "Oh well. Don't let them come through, Nabiki, it's probably best if you come last. We'll close the portal as soon as you're through." She nodded, watching as he and Quannyr walked through the rip in space. Onkra followed, then her sister and husband, who shifted to 'Chou' and 'Yori' on the way. She turned to the two soarers who were watching with their heads cocked to one side, appearing puzzled.

"Stay," she said firmly, shimmering back to 'Azumi', then giggled, walking backwards through the portal. Seconds later the two animals were alone in the garden. The portal closed with a pop, which made them flinch slightly, then they stared at each other. A few minutes later, when nothing else of interest happened and their new friend didn't come back, they got bored and flew off, yipping happily.

Cologne stroked her chin, studying the much younger women who were standing in front of her, thinking. "America, hmm? I haven't been there for a very long time. Do they still ride horses around everywhere and shoot at each other?" She cackled as Shampoo and Akane exchanged
glances, then giggled.

"They use cars mostly now, Grandmother," the lilac-haired warrior said, grinning. "Although if the news is to be believed they still shoot at each other." Cologne laughed in delight.

"So, Akane Tendo, there's a chance we could see you on the big screen, then? Is that really something you would like to do?" Akane smiled and nodded.

"Yes. I wanted to be an actor since I was a little girl. School plays were the nearest I ever came, though, and for a long time it looked like I'd never be able to go any further. I more or less stopped dreaming about it. Then this incredible opportunity came out of the blue. Nabiki is right. I have to go for it, see how far it takes me, or I'd regret it forever." The Elder inspected her for a long moment.

"I see." She was silent for another few seconds. "I think your sister is probably correct. She's a very perceptive young woman. And I know what following a dream can be like. Not many people ever get the chance." There was something somewhat melancholy about her for a little while.

"It might not come to anything, but Aiko thinks that this director is very interested. I'm no magical girl, but she says I'd be very good at the stunt work, which could well lead to all sorts of things." Akane grinned, looking excited. "I still can't believe it. The fact that Ms Aoyama, of all people, mentioned to Yori that I was getting quite good, and that Yori would think of this. Aiko is being incredibly generous as well, offering to teleport us there and back when we need it."

"Indeed. It is very fortunate in several ways that you met those young women. They cured you of a very unpleasant affliction, set you on the path to a much better mental state, and have possible managed to guide you to a lucrative career opportunity." Cologne smiled slightly evilly. "You owe Ryoga thanks, I think." Akane stared at her, then glanced at Shampoo.

"What?" she asked, rather taken aback.

"Well, think about it," the Amazon Elder said with great glee. "If you hadn't encountered him in Minato you wouldn't have had your... little episode..., which in turn might well have meant you never came to the attention of Yori and her friends, which would probably mean you wouldn't have received the medical attention you so desperately needed. Which in turn led to your current status. It all flows from the pig-boy, oddly enough." She seemed vastly amused by her own logic. Akane shook her head slowly, unable to refute it but sure there was a reason she wasn't somehow indebted to the Lost Boy.

"Damn," she eventually said with disgust. Shampoo giggled.

"You can thank him the next time you see him," she commented mischievously. Her friend looked darkly at her.

"Yeah, I don't think so. But I get your point, Elder."

"You have matured hugely in the last year, Akane," the ancient woman said approvingly. "Your attention to the Art in the last few months has been exemplary, far beyond what I ever hoped for. If you apply that same drive to this new opportunity I expect great things from you." Akane smiled happily at the praise. "Don't take it for granted, though," Cologne warned, raising a hand. "You know as well as anyone how quickly things can change. Make the most of it, but be careful. Americans are strange people." She chuckled. "And don't spend all your money. From what I've read, a lot of young women who break into the movies and become rich regret their actions years later. I would advise living sensibly, even if you become highly successful. Which, I think, is quite
likely."

Her smile to the youngest Tendo was warmer than any she had ever received from the Elder before. "You'll do very well, Akane Tendo. Good luck, and make sure you come and visit regularly. I still have much to teach you." Akane nodded, looking very happy. Cologne turned her attention to her great-granddaughter. "Do you want to go, child?"

"Yes, Grandmother, I think I do. I've been trying to learn English, being in a country where they spoke it would help a lot. I'd like to see another place as well, while I like Japan very much, I haven't been anywhere but here or China before. And I'd miss Akane." She grinned at her friend. "I still need to beat her up some more, she's not quite done yet." The old woman cackled with amusement, studying her much younger relative.

"All right. You may go. Enjoy yourself, don't bring dishonour to the tribe or your family, and take care of Akane. Akane, take care of my great-granddaughter." She nodded as they both looked happy, smiling at them. "I expect great things from both of you. It's not traditional warrior-work, to be sure, but this modern world has little call for that sort of thing in most places. Your skills will at least be used well." She stood up, walking over to the young Amazon, who knelt down and hugged her. "Take care, child. Look after your friend and be careful of the Americans. They're crazier than the Japanese." Shampoo giggled.

"I'll be careful. Thank you, Grandmother."

"Make sure you both come back often, or I'll have to come and visit you," Cologne grinned, "Or, on second thought, I may do that anyway. Does LA have any decent Ramen restaurants?" She winked, making them laugh. As they left, she watched them go, a slight thoughtful smile on her face, before heading upstairs.

"Hollywood doesn't have a clue what's about to happen," she mumbled to herself, snickering. "I almost feel sorry for them..."

Smoothing her skirt down, Akane looked at her reflection in the mirror on the back of her door. She fiddled with her yellow shirt for a moment, looking unsatisfied, before yet again brushing her hair.

"You look fine, Akane," Shampoo said from where she was watching, sitting on Akane's bed, smiling a little. She was wearing her best Chinese silk top and trousers, in deep blue. "Don't keep redoing it all."

"Are you sure?" the youngest Tendo said anxiously. "This colour is all right?"

"It looks very nice," Nodoka said, entering the room and casting an expert eye over the younger woman. "No one could complain. You both look very pretty." Shampoo got up and walked over, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder.

"I told you. Now calm down, make sure your practice clothes are packed, and let's get a cup of tea before Aiko turns up. She should be here in about half an hour."

"Oh, by the way, Akane, this just came for you." Nodoka handed her the parcel she was holding. "The courier apologised, he got stuck in traffic, it should have been here this morning." Looking at the address on the parcel, Akane raised an eyebrow, then quickly opened it. Inside the box was another wrapped parcel and an envelope with her name on it. She opened the envelope, scanning the contents quickly, then smiled.
"It's from Nabiki. For my birthday tomorrow. She says she's sorry she couldn't be here but she hopes I have a nice time, and to enjoy myself." The youngest sister giggled slightly. "That was nice of her. I wonder what this is?" Feeling the parcel curiously, she added, "It feels like cloth or something. Soft."

"There's an easy way to find out, you know," Shampoo said with a grin.

"Should I open it now?" Akane wondered out loud. "My birthday isn't until tomorrow." Shampoo and Nodoka looked at each other, counting mentally. They got to six before the young woman shrugged, tearing the paper off, both of them smiling. "Oh, wow. This is really nice," she said, unfolding the contents of the parcel. It was a very high quality gi, like the ones her father and Genma had received for Christmas, if not even better quality, with her name neatly embroidered on the left breast. On the back was written 'Tendo-Saotome Training Hall, Furinkan, Nerima' in elegant Kanji. The gi was deep black, while the embroidery was a pale blue, contrasting nicely.

"That's a very nice present," Nodoka said admiringly, feeling the fabric. "Very good quality cloth. Soft but strong. It should last a long time. Your other one was getting a little worn."

"Good timing as well," Shampoo said. She laughed. "I wonder if Nabiki knew what Yori had arranged?" Akane thought about it for a moment, then shook her head.

"I don't think she did, she did sound somewhat surprised. Anyway, why would Yori have told her?" Admiring the clothing again, she folded it carefully, removing her old one from the small bag on her bed and putting the new one inside instead. "But it certainly is good timing. I'll have to thank her."

"Have you spoken to her today?" Nodoka asked curiously. The young woman shook her head.

"I called, but she's out of range of the network, I think. She did say that might happen. I'll try again tomorrow." Checking her appearance in the mirror one last time, she smiled slightly nervously and picked up the bag. "I need a cup of tea, I think." She looked at her watch. "Only about fifteen minutes left, plus a teleport."

Shampoo looked amused as she followed the others downstairs, carrying her own bag. "It's certainly an unusual manner to travel to a job interview, but very convenient."

They had just sat down with a cup of tea when there was a tap on the front door, making Akane twitch so suddenly she nearly spilled her drink. Nodoka smiled at her, getting up and heading for the door. "Relax, Akane, it will be all right." She came back with Aiko, who looked at the others and grinned.

"All ready?"

"Yes, as much as I can be," the blue-haired girl said nervously.

"Don't get stressed out, Akane, it will be fine. Trust me. Adrian is a nice guy, even if he's a bit highly strung, you'll like him. I talked to him for a while last night. He's very excited about meeting you, and was even happier when I told him about Shampoo. I think he'd like an entire team of female martial artist stunt-women if he could get it." She laughed as Akane smiled.

"I also talked to a friend of mine in LA, Lieutenant Richard Harrison. He's with the police there. We met him over a year ago in Tokyo, with a Canadian colleague, they were here because of the start of what ended in Halleckton. He's a really nice guy. It was his friend Jim who showed us around the studio where we met Adrian. Anyway, he's invited us to a barbecue at his house again,
and suggested that it might be a good place to have the interview. Adrian agreed. Richard has got a
large back garden, you can show off what you can do there, and there won't be a lot of people
watching if that sort of thing makes you nervous. Sound good?"

After glancing at Shampoo, Akane nodded. "I suppose so. I have to admit I'm very nervous. Lots of
people I don't know staring at me would make it worse."

"I understand, believe me. Adrian will have a couple of people he knows, a stunt director and a
studio armourer, with him. I've met the armourer before, he knows a hell of a lot about weapons
and apparently is also an expert on martial arts." Aiko giggled. "Or what they think is an expert.
Anyway, they want to see what you and Shampoo can do. Apparently Adrian has been talking
about us non-stop since we were there and no one believes him." Nodoka looked at the two young
woman and smiled.

"I think they may have a shock," she said, pouring Aiko a cup of tea, which she took with a nod of
thanks.

"So does Adrian. I think he's looking forward to it." The magical girl was looking very amused.
"Anyway, we'll go in a minute, meet them, and you can show off your skills. Afterwards, we can
have a nice barbecue for dinner, before I bring you back. You should be back before the middle of
the afternoon."

"How is Yori doing at the moment?" Nodoka asked, while Akane thought about what she'd been
told. Aiko glanced at her.

"Oh, she's very well, thanks. She, Chou, and Azumi, one of our friends you haven't met, are on
holiday right now, they've been gone a few days."

"It's that time of year," Nodoka agreed. "Nabiki is away with her friends, travelling, as well." Aiko
smiled at this.

"The others and I will be going to meet them later. We can't all take time away for so long, without
Yori around things tend to go... a little weird...," she looked mildly annoyed about something, "so
we're going in shifts. Fumiko and Tamiko next week, me and Misaki the week after. It would be
nice to have longer, but what can you do?" She shrugged, sighing a little. "Our lifestyle attracts
some very odd things."

"So I gather. I heard that there was a major fight between two groups of magical girls in Minato
yesterday, or was it the day before? Something like that. Quite a lot of damage occurred, by all
accounts." Nodoka smiled slightly at Aiko's look of irritation.

"Yes, that was a damn nuisance. That other group is mostly a pain in the ass. They're pretty good
when they stick to what they know, but rather... unselective. It's caused a certain amount of friction
between Yori and them before now. Funny to watch, but very annoying to clear up after."

"Oh, dear. That does sound difficult. I hope you were able to resolve the situation." Nodoka sipped
her tea, looking curious.

"More or less. I have no idea whether it will stick, they can stay away for months then turn up
when you least want them, but for the moment things are fairly quiet." Aiko finished her tea,
putting the cup down. "It's a pity. With some real training and discipline they could be very good.
At the moment it's like about six or seven magic-powered Akanes running around blowing things
up." She grinned at the youngest Tendo, who laughed.
"I'm much better now."

"Oh, I know that. I was only joking. Right, ready to go?" Drinking the dregs of her tea, Akane put the cup down carefully, took a deep breath with her eyes shut, then nodded.

"Yes."

"Good. Come on, let's go out in the yard." Shampoo and Akane followed Aiko outside into the sunny morning, Nodoka bringing up the rear. As they came out of the house Soun walked around the corner, smiling when he saw them.

"Ah, good, I got back in time." Walking over to his daughter he took her by the shoulders and looked at her, then gently kissed her on the forehead. "Good luck, daughter. Make me as proud as I know you will." She smiled at him tenderly.

"Thanks, Dad. I'll do my best." After a quick hug she released him and joined the magical girl and her friend in the middle of the yard.

"Remember the flash," Aiko said, waiting for a second or two until she saw they had closed their eyes, then vanished with the other two women. Nodoka opened her eyes and looked at the empty yard, before glancing at Soun, who was smiling proudly at nothing.

"Come on, there's still some tea left," she said quietly, waving at the house. He followed her inside, still with a small smile on his face.

"Are they here yet?" Richard glanced at his friend Jim, who sighed.

"Calm down, Adrian. They'll be here soon. Here, have a drink of orange juice." Neither of them thought it was a good idea to give the man coffee, he was already almost hopping up and down in place from nerves. Grabbing the offered glass, the director drank half of it, then looked out the window into the back garden.

"It's a nice day, at least. I hope they like it. Is Aaron here yet? He's supposed to be bringing Matt with him. Is that your daughter? She's holding a complicated bow. Can she use it?" They looked at each other and grinned.

"Adrian, you're rambling again. Have you taken your pill this afternoon?" The man looked at them, then ran his fingers through his hair, smiling in an embarrassed manner.

"Sorry, guys. I know I get a little worked up. Yes, I took one of those pills. They take a little while to work."

"Don't worry, Adrian, it will all work out. You and I both know how amazing Yori and her friends are, so I'm pretty sure anyone they recommend is going to be very good indeed. Probably spectacularly so. Aaron and Matt are going to have a shock." Jim laughed, as Richard smiled to himself, filling the coffee machine and turning it on.

The director suddenly smiled malevolently. "Oh, I do hope so. I'm tired of everyone laughing at me." He glanced at Richard as the police officer started chuckling.

"That was a very funny tone of voice, Adrian. I guess it's been annoying you?"

"More than a little. I suppose I can't blame them much, anyone who didn't see what happened would probably think I was nuts, but it's irritating to have people say I must have drunk too much."
Adrian shrugged, with a small sigh. "I've got a bit of a reputation, you understand."

"I gathered that. But I also know you have another reputation as being very good at your job, despite certain... personal quirks." Richard smiled, while both studio men laughed. "That last movie you directed was in the top five of the year, I seem to remember, wasn't it?"

"Top three, actually. Didn't quite make the best opening gross, but it's made up for that with longevity. Made more than three hundred and fifty million over the summer." The director looked pleased, as Richard whistled. "One of the few movies in it's genre to make a profit this year. The studio was very pleased. I'm told it may be in the running for a nomination for best action picture, and also best special effects. Which would be nice." He seemed calmer now, finishing off his orange juice and handing the glass to Jim, who put it in the sink.

The doorbell rang, making them all look up. Serena ran past, calling, "It's Sophie, Dad, I'll get it." Looking at each other they relaxed again. Moments later the girl went back past the kitchen, waving to her father and the others, followed by another teenager, who also waved and called a greeting. The men watched through the window as both girls went out into the back garden, Serena picking up the complex compound bow she had put down when she went to the door.

"I see Sophie and Serena seem to be good friends now," Jim laughed, watching the girls examine the bow and talk for a moment, before Serena picked up an arrow and nocked it, pulling it back with some effort. Sophie stood to the side and studied her, then pointed at something in the distance, out of their view. Richard laughed.

"Oh, yes, you wouldn't believe it. It's like they've known each other their entire lives. I think both of them were a little lonely, I know Serena didn't have a lot of friends her own age who shared her interests. She's a very active girl, and smart. Doesn't see the point in boys or clothes when there are more interesting things like archery, and cars, or stuff like that." He grinned. "I always wanted a son."

Jim laughed, as Adrian chuckled and looked out at the girls again.

"Sophie is very much like her. Yori suggesting inviting her and her mother to that party months ago is yet another thing I have to thank her for. She's made a huge difference to my daughters life, almost accidentally."

"I wonder if it was an accident?" Jim asked, smiling. Richard shrugged.

"With that young lady, you can never be sure. Whatever the truth, it was a good idea. They get on like you wouldn't believe, both of them look much happier now, and Emily and Joan have become close as well. It worked out all around."

"Is Sophie still doing the Aikido?" Richard glanced at his friend and nodded.

"Yes, I believe she's doing very well, actually. Serena goes and watches sometimes. She's already competing in her age group, so I hear. It's probably only a matter of time until Serena takes it up as well, I expect. She's tried some introductory lessons and liked them, although she seems to be concentrating on the archery at the moment. Sooner or later, though..." He laughed. They watched as his daughter aimed at something, releasing the arrow smoothly, then smiling. The smile turned to a frown, which became an expression of guilt. Sophie started laughing.

"Whoops," Richard said with a slightly worried smile. "I think she just missed again. I hope it wasn't heading towards Mrs Finch's greenhouse this time." Adrian and Jim looked at each other, then began laughing at the tone in his voice.
"Does that happen much?"

"No, she's actually a good shot, but she gets carried away every now and then. We've had a few arrows returned by annoyed neighbours over the last few months. Not to mention all the ones she's lost out back." He sighed a little, but smiled. "Luckily they're fairly cheap, and they're only training ones, so not too sharp. Mind you, you wouldn't want to get hit by one. The bow is pretty powerful, she's got it set for it's highest pull now. Strong young lady."

Both girls walked off in the direction of the arrow's flight, talking to each other and smiling, as Richard watched fondly. Just as they disappeared from view the doorbell rang again. Adrian twitched but managed to keep it to only a slight tic, making Jim and Richard smile. "I'll get it. Back in a moment." He walked to the front door, opening it to find a familiar face smiling at him. "Hello Aiko," he said happily, waving the girl and the two other females with her inside. "Come in."

Closing the door behind them, he turned to the short brunette with a wide smile. "It's good to see you again."

"And you, Richard. It's been a while. I meant to drop by and say hi to you guys, but things have been a little hectic. How are Emily and Serena?"

"Serena is in the back yard sticking arrows in things with Sophie, and Em is shopping for the barbecue. She'll be back soon." He inspected the other two young women, who were looking nervous. Aiko waved to them. "I'd like you to meet some friends of mine. This is Akane Tendo, and Xian Pu. Guys, meet Richard Harrison, LAPD Lieutenant and demon bait." Richard looked narrowly at her, then grinned as she laughed. The two girls exchanged glances, looking puzzled. "Long story. I'll tell you later." Aiko seemed very amused.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Harrison," the short haired girl, Akane, said shyly, shaking the hand he offered her. Her accent was noticeable, she certainly wasn't as fluent in English as Aiko, or Yori, but it was very good.

"Call me Richard, please. I'm pleased to meet you as well, Akane." She smiled a little, nodding. He turned to the other girl, who looked much more confident.

"Hello. I Xian Pu, sorry about English, still learning." She shook his hand firmly, grinning. "Sound like idiot." He laughed, as Aiko and Akane giggled. "Call Shampoo, easier. Understand more than speak, but may ask questions."

"She doesn't have a gift for languages," Akane said, smiling at her friend, who shrugged. "It took her years to learn Japanese properly, she sounded very funny for a long time."

"At least not break buildings so much as you," Shampoo said, giggling. Akane raised an eyebrow at her.

"Oh? I can remember you didn't seem to know what a door was for the first couple of years. You just made a new one." The Chinese girl sighed, looking embarrassed.


"That sounds like there's an interesting story there."

"Um." Akane now also looked embarrassed. "It's quite a long one."

"Don't worry, we won't push. Everyone has something in their past they'd prefer not be made public." Richard smiled at her. "Come and meet Adrian and Jim. Aaron and Matt aren't here yet,
they should turn up quite soon. Traffic is a nightmare at the moment, so that's probably the problem. Would any of you like a drink? Coffee, tea, juice?” He led the way to the kitchen where the other two men were.

"Coffee, please," Akane said.

"Same," Shampoo added.

"I'll have coffee as well, please, Richard," Aiko said, bringing up the rear. He nodded, moving to the coffee machine.

"You know Aiko, guys," he said as he prepared several mugs of coffee. Both men nodded, looking at the three women curiously, concentrating on the two they didn't know. "This is Akane, on the right, and Shampoo on the left." Both of them smiled, looking nervous again. "Girls, this is my friend Jim Rush, and Adrian Stewart. Adrian is the famous director you're here to meet.” The slender man looked amused and mildly embarrassed, walking over and shaking hands with them.

"Famous is perhaps a bit overstating the case, but I'm reasonably well known in the industry. It's nice to meet you. Aiko has told me good things about you, Akane, and also says you're very good as well, Shampoo." Both of the girls looked at each other, then back at him.

"Thank you, Mr Stewart. I still have trouble believing all this, Aiko caught us by surprise.” Akane smiled again, Aiko snickering behind her. "It was something of a shock. I wanted to be in the movie industry a long time ago, but... my life became a little complicated for a few years. Recently it seems to have changed a lot, though, which is taking some getting used to."

"Don't worry, I know it might be a little much at first, Hollywood hits most people like that. It's a weird place." He grinned at them. Aiko muffled a laugh as she exchanged a glance with Richard, who was grinning widely.

"Oh, I think they may be OK with weird, Adrian. You wouldn't believe Minato, and if Nerima is as bad..." Aiko glanced at him.

"It's worse in most ways." He winced.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes, it's completely insane. Minato is merely mostly insane." Chuckling, he handed everyone except Adrian a coffee.

"Milk and sugar on the table, if you want it." When everyone had sorted their drinks out, he suggested, "Let's go and sit in the garden. I've put the awning up, there's shade, which is going to be needed." He looked out the window. "It's been another hot day." Leading the way outside he smiled at his daughter and her friend, who had just come back from wherever they'd gone, Serena holding a bent arrow and inspecting it with a frown.

"Another one? What happened?"

"Oh, hi, Dad. I missed. It bounced off the fence behind the target and went right into a big rock over the other side, somehow. I don't think it's any use any more, unless I want to shoot around corners." She smiled, then looked thoughtfully at the arrow, making him grin.

"I don't think that will work, Serena." She shrugged a little, still looking thoughtful. He had a feeling that she was going to experiment. "Come here and meet Akane and Shampoo. They're from Japan, like Aiko and the others." Tossing the bent arrow next to her bow on the ground, Serena
exchanged a look with her friend, who was watching the two older young women with interest. "Are you magical girls as well?" she asked excitedly. "Hello, Aiko. How are you?" she added, politely.

"I'm fine, thanks, Serena," the brunette said, smiling at them. "Hi, Sophie. How is your Aikido coming along?"

"Not bad, thank you. My Sensei says I have a gift for it. He's very pleased with my progress, although he says I need to keep my temper, because sometimes I get carried away." Shampoo and Akane exchanged a glance and giggled.

"I know what you mean," Akane said, while beside her Shampoo rolled her eyes.

"Have no idea," she added, looking amused. Akane nudged her friend in the ribs, making her snicker.

"No, we're not magical girls, Serena," Akane answered the girl's original question. "I'm a martial artist, and Shampoo is a warrior from China and a very good friend. She's much better than I am, she's been teaching me for some time now."

"Good student," Shampoo said, "Slow at first, but got better very quick." She looked slyly at her friend. "Still needs work." Akane sighed a little with a small smile, while Serena and Sophie giggled.

"I beat you four times so far."

"Lose count number of times beat you," Shampoo laughed. She stepped forward and held out her hand. "Nice meet you, girls. Sorry about sound like idiot, still learning English. Stupid language, very complicated." They grinned, shaking her hand. Akane repeated the exercise.

"She's getting better, and understands more than you'd think. Just can't speak it very well." She looked pleased at her own fluency. "I need to practice but I hope I'm OK at it."

"You're fine, Akane," Aiko reassured her. "You'd be surprised how quickly you improve when you speak it all the time. Anyway, an accent is useful here, it makes you sound exotic." Adrian, off to the side, chuckled. He was watching them with interest, noting how they'd both relaxed a lot in the last few minutes. Exchanging a glance with Jim he nodded slightly.

"That's true," he said, "There are several Asian females in Hollywood who are very much in demand. I know for a fact at least two of them speak perfect English, but keep the accent deliberately because people seem to like it." They looked at him, then at each other, smiling.

"I suggested to Adrian that he get a few visual aids in," Aiko commented, pointing across the yard. "Yori told me that your sister had mentioned some of your old training exercises, and she thought they might be useful in demonstrating your abilities." Akane followed her finger and saw a pallet of concrete blocks, still strapped together, along with a number of thick pieces of lumber. There was also a huge wooden post about twenty centimetres in diameter sunk into the lawn, a metre and a half of it sticking out.

"OK. I don't do much of that at the moment, it's mostly for strength training, but it's good fun."

"I hope it's useful," Richard commented, looking at the post. "It took Jim and me two hours to dig the hole and get it in, that thing is heavy."
"It looks fine, Richard," Akane said. "I don't know how long it will last, though, the one at home is in a big lump of rock. That's just in the earth. But is should be OK for a few hits." Richard glanced at Jim, who looked impressed. Aiko grinned at their expressions.

"She's very strong," she told them. "Not magical girl level, but a hell of a lot more than she looks." Adrian glanced at her, then inspected the young woman, who seemed embarrassed. "Impressive. How strong?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I've seen her throw a light van about thirty metres," Aiko said, looking pleased at the expression of shock he developed. "That's not bad by anyone's standards."

"No. No it isn't," he replied faintly, slightly pale. Akane was going red, staring at the ground.

"It was a mistake, I was really angry at the time," she said quietly.

"Don't worry, Akane, I was just teasing. Anyway, the insurance covered the damage. Yori made sure of that." Aiko went over and clapped her on the shoulder. Serena and Sophie were looking at her with astonishment.

Glancing at his watch, Adrian muttered to himself. "I'm sorry about this, ladies. I have no idea where Aaron and Matt have got to. I'll try calling them again." Pulling his phone out he moved off to the other end of the patio.

Looking curiously at the bow on the ground, Shampoo asked Serena, "You want be archer?" The teenager nodded.

"It's a lot of fun, and I'm getting quite good at it, I think." Picking up the bow she showed it to the Chinese woman. "This one has a draw weight of twenty five to forty five pounds. I started with the lowest, but it's set to forty pounds now. That's apparently quite a lot for a female my size."

Shampoo nodded, inspecting the bow with interest.

"Complicated machine. Not use one like this before. Amazon bow different. May try?" Serena handed it to her. Looking at it carefully, Shampoo held it with an experts grip, pulling the bowstring back smoothly to her ear. Serena watched with interest. "Same length arms, that good," Shampoo commented, smiling. "Machine set up properly. Very good." Gently letting off the string, she glanced at the target Serena had set up near the fence thirty-five metres away. "Not much range, but good for try," she added. "May shoot?"

"OK," the younger woman said, while the others watched. She picked up the quiver she'd hung on the back of one of the patio chairs. "I've only got nine good arrows left, the rest kind of got a bit... bent."

"Metal arrows do that," the Chinese woman said with a smile. "Wood ones not bend, but break easily. Not tried other types." Picking the arrows out of the quiver one by one she examined them carefully, putting two on the table and the rest back. "Those ones no good." Slinging the quiver around her shoulder and adjusting the strap so it hung near her waist, a different position than Serena had used, she walked out onto the lawn to face the target, a round compressed straw affair about a metre across on a stand, with a paper cover, marked in multiple rings of different colours. "First, trial shot."

Taking an arrow from the quiver without looking, she nocked it, pulled, and released in one smooth action, making Serena stare in wonder. The arrow whistled through the air, landing in one of the middle rings. "Not bad." Repeating the exercise twice, the third arrow landed in the exact centre of
the target. Shampoo smiled while Serena and Sophie stared at each other. "Good bow, consistent. I like." She retrieved the arrows and retook her shooting position. Holding the bow she studied the target, nodded, then fired all seven arrows one after another in a blur of motion, the thump of the bow just a ripple of sound. Everyone but Akane and Aiko stared in shock. Akane was smiling while Aiko nodded, looking impressed.

"Not at all bad," she said. Shampoo glanced at her with a smile.

"Was village champion for reason."

The Americans were staring at the target, which had six arrows arranged in a circle around the bull, with the seventh firmly lodged in the exact centre. "Holy shit," Adrian mumbled. "That's incredible." Shampoo looked pleased.

"Short range. Bow not powerful enough for long range shot, but very accurate."

"How far could you shoot with the right bow?" he asked, looked at her with astonishment. She shrugged.

"Amazon bow good for about five hundred metres, more from high place. Not have one here or show." Aiko chuckled a little, then produced a bow from nowhere. Shampoo looked at it with interest.

"I wondered if it might come up, I know a little about the Amazons. I borrowed this from a friend. Will it do?" Handing the compound bow back to Serena, who was still gaping at the target, Shampoo strode over and took the longbow that Aiko gave her, inspecting it carefully.

"Very nice bow. Not quite same, but similar to Amazon one. Have arrows?" The magical girl handed her a quiver of wooden arrows over a metre long. Removing one from the quiver Shampoo tested the steel broadhead point with her finger, then smiled. "Sharp. I like." She looked at Akane, who was watching with a smile. "Move target, please, Akane?"

"Where to?" the girl asked her friend. Shampoo looked at the land behind the garden fence, then pointed to a place three hundred metres away, higher than the fence due to the upwards slope of the ground.

"There, by big tree."

"OK." Jogging over to the target, Akane removed the arrows from it, handing them to Sophie, who had followed her, then picked the target and stand up, jumping over the metre and a half fence easily, before heading to the indicated spot. Sophie stared, then grinned, walking back to her friend.

"That's remarkable," Adrian said, watching with interest.

"I thought you'd like it," Aiko told him. "She's actually pretty damn good. Not in our class, true, but..."

Waving to Shampoo from beside the tree, Akane pointed to the ground. The Amazon waved her back another fifty metres, indicating the right position. Setting up the target Akane stepped a few metres to the side, trusting her friend. Shampoo nodded to herself, then bent down, picking a few blades of grass and dropping them to check the wind, which was slight. She nodded again. Testing the pull of the bow she smiled. "Again, test shot." Slinging the quiver at her side she selected an arrow, firing it in a smooth move with no more apparent effort than she'd shown with the compound bow. The arrow made a very lethal sound as it buzzed away into the distance, the young
woman watching its path with an evaluating eye, tutting to herself even before it made contact.

"Bad shot," she muttered. The arrow had landed right on the edge of the target, almost completely penetrating the thick straw to the point the fletching was the only thing showing. She thought for a moment, then tried again. This time she smiled. The arrow landed much closer to the centre, although still some way off. The third one hit the centre.

Adrian looked at Jim, who whistled silently. "Fucking impressive," the director said, making his colleague nod.

Waving to Akane to remove the arrows, Shampoo waited until her friend was clear, then took a deep breath. Everyone watched silently. There was a series of twangs, too close for anyone other than Aiko to separate, ending when the quiver was empty. Fifteen arrows arced towards the target, the first one landing just as the last was fired. A second later the sound of multiple, close thuds sounded as all the arrows embedded themselves in the straw to the feathers. Five people gaped in amazement, then looked at the girl with the long lilac hair, who was grinning.

"Out of practice. Sorry about too slow."

"Oh. My. God!" Sophie slowly said. "That was AMAZING!" She looked at Serena, who nodded vigorously.

"Unbelievable," Jim muttered, while beside him, Adrian seemed to have stopped breathing.

Richard was slowly shaking his head in respectful awe. The doorbell sounding made him jump, then go to answer it. Just after Akane jumped the fence on the return trip, he came out with two other men following, who looked around.

"Sorry, Adrian, we got stuck on the freeway, there was some sort of accident. The phone networks are all screwed up as well, we didn't have much reception. I tried calling you but couldn't get through." The taller of the two men, a solidly built brown-haired person with dark grey eyes, who looked ex-military, smiled apologetically. Beside him, the shorter and heavily chewed up figure of Aaron, the arms-master from the studio, nodded.

"Complete chaos. Hope it's cleared up when we leave." He looked about at the various people, stopping on Aiko. "Ah. I remember you. You were with that little black-haired girl with the ridiculously good nunchaku skills." She grinned.

"Yep. Yori is something of an expert with most martial arts weapons."

"She here?"

"No, she's on holiday with friends. Needed a break." He nodded.

"Fair enough." Akane walked over with the target, setting it up next to Shampoo, who looked at it in satisfaction. Everyone inspected it, the two recent arrivals curiously, most of the rest with awe. All the arrows were clustered in the middle, forming a neat X shape, which was clearly deliberate.

"Good god," Adrian managed. Jim just shook his head in wonder. Shampoo handed the bow back to Aiko and began carefully pulling the arrows out, putting them back in the quiver.

"Nice shooting," the tall man said, looking at the Chinese woman, who smiled. "What was the range?" He glanced around the garden. Adrian tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the tree in the distance, an odd look on his face.

"See that tree?" The man nodded slowly. "About another hundred feet or so. I could barely see it."
The man stared at him, then back at the tree, then at Shampoo, who shrugged, handing Aiko the quiver of arrows.

"I know, too close. Ground too rough for target stand further away." He looked slightly stunned, while behind him Jim turned to his friend and mouthed an expletive. Richard grinned.

"Stop showing off." Akane giggled. Shampoo looked amused.

"That what we here for, no?"

Adrian chuckled. "That what you here for, yes. Very yes."

The Amazon smiled at him, while Akane sighed. "Oh, don't say that. You have no idea what she's like."

"Akane as bad." They both giggled.

"Do you mind?" Aaron asked, motioning to the bow Aiko was holding. She smiled and handed it to him. Experimentally drawing it, or trying to at any rate, he looked shocked when the string moved about fifteen centimetres. "Holy..." Grunting with strain he pulled harder, managing to pull the bow about three quarters of the way to full extension. "What the hell pull does this thing have, for god's sake?" Aiko looked at him, amused.

"My friend said it was about a hundred kilos. That's... two hundred and twenty pounds, or so, in American." He stared, appalled.

"That's insane! No one can use a bow with a pull like that. Not more than maybe once." Shampoo giggled a little.

"Takes practice. Lots." Smiling, Aiko retrieved the bow, pulling it to full extension while holding it in front of her at arms length a couple of times.

"Seems easy enough." She grinned at the expression on their faces while Richard roared with laughter.

"Coffee, guys?" he asked. They both nodded numbly, still looking at Aiko. He came back quickly, handing them each a mug full.

"OK." Adrian looked around at his colleagues. "Guys, this is Akane and Shampoo, they're the ones I wanted to meet. Aiko has recommended them as people who could be exactly what we're looking for. Ladies, this is Aaron Webb, the studio arms master, and Matt Jordan, the stunt and fight director." The two men snapped out of their slight bemused trance, turning to the other young women, as Aiko stepped back beside Richard, unstringing the bow and putting it and the quiver back wherever she'd produced them from. Neither man noticed although Jim and Adrian did, their eyes widening slightly.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you," Aaron told them, smiling in a way than made his somewhat battered face warm up a lot. He shook both their hands. Matt repeated the exercise.

"It's good of you to come all this way," the stunt director said.

"It's no trouble," Akane replied, glancing at Aiko who smiled slightly. "We're both very excited and nervous about this. I've wanted to get into this industry for a long time, but I never thought it would happen. Especially not like this." Matt smiled at her as well.
"It's funny how that sometimes happened. I was in the military for quite a while, but ended up making films. I prefer it to getting shot at." He shrugged a little. "Life sometimes throws you a curve ball. You grab it, or duck."

"That's what my sister said." Akane laughed.

"Let's sit down, tell us a little about yourselves," Adrian suggested. He motioned to the patio table, which had a number of chairs around it. "This first meeting is just to get to know you and see what you can do." He glanced at Aiko for a moment. "I'm already fairly sure just based on the recommendation, but some people need more..." She grinned, nodding to him, while Akane and Shampoo looked at each other, smiling. Matt rolled his eyes.

"Adrian, you know how crazy what you told us sounds, right? It's impossible." The director got a weird little smile on his face.

"Remember you said that. In fact, I'll bet you both a thousand dollars that inside two hours you're going to apologise to me." They exchanged glances. Richard shared a look with Aiko, both of them very amused.

"You're on," Aaron said after a moment, shaking hands. Matt sighed, but did the same. The director had a very predatory look suddenly, making them seem just a little worried.

"Great." Turning back to the two young women, he grinned. "I'll split my winnings three ways." Moving to the table he sat, the rest of them doing likewise. "OK, Akane, why don't you start."

She thought for a moment, nervous all over again. Taking a breath, remembering Nabiki's advice, she tried to calm down. "All right. My name is Akane Tendo. I'll be twenty-three tomorrow. I was born in the Furinkan district of Nerima, Tokyo, where I've lived all my life. I've got two older sisters, although I haven't seen one of them for some time. My father is a martial arts expert and teacher at the family school, along with Uncle Genma, his best friend. They teach two different branches of our own style. My mother died when I was young, my sisters and father raised me."

She looked slightly sad, as Adrian nodded.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was a long time ago," she replied, smiling slightly. "It caused me some problems, I'll admit, along with... other things, but that's in the past."

"Good enough. Go on, please."

"I've been practising martial arts since I was very young, although not as seriously as I should have. Various things kind of... got in the way. But over the last year, and more in the last six months, I've been training very seriously with Shampoo and her great-grandmother, an honoured Elder in her village. They've both improved my skills a huge amount." She glanced at Shampoo, who nodded encouragingly. "For about the last four years I've been working in a local jewellery shop. While I did well at school, when I graduated money was tight for a number of reasons and I haven't been to university. I'd like to get some higher education one day, but what with one thing or another it just hasn't happened yet."

The four men listening all nodded thoughtfully. She stopped for a moment. "I don't know quite what else to tell you. I've never done this sort of thing before." Adrian smiled at her.

"Don't worry, this isn't really a formal interview. You're doing fine. Why don't we ask some questions and you answer, that might be easier."
"OK."

"What do you do in this jewellery shop?"

"Mainly serve customers and help Mr Ito at the counter, but I also provide security. Every now and then someone tries to rob the place, even though we're in the middle of Nerima. Most smart criminals avoid the entire ward completely, but sometimes we get someone who hasn't worked out why." She laughed a little. "I educate them on the reason. When they get out of hospital, then jail, they don't come back." They all looked somewhat shocked, while Shampoo giggled.

"Keep telling Akane, bad idea let enemy live. Attack you with weapon, deserve what get."

"It was only a little knife last time," Akane said, indicating a length of about thirty centimetres with her hands, making the studio men stare. "I took it away from him when he tried threatening me with it. He wasn't very fast. When I snapped it in half he gave up, it was the other one with the crowbar who wanted a fight." She grinned. "I had to break a couple of bones but he stopped struggling in the end."

Aiko was snickering to herself beside Richard, from where they were listening out of the way, his daughter and her friend also sitting quietly next to them. He looked at her and smiled a little.

"Um, OK. And the local police are all right with this?" Jim asked. She nodded happily.

"Oh, yes. I got complimented on the lack of damage last time. The Sergeant was very pleased. He wasn't happy the first time, neither was Mr Ito. He took the cost of the front window out of my pay." She frowned slightly. "That was quite expensive. But it made a wonderful noise when the thief went through it."

"Riiight," Adrian said slowly.

She smiled at him. "Don't worry, I don't do things like that any more. Unless someone does something that really needs it." The blue-haired girl shrugged. "So far, no one has."

They all looked at her for a long moment, not quite sure what to ask next, while she waited patiently.

"OK, then," the director said after a moment, somewhat wishing he'd not raised the question. "Do you have any hobbies or interests other than the martial arts?"

"I quite like tennis, and skating, although I haven't done much of either recently. I was good at volleyball in school, I ended up as the captain of the girls team, and I played baseball as well. I also read quite a lot." She thought for a moment. "I'd like to be a better cook." Beside her Shampoo involuntarily shuddered hard.

"Could not be worse cook," she muttered. Akane glared at her for a moment.

"Thanks."

"Is true. Takes special talent make food chases you out of kitchen." The Chinese girl grinned at her friend, who sighed and nodded.

"I'll admit, I'm not at all good at it."

"That understatement." Shampoo subsided, snickering, when Akane glared at her again.
"Other than that, no real hobbies. I've tried a few things over the years but never stuck at them. The Art is the one thing I come back to." She smiled a little. "I love it."

"OK. That's very interesting, thank you, Akane." Adrian studied her for a moment, then turned to the other young woman.

"So, Shampoo. I'm sorry, is that really your name? It sounds a little odd to us." She laughed.

"Name actually Xian Pu, but people not Chinese say it wrong. Everyone in Nerima call Shampoo. I used to it now."

"I see." He smiled back at her. "It's not a bad name, just a little strange. Chinese is a very complex language, I understand, so I suppose it's not surprising that people might mispronounce it." She nodded.

"Not good with languages, understand problem." The Chinese woman shrugged a bit. "Took five years learn Japanese good enough not sound like idiot. English not easy either, but learning faster. Maybe in America get better sooner."

"Well, if it's any consolation, your English is much better than my Chinese," Matt said with a smile. He added a couple of words in Mandarin, which caused Shampoo to stare with widening eyes, then giggle furiously.

"Accent horrible."

He grinned. "I had a Chinese girlfriend years ago who tried to teach me. She gave up in the end. It used to make her laugh her ass off as well."

"Tell us about yourself, Shampoo. Don't worry, we understand the language problem," Adrian said. She nodded.

"Same age Akane, nearly. Month older. Born in Amazon village in Qinghai Province in China. Only relatives left Great-Grandmother Ku Lon, head village elder, and father. Visit him sometimes, but not for while. Trained by warriors of village since could walk, won village champion at sixteen. Was big..." She paused for a moment and turned to Akane, speaking Japanese.

"Competition," Akane said. Shampoo nodded.

"Yes. Sorry, forgot word. Was big competition, fought all other female warriors in age class to win. Very tiring."

"How many did you fight against?" Aaron asked, fascinated. She thought for a moment.

"Think was forty-three. No, forty-four. Not all at same time."

"Wow." He glanced at Matt who was looking slightly impressed.

"Akane used to fight more at once, but they not good." They looked at the other woman, who sighed.

"Yes, that's something I'd like to forget. An idiot at school managed to get practically every other idiot to wait for me every morning to fight me for the 'Honour of a Date.'" She sounded very sarcastic about this. "I had to beat them all down to get to school. It was a damn nuisance. Luckily most of them were terrible, so it didn't usually take very long. I still can't believe they kept at it for so long. Over a year." She smiled a little. "I suppose it was good training in a way, in some weird
form of crowd control."


"Looking back on it the whole thing was kind of amusing, but at the time it made me very angry." Matt exchanged a glance with Aaron, who looked appalled.

"That's... somewhat disturbing. An entire crowd of boys attacking one girl? Didn't the police or the school put a stop to it?"

Akane sighed a little. "It was Nerima. And Furinkan, which is the craziest part of Nerima. The high school principle was completely nuts, so he didn't care, and the police had bigger problems to deal with. As long as I didn't permanently maim anyone they didn't pay a lot of attention." A slight smile crossed her face. "People in Furinkan are used to that sort of thing. Most of them are a lot tougher than you'd expect. I don't know why, though."

Turning back to Shampoo, who was smiling, they tried to remember what they'd been asking. "All right, please continue, Shampoo," Adrian asked after a few seconds.

"Trained in many forms martial arts and weapons. Know swords, spears, bows, clubs, knife, some others. Also very good tracker. Can cook well, know some magic, only small things, but useful. Learned hidden weapons technique from master, but not very good yet. Very difficult." Akane looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"You've managed to make that work?"

"Small amount. Need much practice, probably never be good as Mousse. Teach you when you get ki control good enough."

"What is the hidden weapons technique," Adrian asked, fascinated.

"This," she said, pulling a chúi out of her sleeve. He jumped, then stared in shock. There was no way that the club she was holding could possibly have fitted. Aiko, beside Richard, nodded approvingly.

"Not bad. I didn't know she could do that."

"Holy crap!" Jim stared at her, then at his colleagues, who all looked as shocked as he felt. Glancing at Richard he noticed with slight surprise that his friend didn't seem at all taken aback by what the young woman had just done.

"Only small pocket, hold pair of chúi, sandwich for later." Shampoo smiled at their expression. "Can't hold for more than one day so far. Mousse master of technique, best in village. Keeps huge amount of weapons, other things, up sleeves. Very impressive. Still nuisance, but good at technique."

"That's... incredible," Matt told her honestly, suddenly wondering whether everything Adrian had told him had a basis in reality after all. The Chinese girl looked pleased. "I've heard stories of advanced martial arts techniques that were a bit unusual, but I've never seen anything remotely like that before."

"Is useful, be more useful when learn properly." Shampoo put the club back up her sleeve, leaving no trace of it. "Never know when need chúi. Or sandwich." She had an amused smile still.
"No, I suppose you don't," Adrian replied faintly.

"Also good at roof-hopping, other special techniques. Teaching Akane them, she also becoming very good. Little rusty at moment, not practice as much as should have for several years, but teaching bringing skills back fast. Great-Grandmother very pleased." She shrugged. "No good sparring partners in hand to hand. Mousse very good at weapons, better than me in many, so kept in practice with most, but not all. No room for archery unless go out of city."

"That doesn't seem to have had much effect on your skills," Jim said, looking at the target in the middle of the lawn. She followed his gaze with her own.

"Too slow," she muttered. "Great-Grandmother be annoyed. Must practice more."

"If that was slow, I'm almost afraid to see what fast would be," he told her honestly, making her grin.

"Also know many interesting pressure points, combat shiatsu. Good for massage as well. Other techniques, take too long to list all. Can also ride bicycle." She laughed. So did Akane.

"What she's not saying is that she could ride a bike along that fence without using her hands," the young woman said.

"Great-Grandmother run Ramen restaurant in Furinkan. Very good restaurant. I work as waitress, cook, deliver takeout. Is boring job sometimes, make more exciting by riding bicycle on roof or wall. Keeps reflexes sharp."

"I can imagine," Adrian said, shaking his head. For some reason, he didn't doubt her story.

"Not had much school, but Great-Grandmother teach many things. Would also like to learn more one day." Shampoo shrugged. "More or less story of life. Can ask questions."

There was a long pause, while they tried to gather their thoughts. Eventually, Aaron asked, "You mentioned magic. What do you mean by that?"

"Some small spells. Fire lighting, useful in kitchen. Tracking spells, some things useful in combat. Only tricks but come in handy." He looked slightly disbelieving. "Could demonstrate. Need candle." Aiko suddenly had one in her hand, which she flipped at the Chinese girl at fairly high speed. Shampoo snapped her hand out and caught it as it went past her face. "Thanks, Aiko." Her interviewers exchanged impressed glances. The motion had been extremely fast.

Putting the candle in her empty coffee mug to hold it upright, she stared hard at it. Mumbling something in Mandarin under her breath she concentrated, then snapped her fingers. The candle promptly lit itself. Everyone looked at it.

"Wow, that was amazing," Serena said quietly to Sophie, who nodded, wide eyed.

"Um..." Aaron stared at the burning candle, then looked around at his friends. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Told you, magic. Kitchen spell Great-Grandmother teach. Only trick, but useful. Not much range, no more than one metre, only work on small things, but still handy." She smiled. "Want to do again?" He nodded dumbly. Reaching out she snuffed out the candle, then repeated the feat.

"Good grief."
Adrian was grinning, pretty sure he was going to win his bet.

Pinching out the candle Shampoo picked it up and flipped it back to Aiko, who caught it without looking and vanished it. Richard grinned as she smiled at him. "Great-Grandmother much more powerful, good mage. I not really talented at magic. Is pity, would like to learn, but not seem to have knack for more than tricks."

"Not many people do, Shampoo," Aiko said from off to the side. "Good mages are fairly rare even in Japan, although most people can learn some useful things with enough effort. That was actually quite impressive. Good energy control."

"Thank you." Shampoo smiled at the other woman. "Fire trick not good idea for gas stove. Take too long, by the time fire light too much gas. Found out hard way. Bang very loud." She winced at the memory. "Great-Grandmother laughing for hours." They all stared at her, then laughed. "Like that." Shampoo grinned. "Very embarrassing."

"I can imagine. I hope you weren't hurt." Adrian looked amused. She shook her head. "No, just black face and bad hair. Got better quickly."

"Anything else like that?" he asked curiously. She glanced at Akane, suddenly looking worried. Her friend nodded. Looking back at the director, she sighed a little.

"One big thing. Have curse. Is very annoying, but no cure."

Adrian looked puzzled. "What do you mean, you have a curse?" The young woman sighed again.

"Very powerful magic, got years ago." She looked around at them. "Embarrassing to tell. Called Jusenkyo curse. Very strange. I turn into cat if get wet with cold water. Warm water changes back." Everyone but Aiko and Akane looked at her in disbelief. She shrugged at their expressions. "Sorry. Know hard to believe but true. Easy to show." Looking at Richard, she asked, "Can get glass cold water, glass hot water?"

After a moment, he nodded, getting up and going into the house. They waited silently until he came back, putting a glass each of hot and cold water on the table in front of her, then sitting down again. "Thank you." She picked up the cold water and sipped it. "See, small contact not cause effect. Slightly weird. But bigger contact..." She poured some on her arm.

Everyone stared in total shock, as Akane neatly caught the falling glass and put it back on the table. Bending down she moved some clothes around on the pile on the floor, allowing the feline version of Shampoo to escape, then picked her up, holding her gently. "It's a very awkward problem," she explained, as they kept staring. The cat in her arms nodded. "Unfortunately there is no cure. Several people I know have similar curses, they've looked for a long time, but once you have it you're stuck, apparently. There are ways around it, though. Her village makes a special soap that you can wash with, which kind of turns it off for a while, as long as you keep using it. It's quite expensive but her Great-Grandmother can get it easily whenever she needs more. Shampoo doesn't always use it, she doesn't like the smell, and she's used to the curse now. So are the people in Nerima." She grinned.

"It was kind of weird at first but you'd be amazed what you can get used to if you have enough time."

Richard began laughing slightly, causing Aiko to look at him with a grin. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it," he said, before laughing harder. Everyone looked at him, Aiko giggling, while his
daughter sighed.

"He keeps saying that and laughing when something odd happens," she complained, "And he won't say why it's so funny." He kept laughing, more quietly now, as his daughter gave him a look of long-suffering irritation. "Oh, Dad. You're such a child sometimes," she added, which made Aiko also begin laughing quite hard.

Casting his friend occasional odd looks, Jim turned back to Akane and the cat she was holding, shaking his head. Matt was gaping, while Aaron seemed to be in shock. Adrian, after an initial look of astonishment, seemed thoughtful. After Akane put Shampoo on the table where she sat, curling her tail around her paws, he inspected her closely. "Is that really you, Shampoo?" The cat nodded, meowing once. He held up three fingers. "How many fingers?" The cat rolled its eyes, making Matt produce a small choked noise, then meowed three times. "Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable." He stared for a long few seconds, then looked at his colleagues, who still seemed to be frozen.

"And hot water turns you back again?" Shampoo nodded once more, then looked at Akane, motioning to the glass of hot water with her paw.

Scooping up her friend's clothes and putting them over her shoulder, she picked up the cat and the glass. "I'd better do this inside," she said apologetically. They all nodded, following her with their eyes as she went inside. A few minutes later both girls came out, Shampoo running her fingers through her hair, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"Sorry, I know it shock. Americans not familiar with magic. Even Japanese surprised at first." She sat down again, Akane seated beside her. "Special soap block curse, so curse not problem then, but not smell nice. Will have to ask Great-Grandmother for batch without smell." No one said anything for another few seconds.

Eventually Adrian grinned. "I'm sorry for staring, Shampoo, and testing you, but that really was very unexpected." She nodded, smiling in an understanding way. "It certainly makes a mockery of any special effect I've ever seen, though." His expression turned thoughtful. "Come to think of it, it could be... very interesting. With the right script..." Jim looked at him for a moment, then back at the two young women.

"Yori showed us some pretty incredible things the time she was here, but for some reason that's even more incredible. Does it affect you mentally at all?" She shook her head.

"Can't tell difference. Vision odd, and much better smell and hearing, but mind still same. Everything look very big, though." The Chinese girl grinned as he laughed. "Used to it now, but very annoying at first. Still annoying if it rain suddenly and not using soap."

"I can imagine," he replied, "I can see a number of times it could be awkward. But it could be quite useful as well, I suppose, under the right circumstances."

"Have found some uses in past," she laughed.

Adrian came back from wherever he'd been, looking at Shampoo for a moment, then nodded to himself. "All right. Thank you both for telling us all that. It's very interesting. Now, Aiko told us you were both skilled in martial arts, and coming from someone like her, that's very high praise indeed." He glanced at Matt. "You have absolutely no idea. I know how good some of your guys are, but..." he shook his head with a weird little smile. "You're going to have a bit of a shock, I expect." Turning back to the two young women, he added, "Perhaps you could show us what you can do." Akane nodded, glancing at her friend.
"How would you like us to do this?"

"Whatever's convenient." Aiko got up and walked over.

"Why don't you start with something simple, Akane? You could demonstrate some of your strength training exercises, then spar with Shampoo. If you like, you can both go against me as well after. I think I can probably manage." She smiled as Akane laughed hysterically for a moment.

"Yes, I think you could. OK, I guess you're right." She turned to the police officer. "Richard, do you mind if I change in the house?"

"Help yourself, Akane. Did you find the bathroom earlier?" She nodded, retrieving her bag which she'd left by the door into the house. Shampoo did likewise, following her inside. All four studio men watched, then looked at each other.

"Fucking hell," Aaron finally said, looking slightly guilty as Sophie giggled, having forgotten the two teenagers were there. "Did you see that?" Matt nodded, still looking slightly shocked. Adrian laughed.

"I've been telling you for seven months. What happened? Everyone laughed." He grinned at them evilly. "I think it's going to get better as well."

Shortly the two young women returned, both wearing different clothing, Akane in her new black gi, Shampoo in something equivalent made from silk but cut differently. They inspected the two women with interest. Adrian whispered to Jim, "They look damn good. I can well see that in front of a camera." His friend nodded. Both women walked out onto the lawn, heading for the pallet of blocks. When she reached it Akane bent down slightly, picking up the close to two hundred kilo load without effort, then carrying it into the middle of the lawn. Adrian smiled while Matt and Aaron stared in shock.

"Holy shit. That must weigh a quarter of a ton."

"Oh, at least, I'd think." Jim grinned, remembering the magical girls in the studio when the gantry collapsed. If Akane was anywhere even close to as strong, a few hundred pounds wasn't much effort, leaving aside Aiko saying she could pick up a van and throw it a hundred feet. They watched as she snapped the metal bands holding the blocks together with her bare hands, making almost musical twangs, then picked up a stack of half a dozen blocks. Shampoo looked around, before retrieving a large tarpaulin that was folded up in the corner of the garden, spreading it out on the lawn to stop the broken blocks going everywhere on the grass.

Stacking the blocks neatly on the tarp, Akane built a pile eight high, then stood in front of it, side on to the table. She glanced at Adrian who nodded, smiling slightly. With an indrawn breath, she raised her fist, then struck out at the topmost block, in a move almost too fast to see. There was a loud crack and the top block exploded into tiny fragments, the three under it breaking apart and sliding to the ground. Matt stared while Aaron twitched a little. After a long moment the tall man stood, walking over to the two girls, then looking at the blocks. Bending down he picked up half of one, looking at it, then shook his head in awe. "It's a real block," he said, "and not one of those lightweight ones either." Akane giggled.

"No, those are useless. They're not worth the effort, it's like hitting fog."

"Can I see your hand?" he asked after a moment. She held it out. It was covered with concrete powder but seemed undamaged otherwise. He stared at it, shaking his head again. "Incredible. Do it again." She smiled, quickly pushing the destroyed blocks to one side and rebuilding the tower.
He nodded, and she lashed out once more. Even close up he could barely follow the motion of her fist as it pulverised the block. "Unbelievable. Can you break more than the top one like that?"

"Oh, yes, I normally don't bother because the bits go everywhere, but it's not hard." She made another stack while he looked at her in worried awe. Her concept of 'not hard' frankly slightly scared him. Stepping back slightly he nodded again, watching with amazement as her fist went completely through the top three blocks and crushed the entire stack. As she removed her arm from the crumbling concrete there was complete silence in the garden, broken by Aiko clapping. Akane looked at her and smiled.

"How the hell strong are you?" he asked in awe. She shrugged a little.

"I have no idea. I've always been strong, that was about my only real special talent for a long time, and pretty quick, but both got a lot better over the last year." Shampoo giggled.

"She understating again. Horrifically strong and very fast years ago. More now. Stronger than me but not as fast. Nowhere near Aiko or her friends, but very good for not being magical girl." Akane wiped the dust off her hand with her sleeve, slightly embarrassed at the praise.

"Good god," Matt said in a small voice. Akane glanced at him, smiled a little, then bent down and picked up a head-sized chunk of block, squeezing it one handed. It emitted a crunching sound and crumbled to small pieces. He went white.

"If I were you I wouldn't challenge her to an arm-wrestling competition," Richard called, amusement in his voice. Aiko snickered, sounding remarkably like Yori to him.

"No, I don't think I will." Matt moved out of the way as Shampoo came closer, picking up a few blocks and snapping them in half between her hands, then grinning at Akane, who was watching with puzzlement.

"I throw, you break." Her friend's expression cleared and she nodded, smiling.

"OK." Wide-eyed, Matt retreated to the safety of the table, sitting down again. Carrying her stack of half-blocks, Shampoo walked ten metres away, then put most of them down. Holding one in her left hand, she hefted the other in her right, while Akane took up a side on stance. She nodded she was ready. Smiling, the Chinese girl whipped the chunk of concrete in her hand at her friend, who lashed out at it, swearing when she only clipped it, sending it spinning into the distance in a puff of dust. Everyone watched as it arced over the back fence and landed a hundred metres away.

"Whoops. Sorry, I haven't tried this before," she called, embarrassed.

"Um..." Richard started, getting a little worried about the integrity of his house, but before he could say anything else Shampoo threw the other piece she was holding. This time Akane caught it squarely, causing it to shatter into gravel which rained down on the tarp. Sophie and Serena both clapped while Aiko nodded approvingly.

"Not bad. Good accuracy, and decent power." With a laugh, the Amazon picked up two more half-blocks, throwing them one after another. Akane got both of them, yelping slightly as a high-velocity fragment clipped her ear.

"Ow," she said mildly, rubbing it. "That stung." Aaron and Matt exchanged glances, pretty sure that most people would have required a new ear, if not a new head. The marble-sized bit of concrete had made a remarkable bullet-ricochet noise as it left the vicinity at high speed, luckily heading over the back fence again.
"It might be a good idea to try something with less shrapnel, Akane," Aiko called, amusement on her face. The young woman looked over, then nodded.

"OK." As Shampoo put the blocks back on the stack, she walked over to the thick post partially buried in the ground, examining it. It was apparently a large part of an old telephone pole, perhaps three metres long, half-buried. Poking it experimentally she smiled. It seemed fairly solidly fixed in place. Stepping back a bit she assessed it, then struck out with her fist. Splinters flew. Her other hand made more bits come off. Nodding in satisfaction, she attacked it vigorously, punching and kicking, rapidly causing the upper half metre to resemble a huge cotton bud it was so frayed. The four men at the table watched with different expressions, Adrian with satisfied glee, Jim with interest, and the other two staring in horror. After thirty seconds of punishment the pole was listing at a forty-five degree angle, looking severely sorry for itself.

One final kick snapped the top completely off, sending it bouncing down the garden. Everyone watched it until it stopped moving, Richard with a sigh of relief that it hadn't quite made it as far as the fence, but looking with mild irritation at all the divots it had taken out of the grass on the way. "She's worse than Yori for holes in the lawn," he muttered, making Aiko laugh.

"It was your idea to do this here, Richard," she reminded him, grinning. He sighed.

"I know. I'll know better for next time," he replied, then smiled.

Aiko called to Shampoo, who looked in her direction. "Catch," she said, tossing a sword at her, smiling as several people gasped at the sight of the shiny razor-sharp blade flipping end over end at the Chinese woman. Reaching out Shampoo caught the weapon without problem, looking at it for a moment, then grinned. Motioning Akane to move, she lunged at the remains of the pole, reducing it to firewood with half a dozen incredibly fast strikes, all within less than two seconds. Satisfied, she stepped back.

"That pole dead," she said deadpan. Akane giggled.

Getting up, Aiko walked over to them and had a short conversation in Japanese. Both young women nodded after a moment. They carefully carried the pallet of blocks off to one side, both together so it wouldn't tip any off, while Aiko rolled the tarp full of crushed concrete up and moved it of the way. Putting their burden down they came back, heading for the middle of the lawn. Aiko stood off to one side, as they faced each other, bowing slightly, then waiting. She snapped, "Begin!"

Both women immediately attacked each other, leaping about acrobatically, snapping out kicks and punches at incredible speed. Akane caught Shampoo's arm as it came past, leaning out of the way of the punch, then flipped her over her shoulder in a move almost too fast to see, only to have the Chinese woman roll in mid air and kick out at her back, sending her flying. She recovered into a forward roll, bouncing off her feet when in the right position, back-flipping back into range and kicking out. Her opponent deflected the kick with her arm, diving under the other woman, landing on her hands, then pushing off to fly past her again as she turned, half a dozen blows landing on her ribs en route. Akane winced slightly while most of the other people sucked in their breath, as the sound was fairly dramatic, suggesting broken ribs at least.

Nothing like that seemed evident as Akane spun around in a low sweep kick just as the other woman landed, forcing her to jump again, putting one hand on Akane's head as she went completely upside down over her, then somersaulted twice, landing out of range. With a grin she dived back into the fight.

Looking away from the sparring match on the lawn, Adrian glanced at Jim with a pleased nod, then
looked beyond him to his two colleagues, who were watching open-mouthed. Neither one of them was breathing as far as he could see. Grinning to himself he returned his attention to the two young women, who seemed to be enjoying themselves. He could see that while incredibly fast, they were nowhere near the speed or power of what he'd seen at the party after Christmas, but compared to a 'normal' martial artist of any school he'd ever encountered before, they were astounding.

'I have to have these girls', he thought with glee. 'Whatever it takes. They'll make us all rich.'

Richard looked at Aiko, who glanced at him for a moment before smiling, returning her attention to the fight. He got the impression she was very pleased. He could see that neither fighter was in her or her friends class, the speed was amazing but nothing like what she was capable of, never mind Yori or Chou. You couldn't even see them move when they tried. Akane and Shampoo's motions were a blur, even so. It was extremely impressive. Looking at the director who was watching them fight with rapt attention and a big smile, he got the impression that the other man would offer them anything they wanted to work with him. His colleagues seemed to be broken, staring in disbelief. The police officer grinned a little. That tended to be what happened around people like this, in his experience, when you first saw it.

"Cease!" Aiko said sharply. Both fighters instantly stopped, straightening up. She nodded, pleased. Producing a pair of bo staffs she tossed one to each girl, who caught them, then looked at her. "Reset, please." Both stepped away from each other, going back to their original positions.

"Begin!" As the command was given they dropped into a crouch, Shampoo whipping her staff around at Akane's head. The other woman instantly blocked it with a sharp crack, then returned the blow, which her friend jumped over, before striking out again. They whirled around each other, the staffs making loud bangs on one another, for a couple of minutes, before Aiko again called a halt.

"Well done, very good. How much have you practised that, Akane?" She was speaking Japanese for the moment.

"Not as much as I should have, we've been concentrating on other things recently, but Shampoo does bring it out every now and then." The youngest Tendo shrugged a little. "I should work on it, I could barely keep up."

"It was pretty good, to be honest. Shampoo was obviously holding back, but even so you're not bad. I understand you know something of other practice weapons as well?"

"I've used bokken and other things, I was quite good with them, but again, I haven't practised recently. I've never tried real swords before, except once or twice. Shampoo is much, much better than I am with that sort of thing."

Aiko nodded understandingly. "OK. I understand. You should probably start learning them more seriously now, though."

"I don't think Shampoo was all that keen on live blades when I was, um, prone to being a bit annoyed," Akane said in a low voice, glancing at the people watching her. Her friend nodded, grinning.

"Not a good idea. Akane was dangerous enough without giving her sharp weapons." Both the others looked amused, although Akane was also a little embarrassed.

"I'd suggest that you're probably more than stable enough now to learn to use weapons correctly," Aiko said, giggling. "Practice weapons are all well and good but live blade techniques are somewhat different. Anyway, what next?" She pondered it for a second, then pulled out a pair of
bokken. "Worth trying anyway. They look and sound impressive, which is the point of all this." Handing them to the other two she received the bo staffs back, making them go away.

"I'd suggest that you could add something to it this time if you put a little more action into it." Aiko glanced at the fence, then the house, before returning her attention to them. Both women followed her gaze, then looked at each other with smiles.

"OK. That could be fun."

"Try not to fall off, it makes both of us look bad," Shampoo giggled. Akane poked her in the ribs with the bokken.

"I nearly had you in that spar. If Aiko hadn't called time I'd have won, so who would have made who look bad?" Still giggling, Shampoo stepped back out of range.

"You might be misremembering it," she commented, impishly. Aiko chuckled, then looked over to the house, seeing Emily come out and look around. She waved. The other woman waved back, sitting beside her husband, who leaned over and kissed her. Serena went over to her and began talking rapidly, pointing at the target, then her bow, then Shampoo. Grinning to herself she turned back to the two women.

"Right, make it impressive, but I think you've probably got it in the bag, myself. Adrian looks like he'd offer you his first-born if you agree to work for him." They glanced at the table, seeing the four men staring at them. The director was doing everything but rubbing his hands together in glee. Both the arms master and the stunt director were staring with open mouths. Stepping back, Aiko went back to English. "Reset!" she barked. The two young women moved a couple of metres apart again, holding the bokken ready. "Begin!"

Ducking as Shampoo instantly sliced at her head, Akane grinned at Aiko, then ran for the fence, jumping on top of it, before running along the top. Shampoo followed her, slicing at her occasionally, throwing in a few yells for good measure. Making a sharp turn at the end of the fence, the Tendo woman charged along the back of the garden on two centimetres of wood, blocking blows over her head and smiling. Aiko watched with satisfaction, while everyone else stared. As she reached the next corner, Akane jumped high enough that her friend ran right under her, landing behind her and now being the one doing the chasing. Shampoo giggled, making the turn onto the fence heading back to the house. When she reached it she lightly leapt onto the roof, as everyone under the patio shade suddenly got up and ran out onto the lawn to get a better view. They watched as both women slashed at each other, Akane receiving a bokken to the head in a manner that made them all wince. She dropped to the roof, rolling along it as Shampoo pressed her attack, dropping off the end into the garden and tucking into a ball, then bouncing off the ground right back onto the fence, then the roof again. Matt gaped in shock, looking at Adrian who was grinning happily.

"I'm sorry," he said, making the other man laugh.

"You can pay me later," Adrian said, still watching the fight.

Running around on the roof amid the clacking of bokken slamming together, the two young women seemed to be enjoying themselves. Even so, when Aiko called "Cease!" they both stopped immediately. The magical girl looked at the director and his colleagues. "Do you need any more?"

He looked around at the other people from the studio, meeting their eyes. They shook their heads wordlessly. "Nope, I think that will do it," he said, with a huge smile. Matt pulled his wallet out and
looked in it, pulling out the contents and counting it, before handing it over.

"I owe you six hundred," he said, then went and sat down with his head in his hands, looking like someone had hit him with something heavy. Aaron stared at the girls on the roof, then the one on the lawn, before shrugging.

"Take a cheque?" he asked.

"Cash only, sorry," the director said, chuckling. His colleague sighed and opened his own wallet, counting under his breath and muttering.

Looking up at the roof Aiko motioned to Shampoo and Akane, who dropped to the ground and returned her bokken. "Well done," she whispered. "If that didn't do it nothing will." Both smiled. All three walked back, Aiko going to stand next to Richard who had sat down again, while the other two sat at the table.

Adrian retook his seat, as did his colleagues. Emily whispered to her husband who nodded, getting up and coming back quickly with a number of bottles of chilled beer, looking around at everyone. Aiko smiled at him, accepting one, as did all four studio men and Shampoo. Akane was too nervous. Casually popping the cap off with her thumb Aiko put the bottle to her lips, catching the top in her other hand as it came back down. Shampoo watched, then grinned, repeating the feat. Saluting her with her bottle the magical girl laughed. Adrian shook his head, handing her her bottle. She quickly opened it and gave it back.

"So many talents," he said, smiling. She giggled.

"Good trick. Must remember."

Looking around at the other men, the director asked casually, "Was that enough, or do you need more? Matt, would you like to test Akane or Shampoo? Try out that marine training of yours?" The tall ex-military man shook his head slowly.

"No, I don't think I need to do that. I know when I'm outclassed." He looked slightly embarrassed by the admission but was honest enough to make it. Inside he was wondering what would have happened if his unit had ever come across people like these women in battle, deciding it was something he never wanted to find out, except perhaps from a very long way away.

"Aaron?"

"I think I'm good. Stunned, shocked, a little nervous, but good." The arms master inspected both females. "Thank you for showing me the most incredible martial arts I've ever seen. What style was that, anyway?"

"Mix of Amazon techniques and Tendo Anything Goes School," Shampoo replied. "Not use secret special moves, most too dangerous."

"Special moves?" Adrian asked curiously. The Amazon nodded.

"Many Amazon special moves. Most secret, only used in battle. Great-Grandmother finally teach some to Akane and me. Many left to learn. Very dangerous, very powerful."

"I've learned the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken and the Bakusai Tenketsu so far. They're not too dangerous to bystanders, but very useful. A lot of the other techniques are devastating, not something you should use in a city." Akane smiled at the memories of the times she'd seen some of those techniques used. "One of them can cause a small tornado, for example." They stared in
"What!" Aaron choked out. She nodded.

"I've seen it used. Someone I knew... a long time ago. He was the best I ever saw, until Yori and Chou. He knew a lot of the techniques, Cologne taught him all sorts of things." She sighed a little. "So amazingly good. He could learn anything pretty much just by watching it done. Anyway, he could do the Hiryu Shoten Ha really well. It's very impressive." They all exchanged glances. There was something in her voice that suggested complete truthfulness, as unlikely as it sounded.

"Making a tornado does sound a little... excessive," Aaron finally said. "What are the other two you mentioned?"

"The first one is a speed technique. It's very painful to learn but works well." Akane looked around, then got up and retrieved a handful of the gravel created by the block breaking. Returning to the table she scattered it on the surface, as they watched. A couple of dozen small bits of concrete rolled around for a moment before stopping. "Like this." She poised her hand, then with a flicker all the bits of concrete vanished in a fraction of a second. They gaped as she held out her hand, containing the gravel.

"Fuck me," Matt breathed.

"It's pretty effective for punching. You don't have the power, but the speed makes up for it." She sat down again, smiling a little at their expressions. After a moment she frowned reflectively. "But it's not a good idea to use it when brushing your teeth," she added, which made Shampoo start giggling.

"Silly Akane. Very funny, but painful."

"I got carried away and didn't think it through," her friend said, shrugging with a small smile. The four men stared for a moment, while Aiko smiled.

"Incredible," Matt finally said. "And the other one you mentioned?"

"Technique originally meant for quarries," Shampoo replied. "Only works on stone, or wood and metal if you good enough. Lets you find breaking point, destroy with touch. I show." Standing, she walked over to the pallet of blocks, picking one up and carrying it into the middle of the lawn. She stood it on end, then looked at it carefully. Glancing at them, she said, "Find breaking point, where stone is weakest, then..." Her finger stabbed out, touching the block, which promptly exploded. Small fragments dropped around her. She looked embarrassed as Richard yelped, watching the bits scatter themselves around his lawn. "Sorry. Will pick up later." Returning to the table she sat, looking at the four open mouths.

"Careful, things fly in," she said with a giggle.

Shutting his mouth with a snap, Matt asked weakly, "That's a quarrying technique?" She nodded.

"Yes. Not work for living things. That good, would be very messy." He shuddered, suddenly picturing the result if it did work on living creatures. Aaron looked slightly ill, while Jim closed his eyes for a moment.

"Ick," he muttered.

Adrian recovered before the others did, smiling so widely the corners of his mouth nearly met around the back. "Akane, Shampoo, thank you very much indeed. Would you mind if I went and
talked to my friends inside for a little while?"

"Not at all, Mr Stewart," Akane responded after glancing at Shampoo slightly nervously. They watched as the four men got up and went into the house, with a couple of wondering looks back en route. Aiko came over and dropped into a chair, grinning at them.

"Very well done, both of you. Assuming they're not scared rigid I think you've done it. Stunt work at least should be in the bag." Akane smiled, looking at her friend again, who was also smiling.

"Thank you so much, Aiko, for doing all this for us. And Yori for thinking of us in the first place. We owe you both a lot. Even if nothing comes of it this has been a lot of fun."

"Don't worry, I think it will work out," the brunette replied. "Adrian at least is totally sold. The other two are basically confused at the moment, they've just seen in less than an hour a lot of things they knew were impossible demonstrated live. That tends to cause a bit of a stir." She giggled. "They'll get used to it." Richard started laughing again, making Serena sigh, looking at Sophie, who shrugged.

"So what do you think?" Adrian asked, sitting on the sofa in the living room. The others sat around the place, looking at him wordlessly for a long moment. Matt took a pull on his beer.

"I think I might have had an accident on the freeway and I'm currently in hospital on some very good drugs," he muttered. Aaron shrugged helplessly.

"If that's the case I'm in the next bed." He looked out the window at the three girls sitting at the table. "Un-fucking-believable. And you say that Aiko woman is even better?" Adrian was still grinning.

"Oh, yes. To be honest she and her friends make Akane and Shampoo, as incredible as they are, seem like beginners. Yori and Chou are at least as good again. You simply wouldn't believe it. They said they might be the best in the world which, having seen them in action, I couldn't say was wrong. But, that said, those two out there are amazing." He shrugged a little.

"That's the biggest understatement I've ever heard in my life," the arms master said slowly. "I've seen a lot of martial artists in my time, I thought I was pretty good as well, but..." He drank some more beer, his hands trembling slightly. "Either one of them could take me to pieces in seconds, with nothing more than their bare hands. Screw the martial arts, Akane is strong enough to pull the head off a rabid grizzly. I seriously wouldn't want to get her pissed off."

"If you do she starts throwing cars around," Adrian said, looking both amused and slightly worried. "But I'm told that doesn't happen any more." Aaron and Matt were looking at him with wide eyes.

"I certainly hope not!" Matt shook his head. "I agree, they're absolutely insanely good. Shampoo is obviously better, which makes sense if she's teaching Akane, but that girl is still unbelievable. This Nerima place must be completely off-the-wall insane to produce fighters like that. I don't know which I want more, to go there to find out or to stay the fuck away."

"We've got to get them, you guys." The director was looking out the window again. "They could give the studio an edge in stunt work like you wouldn't believe. They're so good they could write their own ticket anywhere in this town. If we don't grab them someone else will."

"There's a lot of paperwork to do," Matt said slowly. "Work visas, that's just the start." Adrian waved his hand dismissively.
"Not relevant. People come into this industry from all over the world. That's what the lawyers are paid for."

"We'll need to talk to HR, and Legal. I can see a number of potential problems," Jim said. "But I have to admit that I think you're right. They're very young still, but clearly smart and driven. They could go a very long way. Good looking too, which will help. Exotic." He smiled. "That's worth real money. It would be interesting to see their acting ability, but I guess that's something you learn, although you need talent as well." Adrian nodded thoughtfully.

"I have a feeling that Akane at least could be good. There's something about her..." He shrugged after a moment. "Difficult to explain, but I've got a good feeling about it. Shampoo, I'm not so sure, but I wouldn't discount it. She needs work on her English before that but I think she could improve it a lot. She learned Japanese, which isn't exactly the easiest language around."

He looked at the stunt director. "Could you work with them?"

"If I can stop being terrified of them, yes," his colleague said, looking amused yet worried. He glanced out the window. "The thing that worries me a bit is what happens when some of the guys decide to hit on them? I have a sneaking suspicion that Akane isn't all that interested. She might react badly."

"Anyone that tries something stupid probably deserves what happens," Adrian chuckled. "After the first couple of dicks get pulled off they'll learn." Matt winced.

"That's kind of what I'm scared of," he muttered, crossing his legs protectively. The other three laughed.

"There aren't a lot of female stunt people compared to the male ones," Jim said reflectively. Aaron nodded.

"True, but the ones there are are usually damn good. Not that good, but very good indeed." He grinned. "From what I saw they're both ridiculously tough. We could do all sorts of things that would kill most people without needing to use CGI."

"Assuming HR would allow it," Jim said. "They'd have a fit if they got told we were going to drop a twenty-three year old girl off the roof of a building, even if we said she'd bounce."

"They'll learn," Adrian grinned. "I think quite a lot of rules are going to have to be rewritten."

"I wonder if they could train my guys in some of those techniques," Matt mused, looking out the window. He had a thoughtful expression on his face.

"No idea. You can certainly ask." Adrian looked around again. "So, no objections if I go to the studio and tell them we need those two?" The others all shook their heads, one after another.

"What happens if the studio turns you down?" Jim asked. "They can be a little cautious, and those girls are complete unknowns." Adrian sighed a little, nodding.

"Fuck it. If they turn me down I'll hire them anyway, start my own studio, and in five years buy the bastards out." They grinned at him.

"If you do, is there a job for me?" Aaron asked, amused.

"Well, you might have to take a pay cut for a while." Adrian smiled at him. "You're overpaid." Laughing, he got up and went back out, followed by the others.
"Here we go," Aiko murmured. "Don't accept the first offer. You're the ones in the position of strength, trust me." The two women looked at her as she got up and moved away, nodding to the studio men as they came out of the house. They glanced at each other, then waited. Adrian sat down, waiting for the other three, then looked at them for a moment.

"I'm showing my hand, but I have to tell you up front that I really want you two working for me. More than I've wanted anything since my first bike when I was six." He grinned. Shampoo giggled a little. "This is the situation. All of us are sure you would make incredible stunt-women, at the least. Acting is a way off, I think, there are skills you need to learn which would take time, and you, Shampoo, would need to become more fluent in English." She nodded, understanding. "But that said, I have no doubt you could learn those skills. How good you'd actually be at acting I don't know yet, but there are some extremely well paid actors who are awful." He laughed a little. "So bad. Yet they're very popular and make a huge amount of money. Bad acting isn't necessarily a handicap."

Akane thought of some of the action movies she'd seen in recent years and smiled, thinking she had seen some of the people he was talking about.

"I'm going to go back to the studio, talk to the people in charge, and very strongly make the case for you there. It will probably take some time, and I'd think we'd need to have you over two or three more times at least before everyone is satisfied. Probably try some actual stunts, which might need a few days training, see how they go." He glanced at Matt who nodded.

"No problem. The martial arts are... beyond good, but there are a lot of other things you could turn those skills to pretty quickly."

"Right. There's all the paperwork to do to let you live and work here legally, get paid, taxed, all the other things that you need in business. The legal department would need to arrange that, then you'd need to very carefully get it checked by your own lawyers. I could recommend someone, but I'd suggest you find one yourself, just so you'd be happy you had unbiased advice." Both women nodded thoughtfully.

"You would probably need an agent. They're a pain sometimes, but a good one really does earn their pay. There are other things like actors guilds, unions, things like that, which you'd need to learn about. That can come later. I can help you with all that if you want. Don't worry, I'm not about to try to manipulate you, I'm both more or less honest and frankly terrified of what could happen if I did and you found out." He chuckled as they both smiled at him.

"Before all that, though, I need to persuade the studio to take you on. I wish I could hire you on the spot, to be honest, but at the moment that's not quite possible. But, I would like your agreement that you won't go and talk to any other studio before I have a chance to get you on board." Akane stared at him for a moment.

"I'm not sure I understand."

Adrian laughed again softly. "You really have no idea, do you?" He studied her for a moment.
"Akane, what I saw today would let you work in pretty much any studio in the world, unless it's run by idiots." He sighed a little. "Some are, of course. But no, you'd have no trouble finding work. Either of you. I want that work to be for me. I have all sorts of ideas for movies that you'd make possible. I only wish I could find more like you." He glanced meaningfully at Aiko, who shrugged apologetically. "But I'll take you happily. You're both young, intelligent, unbelievably skilled, and good looking women. That's worth a lot of money."
Akane looked over at Aiko, who nodded, holding up six fingers.

"I think we could agree to that, as long as it happened within six months," Akane said cautiously, hoping she'd decoded the magical girl's message. A nod reassured her.

"That's fair." The director looked pleased. "It will most likely take at least two weeks before I can get anything at all done, the studio can be very slow, but once it starts, it should go fairly smoothly. What would probably happen is another demonstration, followed by reviving some of the people who fainted," he snickered, "then a long delay while they get their asses in gear. At that point they'd want all your details to see what paperwork was needed. After that, there would be interviews with HR, who can be a damn pain in the ass, legal, financial, all that crap. Then some more tests, practical stunts, that sort of thing. With some luck it would be wrapped up by Christmas, and if that was the case you'd get your first work sometime after the New Year. There are a couple of movies on the horizon that you'd both be a good fit for."

Akane felt slightly weak inside, glancing at her friend to see her looking back wide-eyed. She returned her attention to the director.

"One thing to remember is that this work isn't full time, it goes in bursts as movies are made, but when we're shooting one it's damn frantic and hard work. You'd be putting in very long days for several weeks at a time, possibly a couple of months. There would be gaps where nothing much happened, although once you got established those would start to fill in. In a few years I would expect you could pick and choose your work, once your reputation builds up. And it will. There would most likely be a lot of travel as well. But, you'll make a shitload of money." He laughed at their expressions. "That tends to make the tedious parts more bearable."

"I'm kind of wondering what the downside to all this is," Akane muttered.

"Shampoo wondering too. Sound too good to be true."

"From my point of view you're too good to be true," Adrian said, grinning. They both laughed, relaxing a little. "OK. I'm going to recommend to the studio that, assuming they agree to take you on, we start you on this much." He pulled a notebook from his pocket, wrote a number on a blank page, showed it to his colleagues who all nodded after a moment, then tore it out and pushed it across to the two young women. "That's in US dollars, per month." They stared at it in disbelief. There were more zeros than seemed plausible. In yen, once Akane did the conversion in her head, it was even worse. Once more she glanced at Aiko, this time for reassurance. The magical girl shook her head very slightly, then made a small upward motion with one finger.

Gulping slightly, she pushed the paper back, feeling she was making a horrible mistake. "Um, that's nice, but..." Adrian grinned.

"OK. My mistake, I must have put the wrong number on that. Let's see." He crossed out the figure and wrote another one, returning it to her. She stared. Beside her, Shampoo swore slightly in Mandarin. Aiko coughed, making her look, then indicated again. Briefly closing her eyes and sending a prayer to her honoured ancestors, Akane pushed the paper back, unable to speak. The director looked at her for a moment, then glanced behind himself at Aiko, who smiled brightly.

"Hmm. OK, I see I made another mistake. Let's see..." He tapped his pencil on the table for a moment, glanced at Matt, then slowly wrote a third figure under the first two. Pushing it back to Akane, he waited. Everyone else was watching them, Richard and his family desperately curious. The youngest Tendo pulled the paper closer, looking at his face, then looked down. She paled a little. A quick glance at Aiko received a small nod. She looked at Shampoo who was staring at the paper and sweating.
"Ah, I think we could probably live with that," she managed to get out, trying to sound casual. Her voice was a little higher in pitch than normal, though. "To start with." Adrian chuckled.

"Great. Right, I just have to get it past the studio, but I think that's doable." Holding out his hand he waited, until she shook it, her own trembling a little. Shampoo was still staring at the paper but reflexively shook his hand as well. "Thank you, ladies. One way or another, I want to work with you both. And if you have any friends with similar skills, I'd be interested in talking to them at some point." He grinned, pushing his chair back, then got up. "Right. Any chance of another beer, Richard?"

"Sure." Richard stood and disappeared into the house, coming back with more bottles. Aiko accepted one, popped the top off, then wandered over and looked at the paper both girls were staring fixedly at. She whistled softly.

"Wow. Perhaps I was a little hasty telling you to hold out."

"Oh, now you tell me," Akane snapped in a whisper, shaking with adrenaline. Aiko giggled.

"Don't worry, people here expect you to negotiate. I'm sure you could have pushed him higher, but there's no need to be greedy." She grinned at the youngest Tendo, patted her on the shoulder, then went over to help Richard set up the barbecue. Shampoo finally managed to turn her eyes away from the paper to her friend.

"Akane?"

"Yes?"

"Is this real?"

"I think so. Does it feel real?"

"I'm not sure. I can't feel my legs. Is that normal?"

"No idea." There was a pause. "Shampoo?"

"Yes?"

"Am I reading that number right?"

"Yes."

"That's a lot of zeros."

"It is." There was another pause. "Every month?"

"That's what he said."

"Fucking hell."

"Yes."

They stopped talking, simply staring at each other. Finally, after a long time, Akane very slowly picked the paper up, folded it twice, then looked at it, before handing it to her friend. "Put that away very carefully." Her hand was shaking. The Amazon took it and made it vanish.

"Akane?"
"Yes?"

"I still can't feel my legs. Can you get me a beer, please?"

"OK." She got up and staggered over to Richard, who handed her two beers, grinning.

"How much did he offer, if you don't mind me asking?" The Tendo woman looked at him, then motioned for him to bend down. She whispered into his ear, before taking the bottles back to the table and collapsing into her chair, absent-mindedly popping the tops off both bottles at the same time and handing one to Shampoo, who took it and drained it in one long motion. She did the same. Aiko watched with a grin. Turning to her, slightly pale, Richard said quietly, "That's more than I make in two years. Every month."

"It is quite a lot of money. Hollywood seems well off." The magical girl seemed very pleased. "Good for them."

"Good grief." He looked at the women at the table who were staring into space, with some of the oddest expressions he'd seen for a while, then smiled. "Yes, good for them."

"Hey, Richard, did your friend Jim bring any of that hot sauce of his?" He looked at Aiko, then grinned.

"Yep. It's in the fridge. Could you get it and the burgers as well, please?" She nodded and disappeared into the house. Firing up the barbecue he fiddled with it for a while, until he was satisfied everything was working correctly, then picked up up his own beer and sipped it, moving to sit beside his wife. She was watching their daughter, who, with Sophie, was moving the archery target back into it's original position. The two girls were laughing together, glancing at Akane and Shampoo every now and then with curiosity.

Emily looked over at them for a moment, concern on her face. "They seem a little shaken."

"I think they just had a major change in their life status, if you want to put it like that." Richard laughed quietly. "It would be a shock. I'm sure they'll get used to it." He snickered, drinking more beer, while his wife looked at him in exasperation.

"One day you'll explain why that phrase is so funny to you, I hope."

"One day." He grinned at her.

"Make sure you tell him about your friend's wedding, and anything else you don't want to miss. They'll need to know to build it into their plans." Aiko looked at Akane, who nodded, still looking slightly stunned two hours after the end of the meeting. "Give him your contact details as well before you forget." She handed the girl a notebook and pen, watching as she wrote her details down, including email address and cell phone number. Tearing the page out she handed the notebook and pen back with muttered thanks. "Cheer up, Akane, it's a wonderful thing," Aiko said, nudging her, then took a bite out of her latest burger.

"I know, but it's like a dream still." The youngest Tendo looked at Shampoo, who was explaining something to Serena and Sophie, both of them looking very interested. "I wanted to be in the movies when I was young, then everything went wrong. For years, I was kind of living a nightmare. I did some horrible things that ended up nearly tearing the family apart." She sighed. "No, it did tear the family apart. I lost my sister, and the man I could have married. It wasn't entirely my fault, I can see that now, everyone helped, but it was mostly me. And those horrible little parasites making me worse than I would otherwise have been." She looked at the brunette
who was listening sympathetically.

"Then, after I nearly made everything even worse, I completely accidentally bumped into Yori, and everyone else. Because of that, you all fixed me and have helped me become a much better person, and now all this? How the hell did I end up here? It doesn't make any sense."

"Perhaps someone decided you'd had enough of a hard time and deserved something nice?" Aiko asked, grinning slightly. Akane giggled.

"If so I owe them thanks. And all of you." Glancing at the magical girl beside her, she smiled. "Thank you so much for all your help. I wouldn't have know what to do earlier."

"Not a problem, Akane. It's been fun, and it gave me an excuse to see some friends again. We all tend to see pretty horrible or at least really annoying things in our line of work, so it's nice to be able to help a friend with something simple, that doesn't involve hitting something very hard indeed."

"The others will be sorry they missed this, but we couldn't really leave Minato all at once. With Yori away it's prone to... oddities."

"When will she be back?" Akane asked.

"About two, maybe three weeks or so. I'm sure she'll come by to say hello and see how you got on."

The blue-haired woman smiled. "I'd like that. I want to thank her."

"I'll tell her next time I see her." Stuffing the remains of the burger in her mouth, Aiko chewed, making Akane giggle. She raised an eyebrow but swallowed. "Richard does make very good burgers, and his friend's hot sauce is very nice. Misaki will be annoyed she missed out on it, she used half a bottle last time." Akane shivered a little, remembering what had happened when she tried some.

"It's kind of... incredibly painful," she replied. Aiko shrugged.

"I like it. We have a high pain threshold." Smiling at the other woman, she stood up. "Really, Akane, you and Shampoo both did very well. I'm looking forward to seeing your first movie."

Heading back to the barbecue to see if there was any food left, she grinned to herself, while behind her Akane stared up at the sky, thinking about how suddenly things changed sometimes.

At the barbecue, Richard smiled at the magical girl, looking beyond her to the young woman with the blue hair, then to the Amazon showing his daughter something dangerous involving a steak knife. "They seem to have recovered," he commented as she walked up, putting the last two burgers on the grill.

"More or less," she agreed, glancing over her shoulder. "Akane is having a bit of trouble with it, I think. Shampoo got over it first, but she still keeps stopping and staring at Adrian every now and then with a weird expression." She giggled. "It's funny, they're both a bit older than I am, but I think I have a lot more life experience in a lot of ways. Shampoo is an excellent warrior, she's been training since she was young to fight, but working in Hollywood?" She shook her head. "Kind of out of her normal comfort zone. Akane has, in many ways, had quite a sheltered upbringing, I think, which made all this come as something of a shock."

Richard glanced at her, flipping the burgers over. "You lot certainly haven't had a sheltered upbringing," he said. She shook her head, bending down and retrieving two beers, holding one up. He nodded. Popping off the tops she handed him one.
"No. Certainly not for a long time. We ended up in this job from a pretty young age, Yori more than any of us. You see some pretty unpleasant things, it takes the shine off very fast."

"Same when you become a cop. You'd like to believe life was all nice and happy, but you quickly find out that a lot of it isn't like that at all. Hopefully you manage to keep that part away from people who can't handle it." He sighed a little, as did the woman. "Oh well."

"Yep." They clinked their bottles together and drank from them.

Looking at her again, he asked, "Why the clothing change?" She grinned.

"That original uniform wasn't very practical in most ways, except for a really hot day at the beach, but we were stuck with it. The original magic we use had it built in. Chou finally worked out how to edit that part out. She also made these for us." Aiko looked down at herself, brushing at a small stain. "Damn. Burger relish." Richard laughed. Smiling, she added, "I've got several sets."

Handing her one of the burgers in a bun, he took the other one. They added condiments and sat down, watching everyone wandering around and talking. "Good party, Richard. Thanks for arranging it."

"You're welcome." He glanced at her. "Laura told me about Halleckton. It sounded very bad." She nodded, putting the food down for a moment.

"It was... horrible. Beyond anything I've ever experienced before, or want to again. All those poor people." He studied her expression for a moment.

"You did everything you could possibly have done."

"I know. I still wish we could have done more." She sighed a little, then shrugged. "It'll bother me for a long time."

"I'm not surprised. It bothers me and I wasn't even there." He drank some more beer. "I saw the photos and read the reports, though. Absolutely appalling. At least that bastard Murray is going to go away forever absent a major miracle. The Canadians are not at all vindictive but they're going to fuck him right up." She nodded, smiling slightly.

"Very true. There are a lot of extremely angry people in Canada." She giggled a little, picking her plate up again. "Mind you, none of them were as angry as Yori was. It was terrifying and she's one of my best friends. You should have seen what she did to that bastard's mansion."

"You can see the hole from space," Richard chuckled. "Now that's a duck pond." They both laughed. "So where did they go for a holiday?" he asked curiously. She looked at him with a grin.

"Through a portal." He choked a little on the burger he'd just bitten into.

"Through a portal!?" he asked when he managed to swallow. She nodded, amused.

"Yes."

"Don't demons come through portals?"

"Oh, yes. But quite a lot of them are very nice people." She laughed at his expression. "Admittedly the one you met couldn't be described like that.""Not even slightly," he muttered, remembering. "Not nice, and not people. Horrible homicidal
"Very true. That type is unpleasant. But a lot of the worlds on the other side of a portal are a lot of fun and very interesting. I've only been to a couple, once or twice, but it's fascinating. Especially if you like science fiction and fantasy books." He looked puzzled. "We're not the only intelligent species around, or the most advanced," she added.

"So, what, they're like something from Star Trek?" He smiled. "Spaceships and aliens, that sort of thing?" She looked steadily at him, finishing off her beer. His smile slowly slipped.

"Not a million miles away from that in some cases." She giggled a little. "One day maybe you'll see for yourself. It's very interesting. I'll be joining them in about ten days or so, I'm looking forward to my first trip into space." Standing, she grinned, then headed off to talk to his wife, while he stared after her in amazement.

Nodoka looked up from her book as she heard the front door open. Shortly after that, Akane and Shampoo walked in, with Aiko behind them. The first two women looked tired but happy, while Aiko was smiling slightly. "Did it go well?" she asked, putting her book down. The youngest sister looked at her for a long moment, then laughed hysterically. Her father came down the stairs, looking at her curiously.

"Um, yes, I suppose you could say that," she finally managed. Shaking her head she sat down, Shampoo collapsing beside her.

"I'd better be going," Aiko said, looking around the room with a smile. "Good luck, Akane. You have my number, call me when you need a lift again." The blue-haired woman raised a hand and waved, a tired grin on her face.

"Thanks, Aiko. Give my best to the others."

"I will." Nodding to Soun, she left through the door into the yard, closing it behind her. She waited.

"HOW MUCH?"

Giggling, she vanished.
"You're certain?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, there's no doubt."

There was a long silence. "I see."

"You know the options. Which would you like to try?"

Another handful of seconds ticked slowly past. "I'll need to think about it."

"Don't think too long, please. There is a limited window of opportunity."

The pause this time went on for nearly a minute.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, but I appreciate the thought."

The person remaining in the room watched the door close with a quiet click, then sighed softly, closing the folder on the desk and getting up to put it away.

Nabiki turned as she heard the door open, admitting the form of her elder sister in her 'Chou' aspect, reverting to normal as she entered. Grinning, she waved out the window of her room in the suite they'd booked. "This place is amazing," she said happily. The elder woman nodded with a smile, moving to stand beside her, both of them looking at the view. "So many people, and things, and things that are also people." Leaning over the edge of the opened window, feeling the slight resistance of the force field that she'd found would stop anything going more than half a metre or so outside the opening, she looked straight down some two kilometres to the ground, which wasn't actually the surface, only the top of the next level of buildings. Apparently it went down another kilometre before one would find actual earth, then in some places two more kilometres below that.

"I don't know I'd want to live here, but it's one hell of a place to visit. Jun says this city has over one hundred and thirty million permanent residents and about half that again transients. It's absolutely enormous! Five times the area of Tokyo and god knows how many different levels." She twisted around to look up the tower they were in, shaking her head in amazement. "There's at least as much above us as below." She stared at the large number of flying vehicles, much less like the cars she'd seen on the first world they visited and more like something from a good movie, moving around outside at several different altitudes, clearly following some sort of traffic rules.

"The lower gravity helps a lot, I believe. Because the planet is very low density, it's actually a bit larger than Earth, but has only about seventy percent the gravity, so the atmosphere is even deeper than Fwetna's, which means the buildings don't need to be sealed and pressurised even that far up, just heated. And of course it's possible to build them higher as well. I think the record is something like ten kilometres or so. Wind is the biggest problem, apparently." Kasumi jumped gently, dropping down again noticeably more slowly than Nabiki's mind found normal, making her grin.

"That really looks weird." She did the same, giggling. "I just can't quite get over it. Uthryyl's home is so... normal. This is kind of a shock, but in a good way. It's a lot more like what I would have
expected from an alien planet, although I'm still amazed how normal the people are after you get over what they look like."

Kasumi laughed gently. "It's a little surprising when you first meet them, true, but most of them are like people everywhere, just people. Two metre tall insect-like people, I'll admit, but still people."

"They're certainly polite and efficient. I've never had service this good in a hotel back home."

Walking over to the table in the centre of the room, the middle sister picked up another item from the plate on it, looking at it curiously. "I still don't know what this stuff it, but it's damn tasty."

Kasumi glanced at it, then giggled. "Don't ask. Just eat it." Nabiki stopped with the blue spiky thing half-way to her mouth, staring at her sister. After a long moment Kasumi grinned. "It's a vegetable root, a bit like an onion. They flash-fry them somehow, then season them with spices. It's fine." Slightly nervously, the middle Tendo popped the snack in her mouth and chewed, savouring the taste, before swallowing.

Her sister slyly added, "Just don't think about where the spices come from..."

"Kasumi! Stop that." Nabiki giggled, eating another one. Laughing, the older woman joined her, taking a couple and chewing them.

"I've finished warding the entire suite. It's not as strong as the one at home but it will suffice, we can't be observed, which is the main thing." She studied the other woman for a moment. "You're probably nearly at the point we can teach you the shielding techniques, perhaps in a couple of weeks. Full wards are a way off but I'll have to start you on the theory soon, practice will be later. There isn't much likelihood of there being any issues here, though, that require anything like that, so Ranma and I can easily deal with it. We're out of range of the house system now but we're powering the same spell for you for the time being." Nabiki nodded.

"That's what I was feeling," she said thoughtfully. "Or, rather, not feeling. I couldn't work it out. It's the first time in months that I can't feel the system sitting at the back of my head watching quietly." She concentrated for a moment. "Or can I?" Her sister looked at her with interest.

"Do you still feel it?"

"I'm... not sure. There's something really faint that might be it, but it might also be my imagination."

"The system did form a particularly deep link with you. I suppose it's possible you can still just contact it, but I very much doubt it could do much at this range." Kasumi looked mildly puzzled for a moment. "If range is the right word to use. Portal travel tends to mess up your vocabulary, distance is more of an idea than a real thing. In theory, everywhere is the same distance away through a portal, but in practice there are energy differences, sometimes temporal flow differences, which sort of substitute for distance." She shrugged. "Magic is, as many have pointed out, very strange."

"Temporal flow? You mean some places have weird time?" Nabiki was trying to wrap her mind around the concept.

"Again, not quite, but that's a more or less accurate way to describe it. The rate of the passage of time in different realities isn't necessarily a constant. It doesn't seem to be possible, or at least, not possible without huge energy input, to open a portal between realities that differ in temporal flow by more than about fifty percent. I suppose you could do it in stages, but it's not something I've ever really looked into. All the realities normal portals travel between in the, ah, local group, I
suppose, have temporal flow rates within half a percent or so. Most are much closer than that. All
the K'nn worlds, Fwetna, Earth, most of the ones I've been to, are the same to a very tiny amount
indeed. You can measure it with the right equipment, apparently, but it's so small it's not worth
bothering about."

"Weird." Nabiki suddenly remembered something she'd meant to ask. "While we're talking about
portals, something I've wondered. Why don't people use portals to travel around in one reality?
Like teleportation." Her sister smiled, nodding with an expression of approval.

"Good question. I was wondering if you'd ask it. The short answer is that it's barely possible, but
wildly inefficient. You get a feedback effect opening portals where the two ends are both in the
same reality, which makes them incredibly unstable. It's just possible, but it takes so much energy
and so much effort to keep them from popping that no one ever bothers. We've tried, out of
curiosity, but it's simply not worth it except perhaps in a huge emergency. Teleportation is much
easier. Or walking." She laughed as Nabiki grinned.

"How close are you to working out Aiko's teleportation method?"

Kasumi sighed a little. "Not as close as I'd like, it's difficult. The spell that powers it is very odd
indeed. Vastly more efficient than anything else I've ever seen that does the same job and much
more flexible. She's honed it to the point she can teleport basically anywhere without even thinking
much about it, she just needs a vague idea of where she's going. That's amazing. Most teleportation
spells will only go to a very specifically targeted area, like a portal will. Or you can go somewhere
you've been before. Originally hers worked a bit like that but over the years she's gotten much
better at using it. We want to copy this version, not the one she started with, which means we need
to work out not only the original spell but all the little tweaks she's added without even knowing
she was doing it, just by using it. Reverse engineering that mess is proving tediously annoying."

Nabiki nodded, understanding more or less what her sister meant. "Do you think you'll manage it?"

"Eventually, certainly. The portal spell was in some ways more difficult, and gave us a lot of
practice in understanding complex spells. It will probably take a few more months though before
we're at the point we can test it. Perhaps by Christmas, or just after."

"Give the gift of teleportation this Christmas?" The brunette laughed as her sister smiled. "Where is
everyone else at the moment?" she asked, sitting on the bed and looking around the room once
again, approvingly, before glancing at the older Tendo.

"Ranma and Uthryyl have gone to talk to a friend of his for a little while, he left a message for
Uthryyl at reception, it sounded urgent. Quanynr and Onkra are in their room getting ready to go
out later, they want to go up the old space elevator to the restaurant at the mid-point. It sounds like
fun. We need to make the portal for Tamiko and Fumiko in about an hour, I've booked a slot in one
of the transport rooms for then. Hopefully they'll be ready on time, we can't contact them until we
open the portal. We'll have about an hour available, so we can make any calls or get messages
then."

Kasumi thought for a moment, working out if there was anything else important, then ate another
spiky blue snack. "After that, we've got three days here, then back to Fwetna for a couple of days,
before on to K'nn nine. You'll like that one, it's a very pretty place with not many people. It's
mostly automated plantations of various sorts in the lowlands, and recreation areas in the higher
parts, with some of the most beautiful oceans I've ever seen. The water is a weird green colour,
some sort of dissolved mineral, I think, and the sun is orange. The colours are amazing. And the
ring system is incredible at night. You can even see it during the day."
"That last place was pretty damn impressive as well. I was wishing I'd brought some skis. All that snow." Nabiki smiled at the memory. "And that sky at night! I've never seen so many stars, they looked like they were practically on top of us. You could even make out all the different colours! I've only ever seen that in pictures from NASA or something." Her sister smiled, finishing the last of the snacks.

"It was very pretty. Uthryyl said it was good, he wasn't wrong. I'd like to go back there some time for longer."

"You'll have to teach me that ki heating trick if we do. I loved it but it was kind of cold."

Kasumi smiled. "I think you could probably learn it soon. It takes quite fine control of ki, but it's not too different from the soul of ice in some ways. When we get back I'll take everyone through the exercises, hopefully you can all get it with a few days practice."

"It's funny, when I was flying it seemed warmer." Nabiki shrugged a little, remembering the last world they'd been to for a couple of days. "It was still cold, but not so much it stopped me from enjoying myself. I'd have thought my wings would have frozen, they're so large with such thin skin, even with the fur."

"It's a very good insulator, and I copied parts of the soarer metabolism that regulate temperature, plus some similar things from other creatures I looked up. You probably didn't notice, but even on Fwetna, at the altitude you were a lot of the time, it was considerably colder than at ground level. The soarer world must be quite cold compared to there, they manage very well even at remarkable altitudes." Her sister looked pleased at the results of her design, as she thought back. She'd noticed the temperature drop, now that she thought about it she seemed to recall on Earth it was a little less than ten degrees per thousand metres on a clear day. She just hadn't thought much of it at the time, caught up in the sheer fun of flying.

"Good grief. That must mean it was about minus thirty or so when I was up at the highest point I reached." The middle sister looked quite shocked. "I didn't notice at all."

#Your flying form would appear to be quite functional in temperatures as low as minus fifty, Nabiki. I did not mention it at the time as it wasn't relevant, but I was monitoring your physical parameters to ensure you were operating within your safe area. You were not in danger at any point, or I would have brought the fact up.# Jun sounded slightly apologetic. #In future, if something similar occurs do you wish me to mention the fact?#

'Thanks for telling me. No, I trust you. Tell me if it's a problem, but I don't need to know if it's not, except out of interest.'

#Thank you, Nabiki. I don't want to overwhelm you with irrelevant information, especially when you are enjoying yourself, but I will make sure to notify you immediately should anything hazardous occur.# She got the impression the SI was feeling a little guilty, making her smile.

"No wonder my goggles fogged up a couple of times when I landed," she said. Kasumi nodded with a smile.

"Yes, that's a small problem. I have an idea for a modification to the form that would remove the need for them but I'm going to have to think about it for a little longer. It's slightly more complicated than I first thought, annoyingly."

Getting up, Nabiki walked over to the window again and looked out, smiling at the sight. "It kind of reminds me of the city in that movie 'Bladerunner', only cleaner, bigger, and not depressing."
Watching the huge variety of flying machines zip around, she added, "I don't think I want to try flying out there, though. Too much traffic."

Her sister was examining the ceiling, which was glowing gently and evenly with a light that was an almost exact replica of sunlight back on Earth, but nodded, laughing slightly. "It would be embarrassing to find yourself spread across the windscreen of someone's air-car like a big moth." She grinned.

"I'd imagine it would come as a shock to both of us," Nabiki agreed, laughing at the mental picture it conjured up. Lying down on the bed she looked around the room with interest, noticing that while very comfortable it wasn't quite as good as the ones in Uthryyl's guest rooms. "This place is pretty neat. Jun says all the rooms have full environmental control, including atmosphere, gravity, and light spectrum. This one is set for what the hotel decided was correct for humans, although it left the gravity off. Even all the furniture can be moved around and changed, it disappears into the floor when you're not using it. Just like something from a book."

Kasumi smiled at her, before walking over to the wall near the door and touching a display that was hovering a little way from the wall with nothing obviously producing it. With a flick of her finger, she turned the gravity down. "Whoa. That's freaky," the middle sister said, feeling herself suddenly become very light, even more so than she'd already felt. "What's that set to?"

Checking the display, her sister said, "About five percent earth normal. It will go to just above zero, and up to about two hundred percent. I think the limits are so you don't either end up floating in the middle of the room unable to reach anything, or crushed flat." She gently pushed off, bouncing all the way across the room in a very implausible way, making Nabiki giggle. Pressing her hands against the bed she floated up until she could put her feet on the ceiling, using no effort at all.

"I know we can all do this anyway, but it feels quite different," she said, laughing, as she tucked into a slow roll and gradually descended again.

"Low gravity is a lot of fun," the older woman agreed, taking slow giant steps across the room like something from video of the moon-walks, looking amused.

"I guess this place caters to a lot of people from very out of town," Nabiki mused, reaching the control panel and inspecting it closely. It was displaying icons with text in written Trade, which she was beginning to have some understanding of. Jun overlaid a translation into Kanji, making her nod.

'Thanks.'

'I can simply interface to the room controls, Nabiki, which would be more efficient,' the SI told her with mild amusement.

'True. Do that, then, please.' She giggled mentally. 'I still sometimes forget how easily you can do all this.'

'While much more advanced than your own world, the electronic systems on this one are still nowhere near what I would consider state of the art,' Jun said. 'I have the capacity to interface to and override any systems you are likely to encounter, should there be a reason to so do and given time to work on it. It is one of my main functions, at which I am very good.'

'Probably not polite to go around breaking into all their computers just for fun,' she laughed. 'I would imagine they have laws against it, anyway.'
Certainly they do, Jun replied, sounding smug, but as they would never detect the intrusion there is little chance of getting caught. But I understand your reticence. Breaking laws simply because you can is seldom a good idea.

Checking her sister was on the floor, she moved the local gravity control Jun had provided her on the internal copy of the room control panel with a small mental twitch, feeling herself get heavier. Pushing it all the way over she experimentally walked around in the doubled gravity now in the room, shrugging after a moment. "I can certainly tell the difference but it's not difficult."

"We are, after all, much stronger than most people," Kasumi said, smiling at her. "It would take something considerably higher than the gravity this system can produce to seriously inconvenience us, although I remember it needed a little experimentation to compensate for how much faster things fall under higher gravity." She pulled a pencil from ki space and let go of it, watching as it plummeted to the floor.

"That looks even more wrong than when it falls too slowly," Nabiki chuckled, dialling the gravity back to normal. "A room like this would be good for strength training, I would think."

"Indeed, although you'd have to be careful when you started not to fall and break something." Picking up her pencil and putting it away, Kasumi tried the bed, then got up again. "I prefer the ones Uthryyl has," she said, making the middle sister laugh.

"I was thinking the same thing. They're still pretty nice, though. I'll try turning the gravity down tonight and sleeping like that, I think." She glanced around again, frowning slightly. "Back home the room would have a TV or something."

There is a comprehensive video and audio projection suite built into the room, Nabiki. Would you like me to activate it? Curious, she told it to proceed.

"Wow. That's not bad." Suddenly, the walls of the room, and the ceiling, appeared to have vanished completely, leaving in their place an outside view as if everything else had gone transparent. She and Kasumi exchanged impressed glances, then inspected the display closely.

"I can barely see any trace of it not being real," her sister said, looking at one of the walls carefully, running her hand over it. "It's not as good as what the SI can produce but I suppose at least this one other people can see."

I can transfer video or still images to the projection system if you would like to experiment, or there is a very large library of files available in the hotel system. This is a live view from cameras on the outside of the building.

'Is there anything like TV or news available?' Nabiki asked with interest.

'Not right now, thanks, but I'll look later.' She thought for a moment, then send one of the recordings she'd made above Uthryyl's house to the room projector, grinning as suddenly she was at the viewpoint of the camera drone she'd been using, seeing herself in the distance on one wall of the room, plummeting towards the ground, followed by the two soarers behind her. The images were completely convincing and three dimensional, as if she was looking out a window.

"That's very impressive," Kasumi said approvingly.

"Damn right. I need to get one of these as well, I think." Nabiki watched the recording play, laughing at the expression on Onkra's face, caught by the camera, as she dived out of the way. "I
wonder how much they are? And how portable?"

"We can find out later, there are several places with very large shopping areas quite close to here according to Nao." Kasumi watched the replay with interest, giggling. "You really did rather take us by surprise with your friends there."

"I wonder if they're still waiting for us?" Nabiki said, grinning. "I still can't believe they got so friendly, so fast. It was kind of weird."

"You clearly have some sort of sinister power over lower life forms," her sister replied, glancing at her with a teasing grin.

"I could build an entire army of them, in that case. Just imagine, so many soarers their wings darkened the sky, with me at their head as their leader!" Nabiki stood in the middle of the room in a heroic pose, hands on her hips, shimmering into her flying Tendo form with her wings half extended and staring upwards, a calm expression on her face, then as Kasumi fell over laughing, started giggling herself.

"Sorry, you're clearly a bad influence on my sanity," she said, collapsing onto the bed beside her sister, reverting to normal in the process. "I think being the soarer queen would be a little too weird even for me." Her older sister began laughing all over again at this. "But I'm still quite curious why those two suddenly decided to be friends with me."

"I expect they're simply rather intelligent and very curious. Seeing you flying without artificial aids must have made them a little puzzled, and you wouldn't have smelled like a D'sage, which might have made them less wary in the first place. Once they found out how much fun you were to play with they just got used to it." Kasumi grinned at her. "We'll have to make sure they don't try to follow us home if they come back. It would be fun but I don't think the middle of Minato is the right place for them."

"They could live on the roof and eat cats," Nabiki suggested, looking darkly amused. "Ranma would probably quite like that idea."

"The owners of the cats, and I would expect the cats themselves, might not be so happy about it." Her sister stood, giggling a little still, then turned off the room projection. "But we may have trouble persuading Misaki not to take one home. You know what she's like."

"If we come across any flying crocodiles we'll have to tie her up," Nabiki agreed, chuckling. "She's still a little annoyed we couldn't get one in Australia and put it in the pool." She shook her head. "I hope she never meets Kodachi..."

Both sisters looked at each other at that disturbing thought, then shook it off. "We should probably head down to the transport section," the elder Tendo said after a moment. "By the time we get there the others should be waiting for us."

"Don't you need Ranma to help open the portal?", Nabiki asked, becoming 'Azumi' as they headed towards the door. Her sister, now 'Chou', shook her head.

"No, I can do it myself now. Our spell modifications have reduced the energy requirements to the point one of us can run it, although it's still smoother with two. Actually, the total energy was never the problem, it doesn't need much, but the level of complexity of controlling it was... very significant. We've managed to simplify it somewhat over the last few months, making it more efficient in the process, and of course we've both had a lot of practice working it by this point." Having left the room they arrived at the device this world seemed to use in place of an elevator,
which was basically a vertical tube with some sort of controlled gravity field in it. 'Chou' simply walked into empty space, turning around as if she was standing on something solid, then waited for her sister, who watched with a grin.

"This is also a very weird thing. Sometimes, seeing all these alien gadgets, I start to wonder if half the science fiction authors back home are actually from somewhere like this and just writing a novel about their normal life." She followed her sister, laughing. 'Chou' told the machine where to take them and they started down. "So why do we have to go to a specific place to open the portal home," she asked curiously.

"It's basically one of the rules here. They don't like random portals opening just anywhere, for security purposes. They're almost entirely a technological society, very little magic is used outside portal operation, some warding, mostly against portals, and certain types of healing." 'Chou' shrugged a little. "From what I know they're very poor at magic control. There aren't a lot of native mages around, and the ones that are, aren't anywhere near up to what we have at home, or the D'sage do. They hire them in. Actually they're probably the largest employer of mages around, since they're dependent on portals to connect to some of their worlds, they keep quite a few open permanently with the mages working in shifts."

"I guess it pays well, then."

"Oh, yes, very well indeed. It comes with some fairly significant contracts, though, as they don't want their mages deciding to just suddenly leave for somewhere better. I think they normally sign on for something like ten years at a time. But they can earn more credit in that ten years than they could anywhere else in fifty. Since mages tend to live a long time, it's not uncommon for them to spend ten or twenty years building up a nest egg here, they can live on it for the next hundred years."

'Azumi' nodded slowly. "I can see where that would be a good idea. Do any of them come from home?"

'Chou' frowned slightly. "I'm really not sure. You certainly do meet human mages in the demon worlds sometimes, but not so much in the K'nn grouping. I'm not sure why, to be honest, they're very nice people and their worlds are mostly very interesting and hospitable. But human mages seem to stick mainly to the magic only or magic-technological hybrid worlds in the majority of cases. There aren't all that many who can even make portals in the first place, not to mention the fact that it normally takes three or more anyway." She sighed a bit. "It's a little depressing how many people back home think that portals are only for spewing out horrible demons. Not many human mages outside Minato do much portal travel, most of them seem scared of it."

"I don't know why, so far it's huge fun," her sister said, grinning.

"Yes, but as you've said on numerous occasions, we're all insane!" The elder Tendo laughed, as they stopped on their desired level. "Come on, it's just down here on the left. We've got about five minutes before the scheduled time. As soon as they drop the wards we can open the portal. I'll leave it open until our slot is up, so if you want to make any calls to anyone, you'll have about an hour."

"I wonder how Akane got on?" 'Azumi' asked. "I hope it all worked out for her. That was a wonderful idea your crazy husband had."

"It was. Apparently, my dearest thought of it the moment they got those cards. Akane's birthday was a nice time to do it, but it was only possible because she's so much better nowadays." She smiled gently to herself. "Such a nice thing to do. And after having so much trouble for so long
with our sister."

"It's funny, I remember how keen she was on school plays and the like all that time ago, but for a
while I was wondering if she'd just told herself is was something she wanted to do, possibly
because it was something she was unlikely to be able to do."

The elder woman shook her head. "I don't think so. Even when she was very young she talked
about acting one day. You were probably too young to remember, but she went through a phase of
dressing up in all sorts of ridiculous costumes and putting on silly voices." 'Chou' grinned slightly.
"It was very funny. She'd mix up mother's and father's clothes, put on some very strange makeup,
and do little plays she'd come up with." 'Azumi' laughed.

"I wish we had some video of that. Or photos. It sounds very funny."

"Oh, it was. I think I might have a couple of photos mother took, somewhere. I'll see if I can find
them when we get back. But you must never show them to our sister." They looked at each other
and giggled. "I think this acting thing really is something she wants to do. I hope she gets her
chance. Even the stunt work would be wonderful, I have no doubt she'd be very good at indeed."

"I'd think this director would be thrilled to get his hands on a damn near indestructible, good
looking, incredibly good female martial artist."

"He'd have paid all of us anything we asked, I think, if we'd wanted to work for him," 'Chou'
laughed. "You should have seen the look on his face, and his friend Jim's. They were... quite
surprised."

Entering a large round room, some fifteen metres across, with a highly polished floor, 'Chou'
glanced at the door which slid shut. 'Azumi' could feel a set of wards go up. "Good security," her
sister commented. "Those wards are quite well done, they'd block most things from getting out."

"Would they stop you or Yori?" 'Azumi' asked with a grin. Her sister snorted delicately.

"Of course not. Don't be silly." With a quick grin she walked to the centre of the room, then
concentrated. After somewhat longer than normal, the familiar sight of an open portal hung in the
air next to her. 'Azumi' immediately felt the ward system reconnect fully, seeming to inspect her a
little anxiously before it decided she was all right and went back to watching.

"Hi, right on time," Tamiko's cheery voice came over the comm. "Hang on, we're just talking to
Aiko and Misaki, we'll be through in a second, they've got to go deal with something." Shortly
afterwards the tear in space disgorged the auburn-haired girl and Fumiko, who looked around
quickly then grinned at their friends. "Hi, guys. Where's everyone else?"

"Uthryyl and Yori are at a friend of Uthryyl's place, he needed something but I'm not sure what.
Onkra and Quannyr are upstairs. They told me just now they'd found the waterpark and were going
to meet us there." 'Azumi' glanced at her sister, surprised.

"What about this restaurant?"

"That's later. They wanted to get some swimming in, the last place was a bit cold for that." 'Chou'
smiled.

"It was that, certainly. Not to mention the fact you'd have had a lot of work even getting at the
water through the ice in the first place." The two new arrivals exchanged looks.

"Clearly we've missed something interesting," Fumiko commented with a grin. 'Azumi' laughed.
"Oh, many things, some of which are a lot of fun." She casually took on her flying form, making them both gape as she spread her wings fully. Fumiko stared for a moment, then looked at 'Chou' who was smiling serenely.

"Gimme!" They all laughed. "Seriously, I want it. Gimme."

"I've got presets designed for all of you, don't worry." 'Chou smiled at them. "There's nowhere around here to fly, unfortunately, the sky is a bit busy, but as soon as we go back to Fwetna in a few days you can do all the flying you want." Tamiko moved closer to her friend, inspecting her closely, then felt one wing, running her hands over the fur.

"So soft," she said, smiling. "And that colour is amazing. Is it based on something specific? I don't recognise it."

'Azumi' sent her an image of one of the soarers. "Sis used one of these as the basis for a lot of the work, although it's not a direct copy." She giggled. "They're loads of fun. Two of them at Uthryyl's house seem to have adopted me." She folded her wings away, as her friends watched. "Flying is so much fun. You're going to love it. It's even better than swimming."

Fumiko was staring at her with clear envy. She sighed. "Now I want that more than I want anything," she said, sounding annoyed and amused at the same time. 'Chou' laughed a little.

"Don't worry, you'll have it very soon. Think of a colour scheme in the mean time." She looked at her sister. "We're covered, show her the other one." Flying 'Azumi' became flying Nabiki.

"Oh, wow, that's really nice," Tamiko giggled. "I love the stripes."

"It's good, isn't it?" Fumiko sighed heavily, making Nabiki reach a wing out and poke her. "Cheer up. Only three more days and you'll be flying with me and some friends." The other woman nodded, then looked intrigued.

"What friends?" Sending her and Tamiko the recording they'd been watching in her room, Nabiki grinned at the expression on her face a few seconds later. "Good grief. How did you train them to do that?" she asked curiously. 'Chou' snickered a little.

"I'm not sure who trained who."

Glancing at her with a smile, Nabiki added, "They started following me around all by themselves and just kind of showed me all sorts of flight manoeuvres. I came up with some and showed them as well. They learn really fast."

"If Misaki sees them she'll want one in the living room," Fumiko said, giggling. 'Chou' and her sister exchanged a glance, smiling.

"Yes, we've already discussed that," the blonde said. "I have no doubt that those two would happily follow Nabiki home, but I'm not at all sure it would work out well. Minato is bad enough with magical girls chasing real demons, never mind curious soarers added to the mix. It would be absolute chaos."

Fumiko exchanged a look with Tamiko, both seeming slightly worried and mildly guilty. 'Chou' watched them, then got a suspicious look. "What happened?" she asked slowly.

"Um... We kind of had an... incident." Fumiko sighed nervously. "With Ami's friends." Closing her eyes briefly with an expression of pain, 'Chou' nodded.
"All right. Did you resolve it?"

"Yes. It was... very annoying, and I'm afraid it will be a fairly large hit to the fund. There was quite a lot of damage. But it's mostly fixed now." Fumiko watched her friend's face anxiously.

"Who was involved?"

"The usual suspects. Ami tried to stop it, to give her all due credit, but the other four were worked up and just wouldn't stop. It was all over one small demon, you remember Xrist?"

"Yes, he's harmless, but a total coffee addict," Chou' said with a long-suffering sigh. "Let me guess, he came through a portal looking for an espresso and they jumped him?"

"It was a cappuccino, but otherwise you're right. He came charging into your area looking for Yori to save him from the horrible magical girls, he didn't know you guys were away. They followed him. By the time we got there they'd already smashed half a dozen cars and a building trying to hit him. He's damn quick, I'll give him that, and they're mostly lousy shots. Lots of power, though." Fumiko looked unimpressed. "I told them to pack it in and go home, that mouthy blonde told me to fuck off, then the other one took a shot at Misaki. That didn't end well."

Tamiko giggled. "Misaki punted her all the way down the street. You should have heard her swearing like a sailor. Came charging back ready for a fight, I got in the way, the next thing I knew she's nearly totallyled Mr Singh's curry place. I had to shut her down good and hard. Those pressure point methods work very well, although I had to dump a lot of ki into it to get the bitch to stay down." She shrugged a little. "Might have overdone it a bit, she was wobbling around a lot when she finally came around."

"Serves her right," Fumiko muttered. "Anyway, after that, we lost patience, smacked them down hard, then read them the riot act, so to speak. I was channelling Yori very hard." The tall girl smiled a little tightly. ", They argued a little, but some ki shots took care of that, and some more yelling. Yori is a lot better at it than I am but I think I finally got the point across. Afterwards, we made them clear up, which at least amused the residents. Quite a few were watching and taking pictures." She grinned. "I won five hundred yen betting on which of them would be the first to start crying."

"Chou' sighed, but smiled a little. "What was Ami doing during all this?"

"She was amazingly pissed off about it all. I think she's right on the edge with them, to tell the truth. It's a shame, they started out so well in many ways, but they've certainly lost their edge in the last eighteen months or so. She's the only one other than that younger girl they have who seems to have a clue about how to treat other people. At least the other ones are smart enough to stay away now. After what Yori did to them the time they all turned up, I'm not surprised." Fumiko shrugged, looking disgusted. "They were really looking at poor Ami like she'd betrayed them, but in most ways I'd say it was the other way around."

"Oh dear. Poor girl. I know how much she hates that sort of thing," 'Chou' murmured. "I'll have to talk to her when we get back, see how she's feeling."

Fumiko nodded understandingly. "Well, she helped us deal with her friends, which was interesting. Got the brunette right in the face with that freezing spray attack of hers, didn't even bother with that stupid wind-up they seem to do all the time. Took her completely by surprise, I'm not even sure she knew who did it. It was quite effective. With some real combat training that girl would be very good. Better than most of her friends, certainly, in my opinion."
"When they were cleaning up we had a nice long lunch and kept an eye on them, and talked to Ami. She's a very intelligent young woman." Tamiko glanced at Nabiki, who was listening with interest. "She reminds me a lot of you, to be honest. Not the most powerful, but the smartest of the entire lot, and very good at learning things." She turned back to her friend and mentor, a troubled expression crossing her face. "She said some rather odd things, though. Only hints, but I have a feeling there's something about their story that's somehow very wrong. I think we may need to investigate it at some point."

"Wrong how?" Nabiki asked curiously. Tamiko looked puzzled.

"I'm not sure. Just... wrong. She didn't go into details, and we didn't push, they're her secrets after all, but something about what she said just didn't make sense when taken all together." The auburn-haired woman shook her head slowly. "I'm not sure," she repeated. "I'll send you the recordings, have a look and see what you think."

'Chou' thought for a moment, then turned to Fumiko. "It sounds like it couldn't be helped. Thank you for dealing with it. It's probably best if you give me all the recordings and let me tell Ranma, though. He's going to be... very irritated."

"Sorry. I don't want to ruin the holiday." Fumiko looked apologetic.

"You haven't, it's just a minor problem in the overall scheme of things. We half-expected it, to be honest, although not necessarily from them." The tall blonde giggled. "You know how strange Minato is at the best of times." The others all nodded, grinning.

"What happened about Akane and that director?" Nabiki asked, now that Fumiko had finished her report. The two other women looked at each other with grins.

"It went very well. I've got Aiko's recordings, but perhaps you should call Akane and ask her before you see them," Tamiko told her, an odd look of amusement on her face. After a moment, Nabiki did so, including her older sister in the audio feed.

"Hi, Nabiki!" Her younger sister sounded very pleased to hear her. "I'm glad you called, I've been trying to get hold of you for several days. Thanks for the present, the timing was amazing. I used it in LA."

"How did it go, sis?" Nabiki asked. There was a short pause.

"Better than I could ever have hoped." Akane laughed. "They were very nice, and Aiko was wonderful, she helped so much. I owe her, and Yori, a huge amount. She took me and Shampoo to LA, arranged everything with the director, he's a nice man called Adrian Stewart, and we even had a barbecue at the house of a friend of hers, an LAPD officer. Lieutenant Richard Harrison. He and his wife and daughter are really nice people as well."

"So what happened? Did you show them what you could do? And how did Shampoo do? Is she interested in a job in Hollywood as well?" Nabiki was very curious as well as pleased.

"Yes, we both did. We had a sort of a job interview beforehand, we both told them about ourselves, what we did, how long we'd been doing it, that sort of thing. Shampoo even showed them her curse. I thought that Matt, the stunt director man, was going to faint when he saw that!" She giggled. "His face was amazing. Shampoo showed some incredible archery skills, she's fantastically good, then I did some strength exercises with blocks and a wooden post. Shampoo shredded what was left with a sword Aiko gave her. After that we sparred, then did some staff work, then bokkens. That was fun, we were running around on the garden fence and the roof of Richard's house. They
seemed to like it.

Nabiki laughed softly. Her sisters voice was more excited than she'd heard in years, she'd clearly had a good time.

"Shampoo is getting really interested as well. I asked her to come for moral support as much as anything, but I was hoping they'd like her. How couldn't they, she's much better than I am."

"Don't sell yourself short, sis, you're still very good and getting better all the time." Akane was quiet for a moment.

"Thanks, Biki. Anyway, in the end they went and had a private meeting, then came back and Adrian said he wanted to work with us more than anything ever. He really seemed to mean it as well. He looked like a kid with an ice-cream." She giggled again, as Nabiki grinned. "He told us what the process was, which sounds very complicated, then said he was going to make sure we were hired one way or another." She went silent for a moment, then added, "He also said what the amount he was thinking of starting us on was. It was a lot. But Aiko told me not to accept the first offer, she kept giving me little signs to go higher. I was terrified, I thought it would wreck everything, but he seemed fine with it and kept raising the figure."

Slightly apprehensively, when her sister stopped talking again, Nabiki asked, "So what was the final amount?" There was a very long pause, then Akane mentioned a figure in a small voice. A large figure. A very large figure. Nabiki almost stopped breathing.

"How much?"

Akane said it again. "In US dollars. Per month. Each." This time it was Nabiki's turn to be silent for a fair while.

"Holy shit. Well done, sis. Well done indeed. You'll earn more in a year than I have in my life." She glanced at 'Chou', who was looking both slightly shocked and very proud. "What's the next step?"

"Well, Adrian is talking to the studio to persuade them it's a good idea to take on two unknown female stunt people from Japan, which is something they apparently need quite a lot of persuading about. He called last night, though, and said it's going well. They want to see both of us again in about two weeks or so. That will probably be for two or three days. Aiko has offered to take us back and forth when we need it, but she'll be away for a week in about a week, so it's good that they're being a little slow. He seems very pleased with the progress so far, even so."

"Not bad at all." Nabiki was extremely pleased for her younger sister, as she could clearly see her older one was. "What about Shampoo? How's she taking all of this? For that matter, how did Cologne?"

Akane giggled happily. "When we told the Elder how much we'd been offered, she fell off her stick." Nabiki started laughing helplessly. "It was very funny. I've never really seen her surprised before. But she's being very supportive. I think she's very pleased for both of us. She's given us quite a bit of advice, she actually turns out to know quite a lot about money. When you get back I want to go over things with you as well, you know a lot more about this sort of thing than any of us. She told me to, in fact, she seems to respect your abilities quite a lot." Somewhat surprised, Nabiki smiled to herself.

"As I respect hers. It's kind of funny, who'd have thought years ago we'd all have ended up more or less friends."
"I know. But she genuinely speaks of you as someone she thinks knows her stuff. Shampoo is getting as excited as I am. I don't know if she really wants to do acting in the long term, although I think she'd be good at it, but she certainly seems interested in the idea of stunt work and fight scenes. So am I. Even if it never goes further than that, I'll be happy. And while I'm kind of scared about moving to the US, I'm starting to look forward to it as well."

"Don't be scared, sis. Think of it as an opportunity to travel, meet new people, and get paid a hell of a lot of money to do something you'll enjoy." Nabiki laughed, happy for her sister. "I just make sure you remember your family and friends and come and visit often. And don't let it go to your head. Overconfidence is the worst trap for someone who suddenly finds themselves in a situation they didn't look for like this."

She could almost hear her sister smiling. "I know, Biki, and I'll be careful. Cologne said the same thing, and so did Dad. Even Genma told me he was proud of me. They both want to keep teaching both Shampoo and me more of the Anything Goes techniques, and Cologne wants to continue teaching the Amazon ones. I'll be coming back a lot. I don't know how long Aiko will be OK with jumping us around, but when she's had enough there are old-fashioned airplanes." Snickering, Nabiki listened with pleasure.

"It sounds like your life is finally coming together, sis."

"I know. It's so weird. I have no idea what I've done to deserve all this good fortune all of a sudden, but I'm incredibly grateful for it. I'd even thank Ms Aoyama at this point and she scares the crap out of me." She laughed a little. "Not that I'm likely to run into her in LA."

Nabiki glanced at 'Chou', raising one eyebrow in an amused manner, making her sister look at her and sigh. "Be good," she mouthed, as both Tamiko and Fumiko smiled.

"Probably not, but you never know. OK, sis, I'm going to have to go, but I really am incredibly pleased for you. We'll talk more when I get back, all right? If I can get network access before then we can talk again, but I can't guarantee it."

"That's fine, Biki. Have a fantastic holiday, give my best to Maiko and Rika. I'll see you in a couple of weeks." Smiling, Nabiki disconnected the call, then looked at her older sister.

"Holy crap. That's a lot of money."

"It is a rather substantial amount," 'Chou' agreed, looking impressed and pleased. "Well done, little sister. I hope it all works out for you." She looked sad for a moment. "I wish I could tell her that to her face."

"Keep smiling, I'm sure it will work out eventually." Tamiko tried to cheer them both up. "I know how long it's taken to get this far, but things seem to be speeding along now. She's pretty much normal, at least for Nerima, she's almost certainly going to end up a big star in Hollywood, and from what I can see the possibility of you guys coming clean to one degree or another is getting much stronger pretty fast." 'Chou' glanced at her, then nodded, smiling slightly.

"Yes, you're right. Thank you. All right, I just need to make a few short calls to check on a few things, then we can go. We've only got about another thirty minutes booked, Nabiki, so if you want to call anyone else now would be the time."

"OK." After a moment's thought, Nabiki called her father. "Hi Dad. I just wanted to quickly call and let you know everything is fine. We're all having a lot of fun."
"Hello, daughter. I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for calling. How are Rika and Maiko?" Nabiki looked at her older sister who was concentrating on something she was doing. "They're fine. Rika is here with me now, Maiko is off with another friend of hers. We're going to meet up soon for some swimming, then go to a restaurant that I'm told has an amazing view." She snickered a little, thinking that considering where that restaurant was, it could hardly not have a good view.

"Give them my best. Did you speak to Akane?"

"Yes, just now. She sounds very excited and happy. And likely to have enough money to make the Kunos green with envy."

Soun chuckled. "Oh, yes, that would be very funny. It will be interesting to see the effect it has on Kodachi when she hears about it. I'm so very proud of Akane and pleased for her. I nearly fainted when she told me how much that studio director offered. And that's just the beginning pay! He apparently said it was likely to increase considerably over the next few years once they got established."

"That's amazing. I really hope she does well at this."

"She will. All my daughters do well at whatever they do." He sounded very proud. "I must thank Chou and Yori the next time we meet once again for fixing her medical problem. That seems to have been the key to starting her on the road to recovery. She's put in a vast amount of very hard work herself, something I'm extremely impressed by, but those two remarkable young ladies managed to set her on the right path before something horrible happened. Again." His laugh was slightly sad.

"We all owe them a lot," Nabiki agreed, smiling to herself. "Has Auntie Nodoka fixed a date for the party yet?"

"She's thinking of the second weekend in August as being suitable. Does that fit with your plans?"

"Yes, I'll be around then."

"Good, I'll tell her. She's with Ukyo and Konatsu now, they're trying to work out the right place to have the wedding. They've whittled it down to a list of only about six places, but they all have minor problems. They'll work it out, I expect."

"Give everyone my love, and say hi to Ukyo and Konatsu for me."

"I will. Have fun, dear."

"Bye, Dad." She disconnected, feeling pleased. After a moment, seeing that her sister was still at whatever she was doing, and seeming pleased about it, she called Miki.

"Hey, Nabiki! I didn't expect to hear from you. How's it going?"

"Pretty damn well, thanks. I've been having enormous fun, trying out all sort of things. How about you? Are you with John still?"

"I'm on the way home to see my parents after spending a week with him and his family. They're really nice people. His father doesn't speak Japanese as well as John does, his accent is funny, but he's hilarious. Always making jokes, most of which are actually very funny. I like him a lot. His mom is really pretty and very smart, she seemed to like me. It was a bit scary at first, she was looking at me like she was trying to x-ray me with her eyes." Miki giggled as she spoke.
"Mothers want the best for their sons, I guess," Nabiki laughed back.

"I suppose so. It was kind of unnerving, though. But she came around after a few hours and turned out to be very nice. We went out to a few places to eat, saw a couple of movies, and went to the beach. Nothing dramatic, just nice. How about you?"

"It's been fun. Driving in the mountains with friends, taking lots of pictures, seeing strange wildlife. You know, a normal holiday." It was a good thing she was using Jun, Nabiki thought, she was laughing too much to talk out loud. "Did quite a lot of swimming as well. In fact, we're off to the waterpark in a little while. Oh yes, I also went hang gliding."

"What? That sounds amazing. Was it scary?" Miki sounded like she wasn't sure to be worried or jealous, settling for both at once. Nabiki grinned.

"It wasn't scary, but I was with some people who really knew their stuff. The guy who showed us what to do was really good. Jumping off the cliff was a little... dramatic... but I trusted the equipment. Once we were up we didn't want to come down again. So much fun. I love flying."

"Wow. That sounds terrifying to me, but maybe it isn't. Jumping off a cliff? Was it a tall one?"

"Tallish. Good view, though."

"Are you going to take up flying as a hobby, then?" Miki asked with a laugh.

"I might. I well might."

"I'd like to see that one day." There was a muffled announcement in the background, making her pause. "Whoops, my train is arriving. I'd better go. I need to get on. Have fun, and thanks for calling."

"You too, give my best to John when you see him. I'll see you guys back at university in the autumn."

"Bye, Nabiki." Miki hung up, while Nabiki smiled to herself. She found she missed the other woman, who had become quite a close friend. John was also someone she enjoyed talking to.

'Chou' smiled slightly as she turned to the others. "Sergeant Harada says things seem to be fairly quiet now, although your magical girl battle made the news two days running. It received quite good ratings in the community for level of damage, and style." She laughed as Fumiko looked embarrassed. "Don't worry, people aren't too upset. Everyone knows it wasn't your fault." She looked at Nabiki for a moment. "Agent Naito told me that the Halleckton affair is still getting bigger. Two more banks in the US and one in Canada have collapsed, and it's spread to Germany and France. They're a little worried it might be heading to some form of financial reset. All sorts of very bad things are suddenly coming to light in the financial system. A lot of people are going to go to jail, he thinks, all over the world. We accidentally managed to expose some very widespread corruption."

"Good grief. I wonder where it will stop?" Nabiki shook her head in amazement. "I'm feeling kind of guilty, now."

"So am I, but it was something that had to be done. Aside from anything else, we're not the ones who have apparently been fiddling the books for years, if not decades," 'Chou' sighed a little, looking at the floor, then met her sister's eyes again. "It's regrettable, but I expect it would all have come out eventually, and the longer it took the worse things would be. Hopefully this will prevent a larger global financial collapse in a few years, that could be very bad. Anyway, when we get back
the Canadians would like to talk to us again. Apparently they are considering giving everyone involved some sort of recognition award or something like that."

The other three looked at each other. "Are magical girls allowed to accept awards?" Tamiko giggled.

They all laughed. "I don't see why not," the elder Tendo said, grinning. "It's certainly unusual, but it might set a good precedent with the others. Right, anyone need anything else, or can I shut this down now?" She gestured to the portal. Nabiki shook her head after glancing at the other two young women.

"Nope. I'm done. Thanks." The portal immediately popped out of existence, then the blonde led the way to the door, Nabiki switching back to the wingless version of 'Azumi' on the way.

Watching everyone swimming with shouts of fun, 'Azumi' looked around the waterpark, grinning. It was an amazingly detailed replica of an island in the middle of some alien ocean, a deep orange sun sitting half-way to the horizon, while the sea shimmered sapphire, low waves rolling up the beach, which was covered in fine sand an unusual bluish-grey colour. The water was only mildly salty, at a very comfortable temperature, and was extremely clear. It reminded the middle sister of 'Aiko Island' only without the lagoon. It was also much larger.

'I can't see the edges at all,' she commented to Jun.

#The environmental simulation is impressive,# it agreed. #This facility is just under a kilometre in diameter, which allows for some very effective wave effects to be generated. At points the water is close to fifteen metres deep. Several species other than D'sage and Humans enjoy swimming, including the local inhabitants.# Indeed, there were lots of the large insect-like people that called this world their home enjoying themselves in the water, using a wide variety of accessories, including something that was remarkably close to a wind-surf board. The waterpark had a light breeze blowing across it, enough to make the board move at a decent pace, but not so much it could be considered windy. With an ambient temperature of just under thirty degrees the breeze was refreshing.

Heading for one of the food dispensers discreetly built into the scenery around the place, she acquired a cold drink and another plate of the spiky blue snack roots, sitting on a large rock and nibbling them while watching the people running around and having fun. She'd swum in her merform for nearly an hour, but had become somewhat hungry, hence the break.

'These things are kind of more-ish;' she mused, finishing the plate and wondering whether she should get some more. 'I'll have to get a load to take home.' As she was considering getting back into the water, she felt 'Yori' walk up behind her, turning to see the short woman smiling at her.

"Good, isn't it," the black-haired woman said, sitting beside her. She was holding another plate of the snacks, which she offered to the middle sister. Accepting a few with a nod, she smiled back.

"It's damned impressive. You really can't tell the difference. I'd never have believed we were indoors."

"Unless you get pretty close to the outer edges you really can't see anything out of place." 'Yori' looked around, nodding approvingly. "Someone spend a lot of money setting this all up." She turned to the other woman. "I've got a little job for you. Or rather, for Ms Aoyama."

'Azumi' looked surprised, glancing around guiltily for a second. "Don't worry, we're fully
shielded." 'Yori' grinned. "I met this friend of Uthryyl's. He's a trader as well, kind of Uthryyl's counterpart on this world. Nice guy. They do a lot of business together. He's got a problem, which he hoped Uthryyl could help him with. Apparently, he'd recently been having problems with a local crime syndicate. Think Yakuza, or Mafia, but not as good. However, they're getting kind of nasty. T'kl'it says he can't get the authorities involved because so far they haven't done anything that's actually provably criminal, but the threats are annoying him. Since we have level two authorisation we can legitimately intervene without any real issues. I don't want to start a shooting war, but I think that some friendly persuasion might do the trick. You up for it?"

"It sounds interesting. But will a species this alien find Ms Aoyama worrying enough to pay attention?"

'Yori' giggled. "Oh, trust me, yes indeed. Possibly more so than back home. After all, from their point of view, you're the demon..."

"Sir, there's... something... here to see you," the hushed voice of his assistant came through the netlink. He looked at it, slightly puzzled.

"Something?" he enquired. "What does that mean?" There was no response. "K'th'yr? What's going on?" He started to head to the door to investigate.

"Your assistant would appear to be indisposed," a voice that send shivers through his exoskeleton said from behind him in Trade, making him whip around, reaching for his weapon with one middle hand. The black-clad female alien of a species he was unfamiliar with standing against the back wall simply watched. He pointed the energy pistol at her, activating the seeker function. It hummed gently, ready to follow any move she made.

"I have no idea who you are or how you got in here, but you made a very large mistake," he said, even while he was wondering how she had managed to penetrate his security, which was the best on the market. None of the magic detectors had registered anything, although alien magic of some sort seemed the only explanation. The female simply looked at him, raising one eyebrow behind the dark eye-covers she was wearing, apparently unimpressed.

"Mr R'ng'wr, you have come to our attention due to some unfortunate threats you have made to an associate. I am here to resolve the situation." She looked around the office for a moment, then back at him, while he tried to work out what the hell was going on. And why was it getting cold? "I refer to Mr T'kl'it and his business. We would prefer that you refrain from further contact." Raising the pistol further he aimed it between her eyes, fairly sure that was where most species kept something important.

"Who is 'we'?" he asked. "Did Y're'tq send you? Is he trying to grab my business for his own?"

"The person you mention has no involvement with my presence here, Mr R'ng'wr. That is due to your own actions. Information on the organisation for which I work is unavailable. We are simply making a request that you cease your activities concerning Mr T'kl'it immediately, before the situation becomes more involved. This would be unfortunate."

"Is that a threat?"

"Merely a statement of fact." Her voice was, even taking into account the fact that it was coming from an alien throat, deeply disturbing on some very fundamental level. He suppressed a quiver of his antennae with a deliberate act of will.
"Who are you?" he asked.

She took a step forward, which he matched with an involuntary one backwards. "I am Ms Aoyama. We have an interest in Mr T'kl'it, which your involvement disturbs. Will you cease your actions towards him? If your cooperation is not forthcoming, there are actions available which will resolve the situation to our satisfaction nonetheless. I believe that you would not particularly enjoy them, however." The alien woman did something with her mouth that made him shudder. There was something about it that was simply horrifying. He had a sudden flashback to books he'd read in childhood, describing unholy things from other dimensions that turned up and ate you, suddenly not entirely sure they were fiction.

He pulled the trigger. The energy beam spiked out, only to splash against some sort of incredibly powerful forcefield mere centimetres from her head, a brief purple glow showing around the impact point. She watched him with the air of someone waiting for an unruly child to finish it's tantrum. "That was unwise, Mr R'ng'wr." Shaking her head slightly, she gave off a very small sigh as he fired twice more. "It would be in your best interests to cease your current activities. Your weapon will not harm me, and I dislike this waste of time. It is inefficient. I find myself forced to take steps."

The weapon suddenly beeped sharply at him, going dead. He stared at it. A different alarm sounded, making him yelp and throw it across the room. He knew that sound, it was the anti-theft self-destruct activating. Ramming himself against the wall he tried to escape the blast he knew was coming as the power cell shorted out. A muffled thud made him jump, staring in shock as the weapon vaporised itself, the blast somehow staying in a small spherical zone. The glimmer of purple made him realise it had another force-field around it. After a long moment he turned his head to the alien woman, emitting a small screech to find she was standing a metre away studying him with cold curiosity. He'd had no idea at all she'd moved, not having heard anything. It was so cold now he could see his own breath, but horrifyingly, not hers.

"Are you now prepared to be cooperative, Mr R'ng'wr? Or is it necessary that I take further steps?" The room illumination suddenly died, everything in it losing power. "It is very dark in here, Mr R'ng'wr." The voice was now across the room. He shivered. It was very cold, and not just physically. "I strongly suggest that you cease all activities relating to Mr T'kl'it. We will be monitoring your movements. Should I find that you are still interfering, I will deal with the problem in a permanent manner. You would not find that eventuality to be to your liking."

The horrible voice was suddenly right next to him, making him freeze and nearly lose control of his bodily functions. He couldn't see, feel, or sense her, but he could definitely hear her, something he wasn't happy about. "I would advise that you take this warning very seriously, Mr R'ng'wr. I will be most displeased should I be forced to return. I am not in the habit of giving second chances. I am behind schedule today so I will not proceed with further action at this time, but should we meet again..." The horrible emotionless voice trailed off into silence.

After a long moment, he started to relax, wondering what to do. The room lights came back on, making him twitch. Looking around he saw no sign of the woman. He noticed with shock that the half-dozen plants he had under lights on the side of the room opposite his desk had all withered away as if they'd been sprayed with liquid nitrogen. Walking over he fingered one, watching it crumble to powder, shaking his head in terrified awe.

"That... person... is horrible," he muttered.

"Thank you, Mr R'ng'wr," the cold voice said in his ear, making him scream and jump sideways. When he turned, no one was there. After a very long moment he made his way to his desk, opening
a link to his second in command.

"L'nd'rd? Shut down everything to do with T'kl'it. He's off limits. Permanently." Killing the link and slumping in his seat, R'ng'wr concentrated on getting his breathing under control, trying not to faint, before looking up at the empty room. "Ms Aoyama?" he said tentatively, after a long moment. There was no answer.

For some reason, that didn't make him any happier.

T'kl'it stared at the woman standing beside Yori, who seemed amused, then glanced at Uthryyl. "That's it? It's over?"

"Yep," Yori replied, grinning. "Ms Aoyama had a word with R'ng'wr, he told his people to back off, that's the end of it. I doubt you'll have any more problems with him."

"Mr R'ng'wr appears to have taken my advice to heart," Ms Aoyama said emotionlessly. "He seemed disinclined to risk a further meeting." She smiled slightly, making Uthryyl and T'kl'it both shiver a little. It was horrible. Uthryyl found, even knowing who was under that persona, he really didn't find it anything other than extremely unpleasant.

"Thank you both so much," T'kl'it said after a long moment. He turned to Yori, finding her less disturbing to talk to. "If there's ever anything I can do to help you, please let me know."

"Thanks, T'kl'it. I'll bear that in mind." She grinned at him. "But for now, Ms Aoyama needs to return to her business and Uthryyl and I need to get back to our holiday. It was nice to meet you."

"And you. Stop by next time you're in the area." The insect-like merchant made the gesture with his antennae that was the equivalent of a smile. She nodded, then left with the other, much more alien, female following. He turned to his old friend. "What was that?" he asked in a low voice. Uthryyl shrugged slightly.

"Someone you really don't want to mess with. Yori is incredibly powerful and probably the most terrifying person I know when she has to be. Ms Aoyama is just... extremely worrying. Even when she's being friendly."

"She's the creepiest thing I've ever seen," T'kl'it replied with a shudder. "There are stories about things from the dark places in the universe, things that drive you insane at night. She is what they have nightmares about, I think." Uthryyl grinned a little.

"Ms Aoyama would probably enjoy that thought."

"Don't tell her, please. I don't want to see that smile again." T'kl'it looked at his friend, who laughed a little. "Thanks, Uthryyl. That could have ended up being a real problem by the time it got bad enough that the authorities stepped in."

"No problem, T'kl'it. Glad I could help. Right, I need to get back, Quannyr and Onkra will be annoyed I'm missing so much vacation time."

"Give them my best wishes," his friend said. "I'll have to come and visit again some time soon."

"Please do." Uthryyl smiled at his old friend, leaving him in his office as he left the building.

"And the legend grows," Fumiko giggled, looking at 'Azumi', who grinned back. "I wonder how
long it will be before Ms Aoyama is talked about in hushed tones on every world in the K'nn group?"

"I don't think *that* sort of thing is likely," the silver-haired woman replied. "But that was fun. Mind you, when he shot at me I had a bit of trouble not twitching."

"You did very well," 'Yori' commented, proudly inspecting her sister-in-law. "Not a flicker. You just looked coldly bored. It was very impressive."

"I trusted you to stop anything happening." She gave the short girl a smile.

"It was very funny the way you used Jun to hack his gun. He looked extremely surprised."

'Azumi' chuckled. "It was Jun's idea. It told me the thing was open to that sort of attack, although not by anything around here. The SI units are clearly a damn sight more advanced than practically anything, I think. You could probably cause absolute chaos on a world like this one that's so dependent on computers." Turning to look out the window set into the floor nearby, she grinned again. "I still can't believe that view."

The rest of the people at their table turned to look, nodding agreement. At the synchronous orbit point half-way up the space elevator, they had a fantastic view of the planet in the distance, seen through various transparent sections of the floor, and also space, more stars than you could possibly see from the ground blazing through the windows. "Jun said the windows are made of diamond laminate about twenty centimetres thick, with some sort of enhanced molecular bond. More or less completely unbreakable." Looking at the nearest one she shook her head slightly. "That's a long way down." The window was so transparent it looked like a hole in the floor, although people were unconcernedly walking around on it.

"They don't use the elevator for people much any more," Uthryyl said, pouring himself and his wife a new drink. "It used to be the main method to and from space. Now, with the anti-grav systems they developed, it's quicker to go directly from the surface. This thing still gets used for inbound cargo, when there's no hurry, since it's cheap and easy to basically just drop it down. Past this point gravity does all the work, you just have to make sure it goes slowly enough not to be a problem."

"It's very cool," Tamiko said, looking around. "Worth the trip up. That was kind of boring, I have to admit."

"We're spoiled by bouncing around the place with teleportation and portals." 'Chou' smiled at her friends. "It makes everything else seem slow."

"What's the next thing on the list?" Onkra asked with interest. Uthryyl glanced at her.

"Well, if you're wanting excitement, they do orbital skydiving from lower down," he suggested, grinning at her wide-eyed stare. "It's true. They come up to here, put on a sort of one man ballistic re-entry capsule, and jump out. Totally insane. A little drive system pushes them a few dozen kilometres away so they don't hit the thing, then they just fall. Once they contact the atmosphere they're going fast enough to bounce half-way around the planet, then they deploy a wing once they'd deep enough and glide to the ground."

'Yori' laughed a little. "Weirdly enough, that's been suggested at home, I think. I seem to recall reading about something the Americans came up with decades ago as some sort of emergency re-entry system that worked a lot like that."
"I don't think I want to jump from orbital heights," Onkra said, after a moment. "The gliding was a lot of fun, but there are limits."

"Some people have no sense of fun," the martial artist replied with a grin.

"Are you going to do it?" Onkra asked curiously. Yori giggled.

"Of course not. I may be crazy but I'm not that crazy." They all laughed, as she finished her meal.

"More seriously, S'th'kx has invited us on a short trip on one of his mining ships," Uthryyl went on, after a moment. "He's going to check up on a mining operation on an asteroid they pulled into a solar orbit a couple of years ago. It's quite big, they stuck a refinery on it to take it to pieces and extract all the useful metals from it."

"How long would it take to get there and back?" Chou asked curiously.

"It's about half a day each way. I'd like to see it, I haven't been on a spacecraft for quite a few years now, but you can always stay and find something else to do. It's not like K'nn four isn't full of interesting things."

"Are you kidding?" Fumiko said, looking at him as if he was nuts. "Go into space in a real alien spaceship? Of course I'm going." Tamiko was nodding with a huge grin.

"Damn right. Count me in." He looked around the table, smiling as everyone was clearly up for it.

"OK. I'll call him and let him know. It's not all that far into space, only a few million kilometres, though. It's not like interstellar travel. We'd need to go to one of the really high-tech worlds for that, the K'nn group worlds don't bother with it at the moment. I know that K'nn four did lease a couple of hyperlight drives a while ago for evaluation, but they're not doing anything much with them right now."

'Azumi' slowly shook her head. "That's amazing, I have to admit. Just being able to casually lease a faster than light spacedrive. No one at home would believe it."

"They're not cheap," Uthryyl said. "But a lot cheaper than building one, even assuming you could."

"How fast are they?" she asked curiously.

"I'm not entirely sure. The ones I've seen in the past were something like five hundred times the local speed of light, which varies a little from reality to reality. Even so it still takes quite a time to go very far, stars are a very long way apart. I've heard of faster ones, but it's not a subject I know much about. Interstellar travel isn't common outside a fairly small number of worlds, ones that don't have much contact with portal-travelling civilisations or magic."

"Unbelievable. Still, I think a trip to an asteroid is pretty damn impressive. Not at all something I'd have ever thought I'd do." She smiled, shaking her head. "This is one hell of a vacation."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Aiko dodged the attack from the creature diving at her, shooting it in the back with a ki ball, watching with grim satisfaction as it bounced down the road, to lie still. "How many of these fucking things are there?"

"I've killed nine so far, Ami got six and you've done another eleven." Misaki looked around at the damaged supermarket. "Twenty-six all in." A noise from behind them made them both whirl and fire simultaneously, the demonic creature exploding into charred chunks of smoking meat.
"Twenty-seven."

"What are they, even? I've never seen anything like them before."

"No idea. Some sort of magical creature, I think, but I don't know what type. Not very smart." They turned to look at the somewhat larger than normal portal which had opened in the car park, then started disgorging these supremely irritating little monsters with big teeth and a bad attitude.

"They certainly like biting," Aiko muttered, rubbing her arm. Even she had felt that one. A normal person would have lost the arm on the spot. "Vicious little fuckers. This is beginning to get annoying."

"I think some more are on the way," a voice from the side said, as Ami walked around the corner, pointing her hand-held computer at the portal. "It's fluctuating again." Aiko growled and fired a large ki ball directly into the portal, making the blue-haired girl yelp and duck as it roared past. A weird thump sounded and a large amount of small pieces of demon slid out of the portal into a smoking heap on the tarmac. "OK, that worked," she said, looking at the remains with some shock. "Holy shit, Aiko, how large can you make one of those things?"

"A lot bigger than that, believe me, but it's a bit much for around here. Yori would kill me if I blew up the entire middle of the district." The brunette grinned slightly manically. "Without a good reason, anyway."

"Um, right, OK," the other woman said, glancing side-long at her. Misaki was smiling in a worrying way. "So, what do we do now? That portal doesn't seem to want to close." Her computer beeped, making her check it. "Damn. More of them."

Something small and fast shot out of the portal, whizzing into the sky, circled twice, then dived back in. Misaki's shot barely missed it. She grunted with annoyance. "Don't tell Yori I missed, she'd never let me hear the end of it."

"It was moving about five hundred kilometres an hour," Ami replied, checking her machine. "I'm not surprise you missed. I could barely follow it."

"She wouldn't. I shouldn't." The thing popped out again, with a friend, but this time the tall girl got both of them almost instantly. They exploded with a loud bang and a small shockwave, making a couple of somehow undamaged windows nearby tinkle to the ground. "Oh, I didn't," Misaki said with a grin. Ami stared, then shrugged.

"I think they're some sort of surveillance drone," she said, looking at the remains of one then scanning it.

"So something on the other side is trying to find out what happened to it's horrible little friends?" Aiko scowled. "I'm beginning to lose my patience with this crap. Why the hell doesn't this sort of thing happen when we're running around all over the world chasing portal bombs, but as soon as they go on holiday, it's one thing after another?"

Misaki shrugged, pulling out a chocolate bar and unwrapping it. Ami gave her an odd look. She offered the other woman one, who looked at it for a moment, then took it. "No idea. Life, I guess."

"Well, I'm not going to take it any more." The short brunette was about to say something else when a huge demon, some four metres tall, stepped through the portal and looked around, radiating evil intent. They watched it intently.

"Tremble, you tiny creatures, before the might of gakkk!" As the echoes died away, Misaki
turned to her friend, grinning.

"That's an odd name." Aiko nodded, looking at the remains of the thing, then glanced at Ami, who seemed satisfied.

"Nice shot." An ice attack had erupted inside the demons open mouth at the same time two large ki balls had entered, removing it's head and most of it's upper torso. What was left was smoking on the ground.

"Thanks."

"You're getting better at that. Not shouting out all those silly attack names is a definite improvement. When they get back, maybe you should ask Yori for some training. I'm pretty sure she'd have some good ideas on how to improve the efficiency of what you can do. She's a genius for that sort of thing."

The blue haired girl looked nervous. "Would she teach me? After all the trouble?"

Aiko shrugged. "You can only ask. But probably. Anyway, what are we going to do about this?"

She indicated the portal which was still there. Misaki walked over to it, inspecting it, then experimentally tossed a ki sphere through it. It flickered slightly but absorbed it.

"It went through," Ami reported, looking at her computer.

"Fair enough," Misaki replied, looking satisfied. She held out her hand and an energy sphere began forming on it, growing very large then shrinking to the size of a marble. Ami went white as she scanned it.

"Oh, fuck me," she whispered. "The power in that is..." Misaki fired it through the open portal, then dived out of the way of the flash of energy that leapt out, before the portal collapsed on itself with a weird screech.

"That should do it," the taller woman said, dusting her hands off in satisfaction.

"Considering you basically just nuked the other side, yes, I'd think so," Aiko laughed. She turned to Ami, who was staring at Misaki as if she'd seen her own death rapidly approaching. "Come on, let's get rid of all these bodies then get some ramen. On me." Numbly the younger woman watched as her two companions produced small devices which made the dead demons gradually disintegrate as they waved them over the bodies, then went to bring more of the deceased creatures to them, still unable to think what to say.

Many realities away, a huge orange flash completely obliterated the staging post set up for the invasion, killing every portal-capable mage instantly and triggering the rapid collapse of the ruling military party. The ensuing civil war completely reshaped the entire world and occupied the inhabitants for decades.

When it cooled and filled with rainwater, the large crater became a home to a number of the local equivalent of ducks, proving the multiverse has a sense of humour of sorts.
Chapter 62

Her communicator made the little noise that meant one of her team-mates wanted to talk. It was the third time in the last hour. Pulling it out she considered it for a moment, then put the thing away again, unanswered, sighing slightly, her mind awhirl with troubling thoughts. Lying back on her bed she continued to think for a while longer, then got up to find her grandfather. He was sweeping the yard, an exercise he did regularly and without complaint. Watching him for a moment she idly wondered how many million times he had moved one broom or another over the ancient stones, in his long life as a priest.

Without looking up, making her twitch slightly as she came out of her thoughts, he suddenly asked quietly, "What is your question, child?" The young woman was silent for a while, as he patiently continued his task, waiting.

"Why did they laugh at us?"

"Who?" He kept working.

"The workmen. The other day, when Fumiko and her friends made us clean up, they called a lot of workmen to take the damaged vehicles and the debris away. Several of them were definitely laughing at us. Not in a nice way, not being friendly, or sympathetic."

"Ah." Finishing sweeping some fallen leaves into a neat pile, he stopped, leaning on the broom and studying her for a moment. "You didn't like it."

"No. I don't understand it, either. They weren't laughing at Fumiko, or Aiko, or the others. They weren't laughing at Ami. They laughed with them, Fumiko and Tamiko were making jokes, the workmen and the pedestrians stopped and talked, they all seemed to know the entire team, but it was different." She shrugged a little helplessly. "Us, they were laughing at us."

The old priest smiled for a moment. "I'm sorry about that, but I understand it. I think the concept you're reaching for is respect. Yori and her friends are respected, because in turn they respect the people in the community they live in. Respect is a two way street. And it can only be earned, not forced. It can be lost much more easily than it can be gained. Those young women have, from everything I've ever seen, earned the respect of everyone they meet."

"We do the same sort of thing. More, even. Some of the things we've done in the past..."

"You have indeed kept the community safe from some true horrors, if what I've seen on the news is even remotely true. Yet, when you managed to deal with that demonic incursion six months ago, did you apologise for the buildings you destroyed?"

"Um..."

"There were three people hospitalised about fourteen months ago, when they were caught in an explosion your blonde friend caused. Did you apologise to them?"

"We didn't even know about them until a week afterwards!" She looked miffed. He nodded sadly.

"Precisely my point. Yori, or any of her friends, would certainly have avoided putting bystanders in danger in the first place. If someone had been harmed as a result of their actions, they would have made it right, and apologised. And moreover, the apology would have been accepted. You girls seem to just charge in, firing dangerous magic wildly about, and give a very strong impression..."
recently of just not really thinking about what might happen. There have been more cases like that than I care to think about. People notice."

She watched as he swept up the little pile of leaves, dumping them on the compost heap, before returning to her. "The magical girls are possibly more powerful than anyone in Japan, any of you. That can be a worrying thought to anyone who considers it. Using that power to help people, that goes a very long way towards making it less scary. Giving the impression that because you're more powerful you're better, that the less powerful don't matter as much as you do somehow, that does the opposite. People resent bullies."

She stared for a moment. "We're not bullies. Yori's a bully, she's always yelling at us." He smiled again.

"I can see how you might feel that way, but most others would think of her more like the headmistress of a particularly unruly school. Someone bringing discipline to chaos." He laughed for a moment. "Which is irony at it's best, she's the most chaotic thing I've ever encountered. Perhaps that's necessary to keep a lid on something like Minato." Shaking his head he looked seriously at her. "I don't believe Yori is a bully. Passionate about stopping what she sees as dangerous behaviour, perhaps, but I don't truly think she actually enjoys shouting at you." Pausing for thought he smirked.

"Well, no more than anyone would under the circumstances. Some of it has been very funny." She glared at him for a moment. He shrugged. "Well, it was. But I think she'd much prefer that everyone get along. At heart she's a very cheerful and upbeat person, although there is a darkness in her that it would be very unwise to provoke. I suspect none of you have ever truly angered her, which is for the best."

"She looked pretty damn angry the last time she yelled at us." She shuddered, remembering.

"Oh, I have no doubt she was extremely irritated, but not truly angry." He grinned, walking past her and heading back inside, as she followed. "You are, after all, still alive."

"S'th'kx says we have to leave in about an hour," Quannyr's voice sounded. 'Azumi' looked at Onkra, who shrugged.

"One more try, then."

"OK."

Picking up a baseball-sized rock, the D'sage woman hefted it gently, then checked with her SI for a moment for the right speed and direction. While 'Azumi' held her in place against the nearly non-existent gravity of the three kilometre or so diameter asteroid, she carefully threw the rock in a flat trajectory, watching as it moved away in a very odd manner, not visibly dropping. Staying a constant one and a half metres off the surface it disappeared over the very close horizon, making her grin. "I think that did it. Now we wait."

They turned around to look in the exact other direction. The refinery and smelting facility was off to their right, on one of the poles of the slowly rotating, nearly spherical asteroid, rich with heavy metals. It twinkled with lights, producing a steady vibration that they could feel through their boots, as the drills slowly carved out the middle.

Twenty minutes passed in idle talk, until Nabiki squinted. "Hey. Is that it?"

Onkra laughed. "Yes. Finally. We've been trying for three hours." She caught the rock as it flew gently past. "I actually threw something into orbit." Nabiki grinned at her friend.
"Good throw. Mine keep disappearing."

"You're throwing too hard. Yours are just a hazard to navigation, now. You threw them completely out of it's gravity."

"OK, then, you can throw a rock into orbit, I can throw it past escape velocity!"

"That's not difficult, even I can do that here," the other woman said, laughing to herself. "But orbit. That takes skill."

Heading back to the refinery, using a pair of very small drive units they held in the manner of a scuba-diver's underwater scooter, they entered the airlock, deactivating the force-field environment suits they were using as the inner door opened. "Have fun?" 'Chou' asked, greeting them with a smile.

"Yes. I made this go all the way around," Onkra laughed, displaying her rock. "It took about a dozen tries."

"Impressive," the elder Tendo replied, inspecting the lump of asteroid material with interest. "An unusual sport, but it might catch on." She giggled as the other two exchanged glances.

"If we had a bigger asteroid, with stronger gravity, we could play orbital golf," Nabiki suggested.

"What's golf?" Onkra asked curiously. The middle sister sent her some information on it. "Oh, I see. We have something a little like that at home. It's very boring."

"But imagine it in space! Everything is better in space." Grinning at her friend and her sister, she added, "Where are the others?"

"Everyone else is back in the ship. We were just talking about what to do when we get back to K'nn Four." She waited for them to hang the manoeuvring units up next to the airlock then walked with them back towards the ship. "S'th'kx was telling us about some interesting places to visit. Quannyr wants to look around some shopping areas, as does Fumiko. The others are fine to do anything, although Tamiko does want to go swimming."

Looking around at the refinery corridor they were walking down, 'Azumi' chuckled a little. "You know, aside from the lower gravity this could be just some factory or something on Earth, but then you walk past something like that." That was a wide window giving a view of the outside of the facility, the surface of the asteroid mostly fairly dark, with lighter patches occasionally where some past collision had spalled off the surface. The horizon was ridiculously close and curved, looking like some sort of special effect, but far too sharp and clear to be fake. Millions of stars were apparent, along with several visible galaxies, far more apparent than at home. Off to one side was hanging the mass of S'th'kx's ship, a squat cone shape some fifty metres in diameter and half that in height, while beyond it was a much larger vessel, over a hundred and eighty metres long, with a number of huge cylinders arranged lengthwise around the central spine. This was the main cargo ship, which was loading ingots of purified metals ready to be returned and sold.

They all stopped and looked at the view for a moment. "It is certainly very impressive," 'Chou' replied after a moment. "Much more convincing than any movie I've seen, which makes sense, I suppose." She grinned.

"I still can't believe I'm in an alien mining facility on an asteroid," 'Azumi' giggled as they began walking again. "It's just crazy. Somehow this is much harder to believe than almost anything that's happened so far. No one at home would ever believe me even if I could tell them."
"You've got enough evidence to easily prove it," her sister laughed. "Although, I have to admit it seems unlikely that we can tell anyone for a while."

Arriving at the airlock to the ship, 'Chou' tapped the relevant control, waiting until the door slid open, then entered with her two companions. As soon as the first door closed the other one opened, admitting them to the vessel. One of the five crew S'th'kx had nodded politely to them as he passed. After a short walk they entered the ship's common room, looking around. S'th'kx was talking to Quannyr and Uthryyl, but looked up and gave a friendly wave of his antennae when he saw them.

"Did you enjoy your trip outside?" he asked. 'Azumi' glanced at Onkra, then both nodded, smiling.

"Yes. It's amazing, walking around out there. Or, not walking so much, more being towed or standing very carefully on the surface," Onkra laughed. "It's pretty weird, I have to say." She held up her orbital rock. "I managed to throw this all the way around, eventually." She was clearly very proud of the feat. 'Yori' looked at her, grinning.

"Not bad. It's a good thing this asteroid is damn near spherical, it would be difficult on something a weird shape." She looked over at the mine company owner. "Isn't a spherical asteroid this small unusual? I thought most of them were normally all sorts of irregular shapes because their gravity was too small to pull them into a sphere."

S'th'kx nodded. "It's somewhat rare. We think this one was at some point in a very close orbit of the sun, which melted it. Surface tension would make it spherical then. It's got a very high metal content, about eighty percent metallic material, mostly iron and nickel, with the rest stone. That's why it has a comparatively high gravity despite the size. We'll be mining it for the next twenty years, it's one of the richest finds we ever located."

"If it's iron couldn't you use magnetic boots or something?" Tamiko asked curiously. He shook his head.

"Too much stone on top in most places. It's a slight pity, it would have made things easier, but we don't go outside much, there isn't a reason for it now the refinery is running." He stood up, nodding to them. "All right, if everyone is on board we'll head back. I've completed everything I needed to do here." Leaving the room he headed for the control section. Shortly the small ship undocked, rotated, then began to accelerate, a very slight vibration being the only sensation of the enormous energy applied by the drive.

"This is a scout craft of some sort, isn't it?" Fumiko asked Uthryyl. He nodded.

"I believe so. It's meant for towing asteroids, it's got an enormously oversized drive system and some form of gravity tug. From what I understand, they can clamp it to an asteroid and move it around, although for a big one either it's quite a slow process or they use more than one. That one was pulled here from a very elliptical orbit over about a year, then stabilised and spun up to make the temperature even out. It's doubled the profit of his company with one refinery." Shrugging, he added, "If you want to know more talk to S'th'kx about it. He'll talk your ear off about space mining given half a chance. He's been doing it for about fifty years or so."

Quannyr giggled a little, making him look at her. "Like you and trading, perhaps, dear?" He grinned slightly.

"That's not impossible."

Onkra sat next to 'Yori', inspecting her rock. The martial artist looked at it with interest. "Are you going to take that home?" she asked. Onkra laughed.
"Of course. You always need souvenirs. This one I'm definitely keeping." Handing it to her friend, she added, "Can you use that trick of yours to keep it safe?"

"Sure." 'Yori' made it vanish, while Onkra watched closely.

"That's so weird. No magic at all, or at least nothing I can recognise as magic."

Laughing slightly, 'Yori' grinned at her. "It's not impossible that one day you could learn to do it. It's very useful."

"I'd certainly like that. Do you really think that I could learn ki control?" The other woman studied her closely for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"To be honest, yes, I think you probably can. How well I have no idea yet. Your natural ki levels are fairly reasonable, but I can't see any differences yet from the training. It's only been a week or so, so that's not surprising. Several months of work and I'd hope to see it begin to rise. Once it starts it goes quite slowly for a while, then speeds up a lot. Or, that's what happens with us, at any rate. It'll be very interesting to see what happens with a D'sage." She smiled at Onkra's expression of expectation.

"Don't get your hopes up yet, there's a lot of work and a bit of luck involved, but we'll see." The young woman didn't look any less pleased, although she nodded.

"Thank you for teaching me this."

"No problem. I found out a while ago that I like teaching, it's a lot of fun. You're a good student, as well, which makes it easy."

Looking very pleased by the compliment, the young woman smiled. 'Azumi' watched, feeling happy for her. She was clearly very taken by the thought she could learn some interesting things, a feeling the Tendo sister was familiar with. Sitting beside her sister she leaned back and closed her eyes.

'This has been an interesting day.'

'It has indeed, Nabiki. Your experiences on the asteroid were most enlightening. Jun sounded very amused, making her smile. #I was quite impressed that Onkra managed to propel an object into a complete orbit. It was not a stable one, of course, it would not have managed more than six rotations at best, but the success was interesting.#

'She seems very pleased about it. I expect that little rock is going to be something she shows to visitors for years.'

#That seems likely.#

'These force field spacesuit things are pretty impressive.' They'd each been given one by S'th'kx when they boarded. The device went on around the upper arm like a large bracelet, adhering firmly, but was light enough that she didn't notice it without thinking about it after the first few minutes. She'd been told by the miner that they were the latest model, providing air and heat for up to three weeks, depending on the species using them. The force field generated followed the skin quite closely, reprocessing the oxygen with close to one hundred percent efficiency, although it also contained a large quantity of the gas hugely compressed in a tiny spherical tank on the outside of the device. The duration limitation was mainly down to power rather than anything else.

They would activate automatically if the pressure suddenly dropped in an emergency, which was
the main purpose for them, although Jun had immediately interfaced to the unit and could activate and monitor it at will. The field was barely visible as a very faint shimmering effect, like a full-body soap bubble, when seen from exactly the right angle. Interestingly, it only blocked air from escaping, and provided temperature regulation both ways, meaning that other things could enter and leave. She was still able to put things in her pockets, she discovered, and they'd immediately tried their ki abilities, finding that they worked normally through the force field.

"They do appear quite efficient," the SI replied approvingly. "I would suggest that it would be a useful item to add to your inventory, as a security measure. While your physical abilities are most impressive you still require oxygen, even if you can use it more effectively than a non-enhanced human." Snickering slightly, she admitted the thing had a point, but she was amused by the way that every time something like this came up the SI became quite acquisitive.

"If I get everything you think would be a useful security measure, my ki pocket will be holding tons of stuff. I'm not sure I can do that yet. There's already enough food and water in there for a small army, because you thought it would be handy to have just in case."

"In Halleckton I believe that the water was indeed utilised on a number of occasions," Jun replied with a distinct air of enjoyment.

"Point to you. OK, I'll see how much they are when we get back."

"Thank you. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not mention things of this nature."

The middle Tendo looked at the display that Jun provided from information derived from the ship computer, seeing that their estimated arrival time at the spaceport was in a little over six hours, then decided to take a nap. She was soon asleep.

Soun watched his youngest daughter and Shampoo practice, then glanced down at the ancient woman balancing on her staff beside him, also studying the two young women. "I hear you were somewhat taken aback by the money the Americans offered Akane and your great-granddaughter," he commented. Not taking her eyes off the match Cologne nodded, smiling a little.

"It was somewhat excessive, I thought. It took me by surprise." She laughed slightly. "But I'm very proud of both of them. It would be nice to have Shampoo doing the things she trained for so long for, but the world has changed. Our type of warriors aren't nearly as much in demand as they were. The modern way of waging war is so different to what it was when I was young. Back then, you saw your opponent face to face. Now, they kill each other from another country, or from the air, or a ship." She sighed a little. "So many good things have come from technology, I'm constantly surprised and impressed by it, but at the same time humanity's ability to turn anything to causing destruction sometimes depresses me." She shook her head. "Oh, well. It's not something I can do much about. At least Japan is a fairly stable country with few enemies, and even China isn't too bad. Better than it's been for some time, certainly."

"Do you ever worry about your village?" Soun asked curiously. "Being attacked by the authorities in China? I can't imagine that the way you live fits with their ideology, certainly since communism took over." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, removing one, then looked at it, looked at the Elder, and put it away again.

Cologne chuckled in her gravelly voice. "They don't like us, that much is true, but we know where all the skeletons are buried. I put some there myself, in fact. We have certain... agreements. They leave us alone, we leave them alone. The Musk and the Phoenix people have also come to an arrangement. Nothing on paper, but we seldom see anyone from the government and they're always
scrupulously polite when they visit. And quite nervous."

Soun laughed to himself for a moment. "Well done, Elder."

"One has to protect one's family." She looked up at him for a moment. "Something we all need to bear in mind." Watching his daughter spar, he nodded slowly.

"Indeed. I'm very proud of my daughters, but I confess I worry slightly about Akane going to the US. Her emotional issues do indeed seem to be a thing of the past, largely due to the actions of those two extraordinary young women from Minato, but I'm a little concerned that they might decide she was somehow a threat. Not the movie people, to them she and Shampoo are worth enormous amounts of money, but certain people in the government. You know what Americans are like." He sighed a little, sitting on the porch, beside the Elder who dropped off her staff and did likewise.

"The Japanese authorities have a considerable interest in the magical girls, in Minato and the rare ones elsewhere," Cologne said after a moment, "according to information I located some time ago. I'm not sure exactly how high it goes, or how deep, but I suspect they are seen as some sort of national asset. It's not impossible that they would step in if something did happen with Akane. She may not have the magical abilities, but from most peoples viewpoint she's not so far away from what the young ladies running around Minato do. With luck that will protect her and Shampoo, should your worries be valid."

Glancing away from the sparring match for a moment, she watched him, then went back to studying the girls. "It might be worth mention your thoughts to Yori or Chou, the next time you see them. Or Aiko, I'm sure she could get a message to them and she seems to be visiting the girls regularly. I would think that if anyone has the contacts that could reassure you it would be those two young women."

"It's certainly a good thought," Soun said, after reflecting on the idea. "Thank you, I'll do that. Just to set my mind at ease." He looked sideways at the old woman. "Thank you for allowing Shampoo to teach my daughter. It is undoubtedly one of the major influences on her recovery over the last months."

"You're welcome. Akane is coming along much better than I expected, I'll admit. I'd hoped to be able to teach her some of our techniques, but she seems sufficiently driven and talented to absorb much more of it that I thought would be the case." Cologne chuckled slightly. "I'm glad to be proven wrong in this case." They sat and watched for a little longer. "At some point in the future I would like to take Akane to the village for some intensive training," the Elder said after a couple of minutes. Soun looked at her in surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes. I think it would do her good. Not immediately, but in perhaps a year or so, for a couple of months. Hopefully, her career will be coming along well by that point and she can take some time off. From what I gather the work will be somewhat sporadic in any case for a while." Soun was silent for some time.

"If she has no objections, neither do I. I would much prefer that she return unmaimed, though." He grinned a little. "I understand that some of the Amazon training methods are rather... merciless."

Chuckling, Cologne nodded. "Oh, they can be, certainly. Not close to the level that idiot friend of yours reached with his poor son, but fairly involved. Don't worry, she'll live. She might walk funny for a while, though." He snickered despite himself.
After a pause, she asked him, "Did Akane ask you about being asked to train some of the stunt people and martial artists at the studio?"

"Yes. I assume Shampoo was asked as well?"

"She was. This Matt person seemed quite interested in the idea."

"What did you tell her?" The Elder was silent for a moment.

"I've been thinking about it quite a lot. Most of the really good techniques are Amazon secrets, as I believe the Anything Goes moves are as well at the higher levels." Soun nodded. "I'm not particularly keen on seeing them taught to just anyone. They could be incredibly destructive in the wrong hands. Not to mention that attempting to learn them could well be fatal for a student not at the right point in their training, or who was simply not up to it."

"Our schools are possibly not quite as dangerous, but even so there are things I would not wish to teach to any but a carefully vetted student, I agree. Genma has techniques that are genuinely extremely dangerous, which even he wouldn't teach."

Cologne smiled slightly at that. "After some consideration I decided that I would allow Shampoo to teach the basic hand to hand moves, which by most people's standards are very high level. Any students that she feels have the ability and inner strength to learn more she can refer to me. I will assess them and decide if they can learn anything beyond that. I don't think that will happen soon, but it allows her to improve the abilities of her colleagues without losing control of the more dangerous things." Cologne looked satisfied, glancing at Soun, who slowly nodded.

"A sound approach. I had considered something similar. By the time Akane gets this job and moves to LA, which I believe will probably be after Christmas from what she's recently been told, should it go to plan, Genma and I have decided she will be at the point we can allow her a basic teaching certificate. She has learned a vast amount very quickly in the last year. I only wish I could have been able to get her to this point years ago, but there were other factors in the way." He sighed sadly. "Most of them my fault, I admit."

Unexpectedly, Cologne patted him on the knee. "You're a good man, Soun Tendo. The loss of a loved one affects everyone differently. You were broken for a long time, but in recent years you have fixed yourself very well. I'm most impressed with how you have turned your life around."

With a slight chuckle, he replied, "Oddly enough, Genma is as much to thank for that as anyone. He was the one who pushed me into restarting the Dojo. I owe him a lot."

Shaking her head with irritation, Cologne sighed. "That man has much to answer for. His past actions have been... very unhelpful. To a very large number of people. But I'll agree, he does seem to have become slightly less of a useless excuse for a human being in recent years." She snickered. "Only slightly, mind."

"That is my best friend you're talking about, Elder," Soun said, then laughed for a moment. "but yes, I will agree that he has done things he's likely going to have to account for in the long term. We all have, though."

"True." They sat in silence for a moment, watching, until Shampoo called a halt, appearing pleased. She talked to Akane for a moment then both young women went off to shower. "Have you heard from Nabiki?" Cologne asked, turning to the Tendo patriarch.

"Oh, yes, I have, two days ago. She seemed in good spirits. She's having fun with those two friends
of hers. It was very nice of them to invite her along."

"Where are they now?"

Appearing slightly puzzled, Soun shook his head. "I'm not sure. She didn't say. All she told me was that they'd be travelling around quite a lot." He smiled a little. "I expect she'll have a lot of photographs when she comes back." Looking at the Elder, he added, "You seem to have become quite friendly towards her recently."

Cologne laughed. 'I find myself rather fond of your daughters. Nabiki reminds me strongly of myself in some ways, more years ago than I care to remember. She is one to watch out for. I feel that she has great things ahead of her, although what form those things will take I have no idea. It's a pity she never took up the Art, I've thought for a long time she'd be exceptional at it, she has the right mindset."

"Thank you for saying it." Soun looked pleased, smiling. "I have thought much the same myself occasionally. But, whatever she does, she will do it well. I'm very proud of her as well. Of all my daughters." Tailing off, he looked sad for a moment. Cologne glanced at him, then nudged him in a friendly manner.

"One day, you'll see her again, my boy." He looked slightly startled, gazing at the ancient little woman, but eventually nodded.

"I do hope so. I miss her, and I have a terrible feeling of guilt over the entire affair."

"Things have a habit of resolving themselves eventually. Wherever Kasumi is or whatever she's doing, I'm sure she thinks of you and the others as well, and is comporting herself with the same honour and grace she always has." She smiled at him. "You'll meet again, eventually."

"Thank you, Elder. That does help." He looked up as the afternoon students came into the yard, talking to each other. "Ah. Looks like lunch is over. Well, I must get back to work. It was very pleasant talking to you, Cologne."

"And you, Soun. Stop by the Café at some point soon, you haven't been in for a while." She hopped back onto her staff, grinning at him. "Friends and family discount. Genma pays full price." As she hopped away he burst out laughing.

"That was fun," Tamiko said, as they exited the ship, looking around at the crowded spaceport. Dozens of ships were taking off and landing all over the place, making a lot of noise but much less than one might have expected. Some of them were enormous, like flying aircraft carriers, while others were down to merely dozens of metres long. 'Azumi' watched with a grin on her face, glancing at Fumiko who looked at least as excited.

"It's like some sort of incredibly good SF movie," she giggled.

"I know! It's fantastic." Fumiko looked at one of the smaller ships, a cone-shaped vessel much like the one they'd just disembarked from aside from the size, which was only about eight metres in diameter. It lifted off, hanging in the air emitting a deep hum, before climbing rapidly out of sight straight up. She watched it go, smiling happily, then turned to her friend. "I want one."

"Where would you keep it?" 'Azumi' laughed. "It wouldn't fit in the parking garage. And I'll bet Tokyo air traffic control would get very confused." The other woman shrugged, looking around.
"That one would fit," she replied, pointing at an even smaller ship.

"True, I guess. Still have a slight problem with people noticing it, though." They inspected the small craft for a moment. "Perhaps next time."

S'th'kx, walking beside them, laughed. "You don't want that thing. It's barely orbit capable. They use them for putting satellites up and maintaining them. Something like mine is much more useful, you can go anywhere in the system in it."

"It's quite big," Tamiko said with a giggle. "And doesn't it need a crew?"

"Well, one person could certainly operate it easily enough, the computer does most of the work anyway, although they normally have a crew of between four and six. It gets lonely when you're poking around in the outer system hunting for decent asteroids, so it's nice to have some company." He sounded amused. "You have to be able to get on fairly well, though."

"I think we have enough going on at home without bringing alien spacecraft back with us, Fumiko," 'Chou' said gently, grinning. "Azumi is right, the neighbours would talk." Fumiko glanced at her, then laughed at the thought.

"Could we even get one home?" she asked curiously. "Can you make a portal big enough?"

'Yori' looked thoughtful, peering back at the ship. "I think so. We haven't tried, the normal sort of portal is fine for everything we've done up to now, but it's just a matter of power. There is a practical upper limit but it's quite large, several hundred metres probably, although that would be quite difficult to achieve for very long."

"We do sometimes move ships through portals," S'th'kx told them. "Some of the other realities in the K'nn grouping have a limited amount of space exploration, although this is where we started and where all the heavy industry is. Eventually they'll begin building them over there, but for now we make them here and transfer them as needed, which only accounts for a few dozen so far."

Soon they arrived at his office on the edge of the spaceport. "It's been very nice seeing you again, Uthryyl, and you two as well, Yori and Chou." He made a gesture of respect. "Thank you once more for helping my son."

"It was no problem, S'th'kx." 'Yori' smiled at him. "Thanks for the trip. It was fun, I've always wanted to go into space."

"Any time." The miner turned to the others. "It was nice to meet you all also. If any of you are ever in the area, please stop in." Glancing at 'Chou', he asked, "Are you staying here for much longer?" She shook her head.

"No. Just one more night, then back to Fwetna. We'll probably come back in about a week with two other friends, if it's possible they would probably also like a quick run into orbit or something like that." He grinned in his own way.

"Certainly. That's no trouble at all. I go out quite often, and it's no trouble to make a special trip." Waving, he headed into his office, as the group went back to the hotel.

Adrian swallowed hard, glancing at Matt, then Richard, who looked very amused. "Are you sure it's safe?" he asked, his mouth dry.

"Of course it's safe. It's like magic!" Richard grinned at him, snickering. Sighing, Adrian turned to
Aiko, who was watching with a highly amused expression, repeating his question. She nodded, still smiling.

"It's perfectly safe, Adrian. I do this dozens of times a day and have for many years, it's never harmed anyone. But the first time will make you feel quite unwell for a few seconds, I'm afraid. Almost everyone reacts like that. It passes quickly and it won't happen again, but just be ready for it, all right?" Looking apprehensive, he nodded, stepping forward. Matt joined him. She looked at Richard. "Would you like to come? It's your day off, right?"

He glanced at Emily, who grinned and nodded. "You go on and play, dear, but be back by dinner time," Aiko burst out laughing as even Adrian chuckled. Kissing his wife, the lieutenant moved to stand beside the other two.

"I'll bring you back a present," he told her with an amused look. She stood with her arm around her daughter, who was watching wide-eyed. "Remember the flash." They closed their eyes as the group of four people disappeared amidst a brilliant rainbow light.

"That's so cool," Serena breathed.

"Isn't it?" Emily examined the place they'd been standing, shaking her head in amazement. "Life seems quite strange recently."

Looking around with curiosity, Adrian examined the large yard they'd arrived in once the intestinal spasms died down, both the first-time teleport travellers feeling much better within a remarkably short time, although Matt still looked a bit green. A stone wall about eight feet high ran around the property, which consisted of a large house in what he thought from documentaries he'd seen was a traditional Japanese style, something he thought looked very attractive in fact, and a much larger building that was considerably taller. Most of it looked like it had been fairly recently repaired, different coloured stones, tiles, and wood showing in places. There were sounds coming from it that suggested a fair number of people were doing something vigorous inside.

Akane and Shampoo, along with an older but very attractive woman with deep auburn hair, were standing on the porch-like construction that ran down the side of the house, the two girls smiling and the older woman looking calm but good-natured. Aiko led them over. Stepping forward Akane shook hands with all three men, as did Shampoo, who grinned at them. "Auntie Nodoka, please let me introduce Adrian Stewart, Matt Jordan, and Richard Harrison, from LA. Guys, this is my Aunt Nodoka Saotome."

The woman walked forward gracefully, bowing slightly, then said in a voice with more of an accent than Akane possessed but still in good English, "It's very nice to meet you, Gentlemen. Akane and Shampoo have both told us a lot of interesting things about their trip to LA." She smiled at them. "It's very good of you to give the girls a chance like this."

"It's very good of them to allow us to, Ma'am," Adrian replied, also smiling. She gestured to the house.

"Won't you come in for tea? Soun is currently teaching a class, he'll be here in a few minutes, so while we wait I've prepared some snacks." Leading the way inside, she took them to a room that was clearly the living room. "Please sit. Akane, could you help me bring everything out?" Both women disappeared through another door, as the others sat, the three men looking around curiously.

"Nice place," Matt said, inspecting some artwork hanging on the wall, then looking out the wide sliding doorway, currently open, into a big garden with a pond in the middle of it.
"It's one of the larger houses left around Furinkan," Shampoo told them. "It's quite old, the family has lived here for a long time. Most of the area has been redeveloped over the years, so there aren't a lot of traditional houses like this around any more, which is a pity. I really like it."

Aiko suddenly looked up and swore in Japanese, sounding annoyed. She glanced at them, while Shampoo giggled at whatever she'd said. "Sorry, something just came up. I'll have to go and deal with it. It won't take long, I'll be back soon." Jumping to her feet she went out into the hallway and vanished as soon as she was around the corner. Blinking at the afterimages from the flash, Adrian exchanged glances with Matt.

"I wonder what that was about? And how did she know something was up?"

Coming back into the room with a tray, followed by Nodoka carrying another one, Akane shrugged, putting the tray on the table. "She does that. Magical Girl superpowers, I guess." Pouring cups of tea for everyone she handed them out, while the older woman passed around plates with a variety of small items of food on them. Trying some of the sushi rolls, Matt nodded his approval.

"Very nice, Mrs Saotome."

"Nodoka, please. Thank you." She smiled at him. "I wasn't sure what to make, I'm not familiar with the American diet, but I've discovered over the years that most people seem to like sushi of one type or another. I have a small cake for later as well."

"It's fine, thank you, Nodoka," Adrian assured her, eating another roll himself. Matt, his mouth full, nodded happily. Turning to Akane, he grinned at her. "Things are going well with the studio. It took some fast talking but I've got them to agree in principle to what we talked about the other week. There are a couple of hold-outs amongst the executives who will only be convinced when they see it for themselves, but I think they'll come around." He chuckled. "When they come around. From the dead faint..."

She laughed, as did Shampoo. Nodoka smiled politely, although she seemed genuinely amused.

"So what does this mean? What's next?" Akane looked both eager and curious.

"Well, basically, it means there's going to have to be another meeting, at the studio this time. Matt and I think we need to get you both over for about three, perhaps four days, and arrange a mock shoot. Do some real stunts, something picked from one or other of the scripts they're currently assessing. That would require some initial training in what is expected, but I wouldn't think either of you would have any trouble picking it up very fast, not after what I saw last time." He paused for thought for a minute, then Matt cut in.

"Can either one of you ride a motorcycle or drive a vehicle?" The two girls exchanged glances.

"Can ride motorbike," Shampoo said. "Not tried for while, probably rusty, but did have some practice few years ago." She shrugged, smiling a bit. "Prefer bike, better exercise."

"We've both driven go-karts in the past, and I did have a few lessons in driving a car a couple of years ago," Akane added, "But I didn't take it any further. Owning a car in Japan is much more expensive than in the US, and in Tokyo isn't really worth it unless you're going to do a lot of driving. Until recently I never much went outside the ward anyway."

He nodded, making some notes on a pad. "OK. Fair enough. I have a couple of stunts in mind that I think you could make truly spectacular, which involve vehicles, so we'll definitely have to work on that aspect of your training." Akane looked intrigued, sharing a glance with Shampoo, who
shrugged slightly, smiling.

"It would be in about, hmm, probably three weeks," Adrian said after a little thought. "I'd like to do it sooner but a couple of the people you need to convince are away on business until then. There's no huge hurry, we can wait, plus it gives us more time to work out exactly what would be the best approach." He grinned at the girls, who suddenly looked apprehensive. "Don't worry. I have no doubt at all you can do anything we need. It'll be fun."

He was about to add more, when a tall man with long dark hair appeared in the doorway, dressed in a deep green loose-fitting gi, Kanji characters embroidered on the left breast. He looked around as Akane hopped to her feet. "Hi, Dad. This is Adrian Stewart, the director from the studio, Matt Jordan, the Stunt director, and Lieutenant Richard Harrison, LAPD. Guys, this is my father, Soun Tendo." They all stood, while Soun looked them up and down, then nodded to himself, suddenly smiling.

"It's very nice to meet you all," he said, again his English not as fluent as Akane's, but still good. Bowing slightly he added, "Thank you for everything you have done and are doing for my daughter." Straightening up he glanced at her, then smirked. "I was beginning to wonder if she'd be a store clerk for the rest of her life." Akane groaned.

"Dad! Stop embarrassing me." she whispered in Japanese, sounding aggrieved and embarrassed, the tone coming across perfectly even if the visitors couldn't understand the language. They all grinned.

"Oh, I have no doubt whatsoever she's destined for much more than that, Sir," Adrian said, taking the hand Soun held out and shaking it, feeling hard callous over a grip of incredible strength. He shook hands with both Richard and Matt as well, before everyone sat again, Nodoka passing him a cup of tea and a plate. "I'm glad to have this opportunity to meet you. Akane told us quite a lot about her family life when she was in LA, as did Shampoo. I needed to talk to the girls again and when Aiko offered to bring us over like that, it seemed like something worth doing." He shook his head in wonder. "I still find it unbelievable that less than half an hour ago we were in the middle of LA, then just like that we're in Tokyo."

"The abilities those girls have is remarkable," Richard agreed, grinning. "You've only seen the tip of the iceberg as well, trust me." Soun nodded with a small smile.

"They do seem to have a remarkable number of very unusual talents," he said. Glancing around he asked curiously, "Speaking of that, where is Aiko?"

"She had to go and deal with a problem, she said she'd be back soon," his daughter replied.

"Ah, I see. I wonder if it's another magical girl fight, or just some demons again." Soun grinned at the expressions on the two studio men's faces as they exchanged glances. "The magical girls are getting a little... over-exuberant, with Yori out of town," he explained. "There have been a few incidents. She and Chou seem to have some remarkable power to keep them from getting over excited and breaking things, which appears to involve a lot of shouting." Akane giggled.

"You should have seen some of the things on the news. She's terrifying when she really gets going. And has an amazing vocabulary."

"Not to mention a level of sarcasm that can strip paint at twenty metres," Soun chuckled, sipping his tea appreciatively. "A very nice girl, but by god you don't want to get on her bad side."

Richard snorted slightly, shaking his head. "No, you do not. It's a career-ending thing at best, from
what I've seen. A certain Anthony Murray would heartily agree, I suspect, based on the news over the last few weeks." Soun nodded gravely.

"Yes, that particular incident does seem to have produced some very long-lived ramifications. I heard another bank in the US collapsed yesterday. That's five now, isn't it?"

"Six, I think. The one yesterday was the largest so far by far. What they uncovered at Halleckton seems to be snowballing constantly." The police lieutenant shook his head again, more sadly this time. "It's affecting a lot of people all over the world. Some people seem angry about that, but as far as I can see it would have been much worse to let it fester. Ten or fifteen years from now the results would have been horrible. There are a lot of financial experts that think this may in the long term have saved us from a very bad financial crisis."

"Very strange, the whole thing," Nodoka commented, pouring Matt another cup of tea. "And mostly down to a few young women who don't look old enough to be so powerful." She smiled a little. "But they're certainly very talented."

"Unbelievably so," Richard agreed, looking at her. "We worked together on the case that started all of this and I have to say I've never been as impressed in my life. Or as scared. They came to LA after Christmas and sorted out a nasty problem we had there as well, very effectively and quickly."

"Here, the US, Canada, the UK, I've even heard rumours they were in Australia before Canada," Akane said, looking impressed. "It's amazing. I still can't believe people so powerful and important would help me and Shampoo like that."

"They're very down to earth young ladies," the lieutenant told her. "Not at all full of themselves. I consider them very good friends, and from what I've seen of them it doesn't surprise me at all that they'd put themselves out to help you girls. That's basically what they do."

"Aiko said the same thing," Akane nodded, smiling. "Whatever, I'm very grateful for it all. Without them I don't know where I'd be now, but I suspect it would be a bad place." She shivered slightly, making Shampoo hold her hand for comfort for a moment.

"Don't think about things that didn't happen, Akane," her father advised. "Concentrate on what's going to happen, work at it, and make it wonderful." Looking around at the others, who had finished their tea and snacks, he added, "Would you like to look around before you continue?" Adrian looked at the others, then nodded.

"Certainly, thanks very much. I'm curious to see where Akane learned her art." Soun stood, prompting everyone else to do the same. Placing the empty utensils, plates, and cups back on one tray, Nodoka picked it up.

"Go on, Akane, I can do this," she said, smiling, when the youngest Tendo made a move to help.

Soun led them out into the garden, showing it to them. "It's a very nice garden. My wife used to look after it, she loved plants. My elder daughter Kasumi was the same." His face darkened slightly with sadness for a moment. "But she left some time ago. Since then, Nodoka has taken over maintaining it. She does a good job, it's beautiful right now." They looked around, agreeing. A lot of flowers were blooming, making the whole garden look very cheerful. Leading them past the pond he glanced at it nervously, making Shampoo and Akane exchanged delighted looks, but said nothing.

Back in the yard he headed for the Dojo. "My great-grandfather built this training hall around a hundred years ago. It wasn't used very much for the last fifteen years, but about two years ago we
restarted the teaching seriously and now have nine students, with three more coming in soon. Genma and I are very pleased with their progress so far, there are at least four of them that will be very good and two of those will likely be superb." Going inside the visitors looked around with interest. A rather large, but clearly very muscular man, bald, wearing glasses and a blue gi, was talking to a couple of students, a boy and a girl, both looking around fifteen or sixteen, off to one side, while in the middle of the room seven other people ranging from perhaps fourteen up to about nineteen were going through a set of exercises. The man was glancing over occasionally to check on their progress. When he finished talking to the two students, they nodded, bowed to him, then moved over to a clear part of the floor and began sparring, while he watched critically.

The other students stopped their work, also watching, then clustered around one of the young men who pulled out a notebook, flipping through it for a moment, then reading something out. They all nodded, handing him various sums of money, before turning to watch the sparring match. The young man, clearly the bookie in the Dojo, counted his cash quickly before putting it into his pocket with a smile, also watching. Adrian and Matt exchanged glances, watching what looked to them both like some very good martial arts.

"These are just students?" Adrian whispered to his colleague. "I've seen some professionals who weren't as fast as that." Matt nodded, watching intently, his eyebrows raised and wearing an impressed expression.

"They're damn good," he whispered back. "Nowhere near Akane or Shampoo, but a lot better than most people I've come across."

The sparring match went on for about five minutes, before the girl finally pinned the boy and sat on him, looking pleased. He sighed loudly, submitting with a wave of his hand. The other students either smiled or frowned, the smilers turning to the young man holding the pot, who distributed their winnings, putting the remainder back into his pocket looking pleased. Standing and helping her defeated opponent to his feet, the girl bowed to him, as he returned the gesture of respect, then grinned.

The large man clapped, said something to both of them, then sent them back to the others, all of whom resumed their exercises. Watching in satisfaction for a moment he turned to Soun, inspecting the visitors with him curiously. "This is my partner and best friend Genma Saotome," the elder Tendo man said, waving him over. "Genma, these are the people from the studio in Hollywood, Adrian and Matt, and a friend of Aiko's, Richard, the policeman she mentioned."

"It's nice to meet you," Genma said in accented English, holding out his hand. They all shook it. "Akane has been talking about her trip to Los Angeles almost non stop for weeks." He grinned at the young woman, who rolled her eyes but smiled at him. "I hope there is some studio left afterwards," he added, snickering.

"Uncle Genma!" Akane looked annoyed, while Shampoo and Soun burst out laughing.

Richard grinned, then looked apologetic when Akane glared for a moment. "It was quite funny, Akane," he said by way of apology. "Aiko mentioned what happened in Minato that time."

She sighed slightly, shaking her head in embarrassment. "I'll never hear the end of that," the girl muttered. Matt and Adrian exchanged glances but wisely didn't ask.

"I understand that you and Soun are the teachers here?" the director said, quickly changing the subject.

"Yes. We've been friends since we were young, we learned together many years ago, and despite
being apart for over ten years, in the end decided to restart the Dojo and teach." Genma glanced at his friend for a moment. "There was some confusion around here a few years back but after it all settled down and we rebuilt the Dojo, we've managed to make it all work quite well. Once we get the three new students in and up to speed, we'll probably have all the work we can handle for a while." He looked at Akane for a moment.

"I had hoped that Akane would be able to start teaching at some point, but I suspect she will be much too busy for that." The young woman grinned.

"I don't know I could teach, Uncle Genma."

"Not yet, Akane, but in the not too distant future, certainly. At least the basics." He smiled slightly. "I believe by the standards of much of the world that would be to a fairly high level."

Matt nodded slowly. "If what I've seen here is representative of your school and the effectiveness of your teaching, I'd have to agree. I know a fair amount about martial arts and other forms of hand to hand fighting and I have to say all your students do look very competent. Do you have some formal form of skill rankings?"

"Anything Goes doesn't work quite like that," Soun explained. "It's a style that amalgamates the best of a number of other styles into it's own, then extends the techniques. There are two main branches, primarily designed by Genma and myself, based on the teachings of our old Grand Master Happosai." He looked slightly worried for a moment, glancing around nervously, then at Genma, who sighed in relief when nothing happened. "We try not to talk about him. We are the highest ranking in our school, after him, and we have the right to allow others to teach it. A student's ranking is decided by one or both of us when we decide they have reached the appropriate level. It's a continuous process."

"Interesting." Matt listened with a thoughtful look. "Do you have moves and techniques that are specific to your school?"

"Oh, yes, many of them. We utilise other techniques, as I said, but we also come up with completely new ones. Some of those are too dangerous to teach to just anyone, I'm afraid. Like the Amazon techniques that I believe Akane and Shampoo showed you, they can only be passed on to people we trust not to use them wrongly." He glanced at his friend for a moment. "There have been problems in the past when we didn't have that rule. But, I hope, we learned our lesson in that respect."

"A few of the techniques are sealed, they're too dangerous to pass on at all," Genma added. Matt looked intrigued.

"How dangerous can they possibly be?" Genma and Soun exchanged glances for a moment. Eventually Soun nodded, shrugging a little.

"Come with me," the bald man said, indicating the door. They all followed him outside. All the students abandoned their lesson for the moment and rushed to the door and windows to watch. Walking over to where a large block of stone with a round hole in it stood to one side, near the wall, Genma bent down and picked up a wooden post from a stack of them on the ground, dropping it into the hole so it stood upright. The post was close to eight inches in diameter and four feet long, the three Americans noted, and was clearly very solid and heavy wood, but he showed no difficulty moving it. Stepping away some twenty feet, he turned to them.

About to speak, he jumped a little when Aiko suddenly appeared in the middle of the yard, making her grin. "Sorry, Genma. I didn't mean to startle you." He shrugged a little, smiling.
"Don't worry about it, Aiko."

"Did you resolve the problem?" Akane asked curiously. The magical girl nodded, a slight frown on her face.

"Yes, it took longer than I hoped but it wasn't too bad. Lots of irritating little ankle-biters running around the place and the girl who chases them, or attracts them, or something. Annoying but not a major issue. Poor girl was very apologetic, but it caused quite a lot of chaos. Misaki is finishing up now." She looked around. "So what's going on?"

"Genma is demonstrating why some of the Anything Goes techniques he came up with are sealed," Richard said, sounding very interested. She nodded understandingly.

"Ah. I see. Mind if I watch?"

"No, not at all," Genma replied. "All right, this is one of the techniques I invented. It's simply too dangerous to use, more powerful than I expected. To be honest it scares me a little." They watched as he turned to face the post. Assessing it for a moment while everyone watched, he suddenly made a blindingly fast slashing move with one hand. A visible distortion in the air crossed the distance between him and the post in a fraction of a second, passing through the post as if it wasn't there. The top foot of the post, cut completely through at an angle, slid to the ground. The Americans stared in amazed horror, while everyone else looked impressed. The students talked amongst themselves excitedly.

"Not bad," Aiko said, nodding. He repeated the feat with the other hand, then used both at once, reducing the post to a number of sections on the ground.

"Holy fuck," Matt murmured, shocked. "How the hell did you do that?"

"It's a technique that uses ki to focus a huge change in air pressure to a very fine line," Genma replied, walking back to the post and picking up one of the sections, then bringing it over to them. "The centre of the distortion is more or less a perfect vacuum. It will cut through many things at short range." Showing them the sliced piece of wood which had a smooth finish like a giant knife had gone through it, he tossed it back to the other pieces. "Wood, bricks, stone... People..." They all shuddered at the thought. "That's why it's too dangerous to use. It's a killing technique. A true martial artist doesn't kill except in the most extreme of circumstances."

"There are other techniques that are similarly dangerous," Soun added. "Those ones, we don't teach. You understand why."

Adrian nodded, glancing at his colleague. "Yes, I do. That's... absolutely terrifying." "Other techniques aren't quite as devastating, but are still dangerous, either to use or indeed to learn. They can only be taught safely to a student who has reached a suitable level. Someone trying too early could easily be damaged or killed," the Tendo patriarch said. "None of our students other than Akane are anywhere the level they can learn special techniques. Or Shampoo, we'll be teaching both of them in due course. Both are very good indeed."

Still staring at the pile of post slices on the ground, Matt nodded slowly, then seemed to remember something. "Sir, I don't know if Akane mentioned it, but I'm interested in having her teach some of her skills to a number of my own people. Would that be permitted?" Soun looked at his daughter with an evaluating expression, then glanced at Genma.

"We have discussed it. I have also talked to Elder Cologne about the similar request you made to
Shampoo. All three of us feel that, with some specific limitations, we would allow our students to pass on some of their skills. Genma and I think that sometime after Christmas, at the current rate, we could grant her a beginning teaching certificate, which would permit her to teach the basics. I suspect that would be sufficient for your immediate requirements." Akane was looking both surprised and very pleased, grinning widely.

Matt nodded, smiling. "Thank you, Sir. I appreciate that very much."

"Don't thank me until after you see the teaching methods," Soun grinned. "Some of her students may not enjoy the experience at first. It can be... a bit of a shock. On the other hand, our methods seem to work quite well." He glanced at Shampoo. "I think that the Elder will be talking to you soon about something similar." She nodded.

"Has already talked. Still working out list of things allowed to teach."

"Ah, I see. All right." He turned back to the others. "Cologne told me that she would allow Shampoo to pass on her own basic, non-secret moves, and assess the student's abilities. Those she felt could genuinely benefit from and perhaps survive more intensive training would be referred to her. She would undertake this training directly, should the student wish to continue." Soun shrugged a little, smiling. "They might not having met her."

"Great-Grandmother acquired taste," Shampoo giggled. Soun, Genma, and Akane all laughed.

"Indeed. But, despite problems we have had in the past, well worth acquiring," the elder Tendo said, making the Amazon look pleased. "I'm slightly surprised that she's even allowed this much, in the past the Amazons have been very secretive about their methods. I have a suspicion she may be working on some long-term plan to bring income to the tribe through Hollywood." He grinned at Matt and Adrian. "She's very sneaky, very smart, and takes a very long term view."

"We would work on a similar basis," Genma told them. "If Akane feels that a student of hers was particularly gifted we would want to assess them ourselves to decide on the best method to proceed. As we've said, there are some risks involved and we have no wish to injure someone who wasn't up to the job. With no disrespect to Akane, she doesn't yet have the experience to make this decision." He glanced apologetically at the youngest Tendo, who nodded, accepting the judgement without comment.

"That all sounds fair. I look forward to seeing how it all works out." Matt looked very pleased.

"So do we. One note of warning, we don't have much spare capacity for teaching at the moment, and won't for perhaps six to eight months. But I wouldn't expect that either Akane or Shampoo would have found any advanced students by then anyway. They are both unusually gifted in this field and also benefit from years of training. I'd think even with regular lessons any of their students would be two or three years away from requiring a more advanced teacher." Soun shrugged a little. "But when it happens, we're interested in seeing the results."

"Do you think they could produce students who could do the sort of things they can?" Richard asked curiously. The two teachers glanced at each other.

"I... really don't know," Soun finally said slowly. "If they caught them early enough, possibly. To be honest, from what we've seen in our careers, very few people have the inherent ability to learn a martial art to that level. For some reason most of them seem to end up in Nerima, which certainly makes it an interesting place to live. But even in Japan probably only one in a hundred students could get to, for example, Mariko's level, and perhaps one in a hundred of those get to Akane's or Shampoo's level. And they'd have to start quite young to have a chance to reach their full potential,
unless they were astoundingly gifted. It certainly happens, but it's unusual. In America... I'm not sure at all. I have nothing to base anything more than an opinion on."

"Even in Amazon village, number of people reach my level not big," Shampoo told them. "Most very good by normal standards, even superb, but only few close to me."

"And that's in a population that's more or less been breeding for that sort of talent for a very long time," Akane said. "Cologne would know the number, but whether she'd tell you is another matter." The LA policeman nodded thoughtfully.

"I see. Interesting. But I would expect that regardless of the ability to learn the more esoteric and rather frightening skills, your teaching would certainly improve most martial artists abilities considerably."

"I would think that would be the case," her father agreed. "It will be interesting to find out." Genma glanced over to the Dojo, scowling at all the faces peering out at them, which promptly vanished back inside.

"It was nice to meet you all," he said, "but I have to get back to this lesson." Once more he shook hands with them. "Perhaps we'll meet again." Heading back inside the Dojo he started calling instructions to the students, who hastened to obey, slightly worried by what they'd just seen.

"Come on, Richard, let's leave them to it and go say hello to Sergeant Harada and Captain Uehara," Aiko said, smiling at the lieutenant. He nodded, returning her smile.

"Good idea. I'll see you guys later, OK?"

Adrian looked at him. "All right. Have fun with your friends."

"Call me when you want to go back," Aiko told him, before walking off with Harrison then vanishing. The director blinked, smiling and looking impressed.

"I still find that amazing," he commented. "I wish I could persuade her to come work for us."

"She's got more important work," Akane laughed. "Let's go back inside, Adrian, you can tell us the rest of what's going on." They all followed Soun back into the house, the two Americans glancing back over their shoulders at the pieces of post and shivering.
"This place is wonderful," Fumiko said happily, dropping next to Nabiki where she lay on the side of a hill sunbathing. "No one but us for a hundred kilometres in any direction, nice and warm, no rain, good food, fantastic views, what more could you want?"

"It's pretty damn nice," the middle sister agreed sleepily. Pointing up into the clear deep blue sky she added, "Just look at that thing. This is a view people back home would never believe." Above them was a faint but visible arc of twinkling lights, the ring system of the planet they were on, going from horizon to horizon. "Jun says its about two thirds the distance to the moon at home on the inner rim and about twice that on the outer one. Mostly made of ice and small chunks of rock. It's not stable, it will only last for a few million years, so have a look at it while you can." She giggled to herself. Pulling out her camera she took another photo of it, then put it away.

"Still using that? Even though you've got those cool little drones now?" Fumiko looked curiously at her friend, who nodded.

"Of course. Electronic cameras, even high tech, partly magical alien ones, as good as they are, still don't quite do what real film does. They go well together, though." Fumiko looked up as a faint hum heralded the arrival of one of the little camera spheres, which zipped in from somewhere over the other side of the hill to hover above them. She laughed.

"So you're keeping an eye out all over the place?"

"Yep. Mostly because of the view but it's kind of fun as well. Jun can link to them over an amazing distance and control the things easily. It's becoming quite normal to have a few windows open in view with feeds from them. Funny what you can get used to." Nabiki smiled, closing her eyes, the drone moving down to peer at Fumiko from a metre away, before spinning around and shooting off into the distance, fading from view as it went. "The stealth mode is pretty good. You can sort of see a really faint distortion if you're looking for it, it's not anywhere near as good as the effect Ranma and Kasumi can produce, but if there was anything else going on you'd never notice. The resolution is amazing as well, it's much better than my eyes are. I might buy some more when we get back to Fwetna."

"I'll have to look into it as well," Fumiko commented, lying back with a smile. "They could be useful in a fight."

"That's what Jun thought. It's having fun collecting useful tools, I think. Like those force field spacesuits. They were surprisingly cheap, only two thousand credits. I got a couple of them and the charging unit." Nabiki chuckled suddenly. "Jun just told me again that it doesn't understand fun. It's clearly lying." They both laughed. "What are the others doing?"

"Don't you already know, my many eyed surveillance friend?" The other woman giggled as Nabiki glanced at her, then grinned.

"I'm not spying on everyone all the time, you know. One drone is about five kilometres up following an interesting sort-of bird, one is way over that way getting some shots of the sea, and the last one is right here." She produced it on the palm of her hand, then flipped it into the air. "I suppose I could send it off to find them."

"No need. Ranma and Onkra are having a lesson, Tamiko is deciding on what colour and pattern she wants on her flying form with Kasumi, and Uthryyl and Quannyr are making lunch."
"Have you worked out what scheme you want?" the middle Tendo asked with interest. In answer her friend bounced to her feet and shimmered into a flying version of herself, spreading her wings widely with a huge grin. They had dark brown fur with blonde tips, which gave a very attractive effect as it moved in the light breeze, patterns coming and going when the strands of fur moved about. Underlaid beneath that were slightly darker stripes which were only visible from certain angles. "Oh, very nice," Nabiki complimented the other woman, who looked extremely pleased with herself.

"Isn't it?" Fumiko brought one wing around in front of her and stroked it with satisfaction. "This is completely amazing, even bearing in mind all the other things we do all the time. I've wanted to be able to fly my entire life."

"I think most people probably have," Nabiki agreed, getting up and studying her friend closely. "It's one of the absolutely fundamental dream types, everyone has a flying dream soon or later. The difference is we can actually do it."

Still smiling, Fumiko leaned into the breeze, raising her wings and closing her eyes. "It feels amazing just standing here."

"It's much better when you're actually in the air." The middle sister laughed to herself, remembering. "Do you want to wait for Tamiko or try it out right now?"

Without even needing to think about it, Fumiko replied, "Right now. I can't wait any more." Taking on her flying Nabiki aspect, the Tendo woman nodded, grinning.

"Good enough." She looked around, then pointed. "Come on, let's go and run down the steep side of the hill, it will probably be easier for the first time." Folding her wings Fumiko followed her friend, still grinning like an idiot, the tip of her tail twitching with excitement. They paused at the top of the hill, which from here ran down at close to a forty degree angle for over a kilometre until it levelled out somewhat, heading down to the sea some distance away, the visibly green water quite calm.

"OK, I'd try spreading your wings and just running, you'll feel when you get lift. Then flap. It seems to come pretty naturally." She laughed at herself. "I jumped off a damn great cliff, it was a very good incentive to learn quickly, even if I knew in my head I wouldn't come to any damage my body wasn't so sure." Fumiko giggled.

"That was a horrible trick to play on you, what Kasumi did."

"It was a bit of a shock. She's certainly got a weird sense of humour these days. Even Ranma looked surprised." Laughing, Fumiko spread her wings widely, tilting them into the wind and feeling the direction and strength. Taking a deep breath she sprinted down the hill, her feet coming off the ground within a dozen metres, then started flapping, quickly rising. A yell of triumph came back on the wind to Nabiki, who laughed, following after the other girl, her camera pacing them off to one side.

"This is incredible!" Fumiko shrieked happily, flapping vigorously. "AAAHH!" Slightly over-correcting she suddenly plummeted, before pulling out with a yell.

"You OK, Fumiko?" Nabiki called from above her.

"Yep. Just screwed it up a bit. I think I've got it."

"Good. Come on, we need some altitude, then we can practice. I can show you what some very
good teachers showed me." Climbing hard, they both headed up, the taller woman laughing with
delight the entire way.

Half an hour later, when Tamiko and Kasumi came out of the rented accommodation and looked
around, their attention was drawn to distant laughter hundreds of metres up, causing them to watch
as two small figures dived and wheeled about above them, clearly having a wonderful time.
Kasumi giggled, watching her sister loop, coming in behind Fumiko then firing a small ki ball at
her, which caused the other flying girl to roll sharply to the side and dive hard. Tamiko watched
open-mouthed as they had a magical girl ki ball tag dogfight, her smile slowly growing so wide it
threatened to split her head in half.

"There!" She pointed up. "I want to go there! How do I fly with these things?" Spreading her deep
auburn wings which had dark leopard-like rosettes, she looked at them eagerly. Kasumi laughed,
shimmering into a flying form of her own. "Come on, I'll show you."

Very soon after that, five flying magical girls lit up the early evening sky with ki based tracer fire,
three D'sage watching from the ground with enormous enjoyment, shaking their heads at the antics
of those weird aliens.

Sergeant Harada looked up from his desk as he heard a familiar voice, smiling at Aiko, then
brightened further at the sight of the man beside her. Standing, he held out his hand, grinning.
"Hello, Richard. I didn't know you were in Tokyo. How are you? It's very nice to see you again."

Shaking the hand of his friend, Harrison grinned back. "I'm doing very well, Tetsuo. It was a spur
of the moment thing only possible because of magical girls." He indicated Aiko who had taken a
seat at an unoccupied desk and was watching them both with amusement. She mock-saluted him,
laughing slightly. "How's things with you?"

"Personally, very good indeed. Emiko is pregnant, I think I told you?" Harrison nodded. "About
two months along. Everything looks good so far, according to the latest check-up."

"Congratulations. Do you know whether it's a boy or a girl yet?"

"No. We discussed it but we're not sure we want to know. That might change, it might not. But
there's some time to go yet." He looked momentarily nervous. "Being a father is going to take
some getting used to."

"It's well worth it, believe me," his friend said wisely. They both sat down. "Serena is the best
thing that ever happened to me after Emily."

"So you've said. I'd like to meet them both one day." Harada looked at Aiko. "How did that little
incident earlier go?"

She shrugged a bit, seeming annoyed. "OK, I guess. It was only a nuisance rather than a disaster,
not even much damage, but I really hate those little bastards. Like bitey little rat monsters from
hell." They both laughed at her description. "Little miss princess is a bit of a pain as well, although
I don't think she really means to be. I still can't figure out whether she follows them or they follow
her, but they always turn up as a set. And things get nibbled. Very irritating." Shaking her head she
sighed.

"We blew most of them up, then had a word with her. She needs to learn to shoot straight aside
from anything else. I'll write you a report later. The girl was very apologetic and left once we'd
dealt with the things. There was one damaged car, they ate it's tires, and a wall got a few holes
blown in it when she missed. Several times." Harada nodded, grinning at the tone in her voice.

"Thanks. Hopefully things will go back to what passes for normal when Yori and Chou get back."

"I hope so. There's been more insanity in the last two weeks than in the previous six months." Aiko shook her head again. "I have no idea why it all kicked off as soon as they were out of touch. Everything was pretty quiet when we were running around all over the world after those damn portal devices."

"The crazy obviously knows when Yori is out of town and saves itself for then. In the US doesn't count," Harada chuckled.

"It's as good an explanation as anything." She got up. "I'm just going to go and say hello to the Captain. Is she in her office?"

"Yes." He watched as she headed for the corridor to the rear of the station, smiling slightly, before returning his attention to his friend. "So, what brings you to Minato? I thought you'd had your fill of the place last time."

Laughing, Harrison shrugged, his hands wide. "It's insane, clearly, but so is Hollywood. As long as I don't need to be demon bait I like it. Mainly because of the people." He explained the situation regarding the Tendo girl and her Amazon friend. Harada listened with great interest.

"Hmm. That's pretty fascinating. I've heard of Akane Tendo and Shampoo before. There was a rather spectacular incident here before Christmas involving Ms Tendo and one Ryoga Hibiki, who she seems to heartily dislike." He rummaged around in his desk for a moment, pulling out a folder, opening it and removing some photos which he showed to his friend. "She's capable of some fairly impressive feats of strength when sufficiently motivated, it seems."

Harrison looked through the photos, whistling silently at the damage. "Wow. That's putting it mildly. I'd heard from Aiko about some of this, but she didn't go into too much detail. Akane did all this by herself?"

"Mr Hibiki was responsible for some of it, but the Tendo girl did her fair share. The Neriman martial artists are easily capable of as much damage as the magical girls are, and they're even crazier. That place can be a complete madhouse. I went to see an old friend of mine after it happened, just out of curiosity, who had a lot of information on the Tendo girl, this Shampoo person, and a lot of others. They're all nuts." He grinned.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, precisely. Akane and Shampoo both strike me as very nice people. I suspect they've both matured a lot in the last year, Akane certainly. Aiko mentioned there was some sort of unusual medical problem at the base of her anger issues, which Chou and Yori had found and fixed. She didn't mention any details but seemed to think it had helped a lot. Judging by what I saw when they were in LA a couple of weeks ago, it did dramatically improve things. Akane seemed quite well adjusted and stable, if a little naïve."

"I doubt Yori would have recommended her to this director of yours if she didn't feel the young woman was stable enough to be trusted. She certainly wasn't before Christmas last year, based on this and the reports Norio showed me." Putting the folder away again he looked pleased. "Good luck to her. I hope it all works out."

"I think it probably will. Adrian and Matt both seem very excited about working with those two young ladies, Adrian looked like a kid in a candy story with unlimited credit when he was watching them show off what they could do." Harrison laughed. "Matt and Aaron, the arms master from the
studio, just looked like they were about to faint."

Chuckling, Harada nodded. "I can imagine, even the martial artists from Nerima are impressive enough if you're not used to it. Some of them could probably give a few of the magical girls a hard time even without magic. A few of them are seriously dangerous."

"Shampoo certainly is. She's clearly been raised to be a very competent fighter, and I suspect has the mental attitude to be extremely good at it. Akane isn't quite as potentially bloodthirsty, I think, but she'd probably be a bad person to threaten. She seemed very pleased with herself when she was telling us about how she dealt with would-be thieves at that jewellery shop she works at." The American grinned. "Adrian and Matt are fascinated by this Tendo Dojo. We saw some remarkably good students practising there, and Genma Saotome showed off a stunningly dangerous advanced technique when he and Soun Tendo were explaining why they wouldn't teach certain things. Having seen it in action I agree completely."

"I've heard some of those special moves are appallingly dangerous and powerful. There was one martial artist, related to Genma actually, his son, who is on record as having had the ability to call up a small tornado on demand."

"Interesting. Akane mentioned the technique, and that she knew someone who could do it. I guess it was probably the same person. Is he around here?" Harada shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Nearly five years ago something happened. No one who knows for sure will say what. But this Ranma person and the oldest Tendo sister, Kasumi, disappeared overnight and no one has seen or heard anything of them since. It's very odd, they dropped off the planet completely as far as I can find out. Quite a lot of people were looking for them for a long time, some still are I believe, including the Chinese Amazons. Apparently he was engaged to Shampoo, at least by their laws. I don't know any more about that, but it meant they were looking for him very hard."

"Weird."

"Very. There were some extremely strange things going on with that young man, even by Neriman or Minato standards, according to Norio. He also was apparently the most gifted martial artist anyone had ever seen."

Harrison grinned for a moment. "As good as Yori? I find that hard to believe having seen her in action."

"I don't know, but it would be an interesting thing to see, her up against this martial arts prodigy." Harada laughed. "You could probably make a killing on betting on the right side. But, it seems unlikely to ever happen. I have actually wondered if he ended up going through a portal and leaving permanently, probably with this Kasumi Tendo. They disappeared so completely and effectively no one has seen or heard anything from them in years. Amazingly professional job." He was silent for a moment, thinking. "I have wondered, on and off, if I should mention it to Yori. It's just possible she actually knew the man. It might explain where she learned so much, if he'd taught her. He'd be a few years older, I think, although I'm not sure how old either she or Chou really are. Looking at them I'd guess about twenty but like I told you when you came the first time, looks can be deceiving with the magical girls."

"If Yori does know him, or knew him, do you think she'd tell you if you did ask?" Harrison wondered. "She seems to me to be the sort of person who can keep a secret and would never betray a friend."
Harada sighed a little. "Believe me, I know. That's why I've never said anything although I've been wondering about it for months. I don't want to offend her, I consider both of them friends, although I'm extremely curious. Quite a few people back in Nerima are genuinely worried about those two, they'd be reassured if they knew they were OK even if they never saw them again. But, I guess in all probability we'll never know."

"What about the other sister?" Harrison asked curiously. "Akane hasn't said a lot about her."

"Nabiki Tendo. She's not a martial artist but has a reputation as a very bad person to get on the wrong side of. Extremely smart, scary smart Norio said, and capable of being very cold and calculating. Practically ran her high school through various information brokering services, he told me. His view was that she'd have ended up running the Yakuza at some point if it wasn't for whatever happened years ago." Harada grinned a little as Harrison snickered. "Very capable young woman by all accounts. She seems to have turned her life around, away from the path she might have been heading down, now she's a student at a university in Setagaya, I think. Some sort of business degree. She'll still probably end up running the country..."

"Interesting family." Harrison looked amused.

"Yes. Nerima produces some odd people but they seem some of the better adjusted, oddly enough. Now, at any rate. Akane was responsible for some huge percentage of all the trouble in Nerima, or involved at least, but in the last few months that's stopped pretty much completely. They've become a well respected family again. Soun and Genma restarting the Dojo took everyone by surprise, apparently, and actually doing well at it was a real shock. But they're definitely doing a good job from what I hear. Something of a success story."

"If this movie studio thing works out I suspect they'll make out like bandits. I could almost hear Adrian and Matt both thinking that they were looking at a Dojo full of future action movie stars." The lieutenant chuckled. "Nerima may well end up supplying some very well paid stunt people."

His friend laughed, looking up as Aiko came back with Captain Uehara, talking quietly to her and smiling.

"Hello, Lieutenant. I'm pleased to see you. How are things at home?" The captain sat after greeting him, inspecting him closely. "You look well."

"Thank you, Captain. It's nice to see you again. Things are fine, nothing as odd as that case so far, although LA has it's own share of bizarre happenings. It's a strange place." Harrison shrugged, smiling at the woman. "Not as strange as here, obviously, but weird." She smiled back slightly.

"So I gather. Aiko was telling me about some of her and her friend's adventures there at the New Year. It sounds like a large disaster was narrowly averted."

The LAPD officer shuddered a little. "All too closely. Having heard about what happened in Halleckton, I started having nightmares again. I'm very glad your girls were able to help. The US owes Japan a debt of gratitude in my opinion."

"That's nice of you to say, Richard, but we were only doing what we do," Aiko noted, looking pleased. He glanced at her.

"So you say, but it's not something most people could or to be honest would do. You're all building quite a reputation for yourselves internationally. There are a lot of people who are very grateful for your interventions."
"Yori will be annoyed. She doesn't want a reputation." Aiko grinned at them. "She just wants a quiet life."

"Picked the wrong career, then," Harada joked. She shrugged, laughing a little.

"It kind of picked her, like it did to all of us." The brunette was about to say something else when she got a distant look, then swore. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Not again." Looking apologetic she shrugged, pushing off from the desk she was leaning against. "Sorry, got to go. A persistent problem is back." Walking to the door she waved. "Back soon." Vanishing with the usual flash, she left silence behind her for a moment.

"I wonder what that persistent problem is?" Harrison asked.

"I suspect it's a number of girls from one of the more famous teams in Minato. They seem to have something of a feud going on with Yori and the others at the moment," Harada responded, sighing. "I'm not sure why. They're very powerful, probably the most powerful group around at least in theory, but every time they've come up against Yori or her friends they've lost quickly. I know of at least one time she beat the entire lot of them single-handedly. Most of them seem to both hate and fear her. Their group was well respected for some time, but shortly before Yori came to the area they started getting a reputation for causing more damage than what they were fighting and it's been getting worse ever since."

"Those girls aren't liked much around here, by and large," Captain Uehara nodded, looking sad. "It's a pity, but they seem to have lost much of the respect they once enjoyed, although I'm not sure they even realise it. I gather they annoy Yori immensely. I don't think she takes any real enjoyment in dealing with them, even though some of her interactions have been very amusing to watch on the news, but she seems to feel they're casting a bad light on all the other girls. Unprofessional, was the description she used. Even some of the other groups seem to be starting to dislike them quite a lot."

Sergeant Harada sighed. "It could be a real problem if they've decided to take the opportunity of Yori being away to start trouble. There's something like eight or nine of them, I think, they seem to work as two teams most of the time. One team is five girls, including the one who's apparently their leader. She seems to have become more and more bad tempered over the last year or so. Colleagues in the area they mostly work in have mentioned that their interactions with the police and the community are getting downright rude and dismissive, which isn't making them any friends."

"Yori is going to be very, very irritated when she gets back. I'm afraid that those girls are putting themselves into a bad place. The other team at least seems to avoid this whole area like the plague since she thrashed them the last time, but the first group pops up every now and then. They turned up around a week ago chasing one little inoffensive demon and destroyed half a street, until Aiko and the others shut them down. Very effectively, actually, it was most impressive. Yori and Chou have obviously been training them pretty intensively this last year. Afterwards, Fumiko gave them the lecturing of a lifetime then made them pick everything up, which probably didn't help their outlook as far as our girls go, but was clearly necessary."

"I heard that one of them was helping Fumiko and her friends?" the captain half-asked. He nodded.

"Yes. That one with the short blue hair, whatever her name is. She's different, a nice polite girl and extremely bright, I think. She's been around several times in the last week helping our lot deal with annoying problems. I haven't really met her aside from in passing, but she seems very responsible, and I suspect, embarrassed about her friends. Poor girl looked mortified when the other four went off last week." He sighed slightly before looking at his watch. "It's lunch time, I think. Richard, would you like to come and get something to eat with me? Perhaps that restaurant we went to last time?"
"Sure. Sounds good. That was very nice." Harrison smiled, standing up, then glanced at the captain. "Captain Uehara? Would you like to join us?" She thought for a moment, looking around the office, then at her own watch, before nodding.

"I think I will do. Thank you, gentlemen. I'll have to be back fairly soon but I haven't been out for lunch for weeks." They left the station discussing LA, Hollywood, and magical girls.

"Give her back!"

Aiko exchanged glances with Misaki, who shrugged. "Give who back?"

"You know." The twin-ponytailed blonde stepped forward pugnaciously, glaring at the two young women. Aiko shook her head slowly.

"Sorry, no idea what you're talking about."

"Ami, that's who I'm talking about. She's my friend, I want her back. What have you done to her?" The girl looked on the verge of tears and also very angry. Aiko looked at her team-mate again, who looked blankly back, before studying the four young women in front of her on the roof of the bank.

"We haven't done anything to her. I haven't seen her in two days."

"I haven't seen her in a week! She won't talk to me, she doesn't answer her phone, when I went to her house yesterday her mother said she didn't want to talk to any of us. You did something to her. Some sort of magic to turn her away from us. I want her back!" She nearly howled the last word then broke down in tears. The other blonde girl put her arm around her and hugged her while shooting them an evil look. Aiko sighed, inspecting them.

The girl with black hair as long as Yori's was standing at the back, uncharacteristically quiet, looking slightly embarrassed and like she wished she wasn't there. Meeting Aiko's eyes she stared for a moment then dropped her gaze, looking at the ground and not saying anything. She was radiating uncertainty, which for her was very unusual, since normally she was one of the most aggressive in her team. Now she just looked confused and worried. The remaining girl, the brunette, was glancing alternately at her and the two blondes, seeming unsure what to do.

After a silent discussion with Misaki, Aiko took a step forward. "Look. We haven't done anything to Ami. I'm sorry if she's not talking to you, but honestly, we're only friends with her. She's a nice, intelligent girl, as you know yourself. She's helped us on a few occasions, out of the goodness of her heart and a sense of responsibility, and because Chou asked her to. That's all. We're not trying to take her away from you or anything like that." She sighed quietly as she watched the other girl. "She's upset at the moment, I know that, she's not happy with the rest of you because of the way you've been acting recently. But she's still your friend. If she wasn't she'd have left a long time ago. I think she just wants some space at the moment. If you let her think it out I'm pretty sure she'll talk to you soon enough."

"Why should I believe you? It's some evil magic, I'm sure." The blonde looked defiant, sniffing and wiping her eyes. Aiko sighed again.

"You can believe me or not believe me, I can't do much about that. But it's not some evil magic. It's just a pissed off Ami."

"Perhaps we should listen to Aiko," the black haired girl said quietly, not meeting anyone's eyes. Her team-mates looked at her with expressions of betrayal and surprise, the two blondes
particularly.

"What?" the first one yelped. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm trying to be sensible." The girl looked upset and confused. "I've been thinking about all this and I'm not sure you're right." Shrugging off the arm of her friend, the blonde girl pulled herself to her full height with a furious expression.

"Not right? What the fuck are you talking about? Of course I'm right."

Aiko looked at Misaki as the four girls suddenly started shouting at each other. "Um, excuse me?" she tried. They completely ignored her, yelling insults at each other, the brunette waving a fist at the black-haired one who looked annoyed and shoved her. Growling, the brunette shoved back, then punched her compatriot in the face. This triggered a complete free for all, all four girls shrieking angrily and hitting each other, although luckily not using their magic. Aiko pinched the bridge of her nose and winced at the migraine that was threatening to come on, while Misaki watched the internecine fight with amused interest, eating an apple. When her friend looked at her she shrugged and tossed her one as well.

In the end they sat on the wall running around the flat roof, waiting for the girls to get it out of their system. Thuds and smacks echoed over the rooftops as they beat the hell out of each other with very little style or grace, while Aiko and Misaki recorded the fight for the amusement of the others, finishing off their apples. Eventually, though, the short brunette sighed. "This is fun and all but I have better things to do, guys." She stood, walked over and grabbed the brunette, pulling her away from the taller blonde and prodding some pressure points which dropped her on the spot. Misaki did the same with her opponent. Turning to the other two Aiko was about to deal with the young woman who had started the entire thing when the black-haired girl knocked her unconscious with a quick punch to the side of the head, completely losing her temper.

"Bitch," she muttered, rubbing her fist and wincing. Aiko and Misaki looked at each other again.

"Very strange girls," Aiko commented silently.

"Completely nuts, they make us look normal," Misaki responded, looking around at the three unconscious figures and the sole upright one, who appeared very battered and irritated, with a nice black eye developing. "Even for them this is a little excessive. I can see why Ami is avoiding them at the moment if this is what they're like."

"They seem close to some sort of breakdown. When Ranma and Kasumi get back we're going to have to look into this. It's not normal even for these girls. I'm beginning to wonder if something is causing it."

Misaki shrugged a bit. "I suppose that's possible. Why just these four, though? The other ones are a pain in the backside but seem content to just avoid the entire area. This bunch keep turning up recently and they're crazier every time."

"No idea at all. I'm going to have to talk to Ami again, see if she has any ideas. Oh well, let's get them out of here. Back to that temple, I suppose, the old priest there seems to have a pretty good grasp on reality. He obviously knows about them even if they don't realise it. Perhaps he can talk some sense into them." She glanced at the standing girl, who looked guiltily back at her.

"Sorry," she said in a quiet voice.

"Nothing got broken this time, so I doubt there's anything much Yori will say," Aiko told her with a
small smile. "Aside from wondering why you're all shouting at each other. OK, I'll take you all back to your temple. You want to pick up your friend there? We'll get the other two." The young woman groaned, dropping to one knee and slinging the unconscious blonde over her shoulder, before rising again. Aiko and Misaki retrieved the remaining pair, then they all vanished.

The old man looked around the room and sighed very softly, before turning his gaze to his granddaughter, who wouldn't meet his eyes. "This seems... unhelpful," he finally said, moving over to her and gently turning her face to his. He ran his fingers over her face very carefully, looking at the damage to it. "You'll need some ice for that eye." She nodded, silently, looking upset and embarrassed. Briefly hugging her, he turned to Aiko and Misaki. "I'll talk to them. I don't know if it will help, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir," Aiko responded, bowing slightly. "That would be appreciated. We're getting a bit worried about their behaviour recently, even for them it's a bit weird. It might be a good idea to check for some sort of external influence. Something isn't right about all this." He nodded. "I will do. Thank you for stopping this before it got any worse." Looking at the three unconscious girls, he asked curiously, "How long will they be asleep?"

"Those two, probably about twenty minutes. The other one, I'm not sure. We didn't put her down."

"She really pissed me off. Sorry." Smiling a little he quickly checked the blonde, nodding to himself. "I'd think she'll probably wake up about the same time. You know it isn't a good idea to knock someone out by hitting them in the head, child?"

"They heal fast, she'll probably be all right," Aiko said, watching. "If there are any aftereffects Yori or Chou can sort it out when they get back, but I think she'll be fine." Glancing at the other girl who was looking guilty again, she added, "But you really should get some ice on that, it looks painful." The black-haired girl touched her eye gingerly and winced. "It's not comfortable, no."

"When Yori gets back, could you ask her to visit me, please?" the old priest told them. "I'd like to catch up, and also discuss all this."

"Of course. That will be in, hmm, perhaps one and a half weeks." Aiko smiled at him. Nodding to the girl she and Misaki left the room, a bright rainbow flash illuminating the doorway a second or two later. The elderly man smiled slightly then turned to his grand-daughter. "Come on. Lets get some ice on that, make some tea for you and your friends when they wake up, and talk." She followed him out of the room after a quick look back at her team-mates. The brunette snored a little as she left.

Cologne studied the two men in the garden of the Tendo household with interest from the roof of the house. Her great-granddaughter looked around, obviously sensing her, then up, smiling. She waved to the Elder, who waved back, dropping off the roof and making the visitors stare in shock.

"Good afternoon," she said politely, grinning at the expressions they were wearing. "I'm Elder Ku Lon, I'm pleased to meet you both. I would think that you are Adrian Stewart and you are Matt Jordan, based on the description Xian Pu gave me." She pointed to each in turn, correctly
identifying them. Shampoo and Akane looked amused. Nodoka rose from the garden chair she was sitting in, offering her a cup.

"Tea, Elder?"

"Thank you, child. And perhaps a small piece of that cake? I know how well you bake it."
Dropping off her staff she accepted the plate and cup, hopping up onto an empty chair. She looked at the two men over the cup. "You seem startled."

Adrian stared at the tiny Chinese woman with immensely long white hair, who stared back curiously and with obvious good humour. Glancing at Matt he received an odd look in return. "Um, hello, Elder Ku Lon." he nearly managed the name, making her chuckle in a rusty voice, leaning forward and inspecting him with bright eyes that betrayed immense experience and a keen mind.

"Call me Cologne, dear boy, it's easier. But that was a good attempt." Her English was extremely good, he noticed. "It's a long time since I met an American. Many years. Your country seems to have come on a long way since I was there last." She snickered, glancing at Shampoo. "Apparently you don't still ride horses everywhere. Pity. I like horses." He exchanged glances with Matt again, who looked confused.

"Um, Elder? How long ago was it that you were last in America?" he enquired politely. She chuckled.

"Oh, I don't know... Late nineteenth century, perhaps? Somewhere around then. I travelled more in my early middle age. Got around all over the place. Europe, North and South America, Russia. I don't move around quite so much at the moment. But it was very interesting learning all the different languages." They both stared in shock as she grinned.

"Late nineteenth...?" Matt gaped at her. "That's a century ago! How the hell old are you?" The old woman looked highly amused.

"It's impolite to ask the age of a lady, my boy," she replied with a laugh. "But, if it helps, a fair bit older than your country. They grow up so fast these days." The Elder smiled at their expressions. "Your Mr Washington was an interesting man."

"You... knew... George Washington?" Adrian felt faint as he listened to this extraordinary old woman. She snickered again.

"I wouldn't say knew, exactly. Met the lad in Barbados, a long time ago. I thought he'd go far at the time. Bright young man. We talked a few times. Anyway, that's all in the past. I was interested in meeting the people who seem to think my great-granddaughter is worth so much money." Glancing at Shampoo with an amused expression, she added, "I've always thought so myself, admittedly, but it's unusual to find someone else who shares that viewpoint." The younger woman stuck out her tongue, then giggled, making Cologne chuckle.

Adrian tried to get his thoughts in order, after such a remarkable piece of information. For some weird reason he didn't disbelieve it. The old girl certainly looked like she could be over two hundred and fifty years old, he thought with mild, stunned amusement. He noticed Matt was still gaping with his mouth slightly open and nudged him sharply. The tall man closed his mouth with a snap and sat still, just listening.

"We both feel that Akane and Shampoo are going to be more than worth the money, Ma'am. They're remarkable. I'm still finalising things with the studio but it's going well. We're hoping to
get them over again for a few days in about three weeks, then there will probably be at least two
more meetings between then and Christmas. Hopefully, assuming there aren't any problems, which
seems likely at this point, they'll be looking at starting some real paid work around the end of
January or perhaps February next year. I'm still working on which of the two or three movies
they'd both be a good fit for to get them started on." He smiled at the Elder. "In all likelihood, if
things pan out the way I'm hoping, they will both have as much work as they can handle within
twelve months. There are a couple of martial arts movies on the horizon, one science fiction one
which needs a lot of pretty extreme stunts, and two or three action ones which could benefit from
their talents. We can probably save a lot of money by cutting back on the amount of CGI we would
otherwise need, and make it look better as well."

Both girls looked interested and pleased at the thought, glancing at each other and grinning.
Cologne watched them for a moment before laughing quietly. "Very good. I hope it works out for
you both. And you, Mr Stewart. Try not to break Hollywood, girls." She snickered as Akane
looked mildly embarrassed. "Take care of them, Mr Stewart. I should be most annoyed if either
one of them came to harm." She gave him a look that for some reason chilled him to the bone for a
moment, before smiling again. "I have a lot of time and effort invested in both young ladies, and
one of them is family." Finishing her tea and jumping down off the chair she picked up her staff,
turning to Nodoka. "Thank you, my dear, it was as nice as ever. I must be off, I left duck-boy in
charge of the kitchen and he's more than likely sold half the kitchen scraps as the house special by
now if he isn't wearing his glasses." Hopping back on top of her staff she looked at them all.

"It was good to meet you, gentlemen. I expect we'll meet again at some point. LA sounds
interesting, I may well have to visit. Shampoo, when you finish here I could do with a hand for the
afternoon customers." The young Amazon nodded, smiling. Matt and Adrian watched the amazing
old woman with wide eyes as she waved, then hopped onto the roof and bounded away, cackling
with amusement.


"Would you like some more tea, Mr Jordan?" she asked politely, picking up the pot. He held out
his cup, still looking in the direction Cologne had gone, nodding numbly.

Harrison looked up as Aiko and Misaki both sat down next to them at the restaurant table, looking
mildly irritated. "Got everything sorted out?" he asked mildly, pushing a pair of glasses towards
them both and filling them with water from the jug on the table. "Hi, Misaki, nice to see you," he
added.

She grinned at him, picking up the glass of water. "Thanks, Richard. Nice to see you as well. Yes, I
think so, for the moment anyway. Those girls are completely crazy."

"So it was them again?" Harada asked with interest. She nodded tiredly.

"Yes. Getting nuttier by the minute. They were accusing us of stealing their friend from them
because she seems to want some alone time at the moment. Got quite worked up about it, then
started fighting amongst themselves when one of them agreed with us. Very strange." She
shrugged, drinking the water and putting the glass back. Aiko seemed to be thinking about it, but in
the end sighed, shaking her head.

"I have no idea what's going on with them recently. They've been odd for a long time but the last
few months I'm sure it's got worse. The internal fighting is worrying."

"Does that sort of thing happen a lot with the various groups?" Harrison asked.
"No, not really. There are some groups that really don't like each other, sometimes to the point of insulting one another and very occasionally a fight between them, but that's pretty rare nowadays. Yori managed to stop most of it, around here anyway, mainly by lecturing them on professional behaviour after shutting them all down whenever something like that happened. If they do fight they do it a long way away and very quietly." Aiko snickered a little as Misaki smiled grimly, pouring herself some more water. "It's pretty strange to have a group fighting internally, though. Usually they get along quite well with each other. There are a couple that seem to not like each other very much but even they manage to keep their disagreements pretty private. This lot completely lost it." She smiled slightly, remembering.

"It was kind of funny to watch but also rather worrying. Like they were on the edge of a real breakdown. I expect that when the others get back we're going to want to look into it. Those girls are far too powerful to have running around if they've literally gone nuts. People could get hurt."

"People have already been hurt," Captain Uehara said quietly. Aiko glanced at her then nodded sadly.

"Unfortunately true. Not for a while, but they've certainly caused a lot of collateral damage, which has included at least half a dozen victims in the last eighteen months. Even Chou was ready to unscrew some heads the last time, she gets very angry about innocents being caught in our business. Especially when the people responsible just walk off." The brunette sighed. "Those girls are becoming something of a liability, to themselves as much as anyone."

"Is there anything you can really do about it?" Harrison asked. She looked at Misaki, who shook her head slowly.

"I'm not sure. We can stop them, that's easy enough, they're powerful but not really very good fighters, and they seem to be getting worse at that anyway, not better, but that's only if we find out about it in time. Actually fixing the problem... I'm not sure. We don't even know what the problem is. There clearly is one, or something that's changed, because they weren't like this when they started. One or two of them aren't the sharpest tools in the box, but they're not stupid either, and they did a very good job to begin with." Sighing, she drank her water. "I don't know. We'll have to talk to Yori and Chou, see if they have any ideas. They're better at this sort of thing than we are."

"You seem to be very effective at it even so," Harada said, smiling at them. Both girls looked pleased at the compliment.

"Thank you, Sergeant. We do what we can." Aiko looked around the table. "Looks like you've just finished. Would you like to wander around the shopping area, Richard? You still need to find a present for Emily for allowing you to come out and play." Misaki giggled as Harrison laughed, nodding.

"I do indeed. Yes, that might be a good idea. I would think that Adrian and Matt will probably be finishing up soon." He looked at his watch. "About four hours, yes, that should be long enough. OK, let's go. Ah, hang on, I don't have any Yen with me." Aiko smiled, pulling out a roll of cash.

"No problem. I can lend you what you need. I know you're good for it." He laughed again, standing up, looking around at the other two police officers.

"It was a lot of fun catching up, Captain, Tetsuo. I hope we can meet again soon." Captain Uehara smiled at him, nodding.

"I'm happy to have talked again, Lieutenant. Give my best to your family. Please make sure to stop in if you're in the area again."
I will."

Standing, Sergeant Harada held out his hand. Harrison took it. "Take care, Richard. Don't worry about the meal, I've got it. I hope someday I can come to LA and meet your family."

"I'd like that. Give Emiko a kiss for me, and tell her congratulations. I really hope everything goes smoothly with your child. You'll like being a father, although it's a lot of work. It's well worth it. Let me know how things go." Harrison grinned at his friend.

"I'll make sure to keep you up to date." Harada stepped back. "If you see Laura, say hi for me."

"Count on it. See you guys later." Leaving the restaurant, the LAPD officer and the two magical girls walked off down the street, talking to each other, as the two Japanese officers watched.

"Very decent man," Captain Uehara commented, looking at her sergeant. He nodded, smiling slightly, as he pulled out some cash to pay the bill.

"He is. I'm very glad to have met him. It took a while for him to accept the whole Minato concept but he rallied magnificently in the end. The girls clearly like and trust him, which is a very good sign, they're good judges of character."

"This problem Aiko was mentioning is a little worrying. Magical girls can be hard enough on the scenery when they're acting normally. I'm more than a little concerned about a number of them having something wrong with them." They left, heading back to the station.

"So am I. Luckily they're based some distance away, but it's not a good situation." He sighed a little. "Oh well, there isn't much we can do about it. We'll have to leave it in the more than competent hands of Yori and Chou. I just hope they get back before something major happens." Nodding, the Captain looked slightly worried, then deliberately changed the subject to something less upsetting.

Adrian yelped as Aiko and Richard suddenly appeared a few feet away, shying away then relaxing. "Jesus, don't do that!" he said with some asperity, his heart hammering. Aiko grinned at him.

"Sorry, Adrian, I'll try to come in further away next time. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It takes some getting used to, that's all." He glared at Richard, who was laughing helplessly. "It's not funny."

"Oh, it is, definitely," the other man gasped out. "You should have seen your expression! It was amazing." Adrian sighed heavily.

"You know I'm slightly highly strung, even with the pills," he muttered, while Richard kept laughing. Aiko patted him on the shoulder comfortingly.

"You're not too bad." She looked around the garden. "Where is everyone?"

"They're in the house. Matt was discussing some possible stunts with Akane and Shampoo. I wanted to have a moment along to think about things, so I came out here." He glanced around, smiling a bit. "It's a very nice place. Peaceful."

"Most of the time. It can get quite..." She was interrupted by shouts from the other side of the house, making them both turn and look, as Soun and Genma came around the corner, fighting each other vigorously. Aiko shook her head sadly as Adrian and Richard stared in amazement. "...loud,"
she finished, watching the two martial artists. Their students came after them in a group, exchanging bets. Nodoka leaned out an upstairs window, watching with a neutral expression, that turned into a wide grin when, inevitably, Soun punched Genma into the pond, slipped on the grass, then followed him in.

Staring at the panda that dragged itself out of the water and collapsed onto the side, panting, Adrian pointed, his mouth working. "Um..."

"I know. They seem to have at least one fight a day, from what Akane told me." Aiko shrugged.

"Um..."

"You'd think they'd have grown up by now, men of their age."

"Um...?"

"Yes, it's weird, the way the fights always end up in the pond. Nodoka has been telling them it's possessed." Soun pulled himself out as well, coughing up pond water and looking green, then lay on the grass beside the panda.

"Um...!"

"Well, obviously it isn't, but there's something weird with it, even so." Aiko grinned at his befuddled expression.

"Um... Panda?"

"Oh, that's just Genma. He's got a Jusenkyo curse as well." Adrian stared some more, then glanced at Richard, who shrugged helplessly, also looking surprised.

"Don't look at me. The Japanese are insane as far as I'm concerned." Aiko giggled, making him smile. "Fun, but insane."

"Weird. So very, very weird." After a long moment, the director turned away from the scene at the pond as the students gathered around their teachers, distributing their winnings amongst themselves and talking loudly. "Ah, right, where was I. Oh yes. Peaceful." He looked over his shoulder as Nodoka came out with a kettle of very hot water and tipped it over her pandafied husband, looking satisfied at the loud yell he let out from the somewhat excessive temperature. "I think I've had enough peace. Let's go back inside."

Emily glanced out the window to the patio as a flicker of motion caught her eye, smiling happily. She went out and hugged her husband, who looked pleased to see her. "Did you have a nice time, dear?" she asked.

"Yes, it was fun. I was pleased to be able to see Tetsuo again, and Captain Uehara. Meeting everyone at the Tendo Dojo was interesting as well, although slightly confusing." She looked at him, puzzled. "I'll explain later. Oh, yes, I have a little something for both you and Serena as well." Turning to Adrian, Matt and Aiko, who were listening with smiles on their faces, he shook hands with the magical girl. "As always, nice to see you, Aiko. Thanks for the trip."

"No problem, Richard. I'll have to get back now, though. Do you need a lift, guys?"

The director shook his head. "No, thank you, Aiko, my car is parked out front. We came in that."
"OK. Let me know if you need to go over again, or if you need Akane over here. I'll be away for a week in three days from now, but before or after that is fine, subject to insanity getting in the way." She smiled at them, shrugging. "You know how it goes."

"I'm beginning to," he replied, laughing. "Thank you very much for all your help."

"Any time. Right, got to go, see you all later." She waved, then as they all closed their eyes, disappeared.

Emily leaned against her husband, smiling slightly. "What a nice young lady. I hope it went well?"

"Yes, thank you, Emily, everything worked out nicely. We met some very interesting people there."

Matt grinned at her. "It's an odd place, Nerima, but they seem friendly."

"Would you two like to stay for dinner? It's nearly ready." The two studio men looked at each other, then Adrian nodded, smiling.

"Certainly. Thank you." All four went back inside, closing the door.

Tamiko looked around the garden, grinning, before bending to feel the deep pink grass equivalent. "This is pretty cool," she laughed, as Nabiki watched, grinning.

"Isn't it?" The middle sister glanced around the sight she was already finding very familiar, then looked up as she heard something she recognised. Giggling, she casually said, "You might want to duck," making Tamiko and Fumiko look at her, before a rising whistle was terminated in a pair of loud cracks and a gust of wind. Both magical girls whirled with ki balls instantly ready, poised to fire, but reabsorbed the energy when they saw the two soarers inspecting them curiously from a few metres away. The animals yipped happily, moving to Nabiki, who went down on her knees and tickled them both under the chin.

Looking at her team-mate, Tamiko raised an eyebrow. "That was impressive," she commented. The other woman nodded, watching Nabiki make a fuss of the two animals, who were clearly thoroughly enjoying it, an expression of deep contentment on their furry faces as they squeaked to her.

"Loud, too." Moving closer she inspected the soarers curiously. "They're kind of cute." She reached out a hand, which the male sniffed, then allowed to touch him. "Very soft fur." Tamiko stroked him as well and smiled.

"Like a kitten, or something like that." Both animals were relishing the attention. Ranma wandered out of the house, watching them with a smile on his face. Walking over the martial artist ticked the smaller animal behind the ears, which made it quiver with delight. When he suddenly became female, the soarer twitched a little, staring at the red-head with what looked like surprise, before relaxing again.

"They're not too fussed by us, are they," she chuckled.

"I'd say they were damn pleased to see you," Uthryyl noted as he came out with his daughter, who immediately moved to also stroke the soarers. Laughing, he sipped the mug of coffee he was holding, studying the animals as they enjoyed all the people fussing over them. "So strange. I wonder if they were waiting for you, Nabiki? Or just happened to be passing."

"No idea, but they didn't take long to arrive. We've only been back for an hour." The Tendo woman stood, making both animals look disappointed, then eager again when she shimmered into her
flying Azumi form. Both Tamiko and Fumiko watched, smiling widely. "I'll be back in a while." She grinned at them. "You coming? These guys can really show you how to fly." With a strong flap she was airborne, the soarers seconds behind her. Everyone watched as the three figures rapidly climbed, before Tamiko turned to her friend.

"Quick! Follow those lunatics!" They sprouted wings and leapt into the air, following 'Azumi' and the two soarers, laughing wildly. Chuckling, Ranma exchanged glances with Onkra.

"Come on, time for another lesson."

"You're right. This is one of the most incredible things I've ever seen," Tamiko said, awestruck, watching the waterfall as the sun set. The three young women stood on the observation area and simply enjoyed the sight.

"This is a beautiful place," Fumiko agreed, turning to look out over the edge at the vast plain below them. "The people are wonderful as well. So remarkably hospitable and accepting of someone from another world." A few D'sage had wandered through since they'd arrived half an hour earlier, greeting them with smiles and very little surprise. A family group was a few metres away looking out at the view as well, one of them pointing something out to his son.

"I find it weird how normal everything is, all things considered," she added after a moment. 'Azumi' nodded.

"I thought the same thing. This world, or the people at least, are very much like the people at home in more ways than seems likely. I love it here, so far. The food is pretty damn good as well, although that might just be Uthryyl's and Quannyr's cooking." Glancing at the waterfall again as the colour slowly shifted to an almost purple shade, both suns now behind it, she smiled. "So pretty. I wish I could show it to Akane and Dad."

"Perhaps you can one day." Fumiko put her hand on her friends shoulder, squeezing it. "Things seem to be changing very fast with your family. Hopefully that means the day you can reunite your sister with them is coming closer."

"I hope so," 'Azumi' sighed a little. "I really do. Oh well, it's not going to change in the short term, so I may as well enjoy myself. Tomorrow we're going into Sirtha again, then to Krentak to look around. I want to go back to the imaging shop and get a couple more of the camera units."

"I'd like to get one or two as well." Fumiko smiled a little. "I wonder if they do a projector like that one you picked up on K'nn Four?"

"Don't know, but we can certainly ask." They turned to Tamiko who was still admiring the waterfall. "Let's go back, I'm getting hungry." The auburn haired girl nodded absently, eventually turning away.

"All right." She grinned at her friends. "But I'm coming back here. It's beautiful." Nodding with a smile Nabiki stepped up onto the wall, diving off it while spreading her wings, followed by her friends, all of them rapidly descending towards the plain then heading in a wide circle towards Uthryyl's house. Behind them the D'sage family watched with interest, before heading back to their car for the trip home, discussing the odd people you met nowadays.

Two soarers, high above, followed the three girls, yipping to each other in a contented sort of manner. They now had three fun new friends, which suited them well as far as they were concerned.
Chapter 64

SM purists, avert thine eyes. You may not enjoy the next part.

On the other hand, I kind of do.

"I'm really getting worried," Ami said quietly, looking out over the night-time scenery from the roof of a building near the university. "They're acting oddly, or more oddly, anyway." She raised one corner of her mouth in a half smile. "We all act oddly, compared to most people."

"True, I guess," Aiko replied, grinning. "Although people outside Minato seem to think everyone inside it is completely nuts. It's only half-true at best."

The blue-haired girl nodded, peering down at the street some twenty metres below, as pedestrians walked past, unaware of the three young women above them. "Most people here are pretty normal, just a lot more open-minded than average. Around this specific district, they're insanely accepting. It's pretty strange. I guess Yori's approach really works."

"Most of the time. We've had a few incidents where things went a bit sideways, but by and large it all works out," Misaki commented, handing her companions each a cereal bar, which they took with thanks. She tipped the camp chair she was sitting in back and crossed her legs on the peak of the roof, looking both extremely precariously balanced and very comfortable, making Ami shake her head in amusement as she unwrapped the bar. "Any idea what's up with your friends?"

"No. I wish I did have some idea, I might be able to stop it. None of my scans show anything out of place, but I'm sure something is wrong, somehow, this behaviour isn't normal. They never used to be like this. Oh, some of them have always been a bit gung-ho, admittedly, I could point fingers at arrogant behaviour and a sort of elitism that's not very nice, but nothing like the recent problems."

"At least being a bit open-minded is a bit normal. At least that's not like what they've done," Aiko shrugged, grinning. "Although they've been a bit closed-minded before."

"Any idea what's up with your friends?"

"No. I wish I did have some idea, I might be able to stop it. None of my scans show anything out of place, but I'm sure something is wrong, somehow, this behaviour isn't normal. They never used to be like this. Oh, some of them have always been a bit gung-ho, admittedly, I could point fingers at arrogant behaviour and a sort of elitism that's not very nice, but nothing like the recent problems." Sitting on the roof peak she nibbled the food and stared at the university clock tower. "Did Yori really dangle a mugger by one foot from that thing?" she asked, pointing. Aiko looked in the direction she was indicating and nodded, looking amused.

"Apparently. I didn't see it, but Chou swears she did. It was fairly effective by all accounts." Ami giggled.

"I can imagine."

"So what are you going to do about your team? Have you spoken to them yet? Blondie seemed very upset about you not talking to her for a week." Ami giggled again.

"That's not her name, you know." Aiko shrugged, grinning. "No, I can't work out what to say. I was so angry last time I was seriously considering just walking away. I don't want to just abandon them, they're my friends and so much more, but..." She shrugged. "It's complicated. Lots of ancient history." The young woman was silent for a while, as the other two waited. Eventually she sighed. "I can't avoid them forever. I guess I'll have to go talk to them sooner or later, but not right now. I'm still too annoyed by it all."

"They seemed kind of worked up the other day. I mean, fighting like that? It was pretty funny, true enough, but not exactly a good working relationship. Mind you, that one with the long black hair seems to at least be thinking about things finally." Ami nodded.

"Rei. She's not stupid. Bad-tempered sometimes, and a bit aggressive and quick off the mark, but
not stupid. Of all of them I'd expect her to figure out something wasn't right, eventually."

"That old priest is her grandfather, isn't he?" Misaki asked curiously. Ami nodded, finishing off her cereal bar.

"Yes. He's a bit of a pervert but also a very experienced and wise man. I kind of like him." She smiled a little. "He's known for a long time about all of us, but never said anything."

"He seems to be trying to talk sense into them, now. Hopefully he'll have some luck." Aiko straightened up, looking around. "What was that?"

"What was what?" the blue-haired woman asked.

"I thought I heard something like a little explosion." The brunette moved to look down at the street, then around at the surrounding buildings. "Odd." She closed her eyes and listened with her head on one side for a moment, then nodded. "There's something going on over there," the woman said, pointing at the other side of the street and a few buildings up. "I can hear a sort of metallic sound." The others joined her, Misaki flipping her chair shut and into a ki pocket in one move, then also listening.

"Like something being cut?"

"That's it."

Ami was looking in the direction indicated, holding her computer and scanning the relevant building. "I can't hear anything," she mumbled, watching the screen. "Hey, isn't that some sort of diamond broker?"

"I think so. On the second floor." Aiko looked carefully at the building. "It should be empty this time of night."

"Well, I'm reading five people inside, and a thermal residue that's probably the result of some sort of explosive," the other woman said, putting her little machine away.

"Aha. Good old fashioned robbery. Haven't done one of those for a while." Aiko grinned. "Coming? They're fun." Misaki cracked her knuckles with a smile. After a moment Ami nodded, suddenly feeling better.

"Why the hell not. I could do with some amusement." She looked down at the street and pointed. "There's a van down there with the engine running and someone inside. Want to bet he's involved?"

"Probably. Let's go and introduce ourselves." They all stepped off the edge, dropping to the street, then strolled over. Ami knocked on the window, causing the man inside, who was studying the building in question intently, to jump violently and whip his head around to look at her. His eyes widened as he recognised the uniform.

"Hello. Would you like to turn off the engine and get out, please?" she requested politely. After a moment's further staring, he instead put the vehicle in gear and slammed his foot on the accelerator, gritting his teeth. Nothing happened except a roar from the engine. After a long moment he looked back out the window at the young woman, who was waiting patiently beside the motionless vehicle, which was currently being suspended twenty centimetres in the air by Misaki and Aiko, one on either side. He looked in his side mirrors at the two girls, who smiled at him.
"We can wait," Ami said. After several seconds he slumped, turning off the engine. She opened the door and gestured, moving aside as he climbed out. Watching as Aiko put her side of the van back down and quickly poked him in the back a couple of times she caught him as he slumped. "That really works very well," she said admiringly, lifting the unconscious getaway driver and dumping him in the back of the vehicle as Misaki opened the door, neatly arranging him to one side.

"Doesn't it? Yori knows loads of weird techniques. Those pressure points are very useful." The short girl closed the van, nodding to a pedestrian who waved at her as he came out of a convenience store and walked past unconcerned. "I'll go around the back in case they go out that way, you guys wait here. May as well grab them as they come out."

The next few minutes were entertaining for them and a number of witnesses, who watched from the other side of the street as the three girls rounded up and rendered unconscious four of the five robbers as they exited the building. The fifth one, realising something odd was going on, stayed inside. As they were loading the last of their captured burglars into the van, a police car drew up behind them, two officers getting out and coming over, no real urgency in their movements.

"Hello, Corporal Otani," Aiko said, smiling. "That was quick."

"It's a slow night," the officer in charge replied, peering into the van. "Not bad. That all of them?"

"Nope. One more is inside. He doesn't seem to want to come out." She gestured at the building. "Would you like us to go and get him for you?" The corporal glanced at his colleague, who shrugged a little.

"If you could that would be a help. We'll take care of these ones."

"No problem. Back in a minute." The three girls went into the building, as the police officers watched.

"Isn't that blue-haired one part of that other group from over in the Azabu-Juban district?" the other officer asked, looking at his companion.

"I think so, yes. I don't like them much, but she's OK. Nice and polite. I wonder if she's going to join Yori and the others?" Otani looked at the building for a moment, then turned back to the van. "Come on, help me with these idiots."

Inside, the three girls went up the stairs to the second floor, looking around with interest. "Down there," Misaki said, pointing. "That's what this sign says." They went down the corridor to the door to the vault room, which had a large hole surrounding where the lock had once been. The smell of explosives hung in the air. Stopping outside the door they looked at each other.

"Should we go in or ask him to come out?" Ami asked in a conversational tone.

"We could ask, I suppose," Aiko responded. "It's probably better than going in. If we have to do that, someone might get hurt."

"I'm OK with that," Misaki said with a hair-raising giggle. "It won't be any of us."

"Go away," a voice called from inside the room, sounding worried.

"No," they chorused, grinning at each other.

"I've got a gun," the burglar said.
"Really?" Aiko sounded surprised. "That's pretty stupid. The cops are going to crucify you, they don't like guns."

"It's not mine. One of the others left it behind." He sounded even more worried now.

"Well, that's all right then." Aiko rolled her eyes, making Ami giggle. "After all, it's not like you're committing a crime... Oh, wait." There was a long pause.

"You're not... Yori..., are you?" the voice asked. She grinned.

"Nope."

"Thank god for that," he mumbled almost to faintly to hear. Ami raised an eyebrow.

"She really does have a reputation," the girl noted. Aiko nodded, looking amused.

"That she does. Very well deserved, too. If she was here this guy would be in really serious trouble." A small whimper came from behind the door. After a moment, she gently pushed it open. On the other side of the room a man with a balaclava over his face was staring at them, holding a pistol in one shaking hand. "You don't look well, my friend. Why don't you put that down and come with us. The police would love to talk."

"They didn't tell me we were going after somewhere in Minato," the man said, raising the pistol with a slightly hopeless air.

"In future you should probably check." Aiko smiled at him. "Come on, be sensible." Closing his eyes he pulled the trigger, flinching at the noise. There was silence after the shot for a moment.

"You see? Catching a bullet is easy enough. You have to make sure to grab it firmly, though, so it doesn't bounce and hurt someone." He opened his eyes to see the three young woman looking at the outstretched hand of the short brunette, the one with blue hair nodding.

"Right. Got it. I've never tried this before."

"First time for everything," the brunette said, grinning. She glanced at the robber. "Well? As long as you're shooting at us, don't stop yet. We're practising." Staring in horror, he instinctively pulled the trigger again. The blue-haired one moved her hand so fast he couldn't even see it, then yelped in pain. A dull thud on the other side of the room made him duck.

"OW! Damn it, that stings!" She waved her hand rapidly with a pained expression then sucked her knuckle as he gaped.

"Slightly too fast. You closed your hand too soon." The brunette looked at him expectantly. Sighing hopelessly, he fired again. She held up the bullet. "There you go, see?"

"OK." Looking at him the one in the skimpy outfit raised an eyebrow. "Well? We're waiting." The by now very confused and depressed burglar fired one last time then dropped the gun and put his hands up, sobbing. She smiled happily, displaying the bullet proudly. "Yay!"

When they came out with their prisoner, Corporal Otani looked at the man, who appeared quite grateful to be dealing with something normal like the police. Holding out his hands he waited to be handcuffed and deposited in the back of the police car. Aiko handed the corporal the pistol in a plastic bag along with the bullets and shell casings. "He said it belonged to someone else. He was helping us with a training exercise, by the way, that's what all the shooting was about." Looking oddly at her, the policeman nodded after a moment, glancing at his colleague who looked puzzled.
"Um, all right. I'll put that in the report. Thanks very much."

"It was fun. Well, we have to be getting on. See you again sometime, Corporal." All three girls waved, then jumped up the side of the building and vanished into the darkness. Shaking his head and smiling to himself, the corporal got on with his job, thinking that Minato was a very interesting place.

A few buildings away, the three young women stopped and sat down, Misaki providing them all a bottle of beer each. Three synchronised thumb motions later they clinked the bottles together and took a drink. "Thanks. That cheered me up a lot." Ami smiled at her friends. "It was fun." Flexing her right hand a few times, she added, "That's going to ache for a while, though." There was a visible bruise on her middle finger where the bullet had struck.

"You'll get over it, and now you have a new party trick." Aiko grinned at her. She looked back, amused.

"What the hell sort of parties do you guys go to, for heaven's sake?" They both laughed.

"You wouldn't believe it. Maybe you'll get invited to one, some day." Shaking her head and laughing, the young woman swigged some more beer.

"Without the magic boost I'd need a new hand. You guys seem tough enough to take it all the time." She looked curiously at Aiko, then Misaki. "I wondered about why you changed the clothing. Wasn't it part of the magic you used?" Looking down at herself she adjusted her short skirt. "I know ours is."

"It was, originally, yes," Aiko replied, glancing at her for a moment. "Our outfit was even worse than that thing. At least you can walk around in public without looking like you got booted out of Roppongi for being too exposed." Ami giggled into her beer. "Chou worked out how to edit it out of the magic. She and Yori are amazingly good at that sort of thing. All the training they gave us made a huge difference as well. We're much stronger and tougher now even without the magic that we were before with it. It's practically unnecessary now, to be honest, although it does provide a useful boost and lots of cool toys."

Ami sighed wistfully. "Sometimes I'm kind of envious. Without the magic I'm not much. Stronger and faster than a woman normally is, true enough, but not all that much. If I'd tried to catch a bullet in my unboosted form I'd have a hole in me. But with it turned on I'm stuck with these clothes, so it's kind of obvious. It would be neat to be able to leave it on all the time."

"I think you're underestimating yourself, Ami. You're a damn sight smarter than practically anyone, which is certainly something to be proud of." Aiko smiled at her. "Some proper training would probably help a lot as well. Your ki levels are quite high, from what I can make out, although you don't seem to use any of it with your magic. I really think you should ask Yori for some help with that. You're strong, fast, and have some good attacks, but you're not really a fighter. You could be, though."

"The others are much better than I am," the young woman said morosely, sipping beer. "They're the ones with all the heavy attacks. I'm just the backup and intelligence asset." Misaki chuckled, glancing at her, then looking back over the town.

"I know someone else who thinks like that, and she's wrong too. Yes, you don't have the raw power of some of your friends, but you're smart enough to know how to use what you do have and adapt very quickly to whatever happens. I'm not sure Blondie is, or the others." Ami giggled again, making her smile. "You shouldn't put yourself down. You're pretty powerful by anyone's standards,
and with some decent training you could be much more dangerous even than that. You have the flexibility to learn new techniques pretty fast, I think."

"Yori terrifies me," Ami admitted, holding her bottle up to the light for a moment to check the level, looking disappointed that it was nearly empty. Misaki handed her another one. "So does Chou, but in a different way. I always feel like I've let her down when she looks at us in that way she has. Yori just makes me want to run away, but I'm too scared to."

Aiko laughed for a moment, glancing at Misaki, who seemed amused. "She'd love that. Look, trust me, Yori is a very good person. Yes, she's insanely powerful and skilled, and yes, she can be very scary indeed. More than you'd believe, to be honest, you've never really seen her properly angry. I have, it's absolutely horrifying. Chou is almost worse, somehow, she's so nice most of the time that when she gets upset it's horrible. But both of them only want the best for everyone. They're amazingly patient and kind with their students." She sighed a little, looking out over the skyline, holding the nearly empty beer bottle by the neck and idly swinging it back and forth.

"All either of them really wants is a fairly quiet life with their friends and family, but like with all of us, the crazy got them. More than anyone else I know, actually. Overall they're fine with it, they like helping people, but something that really annoys them is when others in the same position cause more problems than they cure. Yori finds your friends in particular very irritating, they have a positive gift for anarchy that gets right up her nose." Ami grinned, while Misaki laughed again. "She'd be more than happy to leave them alone if they'd basically just get their act together and start behaving responsibly and politely. It's pretty funny watching her yell at them, but she doesn't much enjoy it. I know she tried just talking to them nicely at first but from what I understand they simply ignored her."

Ami sighed, nodding. "Oh, very true. Unfortunately. I was there. She turned up out of nowhere all by herself when we were dealing with a number of particularly difficult demons just over that way," she waved at the horizon, "very politely asking all of us to go somewhere else if we wanted to play." She snickered a little, drinking some more. "Her exact words. Everyone, including me, I'm afraid, completely ignored her. She tried several times but no one paid any attention. I mean, we didn't know her, she looks impressive, admittedly, but so do several of the girls. Some magic got thrown around, a couple of buildings got badly damaged, things like that. I could see she was getting annoyed but no one seemed worried." She shivered a little.

"Right up to the point she started glowing purple. That was just after Rei nearly hit a pedestrian with an attack when he wasn't quite fast enough to get out of the way. Yori blocked the attack somehow and got him out of danger so fast I still can't believe it, she's much faster than anyone else I've ever seen, then did... something. I'm still not sure what. But Rei was out before she hit the ground." The blue-haired girl shivered again. "The aura of danger coming from her was horrifying. Everyone stopped dead and just stared at her, even the demons. She stomped over and glared at them, telling them to fuck off home before she did something dreadful. It looked ridiculous. Little thing like that looking up at a demon about three times her size and threatening it."

"What happened?" Misaki asked, fascinated. "She's never told us this story."

"Well, the demon sort of looked puzzled. She spoke to it in some weird language I'd never heard before and it stared, then looked at it's friends. Three of them started backing away, which confused us. The last one just yelled something and attacked her trying to kill her." The young woman shuddered at the memory. "She beat the crap out of it in about six seconds, grinning the entire time. When it was lying there she told the others to pick it up and run. That's the last time I ever saw them. She let the things go, turned to us, and told us to clear up the mess then go home and not come back."
"So what did you do?"

Ami finished her second beer, staring out at the dark night. "Something fucking stupid. We laughed. She didn't appreciate that very much."

Aiko winced, looking at her team-mate, who shrugged, appearing unsurprised.

"Then what?"

"She kind of glowed brighter, then it just went out. Everything started getting cold. It was horrible, my computer couldn't make any sense of it. After staring at us for a while, she asked, extremely politely but in a tone of voice that suggested that 'No' wasn't a good answer, that we very carefully reconsider our position." Misaki giggled, then looked apologetic when Ami glanced at her irritably.

"Sorry."

Continuing after a moment, the blue-haired woman went on, "I was just in the process of suggesting maybe we should stop and think about it for a moment, because something I didn't understand was happening, when someone took a shot at her. I don't know who, it happened too fast." She sighed heavily. "It was totally humiliating how quickly it all went to shit. Five seconds later we were in the biggest fight we'd had for years. Fifteen seconds after that, four of our group were unconscious, the others were hiding behind a truck, and she was glaring at all of us like she was prepared to eat our souls. More like a demon than any real demon I've ever encountered. Her voice was... absolutely terrifying. She didn't ask this time. She just told us to either pick everything up and go away, or get hurt. A lot. Our choice. She didn't seem hugely fussed either way."

Ami shrugged. "We picked everything up and went away. She gave us a real talking to before she let us go, I felt about five years old by the end of it. The worst part is she was completely correct. We'd been very careless about what we were doing and could easily have killed several people, never mind all the property damage. It made me take a long hard look at how we worked and I wasn't very happy about what I saw. Half our group won't come anywhere near here after that, they were completely traumatised by it. Unfortunately, the other half don't seem to be able to learn that poking Yori is a really bad idea. They're the idiots I'm stuck with." She looked depressed, so Misaki handed her a third bottle of beer, looking over her head at Aiko, who nodded. Opening it absently she drained half the bottle.

"Whenever we met her after that, which thankfully hasn't been all that often, she basically just glared then yelled at us until we went away again. It always seemed to be after we'd done something stupid or destructive. We completely ruined the chance to get along with her out of stupidity and arrogance. I may not have seen her truly angry, fair enough, but having seen what I have, I don't want to. That was bad enough."

"She was certainly annoyed. But not in a killing rage. If she had been you'd never have known about it." Misaki smiled as Ami shivered at the matter of fact tone in her voice. "It would have been very quick if that's any consolation."

"Not really, no," the girl said quietly. "But that's why I'm scared of her. The more I learn about what she can do the more scared I get. Every time I see her she seems to be more powerful, has more incredible abilities, and now she's passing them on to the rest of you. Chou was bad enough, she's nearly as scary as Yori when she wants to be, although most of the time she's really nice. Having four more like her is worrying."

"Five. Don't forget Azumi," Aiko corrected her, grinning.
"Oh. Right. I haven't met her." She finished her beer and lay back on the tiles, staring at the stars. Aiko and Misaki did the same. Hiccuping slightly, she waved her hand at the sky. "Nice view tonight." Falling silent she just stared up for a while.

"You weren't in any real danger, I think," Aiko finally said, breaking the silence. "She doesn't like killing at all, even the hostile demons. If she has any choice she'd rather shove them back through a portal than anything else. Admittedly, push her into a corner and try to kill her and you won't like the results, but by and large she's a pretty peaceful person. She just has a real problem with people like us putting non-combatants into a dangerous position. So do the rest of us. We all handle it differently, though. Chou makes you feel so guilty you stop and apologise. Yori terrifies you into doing the right thing. Azumi creeps you out to the point you'll do almost anything to stop her looking at you." She giggled a little. "Not as effectively as Ms Aoyama can, though. She can make you want to run just by saying hello, and that's if you know her."

Misaki looked amused, nodding. "Yori really doesn't hold much of a grudge either. If any of your friends just apologised, or were even simply polite, she'd smile and talk to them happily. Even people she doesn't much like she can get on with if necessary. I know she thinks quite highly of you personally, she's even complimented the rest of your group in the past when you've handled something well. But she's got very high standards and when she sees someone fall below the level she feels they should be at she gets disappointed. I have a feeling that's why she finds your group so annoying, she thinks you're not fulfilling your potential, recently in a very dangerous manner."

After a moment, Ami sighed. "I can't disagree with that. I guess I should talk to her. Maybe she can figure out what's going on with the girls. I certainly can't. Things have been a little weird for quite a long time, since before we met Yori that first time, in fact, but in the last eighteen months or so have really gone downhill. Sometimes everyone is more or less normal, sometimes they just go... odd." She shrugged a little, looking puzzled. "I can't really describe it better than that. I mean, a few of them aren't exactly the most even-tempered people around, but more and more recently everyone seems to get irritated by stupid things. They don't listen to my advice any more, they go charging around without apparently even noticing people trying to get out of the way, and they're really rude to everyone when we're in uniform. That's not like them, or it didn't used to be."

"Perhaps it's just some weird magical girl version of combat fatigue?" Misaki asked after a few seconds. Ami shook her head.

"I don't think so. I wondered that, to be honest, but it doesn't fit. None of my scans seem to show anything that would fit. My computer has a very comprehensive suite of medical assessment software and everyone checks out fine. Physically and mentally, they seem pretty much normal. But clearly they're not. I've checked everything I could think of, some sort of external magic, drugs, disease, you name it I've tried to find it. Nothing shows up. And as far as I can tell it doesn't seem to be affecting me, which is weird. One or two of the others are less affected while a couple are affected more badly, but it seems to be going after all of them. Whatever it is."

"Very odd indeed." Aiko considered the problem.

"And worrying. We've been attacked by subtle magic before that had some weird effects, but I know what to look for now and it's not that."

"Talking to Yori and Chou would be a good idea, I think. If it's anything physical they could probably find and fix it with a bit of effort, their healing abilities are remarkable. But they still have limitations, like all of us. What are you going to do if they can't help and it gets worse?" The brunette looked at the other girl, who looked depressed again.

"I have no idea. From what you were saying, at least some of them are close to something really
breaking if I can't work out what it is and stop it. That could be very bad. We may not have Yori's fighting skills, but we do have, as a group, a horrendous amount of power. It's bad enough when they're blowing things up because they didn't think it through, it would be much worse if it was deliberate."

All three of them thought about this then looked very worried.

"Fuck. No, that would definitely be something worth avoiding."

Silent again, Ami stared at the stars. "This isn't what I was told was going to happen," she muttered after a while, rubbing her forehead tiredly. Her companions shared a glance, puzzled.

"Told by who?" Aiko asked curiously. Ami looked embarrassed.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to say that out loud. We have some... advisors. They've been very helpful in the past, but more and more often they seem to be completely wrong. And some of the information we received from... other sources... is also wrong. It's very troubling, it shouldn't be, considering where it comes from." Aiko looked at her for a long moment, thinking hard.

After a moment, acting on a sudden wild hunch, she asked slowly, "Are you getting information from that time travelling member of your group?" Ami froze, staring at the sky, then very slowly turned her head to look at the brunette, her eyes wide.

"Um... That's an interesting idea," she replied faintly, appearing guilty. Aiko watched her for a moment, then rose on her elbows to look over at Misaki, who was listening with a thoughtful expression.

"Isn't it?" She stared at the blue-haired girl, who was lightly sweating and hoping they'd let it drop. "Yori has always said that she thinks time travel is a very bad idea. Old problems with it. I know a while ago she talked to a demon mage who was something of an expert in the field, who also told her that trying to manipulate time could produce some spectacularly bad results. Often almost the opposite of what you're trying to do. Looking at the past was OK, trying to look into the future was very difficult, mainly since it hadn't happened yet and there were almost an infinity of possible futures to choose from, and actually trying to change things..." She shook her head. "Very bad idea indeed, he told her."

Looking back at the sky, she added, "I hope that none of your people are trying anything like that. It could have very nasty results, from what I've heard."

Ami was quiet for a while, before speaking again in a voice that sounded strained. "I can't comment on that subject. Sorry."

"OK. It's your secret. We all have them, we won't pry." There was another long pause.

"But, purely theoretically of course, if someone was looking at the future and saw some great disaster on the horizon, wouldn't you think it would be a good idea to try to stop it? Or at least make sure it was survivable?"

"Thinking logically about that, if you even can apply logic to time travel, how could you be sure that whatever you did to stop some possible future disaster wouldn't actually turn out to be the cause of it?" Misaki sounded interested. "I mean, any number of TV shows and SF books have come up with that idea. It's a total cliché, but that doesn't mean it's not true. Clichés normally are, that's why they're clichés in the first place."

"A causality loop," Ami murmured, nodding to herself. "Yes. That bothers me as well. The whole
idea of time travel is full of more types of paradox than you can imagine. Depending on the model you use, some of them cancel out, some of them can't exist in the first place, and some of them negate the entire principle. It's horrifically complex." She sighed slightly. "I can follow the math, but it doesn't really help."

"I suppose," Aiko said after a moment, "that in the absence of any other information, you wouldn't have any choice but to try to stop this theoretical disaster." Ami didn't respond, merely frowned at the sky for a little while.

"I'm going to have to think about everything for a while," she finally said. "Sorry. I wish I could say more, but..."

"Don't worry about it." Aiko shrugged, sitting up on the roof and smiling at her. "Like I said, it's your secret. But if we can help, let us know. In the end we're all in this together." She grinned slightly. "Hopefully, and purely theoretically, this future disaster isn't any time soon." Ami laughed and shook her head.

"Without being held to something that might or might not be real, not immediately, no." She stood up, wobbling a little. Misaki hopped up and stabilised her. "Thanks. I don't drink very often. I'll be fine." Looking at her companions, she smiled. "Thank you for listening to all that talking. And letting me help with those burglars. And teaching me an interesting trick." Flexing her hand she looked at it in the light from the street-lamps below them. The bruise had faded noticeably.

"Would you like me to pop you back?" Aiko asked, also standing. After a moment the blue-haired young woman nodded.

"Thank you. That might be less embarrassing than falling off a roof." She giggled as Aiko nodded with a grin.

"Back in a moment," the brunette said to her team-mate, who nodded, turning her head as they vanished. Shortly afterwards the short woman reappeared, walking over to join Misaki looking out at the night scene. They stood silently together for a while.

"Interesting," Misaki eventually said.

"Very. And concerning. The others need to know about all this. Even leaving aside all that time travel stuff, which is just scary, the idea that her friends are losing it worries me a lot."

"Think Yori and Chou could help?"

Aiko sighed. "I don't know. They're good, damn good, but nowhere near all-powerful. Some things will be beyond their abilities. Sooner or later we'll run into a problem they can't figure out how to solve."

"Later, I hope," the other woman said soberly. "Much later." Looking down at the street, she pointed. "I'm starving. Let's try that place, I haven't been in there before."

"You're always starving," Aiko laughed, as the two of them dropped five stories and headed for the restaurant.

"Wow," Misaki managed, staring at her friends, then at Aiko. After a long moment she grinned. "That's very good." Fumiko raised her wings more, looking pleased, before folding them away.

"Wait until you get yours. Flying is brilliant."
"Where are Nabiki and Tamiko?" Aiko asked, inspecting Kasumi's wings closely, then Ranma's. The currently red-headed martial artist pointed up with an amused look.

"Tamiko wanted one last flight before she went back." The other two looked up, then stared in amazement at the four plummeting figures, who all braked with a series of bangs seconds later, almost perfectly in sync, before dropping to the ground. Two of them laughed while two of them made weird, happy yipping noises. Half a dozen small flying spheres arrived around them a few seconds later. Misaki inspected the soarers with interest, moving over to them and holding out a hand. Both sniffed her then pushed their heads into her hands.

"What are these things?" she said happily. "They're so cute. Can we keep them?" The female leaned against her leg heavily, apparently aware it was in the presence of someone who appreciated the full value of a flying alien predator. Fumiko looked at her, then Kasumi, both of them suddenly laughing hard.

"Told you," her sister gasped out. Kasumi shook her head, grinning.

"I don't think we should take them home, Misaki," she said, sounding regretful. "But you can play with them here all you want. They love flying with us, it seems."

"Aww..." Misaki looked at her with puppy-dog eyes, making her giggle.

"They have to stay here." Trying to be firm she ruined it by giggling again as her friend dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around one of the soarers, who looked very pleased, while the other one seemed mildly jealous.

Sighing at the antics of her team-mate, although grinning, Aiko turned to Ranma. "I've got some recordings for you to look at. We may have a serious problem at home."

"Them again?" The martial artist looked slightly peeved. Aiko nodded slowly.

"Yes, but not quite in the way you're thinking, I suspect." She send them all the files. "Look at those at some point and see what you think."

"OK. A little later, unless it's urgent." Ranma looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She shook her head.

"Not immediately, I don't think, but it's something that needs investigating."

"Fair enough." Turning to the two going back to Minato, she grinned. "We'll see you guys later. Try to keep a lid on the place, if you can." Fumiko nodded.

"We'll do what we can." Watching her sister make a fuss of the soarers, she smiled again. "Come on, Tamiko, let's go home." Waving to Onkra, who was just coming out of the house, she walked through the portal, followed by her friend and four camera drones. Kasumi giggled.

"I hope they remember about their wings and tails before they go outside," she commented. Aiko looked amused, then slightly worried, jumping back through the portal for a moment before reappearing, laughing.

"How long have they been in that form?" she asked. Nabiki grinned at her.

"About two days. Fumiko spend almost all of yesterday flying, chasing these guys around. Tamiko was nearly as persistent. I can understand why, it's damn good fun." She changed back to her normal form, making the soarers stare at her, with a look that was close to disappointment. She
laughed, tickling them behind the ears.

"Flying parties are going to be as common as mermaid parties, aren't they?" the brunette asked rhetorically.

"Probably. Know any good places?" Nabiki asked. "Like Aiko Island is for swimming?"

"Why not there? It's a hell of a long way away from anyone, I can't see flying over it would be any more of a problem than swimming around in the lagoon."

Nabiki looked thoughtful. "True. Bit boring, though, no scenery to look at other than one tiny island and a hell of a lot of ocean. Oh well, we'll figure something out." Aiko nodded, looking up at the hovering spheres left behind.

"What are those?" she asked curiously, pointing. One of them dropped down to eye level, half a metre away, humming very softly.

"Oh, right, we didn't tell you about these things." Nabiki explained the camera units, sending her friend a feed from one of them.

"That's very cool," Aiko exclaimed, inspecting the device. "I can see some interesting uses for them."

"Everyone seems to have decided they're useful," the middle Tendo laughed. "After I, being the trend-setter that I am, started the whole ball rolling," Aiko chuckled. "We went back to the imaging shop and talked for a while. In the end, with Uthryyl's help, we managed to negotiate a bulk purchase of the things at a very good price. Everyone got two. Yours are inside. I've got five of them now."

"The salesman was very pleased, even at the reduced price his commission was respectable," Ranma said, laughing. "We cleaned him out. Apparently that was as many as that shop normally sells in about six months, in one sale. He was obviously very curious what we wanted so many of them for but was too polite to ask." She looked at the two new arrivals. "We also got three of the matching projectors. Nabiki bought one on K'n'n Four that's a bit more advanced and smaller, but these are as good as far as the quality of the output goes, and considerably cheaper."

"Cool. New toys." Misaki looked pleased, partly from the idea of interesting alien tech and partly because the male soarer was licking her face, yipping like a happy dog. "Hey. Slow down, I need to breath," she told it, laughing.

"Come inside and let's show you around," Onkra interjected, grinning at her friends. She shook hands with Aiko, then Misaki when she stood, somewhat damp from soarer saliva. "It's good to see you two again."

"Nice to see you as well, Onkra. How is your training coming along?" Aiko looked at her with interest. The young D'sage woman smiled happily.

"Pretty well. Ranma seems pleased with my progress, but I'm very aware that it's going to take a long time to get anywhere close to any of you." They all headed towards the house. "But I think I'm going to stick at it. If only to prove to Dad I can."

Laughing, they went inside. Moments later the door opened and Quannyr stepped out. "Both of you, out," she said sternly, pointing into the garden. The two soarers came out with their heads down and their ears back, looking irritated, then stared at each other as she shut the door again, before flying off, but only as far as the roof. There they waited patiently. Sooner or later one of
"So Akane seemed happy?" Nabiki looked at Aiko over the table as they ate. Her friend nodded.

"Yep. Very much so. Have you spoken to her lately?"

"No, we've been back in range for a couple of days but I didn't want to make her think I was checking up on her. She needs to do this herself. I'll probably call her tomorrow." The middle sister looked at the older one, who smiled. "I think this is going to work out well."

Kasumi smiled happily, taking a sip of water. "I do hope so. It would do her so much good to really become a success in something she enjoyed. She might even finally be able to find someone she cared for, and cared for her in the same way, like I did with Ranma." Glancing at the red-head she grinned.

"Not that there's anyone quite like Ranma..." The martial artist nodded grave acknowledgement of the simple fact, while everyone else laughed.

"So true." Chuckling, she squeezed her wife's hand. A sound outside the window made them all look, to see two furry faces peering in at them, one upside down as the soarer dangled from the roof by its hind legs. Uthryyl laughed while Quannyr sighed a little.

"I hope you realise how much trouble we're going to have with them when you leave," she said, looking meaningfully at Nabiki. "Thanks very much for that." The Tendo woman shrugged. "I didn't do it on purpose, you know. They just followed me home and now they want to keep me." She grinned at her hosts. "Onkra can go gliding with them, they'd probably like that." The young woman in question looked thoughtful.

"Might be an idea," she muttered, looking over her shoulder at the two animals, who had exchanged places. "I was seriously considering getting a glider after Jyrron let us use his ones."

"Another hobby?" Uthryyl asked with a long suffering sigh, snickering when his daughter laid her ears back and glared at him. Quannyr poked him in the ribs while their guest laughed. "You could take them home, you know, no one would mind. Here, at any rate." Misaki looked suddenly hopeful while Kasumi sighed a little. His wife poked him again. "Ow."

"Stop helping, dear," she hissed. He grinned but subsided.

"I don't think that's a very good idea, Uthryyl," the eldest Tendo said, glancing at Misaki, who looked disappointed, sadly watching the soarers through the window. "What would they eat?"

Nabiki pointed at them, grinning. "Look at them! Pretty much anything they want to, I think."

"We're not importing mountain soarers to Tokyo," Kasumi said firmly, shaking her head. Beside her, Ranma was shaking with laughter, trying not to let it out. Both wives shared a glance, then looked at their husbands.

"Yours is just as much of a nuisance as mine is," Quannyr said. Kasumi nodded.

"Unfortunately. But, I suppose we love them even so." Snickering, Ranma kissed her, then went back to eating, while outside the windows the two animals kept a watchful eye on their playmates.
"Hello, daughter, how are you?" Her father's voice made Nabiki smile. Ducking a blow from Onkra, she spun and kicked out, barely missing the other woman, who leaned backwards then whipped her tail into the middle sister's ribs, knocking her two metres sideways and into a bush.

"Fine, thanks, Dad," she replied, pulling herself out and brushing off the leaves, before launching herself in a flat dive at Onkra's legs. "Just getting some exercise. How's things at home?"

Sidestepping, Onkra again caught her with her tail, but this time the Tendo woman was ready for it, grabbing the end and heaving, making her opponent yelp. Grinning, she pulled harder, although not using more than a fraction of her strength, as Onkra braced herself, then suddenly pushed off backwards, almost catching her with a backhand blow to the cheek. Ducking just in time she laughed. Ranma nodded approvingly from where he was watching with Misaki. 'She's pretty quick,' she thought to herself. 'Faster than a normal human, certainly.'

"Everything is ticking along well," Soun said, sounding pleased. "I was just wondering how you were getting along, we haven't heard from you for a while. That director fellow, Adrian, and his friend Matt were over here a few days ago. Aiko brought them over along with an LAPD officer she and her friends know. The studio people wanted to talk to Akane and Shampoo, while Aiko took the policeman to visit some friends in Minato. It all seemed to go very well."

"Did you show them the Dojo?" His daughter asked, jumping easily over Onkra's sudden lunge at her, landing on her shoulders and pushing her to the ground then rolling out of the way of her return strike.

"Yes. They seemed impressed. We talked to them for a while about Anything Goes and teaching it. Mariko won another spar, she's definitely got the gift. I suspect if she keeps at it in a few years she'll probably get offered a job in Hollywood as well." Nabiki giggled, pivoting on one foot gracefully as Onkra kicked out, smiling for a moment until her friend's muscular tail, which again she'd neglected to account for, slapped her surprisingly hard on the side of the head, flipping her onto her back with a thud. Onkra grinned while Ranma and Misaki collapsed in laughter.

"You could end up supplying stunt people in bulk," the middle sister said, snickering, as she accepted a hand from her sparring opponent. Her father laughed for a second or two.

"I suppose that's possible. Not quite what we had in mind when we resumed teaching, but it's not a bad thing, overall." Chuckling, he added, "The stunt director seemed quite interested in having Akane and Shampoo teach his own people. Elder Cologne, Genma, and I discussed it and we decided that it was allowable under certain conditions. They seemed all right with that. Especially when Genma showed them why some of the more dangerous techniques are sealed."

Bowing to Onkra, Nabiki smiled, as did her opponent. Ranma came over to talk to the D'Sage woman, while the brunette sat on a low wall next to the bush she'd ended up in, idly picking a few stray leaves out of her hair. Watching as Ranma showed the other woman another set of moves, slowly stepping through them while Onkra watched, then copied them, she asked with amusement, "If the techniques are sealed, why does he keep demonstrating them? He did the same thing six months ago when some of the students asked about dangerous moves." Soun chuckled for a moment.

"He's quite proud of coming up with the techniques in the first place, I think, even though he knows they're far too dangerous to teach. I have to admit that particular one does make an impressive demonstration."

"Isn't there a risk that someone sufficiently advanced could work out how to do it from seeing it done?" she asked, looking curiously at a leaf she'd pulled out of her ear, before flipping it back into the bush it had come from.
"It's not impossible, I suppose, but to be honest, if a martial artist reaches that level they could come up with their own techniques at least as dangerous," her father replied. "Very few practitioners of the Art could reach that level in the first place, so it's not really a problem, although it is rather amusing the way he seizes the opportunity to show what he can't show you." Nabiki laughed, looking up to where Aiko was chasing one soarer while being chased by the other one. At this range she couldn't make out which was the male and which the female.

"Uncle Genma is a strange person."

"True. But then, aren't we all in our own way?" Catching Ranma's eye, she indicated upwards, then took on her flying Azumi form and leapt into the air as he nodded, closely followed by Misaki, who was giggling with joy.

"You lot may be. I'm perfectly normal," she told him, watching the ground drop away in the light of the two suns. Her inbuilt instruments told her she was climbing at nearly a hundred kilometres an hour at a fifty degree angle, heading north-west. "Nothing weird about me at all." The middle Tendo had to level out and glide for a moment as a sudden attack of hysterical giggling overtook her. Her father was silent for a long moment.

"Perhaps," he said in the end, laughter in his voice. "Perhaps not." A voice in the background sounded faintly, causing him to pause again. "Nodoka says dinner is ready, so I'd better go. Have fun, give my best to Rika and Maiko. Take lots of pictures." Pulling out a camera drone she tossed it to the side, where it followed her in formation.

"I will. I'll be back in a few days, I'll come home for a while then."

"Goodbye, daughter."

"Bye, Dad. Say hi to the others for me." As he disconnected, she joined the aerial chase, grinning to herself.

"It's very worrying," Kasumi said quietly, having watched the recording Aiko had made of Ami for the second time. "Poor Ami. She's really stuck between honour and common sense." Glancing at her husband, she added, "That's something we both know is difficult." He nodded slightly, staring out the window.

"Damn right. What on earth is going on with that bunch of weirdos? They've been a little off for a long time, but it's got a lot worse in the last few months. It seems to be accelerating as well, based on recent events. At this rate something is going to break in a big way sooner or later." He scowled as he thought.

"Do you think you can stop it?" Uthryyl asked. Glancing at his wife, Ranma shrugged.

"I have a horrible feeling that we can't. We can probably deal with the consequences, I hope, but by the sound of it they're headed for some sort of real fuckup. If the rest of them get involved it's going to be impressive and not in a good way. Just those four are bad enough."

"It might just be three. Aiko says that Rei seemed to be behaving slightly less oddly than the others. Perhaps her Grandfather managed to get through to her somehow." Kasumi sighed a little, looking at parts of the various recordings. "I hope so."

"He's a smart man and a very wise one," her husband agreed. "If anyone can talk sense into them it would probably be him. I hope he can, but I think we need to plan for the worst."
"What would that mean in practice?" Nabiki asked, worried at the tone in his voice. He looked at her seriously.

"If they go completely nuts, dangerously so I mean, we'd have to deal with it. Permanently." She closed her eyes and swore. "I don't like it any more than you do, but they're much too powerful to go running around wildly shooting at each other in public. A lot of people would certainly end up dead. I don't think we can let that happen, not if we can stop it. I also don't think anyone else could." He looked very depressed. "You remember what you were worried about when you were beginning all this stuff a few months ago?" She nodded quietly.

"Think about what it would be like if someone who wasn't as strong willed and intelligent as you are, but a lot more powerful, really did end up like you were worried you might. Full of their own importance and sure that they were destined to rule, for example, just because they had more power than other people. That never ends well."

Nabiki flopped back in the seat and sighed, putting her hands on her face. "All of a sudden this entire lifestyle is becoming something pretty horrible."

"It's not all fun and games, unfortunately," Aiko said gently, patting her friend on the shoulder. "Sometimes we have to deal with the really bad parts, even if, or especially if, it's one of us. Halleckton was horrible. If these girls go completely off the reservation that would seem like nothing." Nodding unhappily, the middle sister looked around at her friends and family.

"Hopefully they'll work things out and nothing unfortunate will happen."

"I hope so," Ranma sighed. "I really, really do."

Sergeant Harada looked at his computer screen in disbelief. "Fuck me," he muttered, reading the incident report from a neighbouring district. "At least no one got hurt. Somehow." Looking up he shook his head. "What the hell is wrong with them?" he asked Fumiko. She shrugged helplessly.

"Not a clue. The only good thing is that the mall was shut for renovation, so there wasn't anyone around. But they pretty much destroyed the entire thing, without any care about non-combatants at all. The insurance company says it would probably have to be completely demolished and rebuilt rather than repaired. Luckily, by some amazing coincidence, it was going to be closed in about a year anyway, so it's not as bad as it could have been, but..."

"I think that's probably the biggest single amount of damage a magical girl team has ever caused," Harada said, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "And they were fighting each other?"

"Apparently. We didn't get there until the end, when we got the call the fight was pretty much over. Our friend in their team missed most of it as well. That one with the black hair called her, she called us, we stopped them moving next door to the bowling alley. They helped, which was a good thing, those girls were frothing at the mouth. I was surprised by the second girl, she was always one of the pushier ones, but she seems to have changed recently. Still kind of short tempered, but not quite as nuts as her friends."

"God. This could have been very bad indeed," the sergeant said, running his hand through his hair.

"To put it mildly. You remember that Akane Tendo incident?"

"Vividly. I won't forget that in a hurry."

"Well, picture about six or seven of her, all fighting each other. With very real and very powerful
magic on top of everything else." Sergeant Harada went white.

"Shit," he whispered. Fumiko nodded soberly.

"Pretty much exactly shit." The magical girl sat on the desk, staring at the floor. "It's gone way beyond a joke. Something is seriously wrong with that bunch of lunatics. From what we could make out from their ranting, one set of them had gone in after some demons they thought were based in the mall, while the other ones were doing the same thing but from the other side. Both of the teams had bad info, there were no demons in there at all. It looks like one of them got jumpy and fired off some sort of attack at a shadow, the other set thought they were under fire, and..." She shrugged, miming an explosion with her hands.

"Classic friendly fire incident," Harada said, nodding his understanding. "Bad enough if it's a few people with guns and body-armour. Pretty damn devastating with magical girls of the level of those ones."

"That's it. They didn't think to talk to each other beforehand, or coordinate their attacks at all. Incredibly amateurish. Even a street gang has more tactical know-how. Now they seem to have broken down into about three cliques, none of whom are talking to the others." She sighed. "Our two girls are completely out as far as I can see. None of the others will talk to them any more."

"What are you going to do?" Sergeant Harada looked at the photo attached to the report, impressed at the sheer damage done to the mall, little of which was standing now.

"Fucked if I know," his companion said sourly. "I've called Yori and told her and the others. When she stopped swearing she told us to just stay the hell away from them as long as they kept to their own area, to avoid setting them off again, while she and Chou tried to work out whether there actually is anything we can do. They'll be back tomorrow morning, hopefully those idiots won't go off again before then."

"We've never had a magical girl team implode before," the sergeant mused. "I wouldn't have thought it was possible, really, although to be honest, if I'd given it any thought before I'd have pointed at them. They've always been a little... excessive. For some time, at any rate."

Fumiko nodded with a sigh. "We've been around a bit longer, but none of us ever really had any problems with the others. There have always been various minor issues between some of the girls, especially when their areas overlapped, but most of us get along OK, and even the ones that don't are normally kind of coldly polite to each other. The only people they ever really fought were Yori and Chou, which didn't normally last very long. And at least two thirds of those fights were pretty good natured, people just working out how good they really were against the best. But when those girls came along, I started hearing stories after a while. One or two of them seemed... I don't know, kind of like they thought they were so much better than anyone else we should all bow down and serve them." She looked grimly amused.

"Oddly enough, that attitude didn't last long when they ran into Yori."

Harada stifled a sudden bark of laughter. "No, somehow I can well believe that. I remember that first fight, when they met her. It was about the fifth time in three months they'd come through here and wrecked something. I guess she moved in and decided she wanted a quiet home." He snickered. "In about five minutes and without even noticing she got about half the community loving her. When she and Chou started the fund pretty much everyone else came over. I wonder if they really realise how much people respect and like them around here?"

The tall girl grinned slightly. "Quite possibly not. Neither one of them does it because they want to
be liked, that's just a useful byproduct. They do it because someone has to and no-one else was prepared, or possibly able, to." She giggled. "It's actually really funny because neither of them actually wanted all the power they seem to have ended up with. It just sort of happened."

"I think that's why they're good people to have it. Can you picture these other girls with the same abilities?" He pointed at his computer by way of illustration. Fumiko looked at the screen and shuddered.

"Trust me, Sergeant, if you knew what I know about Yori's abilities, that would scare you even more." The girl looked worried at the thought. "Mind you, they're scary enough. A couple of them have some serious power, and some quite frightening potential abilities. Luckily none of them seem able to fight very well, in a coordinated manner, so they're pretty easy to stop." She shook her head looking puzzled. "If anything, they're less effective now than they were a year ago, which is just weird. Normally practising makes you better..."

"Maybe they're doing it wrong," Harada suggested. She gave him a wry look.

"Clearly. The question is why?"

"If you lot can figure it out, do you think you can fix all this?" he asked. Pulling a chair over she dropped into it, crossing her legs.

"Personally, I doubt it. I mean, we, or Yori and Chou at any rate, might be able to figure out what the root cause of it all is, but somehow I don't think that removing that, assuming it's even possible, would repair the damage that's already been done. Half of them don't trust the other half further than they could throw them, at least two of them are sincerely prepared to kill each other given half a chance, and they all hate the other two with a passion now. I can't see how you can repair that without an awful lot of time and luck."

"And I suppose that's even if there is a real, concrete cause underlying it all. If it's just some sort of massive personality conflict..." Harada scowled at the keyboard while she nodded.

"There is that. No, I have a strong feeling that that particular grouping is probably pretty permanently broken. Whether they'd reach some sort of understanding eventually I don't know. For the moment, I just want to figure out how to stop something like this, or worse, happening again." Fumiko looked depressed, then glanced up at the door, through which moments later Tamiko entered, her face set in an expression of stone.

"Problem?"

"If I see that blonde bitch again today I'll save Yori the trouble and pull her mouthy head right off her damn shoulders," the red-head growled.

"Which one? They have at least two."

"The one with the two pony-tails. I can never keep their stupid names straight. All that jumping around and shouting slogans. They're worse than some sort of soft-drink advertiser." Sergeant Harada sniggered, making her look momentarily amused. "Hello, Sergeant."

"Hi, Tamiko. I assume that things aren't ideal?"

She sighed heavily, looking annoyed again. Pulling over another chair she spun it around and dropped into it, folding her arms on the back and resting her chin on them. "Not as such, no. I managed to get them all separated, with some help, then get most of them to agree to go home. Miss Mouth decided to argue. A lot. For quite a long time." She fumed for a moment. Glancing at
her friend, she added, "I think her attitude would be much improved with some altitude, about a kilometre's worth. The drop might give her time to think." Fumiko grinned while Harada looked slightly puzzled.

"Possibly excessive, but probably very funny to watch. So what did you do?"

"Told her to shut the hell up before I smacked her in the face."

"Did she?"

"Nope. I smacked her in the face." Fumiko and Harada both broke down laughing, while she grinned a little. "She was still arguing then, but it was a lot more muffled. The blood got in the way."

"Will she be all right?" the sergeant asked when he stopped chuckling. She shrugged, looking annoyed.

"Probably. They're pretty tough and heal fast. Yori broke her nose last year, she was running around shouting about love and justice two days later without a mark on her. Anyway, the other annoying one took her home then, she was starting to look nervous. That might have been down to the sword I was holding." Tamiko smiled again for a moment. "They were walking pretty fast. With any luck they'll stay away from each other and us for a while."

"Perhaps you should ask Ms Aoyama to go and have a word with them," Harada suggested, wincing at his own words even as he said them. It seemed a pretty horrible thing to do to them even under the current circumstances. The two girls looked at each other, Fumiko raising her eyebrows.

"Might work. We'll talk to Yori about it when she gets back. Ms Aoyama isn't always around."

"Thank god for that," Harada muttered under his breath, making both of them giggle.

"Don't you like her, Sergeant?" Tamiko asked. He shuddered a little.

"How do I answer that without being rude?" She grinned.

"Like that. Well done. She's a decent person, but I will agree, somewhat..."

"Unbelievably fucking creepy to the point she'd have given HP Lovecraft a heart attack on the spot, assuming she wasn't the inspiration for his books in the first place?" Harada suggested. Tamiko nodded, smiling a little.

"Yes. That. Well put."

"And you're friends of hers. Think about how we poor mortals feel." He shivered again, although he was smiling. Rather nervously, but smiling.

"She's not that bad, Sergeant," Fumiko protested mildly. He looked at her.

"Would you want her living in your house?" Her involuntary shudder made him grin. "Exactly."

Tamiko was looking very amused, but her smile slowly faded. "Still, even if that works, it's only a temporary measure. Unless we can get those idiots to talk to each other, or at least stay away from anything breakable, sooner or later this is all going to happen again. You could feel it. And next time we might not be lucky, they could hit something full of people."
"I don't think we can hold out much hope of getting them back together," her team-mate sighed. "Sergeant Harada and I were talking about that just before you came in. I think the best we can hope for is that we might get them to stop getting any worse."

"And if we can't?"

They were all silent for a while. "Deal with it, I suppose," Fumiko finally said, very quietly. Harada looked at her. That sounded very final. She glanced at him, correctly divining his thoughts. "That might possibly just involve pushing them through a portal to somewhere they could settle their differences," she added, not looking particularly hopeful. "Whatever, it's an absolute last resort. We'll try everything else first." He sighed a little, reaching for the phone.

"I'd better call Agent Naito. The PSIA is going to need to know about all of this." She nodded.

"All right. We'll give you a report on what we've seen and done so far, which you can pass on to him. Same as usual. I'll drop it in later."

"Thanks, Fumiko." He looked at the phone in his hand for a moment, unhappily. "I never thought it would come to this."

"None of us did. Perhaps we should have." Standing, she smiled a little at him. "I'm still hoping we can work something out short of... extreme measures. If anyone can, Yori and Chou can."

"I've got at least as much confidence in them as you have, but I've got a bad feeling even so. This may be beyond even their skills." He started dialling, as she left, with Tamiko beside her.
Chapter 65

Hopefully the next few chapters will be entertaining. I suspect it may also go in a way that some people will find surprising, and a few very annoying if they're hard core SM fans. I have to admit I find some of the comments I've had in the past about this story puzzling, sometimes I wonder if people are actually reading the same story I'm writing, and it also makes me scratch my head when someone complains bitterly about how bad it all is when they've apparently put aside the time to read nearly three quarters of a million words. One would think if they didn't like it, they wouldn't bother reading, but...

It was never my intention to make this a full-blown crossover, and in many ways it still isn't, but those damn girls just kept pushing in more and more! But, I think I may be taking it in a way unlike a normal cross-over would go, which personally I'm finding amusing. I've had a lot of this in mind for months, but finding the best way to write it has proven to be more difficult than I expected, and as a result parts of it I've rewritten half a dozen times trying to get what's in my head into a form that's readable. I'm still not sure I've succeeded as well as I'd have liked, but let's try this and see what happens.

"I'm sorry you have to cut it short, my friends," Uthryyl smiled, shaking hands with them all. "But I understand. At least you got a decent night's sleep before you have to do whatever you end up doing."

Ranma nodded, looking somewhat disgruntled, but then smiled a little. "Thanks, Uthryyl. For everything. We'll have to do this again some time, hopefully without all the last minute chaos." He sighed a little, as the merchant clapped him on the back.

"You'll work it all out. If I can help, let me know."

"I will." Looking around at Quannyr and Onkra, he grinned at them. "Take care, guys. It's been a lot of fun. Onkra, keep practising at least an hour a day. We'll come back in two or three weeks to see how you're getting on, when all this is over. We can work out some sort of scheduled lesson plan then as well. Might be a good idea to have you come and stay for a while for some intensive training when you're a bit more advanced." The young woman nodded, smiling.

"I'd like that, Ranma. Thank you."

Uthryyl turned his attention to Nabiki. "We'll get the paperwork for the fusion system exports finished up over the next little while. When you're ready let me know and we can work out the next step."

"Thanks, Uthryyl. We'll talk to various people back home and work out how we can do this, but I really do think it's something we have to do."

"I'd tend to agree. I think it's a very large step, but a potentially very good one for your world to take. And, of course, lots of lovely profit." The merchant grinned toothily at her, making her giggle. "Kasumi, if you can look into those phytochemicals, we can work out whether they're the right ones and what sort of quantities we could deal with." The eldest Tendo woman smiled at her friend.

"Of course, Uthryyl. As Ranma suggested, I'll send you a copy of the drug molecular database from the medical library. Go through it and see which ones are of interest. We can find out more about
"Will do. Thank you both, that could be a remarkable opportunity, it's a wonderful offer."

"No problem, Uthryyl," Ranma replied. "Anything for a friend." He looked around at the others. "Well, time to go. I'm feeling a little guilty about not immediately rushing back, but I don't think we could have done anything more than we can do now." The martial artist sighed, looking at his wife, who nodded to him.

"We needed the sleep, dear. We need to approach this with clear heads. It's too important to make any mistakes."

"True enough. OK, let's get the portal open." They concentrated, seconds later the rip in space-time crackling into existence. "Come on, lets go home and figure out what to do next." Ranma sighed a little, stepping through the portal with his wife holding his hand. Aiko waved to the three D'sage, following the others. Looking around with a smile, Misaki laughed a little, then went through as well.

Left by herself, Nabiki walked over and gave Uthryyl a quick hug. "Thank you for everything. All of you. And if it gets too much, I will talk to you."

He smiled at her fondly. "Do that, Nabiki Tendo. Any time you want to come for a visit you're more than welcome. And keep the ideas coming." Laughing, she nodded, then headed for the portal, vanishing through it. They all watched, smiling, then ducked...

"Crap! Don't let him get up the stairs to the roof!"

"No, the other way! Grab her. Grab her. Damn it, grab her! Misaki, go around that way!"

"Yip!"

"Stop licking me you idiot animal. NO! Not the TV!"

There was a crash, followed by a momentary silence, before the shouting started again.

"Nabiki, this is all your damn fault!"

"I'm sorry, all right? They just keep following me."

"Shit, he's going for the stairs again. Kas, stop him."

There was another crash.

"Damn it, I like that plant. Now look at it."

"Sorry, sis."

"Aiko, stop goddam laughing and grab her, will you?"

"The rope! Get the fucking rope!"

Some time later two rather mussed figures came back out of the portal muttering to themselves, dropped a pair of tied up and extremely annoyed soarers on the lawn, glared at Uthryyl and his family who were rolling around howling with laughter, then disappeared back into the glowing
doorway in reality. It vanished with a pop.

It took a considerable time for Onkra to stop laughing long enough to untie the animals, who exchanged glances, yipped happily, then immediately dashed for the open door of the house.

"Hey!" Quannyr charged after them as her husband and daughter collapsed laughing again.

"Aliens are..."

"I know. But so much fun."

"So, what's the next step?" Fumiko asked, looking curiously around at the broken TV and the plant Kasumi was repotting, mumbling to herself and intermittently shooting her sister dark glances.

"And for that matter, what happened?"

"Don't ask!" five people said simultaneously, looking annoyed. She held up her hands protectively.

"Sorry."

Misaki looked at her and winked. "Tell you later," she commed her sister, who smiled slightly. Tamiko, standing beside her, giggled, looking around, but said nothing.

When everything was cleared up, Kasumi's plant was safely repotted, and she'd stopped looking at Nabiki with mild irritation, they all sat on the sofa with a large pot of strong coffee and a number of mugs. Fumiko asked her question again. Ranma looked at her, then around at the others, before sighing and shrugging.

"I have no idea at the moment. Not enough information."

"You've watched the recordings?"

"Yes, we went over them last night," Kasumi told her, pouring coffee for everyone and handing it around. "Uthryyl and the others watched them as well. It's very troubling. Have you found anything more about what happened before you got there?"

"A little. We haven't spoken to Rei yet, Ami's been passing information on to us though. Both of them are sort of in shock, Rei more than Ami. I think she was more than half expecting something like this. She's much smarter than the rest of them, plus she's been seeing it kind of from the outside for a long time. Even so, it was a surprise how quickly it hit the fan, and how thoroughly."

"Any idea which one of them fired the first shot?" Nabiki went back over a few minutes of the recording from Fumiko's point of view surrounding the time they arrived, shaking her head at the devastation.

"Rei thought it was that tall blonde one. She was acting weird the whole time even under the circumstances, kind of twitchy. Like she'd had way too much coffee, or perhaps something a lot stronger. I saw her using that earthquake magic of hers a couple of times on something that wasn't there as far as I could see, she did quite a lot of the total damage, collapsed one wing of the mall all by herself. Crazy girl was giggling a lot of the time as well, which was a little off-putting. Sipping some coffee she sighed. "I could believe it was her. Never liked her much. Too quick off the mark and pretty full of herself."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully. "OK. So, she sees something, or thinks she does, fires on it, probably massively overdoing it in the normal way, then what? Misses and hits one of Ami and Rei's bunch?"
Or just makes them twitch and shoot back? Either way it's a little weird, you'd think they'd recognise her magic at work."

Tamiko shrugged. "The whole thing is weird. As far as we could work out, she started it all, making the middle of the mall lower floor collapse, which made one of the other side, probably that one with the lightning attack, fire back. She missed as well, but got the first bunch so wound up they all returned fire at the same time. That's when the parking structure blew up. About then Rei worked out something was wrong and pulled back. The others kept shooting at each other and screaming, apparently, not even shouting their stupid attack names properly, just completely losing it. The magic was going all over the place, doing all sorts of weird things it normally wouldn't. That seems to have confused the issue even more."

"Eventually she worked out who the 'Attackers' were and called Ami, who called us. She met us there pretty quickly but it was almost over by then, there wasn't a lot left of the place but rubble and a few walls." Fumiko sighed as she thought back to the previous day. "They were absolutely filthy and damn near foaming at the mouth they were so worked up. Even that tall one with the long green hair, the one who's a bit creepy, was laughing like a lunatic and firing off those energy blasts at anything that moved. Really fucking strange. She took a shot at me and I got her in the face with a ki ball, knocked her silly and took most of her hair off at the same time, which to be honest made me feel pretty good. She's a very annoying person."

Ranma chuckled. "Oh, she is that. She's the one who does stupid things with time." He smiled darkly in a manner than made them slightly worried. "The last time we met she tried lecturing me on how powerful she was while trying to shoot me with that staff thing she uses. That didn't end well for her. The look on her face was hysterical. She won't come anywhere near me now, she seems to think of me as something from the pits of hell."

"OK, so we have what, seven of them going at each other for around half an hour?" Tamiko nodded.

"That's about right. It started with eight, but Rei pulled out pretty fast when she worked out something was wrong. That didn't make her friends like her at all, lightning girl punched her in the head, then apparently tried to strangle her until one of the ones on the other side shot her in the ass with an energy attack. Which then triggered a complete free for all. At first it was one set against the other but by the end they were all pretty much shooting anything at all, even their own team-mates. Like what happened on the roof of the bank with Aiko and Misaki, only a lot worse."

"Unbelievable," Ranma sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. "I always thought they had a collective screw loose but that's just..." He couldn't work out how to finish the thought.

"It would have been funny if it wasn't so serious. Double blondie was screaming about being a princess, damn it! And everyone should give her the respect she deserved. The other blonde idiot was screaming about the power of love while trying damn hard to kill at least two of her friends. One of them was yelling something along the lines of people stealing all the best boys from her, while most of the rest were basically simply gibbering like maniacs. That younger one with the violet hair looked kind of worried but was doing a fair bit of damage as well, although looking back on it I have a feeling that a lot of it was basically self defence. I don't think she actually attacked anyone, just fended them off, but I might be wrong. She was certainly the only one who seemed upset about it afterwords."

Fumiko looked around at her friends, sipping some coffee, before continuing. "The others, if anything, looked quite pleased with the results of their little exercise. Right up to the point we
turned up. We dropped them all fairly quickly, they were so highly strung they didn't have the faintest idea about proper self defence, less even than they usually do. If they'd all been on form, more like they were when they first started, we'd have had a lot more trouble, they're not exactly underpowered, but it was actually a bit pathetic how easy they were to shut down. And if it wasn't for their durability I'd guess that at least a couple of them would have bitten it in the fight. They all looked pretty battered even so. Rei got the tall blonde, Ami did the brunette with the lightning, Tamiko and I got the rest."

"What would you say their mental state was after they woke up?" Kasumi asked curiously. Fumiko glanced at Tamiko, who shrugged, scowling.

"Precarious. We had to drop two or three of them half a dozen times until they stopped trying to start it all over again. They eventually got the hint when I broke that blue-haired girl's arm. What's her name, Michiru or something. She had a go at me a couple of times, and both the stupid blondes as well. She'd have killed the mouthy one for sure if I hadn't stopped her. If we hadn't turned up they'd have happily kept at it, they were heading towards the bowling alley, and none of them seemed to give a shit that there were people screaming and running for their lives."

"It's pretty much ruined whatever reputation they had left," Tamiko added sadly. "At least one of the local police was saying he'd have been happy if they'd simply killed each other and solved the problem that way." Ranma glanced at his wife, neither of them looking happy at all.

"Fucking hell. What a mess." He refilled his mug and took a long drink from it. "How are we going to fix all this?"

Fumiko sighed, then looked seriously at him. "I don't think we can 'fix' it. With some luck, we might be able to prevent it happening again, but even there I'm not sure how, yet. But I don't think they're ever going to trust each other again. Not for years, anyway. To be honest, after what we saw, I'd consider it close to a miracle if you guys can simply work out how to stop them killing each other in their sleep. And even if, somehow, we can talk them around and get them sane again, or as sane as they ever got, no one in the community is going to trust them or feel safe around them, except for Ami and maybe Rei."

"What on earth happened to them?" Kasumi wondered out loud. "They were never the most responsible girls, except perhaps for the first year or so they were active, but this is so far beyond anything I would have expected it's horrifying."

"Perhaps there really is some sort of external magic or something working on them," Nabiki mused. Aiko looked at her, then shook her head.

"Ami seemed fairly sure there wasn't. At least not directly. We should check, of course, but she's damn smart and very careful. If she's ruled it out, either she's right, or she's wrong and it's too subtle for her to find. Which would be worrying in it's own right." The middle sister nodded thoughtfully.

"Another very interesting question is why it doesn't seem to have affected her. And following on from that, why Rei seems to have managed to shake it off, at least to some extent, and the others can't."

"It's possible it's linked to intelligence, in some way," Kasumi suggested, thinking hard. "Ami is extremely bright, at least in your class, sister. Rei is well above average from what I know of her. Most of the others, while not at all stupid, are more or less normal young women, aside from the magic abilities. Perhaps that has something to do with it."

"They were all acting like overpowered low grade morons during the fight," Tamiko told her,
looking disgusted. "I've seen some fairly dim demons who'd have been more difficult to deal with, even without the powerful magical abilities. I mean, the entire thing started because they didn't even think to tell each other what they were going to do in the first place, or take a moment to wonder who they were shooting at during it. Those gang members we were having fun with in LA are brighter and better organised than that! And most of them were idiots." Several of the group grinned at this.

"We're going to have to talk to Ami and Rei, get their input, probably Rei's grandfather as well, since he knows them well and is very observant. He's been keeping an eye on them for years although none of them knew about it. Except Ami, probably." The martial artist looked out the window at the late morning sunshine, frowning in thought. "Check them both over and see if we can find anything wrong. Then grab one of the others, with or without her cooperation, and check her as well. We may have to call in some outside help. We're damn good with the physical stuff, but the mental issues are another matter. If they have something seriously wrong with their minds, we might not even see it, never mind be able to do anything about it."

"If they have something seriously wrong with their minds?" Aiko queried with heavy sarcasm. "I wouldn't have thought that was in doubt by this point." He grinned slightly, nodding.

"Good point."

"Who were you thinking of calling in, dear?" Kasumi asked him. He considered the question for a while.

"Probably Hnther, at first. He's extremely good with mind magic, even if he thinks we're both impossible." Noticing a number of puzzled expressions from the others, he added, "Hnther is the security mage we got the spell Misaki suggested at Christmas from. Nice guy. He finds us very difficult to understand, but unlike most mages he doesn't reject our magic out of hand as not being magic at all. It fascinates him. In his line of work he often has to scan peoples minds to make sure they're not being influenced externally, that does happen sometimes despite how difficult it is to do right. I think he'd stand a good chance of working out if there was something wrong, or if not, would know someone who could."

"That sounds good as far as it goes." Aiko glanced around at her friends. "But, the big question no one wants to ask... What if, even after we scan them, check them out, get outside help in... we can't find anything? What then? If they go off like this again, I'm pretty damn sure people are going to get hurt. It's a bloody miracle that no one died yesterday. Now, from what I can see, they genuinely hate each other. In another face-off they might pull out the really big guns. If one or other of their new factions seriously tried to wipe out the others, it would get extremely messy very fast indeed."

Ranma looked at her, then glanced at his wife. Not looking at all happy but also looking very certain, he quietly replied, "We don't let that happen. If we have to ensure it can never happen, we do."

"You're talking about shooting to kill," Misaki noted. He nodded unhappily.

"As the absolute last resort, yes. It's like Halleckton, I'm afraid. If they go off to the point that a huge disaster is inevitable, we'd have no choice. Nineteen demons is nothing to what those girls could do if they really got going. In one way I'm somewhat surprised that only one mall got destroyed. Their power level, if they ever managed to really get some traction, is much higher than that. We'd be lucky to have Tokyo left afterwards in that case. We can't allow something like that to happen, even if we have to call in everyone else to help stop them."

"Do we have the right to do that?" Nabiki asked, not meeting anyone's eyes. There was a long
silence.

"I think we have the duty to do that," Kasumi finally said, gently. "I would rather do almost anything else, but we have to face the fact that it's unlikely that anyone other than a magical girl could really stop a group of rogue magical girls. The military might, eventually, but only at the cost of probably thousands of lives and untold destruction. The police wouldn't stand a chance. A few of the mages, or one or two of our visitors, could probably do something, but it could well be very difficult and costly. In all probability we're the only ones who can do it cleanly and quickly. But I very much do not want it to come to that."

"But killing people..."

Ranma smiled at her sadly. "Every time any of the girls kills a sentient demon, they're killing people. A lot of us have done it. The people usually aren't human, true, but they're still people. Sometimes, to prevent the death of an innocent, you have to cause a different death. The police know this, any soldier knows it. The good ones always try everything else first, but if all else fails, sometimes you don't have a choice." Nabiki considered his words for a while, then nodded, looking upset.

"It doesn't necessarily mean we have to assassinate them in cold blood, either, Nabs," the martial artist added, looking sympathetically at her. "We can certainly shut them down easily enough, without resorting to lethal force, unless things go completely to shit, which means we could trap them in a good solid ward then drop them through a portal to somewhere they wouldn't come back from. Pick an uninhabited world with food, water, things like that, then just let them get on with it. It's not nice but it's slightly better than just killing them."

"Only slightly," she sighed. "From the sound of it they'd kill each other and save us the effort soon enough in that case. Can't we, I don't know, take their powers away or something? If they weren't magical girls any more it wouldn't be a problem."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. You can't just take magical abilities or ki control away from someone, it's not like disarming a gunman. Once you've worked out how to access magic, or ki for that matter, it's an inherent function of the mind. Without destroying the intelligence you simply can't undo the magical ability. Think of learning do mathematics, or something like that. You can't really unlearn it." Kasumi smiled slightly at her sister, reaching out and squeezing her hand. "It's why it's so difficult to deal with a mage that's gone bad. Many magic-based worlds have tried for a long time to find out how to do something like that, but as far as I know it can't be done. You can, in some cases, limit or block access to magic by an individual, but it's difficult and doesn't last forever. The more powerful they are the more difficult it becomes."

"But your magic is so different, isn't there something you can do? I mean, you managed to edit their magic with that clothing spell and from what I know it's very powerful and old." The middle sister indicated the other four young women, who were listening intently.

"Editing it and removing it are two completely different tasks. All I did was make a small functional change to part of a spell. I could change it quite significantly, or even delete that specific spell, but it wouldn't change the fact that they were magical girls. Without looking at the magic Ami and the others use I can't be totally sure but I would be very surprised if the situation was much different." Kasumi looked sadly around at the rest of the people on the sofa. "We may have no choice."

"Even those mages in the UK who use wands can still access it if you take their little sticks away. The stick makes it much easier, but the ability is in the mage, not the wand. Most of the limitations they have in that respect are because they think they have them, not because they really do. It's a
mental crutch, like using emotions to access ki." The dark-haired man slumped against his wife, who put her arm around him. "It would be much easier if we could simply turn these girls off, but I doubt we can."

Aiko smiled sadly at her friends. "When you come down to it, however we ended up here, we're all defenders of the community. If that means we have to defend the community from ourselves, that's what we do. We'd regret it, but we can't let that stop us preventing innocent people dying."

Fumiko, Tamiko, and Misaki nodded, looking at the table, while Ranma sighed again.

"Hopefully it won't come to that. We have to try to stop it getting any worse, even if we can't repair them properly."

"There's another part of the problem we need to address," his wife noted after a long silence. They all looked at her. "The government is going to be getting very nervous about all of this. They give us a lot of room, far more than some people would think reasonable, but an event like this is bound to upset them."

"Very true." Ranma glanced at her, then closed his eyes and rubbed them. "I'm going to have to make some calls. Reassure some people that this isn't the start of a general breakdown of order in the magical world, just something we can sort out. Somehow."

"Agent Naito?" Nabiki asked curiously. He smiled at her slightly mysteriously.

"No. Somewhat higher than that." At her inquisitive expression he snickered. "Sorry, I really am, we have very few secrets from you, but that one I have to keep. I made a promise." Five sets of eyes were now looking very intrigued. Kasumi giggled for a moment.

"That made them much more curious, dear."

"I can live with that," he laughed. "All right, I'm going to make some calls, then I guess we need to see Ami and the others. At that temple would be the obvious place."

"The priest wanted to see you anyway," Aiko noted. He nodded.

"OK. Can you call Ami, get her to meet us there in about, hmm, let's say an hour."

"Yep." She looked around at her friends. "We should probably go and check on the lunatics, see what they're up to, just in case."

"We can use the camera drones for that," Nabiki suggested, holding one up. "Just send them to shadow the girls. If anything kicks off we'll know immediately, but we won't provoke them into doing something stupid."

"They don't seem to need provocation," Fumiko mumbled.

"Good idea. Very good idea." Ranma grinned at her. "I knew those things would come in handy."

"After I found them, you mean." She laughed as he nodded.

Aiko smiled. "All right. Misaki, you take the two blondes, I'll send mine after those two lesbians, Tamiko, you do the brunette and the green haired one, and Fumiko, you can have the last one." They all pulled a number of drones out of ki space, activating them. Shortly a series of small alien camera spheres zipped out the opened balcony doors, fading out of view and dispersing over Minato.
Ami sat on the steps of the temple looking out into the sunlit courtyard, thinking. Footsteps beside her made her look up to see her friend and team-mate standing there, appearing worried and sad. She patted the stone beside her. "Sit down, Rei. What's the problem?"

The other young woman looked incredulously at her for a moment. "What's the problem? What's the problem?" Taking a few deep breaths she tried to calm down while the blue-haired girl smiled a little. "The problem is that everything has gone completely insane. Our entire group seems to have lost it's marbles, it's only by some miracle that no-one died yesterday, and now we're waiting for some outside group, who, by the way, is led by someone who really doesn't like us, to come and make things all better. That's the fucking problem!" Breathing heavily she stared at her friend, who smiled again and repeated the patting action. Eventually she sat down, grunting with irritation. "And why are you in your civilian form anyway?"

"There's no point in being powered up for all this, they know who we all are anyway. After yesterday, I'm not keen on being associated with that uniform and the group it represents." Ami sighed. "Have you seen the news today? At least one camera crew caught some of them smashing that mall to pieces, and then making a move on the bowling alley. They weren't being complimentary, 'Arrogant', 'Dangerous', and 'Hazard to life and limb' were some of the more colourful terms used. Less than an hour and years worth of good work was undone."

Rei looked at the ground, watching a small beetle wander out of a crack in the stonework next to her hand. Gently touching it, she nodded slowly, a tear in her eye. "I saw it. What happened to us? This isn't the way it was supposed to go." Putting her arm around her friend Ami hugged her.

"Believe me, I know. But it hasn't been going the way it was supposed to for a long time. Almost nothing we were told was going to happen has played out the way it was supposed to, and even the bits that did were... not right. It's been puzzling me for a long time. They were supposed to have good information, but at best it's been only partially correct, and a lot of it was flat out wrong. Not to mention all the things that happened that caught everyone completely by surprise. It worries and scares me. I thought for a while that we were lucky, we had advance warning of things that most people wouldn't get, although even at the time I believed that I was a little nervous about some of the implications. But I think we were all wrong. Something is very different, something very fundamental, from what it was 'supposed' to be, which I don't understand at all."

The beetle now on her fingertip, the black-haired woman lifted it to her eyes and looked at it, before gently blowing on it. Opening it's wings it flew off rather erratically, landing a few metres away. She watched it silently for a while, as Ami stopped talking. Eventually she sighed. "I don't understand it either. Everyone has been twitchy and weird for some time now, including me, but yesterday... That was scary. At first I really did think we were under attack, but I finally realised what was going on, that's when I called you. I tried to get the others to stop but they completely ignored me. Just laughed and kept on attacking each other, like they didn't even know who they were. But they did, they were calling each other by name even while they were firing. The magic was going nuts, all sorts of weird things were happening, but no-one would stop." She shivered a little. "It could have been unbelievably bad. What if that mall hadn't been closed? I don't think it would have mattered."

"Thousands of people could have died if that had happened." Ami looked frightened. "That's not what we're supposed to be like. We save people, we save the planet, we don't put them at risk. Or we didn't, once. I can see why Yori dislikes our group so much."

"We really messed up with her, didn't we?" Rei asked, looking up at the sky for a moment. "Years back, when we had a chance to make a friend, someone who could genuinely help, we completely
fucked it up. And we've made it worse every time we met her since. How can we fix all this? I want my friends back the way they were, damn it." She wiped her eyes, glaring at the pavement as if it was the problem. The blue-haired woman next to her sighed.

"We can't fix it, I think. We might be able to fix parts of it, but... Would you trust them any more? I don't, not after what happened. Unless we can find out what's going on, I don't know I would ever trust most of them now, I'd never know if it might happen again. Leaving aside the fact that they seem to hate each other now anyway."

"Minako was genuinely trying to strangle Makoto at one point," Rei said, then smiled slightly. "While proclaiming the power of love, very loudly. It would have been funny if it wasn't so serious." Ami giggled, then shook her head.

"Ironic, considering that a few minutes earlier Makoto tried to strangle you."

"There was a lot of it going around." They sat in silence for a while. "What are we going to do if we can't repair the damage? And if Yori can't?" Her friend and team-mate closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"Anything we have to do to make sure this doesn't happen again. We can't allow them to kill anyone. We've come pretty damn close before, by accident, it's only by blind luck in most cases nothing like that happened. But, if what happened yesterday had been in the middle of Roppongi, for example, the casualty count would have been horrific. We have to make sure that can't happen." She glanced at her companion, who eventually nodded. "No matter what, we can't end up as mass murderers."

"Oh, hell," Rei sighed deeply. "No. You're right, I don't like it at all, but you're right." They both looked up as her grandfather came out the door behind them with a tray, a pot of tea and some cups on it, then sat beside them, handing each a cup of tea.

"It's a difficult decision to take, to stop a true friend, even when you know they're wrong," he said, taking a sip of his own and looking out at the courtyard. "But sometimes, it's the only decision you can take." He glanced at them both, then went back to staring at the yard. "You and your friends have done much to justifiably be proud of, my children. That won't go away even if you have to prevent the rest of them causing a disaster. I hope that between you, you and Yori's group can find a way to stop that, without violence. But be prepared for the worst. I don't like any of this, it just feels wrong, but I can't work out why, exactly. Hopefully more knowledgeable people will be able to help."

"When will they get here?" Rei asked, looked at Ami, who checked her watch.

"Any minute now, I think. Aiko said half past two, it's nearly that." Thirty seconds later both girls jumped slightly as four figures appeared soundlessly in the middle of the courtyard, although the old priest didn't move a muscle except to smile.

"It's nice to see you again, Yori, and you, Chou," he said, pouring four more cups of tea. The four young women approached, the two in the front bowing respectfully to the priest.

"We're pleased to see you again as well, sir. It's unfortunate it's under these circumstances." Yori accepted a cup, as did Chou and the others, sipping it then nodding appreciatively. "Very nice, as usual." Gesturing to her companions, she added, "You know Aiko, of course." He nodded. "This is Azumi, a friend of ours. We've been training her for some time." The silver-haired, orange-eyed girl with them bowed slightly to the priest, a small smile crossing her face.
"I'm pleased to meet you, sir," she said, her voice neutral but not unfriendly. He studied her for a moment, then smiled.

"Likewise, my dear. Aren't you hot in that leather coat?" He grinned a little. "It's very nice though."

"Thank you." She smiled back, appearing much less emotionless for a moment. "No, I'm fine, thanks for asking." Azumi glanced at the two girls sitting next to the priest, then at Yori.

"Ami, and Rei," the black-haired woman commented, pointing each out. She studied them for a moment, her face nearly as neutral and emotionless as her companion's. "We've had our differences in the past." Both of them winced a little.

"I'm sorry about that," Ami offered. Yori looked at her for a long few seconds then shrugged with a small smile.

"All in the past. Let's forget it, move on, and try to figure out what to do about all this."

Rei exchanged glances with her friend. "Just like that? Forget it? After all the yelling and stuff?" Yori nodded, grinning.

"Yep. No point worrying about things we can't change. Let's worry about things that I hope we can."

"Why don't we go inside," Rei's grandfather suggested, standing up with the tray. "I suspect you want it all to be private." Yori nodded, before they all followed him inside the temple to a large room in the middle. "You can use this for as long as you want," he said, waving one hand at the room. "I'll get you some more tea, then leave you alone."

"Thanks." Yori smiled at the old man, who smiled back.

"Oh, while I remember, I checked them as best I could for any signs of a malign spiritual influence," he added, looking serious again. "I was unable to find anything, either with Rei or Ami, or the other three. I don't know if that helps."

"It might. Thank you," Yori replied. He nodded, leaving them. Shortly he returned with a fresh pot of tea, putting it on the table in the room, before leaving again and closing the door behind him.

They all looked at each other for a long moment. Eventually Yori sighed. "What a damn mess. OK, let's start at the beginning, see if we can find some way out of this that leaves everyone alive and sane and doesn't write off the entire country if not the planet. I like this planet, most of my stuff is kept here." Rei giggled slightly, unsure why, making Chou smiled gently at her.

"Do you think we can?"

"All we can do is try, dear," the blonde said soothingly. "Sit down, have some more tea, then we can talk things through." Shortly they were all sitting around the table. Chou glanced at her partner, then looked at the two currently powered-down magical girls. "So. Where to begin?"

"Probably right at the beginning," Aiko suggested. She looked apologetically at Ami. "Sorry, I know I said the other day we wouldn't pry, but I think at this point we need to know more about you all. Especially about what we were talking about on the roof." Ami glanced at her team-mate, who looked torn.

"I'm not really comfortable talking about that," she said, "it's kind of a secret." She thought some more about it, sighing. "But I guess we don't have a choice."
"If it would make you feel less worried, we do have a security spell that will stop the information going any further," Chou noted. "It's very effective, apparently, although we haven't had cause to use it yet. We're prepared to use it on ourselves to reassure you." Ami looked puzzled but curious, so she explained the spell's purpose.

"Interesting," the blue-haired woman said when she'd finished. Once more she glanced at her friend, who after a long pause grudgingly nodded. "All right. Assuming it works the way you say it does, we accept." Chou glanced at Aiko, who got up without a word, left the room, then flashed out of existence.

"She'll bring the others, we all need to be present for the spell to work, although afterwards they can go again. They're keeping an eye on your friends and the district."

Shortly the brunette came back in with the other three members of her team. Closing the door behind her, she retook her seat. "Now what?" she asked curiously.

"I'll do the spell on everyone," Yori said, "But Chou will have to do it on me, it's sort of fiddly applying it to yourself." Concentrating, her hands glowed as she put them on Azumi's head for a moment. The silver-haired woman looked momentarily dizzy, her eyes losing focus briefly.

"Ugh. That's a weird feeling," she muttered.

"Any aftereffects, double vision, headache, anything like that?" Yori asked, looking at her closely. She shook her head.

"No. It only lasted a few seconds. I feel fine now."

"Good. Looks like it took. OK, I'll do everyone else." This only took a few minutes. Ami and Rei watched with interest as each of the visitors got the same momentary expression of mild nausea, then shook their heads.

"That is a very odd sensation," Chou said mildly, rubbing her forehead. "Quite an unusual spell." Turning to Yori she performed the same action on her.

"Weird." Yori grinned at them. "OK, Ami, you get the other part, it's kind of like a password to the spell. You need to provide it to allow it to be changed, for example to add more people to it."

Not entirely sure what she was going to do, Ami hesitantly nodded. "Um, all right, I guess. What do I do?"

"Nothing, just don't fight it." Yori reached out and touched her head for a moment, producing a sensation like something tickling at the back of her mind.

"Ick," she mumbled, holding her head. "That itches right inside my brain."

"It should subside in a moment." As promised, the sensation went away a few seconds later. Yori inspected her, then nodded, satisfied. "Looks good. If we need to add anyone, I'll show you what to do. Right, now that's sorted, the other guys are going back and we're going to put some damn heavy wards around this room for privacy." Once more, Aiko left the room, her team following, returning a minute later alone. Seconds later Ami felt a massively powerful ward surround the room, blocking everything in or out. Curiously manifesting her computer, one of the few things she could do with the magic in her powered-down state, she scanned it then whistled.

"Good grief. That's seriously impressive." Yori looked pleased.
"Thanks. We've practised a lot. OK, spill it. Tell us how all this started." Putting the computer away again, Ami hesitated, glancing at Rei, who looked uncertain, then sighed and gestured for her to begin.

"All right. When I was about fourteen, I met a cat. It told me some very strange things..." Yori and Chou exchanged glances, as did Aiko and Azumi. "I know how it sounds but I swear it's true." Ami started talking, explaining her relationship with her team, how each of them had come into their powers, the various battles and enemies they'd faced and the problems they'd solved. As she spoke, Yori and the others listened impassively, although she had the distinct impression they were somehow occasionally talking to each other.

The story went on. Future disasters leading to, in the far future, the establishment of a near paradise ruled by her friends. Time travel, information from the future, artefacts and enemies from the past. Interplanetary kingdoms on the moon in the depths of time, reincarnation, talking cats, and much more. Even as she was telling them she had a weird feeling of both deja vu and complete ridiculousness. 'Told like this, it sounds completely insane,' she thought, trying not to laugh. Rei added her own information to the story, which lasted a good two hours. Eventually, they stopped. Yori stared at her for a while, then looked at Chou, her eyebrows raised so high they almost disappeared into her hair.

"You're completely sure about all that, are you?" she finally asked.

"Yes."

"Hmm." The short woman crossed her arms and studied them for a while. "You do realise how nuts all that sounds? And that's coming from someone whose life is totally crazy." A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth for a moment, making Ami snicker.

"I know. I've never really listened to it all before like that, but even as I was talking I was thinking it's completely daft. But, I swear, that's the story as I know it."

"There are quite a number of inconsistencies in it," Azumi commented, watching them with interest. "From what you told us, you believe a number of specific events were to take place in a particular order, leading to, in the long term, some sort of ill-defined disaster that would kill the bulk of the population of the planet. In something like a thousand years, this new kingdom springs up, ultimately ruled by your friend Usagi." Ami nodded.

"That's the plan." She sighed. "And I know what you're going to say. Most of it, or at least a large amount of it, either hasn't happened at all or hasn't happened in the right order or in the right way. That's something that's been bothering me for a long time."

"Quite a lot of it has happened, but somehow different," Rei added slowly, thinking back. "There really was a Dark Kingdom that was sending demons here to suck the life out of people. We had to kill a lot of them, deal with several very dangerous creatures that were in charge of it all, then eventually invade them and wipe them all out. But it wasn't exactly like we were expecting." She glanced at Ami. "One of the weirder things was that some of the demons themselves didn't quite seem to know why they were doing what they were doing. They looked... slightly puzzled, if that makes any sense. Didn't stop them doing it, unfortunately."

"The names were all wrong but the descriptions and the actions were basically right," Ami agreed. "The cats were very confused, not that there's much unusual about that. They always seem a bit confused. But it got a lot worse in the last, oh, two or three years. Most of the information they gave us was at best incomplete and at worst totally wrong."
"From what you said, the time line is all wrong as well," Azumi noted. "There should have been more invasions, things like that, much earlier on."

"Another odd thing is that according to what you said, I suspect you should also be much more powerful than you are," Yori added, inspecting them with interest. "Not that's you're not already very powerful, the inherent magic is very impressive, but based on your story, if you really are destined to defeat all these cosmic enemies, you're wildly underpowered at the moment." Ami looked at Rei, then nodded again.

"Again, I know. I worked that out quite a while ago. I don't have any explanation for it. We do get the occasional power-up or new attack, but nothing much for the last year or two. It tended to happen when we needed it, if that helps. Perhaps we simply haven't needed anything else yet." She shrugged a little hopelessly. "All of it just gives me a headache by now. I've been trying to work it out for years. It's like we're working to a script that someone's torn all the pages out of and mixed up, and half of it is in a foreign language anyway."

"The magical girl lifestyle is confusing and annoying at the best of times from my own experience," Yori snickered, "but I sort of see what you mean. It's very odd." She sat and thought for a while.

"Aside from anything else, we've been doing this for something like five years now," Ami added. "According to the cats and... other information... right back at the beginning, something critical should have happened a long time ago. But it never did. At first they were saying their memories must be slightly wrong, it was bound to happen soon, but for at least a year now they just don't mention it."

"It? This ill-defined disaster that's supposed to kill almost everyone?" Aiko asked.

"I think so, or at least something that eventually triggers it. We've been told several different causes for it. An asteroid setting off a nuclear winter that leads to a new ice age. An actual nuclear winter caused by world war three. Some sort of huge magical disaster. Nothing yet." She shuddered. "Thank fuck for that."

"Other people like us should have turned up as well, according to our sources," Rei added, looking disturbed. "Quite a few of them, actually. Every now and then we'd get information that references someone else, someone who should have been either joining us, or possibly fighting us, but none of them ever arrived. It's just the nine of us. Again, no one seems to talk about it any more. The cats just go quiet when any of us ask about it, so in the end we stopped asking." She turned to her friend. "When did anyone last mention that?"

"Well over a year ago, as far as I can remember. You're right, it's weird. At first everyone was pretty excited about new people turning up, but when they didn't, it all went quiet after a while." Ami frowned as she considered the thought.

"What do the others of your group think of all this?" Chou asked curiously.

Rei sighed a bit. "Based on recent events I'm not sure they're actually thinking at all. But, it's all confusing. Until Ami mentioned it I hadn't actually given it much thought for some time. I knew that things weren't quite going the way we'd been told they would, but there's always been so much vagueness in the whole thing it didn't seem impossible that things were going according to plan, we just got the timing wrong. Some of the others were complaining that none of the information we got was ever right a year or so ago, but since then not much. We don't see the other four very often, they've been keeping to themselves for quite some time now." She looked at Yori. "Mostly because of you, I think. You scared the shit out of them last time."
Ami giggled. "Oh, didn't you just. Setsuna was nearly shitting herself. It was actually hysterically funny, she's one of the most forbidding and annoying people I know sometimes, with her 'I know something you don't' attitude, which gets right up my nose. All this looking into time and working things out in advance is all very well and impressive, except that for a long time she seems to be having less and less luck with it. Which is driving her up the wall. Then you turned up and she went completely round the bend trying to find out about you. Apparently you don't register on her system at all, either of you. That really worried her."

"What is this 'system' of hers?" Yori looked interested, glancing at Chou for a moment.

"Supposedly the most powerful magical or technological artefact in the universe. I haven't seen it, although it's supposed to be pretty impressive. It looks like a sort of enormous door and is some kind of time manipulation device combined with a massive computer, I think. She won't talk about it, but there was a little information on it in my computer."

"A damn time machine. They're always trouble," Yori muttered, looking disgusted. "Not a good idea at all. I'm beginning to get an idea of what might be wrong."

"What do you mean?" Ami asked. "Aiko mentioned you didn't like the idea of time travel, but I'm not sure why."

"It's a massively dangerous thing to do," the martial artist explained, sighing a little. "Probably the most dangerous thing you can do. I only know enough about it to steer well clear, but I know some real experts who could explain in detail that would make you lose sleep for a month why you should never interfere with time. Basically, it doesn't like it. At all. And it has ways of... resolving... paradox, ways that seldom work out well for anyone involved."

"I know quite a bit of theory and math behind various models of time travel," Ami said, looking fascinated. "General relativity permits it in some variants, although with a number of very weird possible outcomes. The Novikov self-consistency conjecture solves a few of them but leaves other things even weirder." She shook her head slightly. "It gives you a headache when you start to think about it."

"It gives you a bigger headache if you actually do it," Yori grumbled. "Trust me. I've heard of the Novikov thing, it's not completely wrong but not completely right either. I suppose it might be if you did the time travelling by purely technological means but most of the ways I've heard of people actually doing it use magic, either completely or partially, which makes things even weirder. Magic breaks normal physics horribly. I've travelled back in time once, using a magical artefact. It was an accident, actually. That's the sort of thing that happens to me. It was... annoying." Rei and Ami looked at each other.

"That sounds like an interesting story," Ami said.

"I might tell you one day. Anyway, I mentioned it to this time mage I met once and he got quite upset. Physically travelling in time, in most realities, is actually one of the very few things that is completely forbidden. The results can be, um, fairly dramatic." She shuddered a little, making everyone look at her oddly. "As in, theoretically possibly deleting the entire reality dramatic." Ami went white. "It's happened. More than once."

"What!?"

"The multiverse does not like time travel. It permits it, but you have to be really careful. Try to change things in the past, the old 'kill your grandfather' bit, that doesn't work. Either things just sort of heal over if the change is small enough or far enough back, so you end up where you started just
by a slightly different path, or you split off an entire section of time that just removes you from the equation so you can't go back in the first place. Sometimes you can make small changes if you're really careful, apparently, but the reaction to it depends on something he called 'temporal inertia'. Basically, some things have a small amount of it and can be redirected a little, other things have massive amounts and can't be, without huge effort. That seems to annoy the multiverse, which if it notices, takes steps. In extreme cases, very significant ones."

"It sounds like you're saying the universe is conscious," Ami noted, listening with worried intent. Yori shrugged a little.

"I don't think it is, not like you're thinking, and there's nothing like a destined path, either. It's more like there's a sort of feedback system keeping things ticking over, which reacts if you try to deliberately push them off course. The harder the push, the harder the corrective action. The time traveller is the easiest thing to react against, so they're the one who gets an annoyed universe in the face. Which doesn't normally end well for them."

"Interesting. Maybe a lowest-energy course?" Ami mused out loud. "Changing the past is running up against an energy barrier..."

"I don't know, it's not a field I've been all that interested in," Yori admitted. "Especially since I talked to the mage. He obviously did know what he was talking about, and to be honest he worried me enough I lost interest in the whole idea completely. The point is, time travel is dangerous, incredibly so. I got very lucky, I got away with it. He did say that what he termed my 'temporal signature' was a little odd because of travelling in time, though. That might be why this machine of your friend's has trouble with me. Apparently, different methods of accessing time travel are normally dangerously incompatible with each other." She shrugged again. "Again, it's not a subject I know a huge amount about. I think we're going to have to call him in, though."

"What about changing future events?" Azumi asked, looking interested. "They haven't happened yet, right?"

"It's not that easy, unfortunately. There are essentially an infinity of possible futures, so even picking the one you want is damn difficult. Once you've found the one you want, trying to guide the present towards it depends on a huge number of variables, some of which might be in the distant past. It's a massively complex problem. Some things you can change, some you can't, and you have no real way to know which is which until you try. If you get it wrong, at best you make your own job even more difficult, or even impossible."

"So, say someone from the future had come back to warn you about something, what would that do?" Rei looked at Ami, worried, then back at Yori. The other woman stared at her, then sighed, massaging her forehead.

"Shit. That's not a rhetorical question, is it?" After a long moment both girls shook their heads.

"Fuck." She was silent for a while. "Enormous fuck. How far ahead?"

"Maybe a thousand years or so?"

"From this utopia of yours?"

"Yes." Rei was looking very worried at the expression on Yori's face.

"That's... possibly very bad indeed. From their point of view, what I said about changing the past would apply, I think. From our point of view, it could be very weird. I'm going to have to get some
outside help, this is rapidly getting out of my comfort zone."

"I think we should put that to one side for the moment, dear, we need to look into the immediate problem. The time travel issue can probably wait." Chou glanced at her partner, who nodded reluctantly.

"Yes, you're right. The universe hasn't gone pop yet, so we're probably OK for a while at least." Everyone else looked uncomfortable at her words, making her grin suddenly. "Don't look so worried. If it does, we'll never know."

"That helps so much," Azumi muttered darkly.

"Good." The look Yori received made her chuckle. "Right, we'll leave that for later. Now, you and your team-mates. We've been talking about it and we think we need to examine both of you carefully. You as a control, Ami, since you seem basically normal. Rei, because you were definitely being affected, but you're more or less OK now, then one or two of the others, as the ones badly affected. Which ones do you think are worst off?" Ami glanced at Rei for a moment.

"Ah, I'd say if you're looking for two people with really big dramatic personality shifts, I'd have to go for Usagi and Setsuna. All of them are acting really weird at the moment, but those two are like completely different people. Usagi used to be a really nice girl, if a bit lazy and sometimes kind of full of her own importance. But yesterday she was totally different, arrogant and pushy, and really aggressive. Setsuna was acting very oddly as well, I've never seen her laugh like that or look so happy about blowing things up."

"All of them are acting very strangely at the moment," Rei added. "But, yes, I'd agree it's really obvious with them."

"OK. We'll grab them and bring them here in a little while." Yori looked at them in an evaluating manner. "First, let's have a look at you two. Ami, you first. Come and lie down on the sofa over here." Standing, with a glance at her friend, Ami followed the instructions. "OK, this won't hurt, so don't worry. I just want to get a good look at how your brain is working." The black-haired young woman knelt next to the sofa and put her hands on Ami's head, a soft purple glow springing up around her fingers. She felt nothing although she could sense extremely complex and subtle magic, or something like magic, at work. She wished for a moment she could study it with her computer, but forced herself to lie still.

"Hmm. Interesting." Yori stared at her through half-closed eyes, giving her the sensation she was being looked right through. It was rather eerie. "Nothing obviously wrong, which is good, I suppose, although it would have been easier if there was." Another minute or two passed as she ran her hands down Ami's body gently. Eventually she rocked back on her heels. "Well, you're in very good health, which is something, I guess. No obvious issues with your endocrine or limbic systems, your brain looks fine, neurotransmitters are normal, everything seems good. OK, Rei, you next." Ami swivelled around on the sofa and sat up, then moved out of the way as her friend took her place. Once more Yori's hands glowed.

"Hmm. Interesting." Yori stared at her through half-closed eyes, giving her the sensation she was being looked right through. It was rather eerie. "Nothing obviously wrong, which is good, I suppose, although it would have been easier if there was." Another minute or two passed as she ran her hands down Ami's body gently. Eventually she rocked back on her heels. "Well, you're in very good health, which is something, I guess. No obvious issues with your endocrine or limbic systems, your brain looks fine, neurotransmitters are normal, everything seems good. OK, Rei, you next." Ami swivelled around on the sofa and sat up, then moved out of the way as her friend took her place. Once more Yori's hands glowed.

Glancing at Chou, Ami nodded thanks when she smiled and made a small motion of permission, removing her computer and activating it, trying to work out what the other woman was doing. The little machine did it's best but seemed very confused by what was going on, eventually giving her an error message she'd never encountered before. Looking at it in irritation, she shook it gently and tried again, getting the same result. Yori glanced at her when she mumbled an obscenity, grinning slightly, before going back to what she was doing. After a moment a small frown replaced the grin. "That's odd," she muttered to herself, moving her hands around on Rei's head.
"What's odd?" Ami asked curiously, slightly worried.

"There's something a little off about her brain structure," was the response, which didn't make either of them any less worried. "Her amygdala is slightly distorted. Just a little too small, but in an odd way, left side more than the right."

"What does that mean?" Rei asked, her voice slightly unsteady. Yori hastened to reassure her.

"It's nothing immediately serious, it's just a bit weird. The amygdala is a part of the brain that's used to process deep memory consolidation, forming and reinforcing long-term memory associations, as well as emotional memory handling and decision making. It's pretty important. Damage to it can cause all sorts of problems with stress handling, fear, aggression level, personality disorders, even social interaction. All sorts of things." She looked over at Chou, who nodded slightly, but didn't say anything. "Ami, come here a moment, will you?" Yori quickly checked her first patient, then nodded again.

"Yes, I think yours is also slightly smaller than it should be, but not enough to make any difference. Women and men often have different sized ones and it varies quite a bit from person to person anyway. But Rei's is definitely not quite right."

"Can you fix it?" the young woman on the sofa asked, worried. Yori grinned at her.

"Yes, if necessary, but don't get upset yet. The damage is slight. Before we do anything else, though, I need to check your friends. I want to see if anything like this is affecting them. It would explain quite a bit, although also raise all sorts of other questions."

"I'll go and get blondie," Aiko offered. "She's just left her house." Ami and Rei looked at each other then at her.

"You're watching them somehow?" Ami asked.

"Oh, yes, we're not letting them out of our sight until we know what's going on," Yori replied. "Just in case."

"Good." Rei seemed quite sure of herself, making Ami look at her in surprise. "Don't let them go off again like yesterday."

"We won't. Wards are down, grab her quick and get back here." Yori nodded to Aiko, who vanished. Seconds later she was back, an unconscious blonde woman slumped in her arms. She laughed.

"Never even saw me coming," she giggled. "Which is another sign of how much they've slipped, I should never have been able to sneak up on her as easily as that if she was operating normally, although I bet I could still have done it."

"You people are extremely worrying." Ami looked at them all. "Much too good at this sort of thing."

"When this is all over we'll show you some interesting tricks," Yori offered. "You two, I think, could learn them fairly easily. Right, Rei, get up please, we'll put your friend here." Aiko carefully laid the girl on the sofa vacated by her colleague, who looked sadly at her. She still had a number of colourful bruises on her face, arms, and legs.

"Damn good thing you girls are nearly as tough as we are," Yori said, looking at the damage. "Those impacts would have killed someone less strong. Even a lot of the other girls." Kneeling
down again she put her hand on the sleeping girl's head, a brief purple flash coming and going. "Right, she won't wake up until we let her, now. Let's see..." Once more she began her scan. "Wow. That's... very wrong indeed."

"Is it the same problem?" Chou asked. Yori nodded.

"Yes, but worse. Much worse. And it's not recent, this has been going on for a long time. Years, probably." She looked over at her partner. "Come and have a look, see what you think." Chou did so, golden light mixing with purple.

"Oh, dear. That's not at all good. Poor girl. What could have done this?"

"No idea, but it explains quite a bit. Aiko, can you get the other one?"

The brunette nodded, disappearing. She was soon back. The other woman she was holding looked in a much more battered state than the blonde on the sofa, half her hair scorched off and the side of her face one large partly healed bruise. Yori winced when she saw it.

"Fumiko wasn't kidding when she said she got her in the face. Put her here on the floor, please, Aiko." Surprisingly gently the brunette laid the green-haired woman next to the sofa. Yori made sure she'd remain asleep then checked her quickly.

"Fuck. She's even worse. It's definitely shrunken and distorted, pretty badly. I'm surprised she was able to function at all with this sort of damage. Her memory must be shot to hell." Glancing at the two conscious members of their team, she asked, "Does she seem to forget things a lot?" Ami nodded.

"Yes. It's been getting worse for months. You can tell her something, half an hour later she's forgotten she talked to you at all. Not all the time, or even most of it, but enough I was definitely noticing it." Thinking for a moment, she added, "Now I think back, they've all been a bit like that for some time. Why didn't I notice it?"

"More to the point, why didn't your computer?" Aiko asked, looking very curious. "You told me the other day you scanned them all carefully and nothing unusual showed up in your computer's medical program." Glancing at Yori who was listening with interest, she asked, "Is that the sort of thing you'd expect to show up in some advanced scan?"

"Oh, definitely, if it's half as advanced as I think it is, it should easily spot that damage." Looking at the woman on the floor, then Ami, she suggested, "Scan her again. I want to see what it finds." Ami pulled the machine out again and did as suggested. After a moment's work she frowned slightly.

"According to this, she's got several bad bruises, a cracked rib, a black eye, and a chipped tooth, but that's it." Yori scanned the woman again, then nodded slowly.

"All that is correct, but the brain damage is definitely there. That's very odd." She took a few moments to heal all the listed damage, making Rei and Ami both stare in amazement.

"Holy shit, that's remarkably impressive," Rei commented. "I knew you two could heal but I've never seen it in action."

"Thanks. It comes in handy." Yori grinned at her. "OK, Ami, scan the other one as well."

"Some bruises, something wrong with one of the tendons in her right knee, nothing else."
"Very interesting indeed. Again, all correct, except for the bit it's missing." Once more Yori healed the damage. She sat on her heels and stared at the unconscious form on the sofa for a while, as everyone watched and waited. "Hmm. OK, let's see what happens if I do this." Putting her hand on Usagi's forehead she concentrated for a moment, the glow coming and going. "Right, scan her again."

"This time it's saying there's a chemical imbalance in her frontal lobes," Ami reported. "What did you do?"

"I moved some of the neurotransmitters around. Nothing permanent, just as a test." The black-haired woman repeated the exercise. "And now?"

"Back to normal."

"That's kind of weird. It's showing everything correctly except for that one, very specific area of damage. Like it's being filtered out." After a moment, Yori glanced at Aiko, who nodded, then vanished again. Blinking from the flash, Ami looked at Rei and shrugged. Shortly the teleporting girl was back, carrying a brunette girl.

"Here you go." Once more, the figure was put on the floor, beside the green-haired woman, and rendered deeply unconscious.

"We'll have the entire set soon at this rate," Azumi quipped, looking mildly amused. Yori snickered, checking the new arrival.

"Same thing. Not quite as bad as either of these two, but much worse than Rei." She glanced at Ami expectantly, waiting as she scanned her friend.

"Nothing aside from superficial injuries."

"You know the old saying, once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, three times is enemy action? This isn't an accident or a coincidence." Yori stood, scowling, looking at the three unconscious girls. "Something did this to them. There's no way it's an accident, not with three, no, four cases. Damage like that is incredibly rare naturally, to find so many people with identical damage is basically impossible unless there's a shared cause. I'll lay money on the others having the same problem."

"So is that the cause of all the weird behaviour?" Azumi asked. Yori slowly shook her head.

"I don't think so. I think, although I can't be sure yet, that this is more of a symptom than a cause. Not sure why I think that way but it just feels wrong. Mind you, it certainly won't improve matters at all." Chou stood from where she had been repeating the scans, looking thoughtful.

"I would tend to agree, dear. There is something very wrong here." The pair of them studied the three unconscious girls for a moment. Eventually Yori sighed slightly. "OK. I'm not going too interfere with them any more right now, until we know why this is happening I'm not sure it's a good idea, I could cause more problems than I solved. Aiko will put them back for the moment. No sense getting their friends worked up if they notice them missing." Bending over the three young women, she did something, then nodded. "They'll wake up in about five minutes and shouldn't remember anything." Aiko came over and picked up the brunette, quickly disappearing then reappearing, before repeating the exercise with the other two.

"OK, they're all back where I found them, nice and safe. Oh, what's her name, Usagi, just woke up. She looks bit confused but doesn't seem to think anything is wrong. They'll be wondering why
they're all healed now, though, I suspect." Aiko grinned a little as Ami looked at her curiously.

"How on earth are you doing that?" she asked.

"Can't tell you just yet, but I expect you'll find out sooner or later." Not completely happy, her curiosity eating at her, Ami nevertheless kept her questions to herself. Azumi, who had apparently been thinking hard, suddenly looked up.

"Ah, Ami? Would you mind if I had a look at that computer device of yours?" The blue-haired woman looked puzzled, but after a moment nodded, producing it. "Don't worry, I won't damage it," Azumi told her, "I just wanted to check something." Putting it on the table in front of her, she looked intently at it for a few seconds, making Ami stare when it suddenly activated.

"How are you doing that?" she asked, flabbergasted. "It's biometrically and magically locked to me, it should only work when I'm using it."

"I have... special methods," Azumi replied, picking the device up and inspecting it carefully. "Interesting. It's got a link to something else active."

"The big mainframe on the old moon base," Ami told her. Azumi looked up, then inspected the device again, eventually shaking her head.

"No, I don't think so. The link goes somewhere else. Not in this reality, not quite. It's difficult to detect except at very close range." Everyone turned to look at her.

"Are you sure?" Yori asked with an odd look.

"That's what..." Azumi broke off with a quick look at Ami and Rei. Yori nodded as if she'd continued talking.

"OK. Very interesting. Ami, scan Rei again, will you?" Picking up the machine, very curious, Ami did as requested. "Anything odd?"

"No, it says she's healthy."

Glancing at Azumi, Yori raised her eyebrow. The silver-haired girl nodded soberly. "When she did the scan, a lot of information went out over the link to wherever it's going, then more came back. It looks mostly the same but there are some changes."

"Hmm." Yori exchanged a glance with Chou. "Can you block the link?"

"Hang on... OK, I think that's done it." The computer beeped at it's owner, popping up another error she'd never seen before.


"No idea, but whatever the outside system is that it's talking to is blocked for the moment."

"Try the scan again, then compare the results with the last one," Yori suggested. Frowning, getting a nasty feeling she knew where this was leading, Ami repeated her earlier actions, then prodded the machine for a moment.

"The scans are identical, except this one has one extra part, noting minor organic brain damage. No long term negative prognosis presuming certain therapies are used." She read the screen again,
then sighed. "How long has this been going on? Something has been hacking my computer, changing the results, who knows how much bad data I've got over the years."

"I don't think it was being hacked, not in the normal sense," Azumi told her, looking thoughtful. As if she was talking to someone else at the same time. "It looked more like it was a standard function, it was passing data to something outside which was then suppressing part of the report when it gave you back the results. Very specifically targeting the problem Yori identified."

"That's even more worrying." Chou studied the two magical girls. "Why would your own equipment not allow you to know about something that's a serious problem affecting your ability to function to a dangerous level?"

None of them could come up with a good answer to that. Eventually Yori sighed slightly. "We need some external advice at this point. I'm going to go and talk to Hnther, then see if I can track down Lldnr'k. He's the time mage. Hopefully I can get them both here, or we can go there. I need them to look at you both and probably one or other of your friends as well. I'll be back in a while."

Ami and Rei both felt the wards go down, then stepped back in slight shock as a portal opened in the corner of the room. Yori walked through it casually, the tear in space vanishing as soon as she was through. They exchanged awe-struck glances.

"You can do portals just like that?" Rei asked Chou. The tall blonde smiled calmly at her.

"It took a lot of effort to work it all out but it seems to have been worth it. Come on, why don't we go and get something to eat? You both look like you need it."

Ami looked at her friend, who nodded with a slight shrug. "OK. Why not. Where should we go?"

Laughing, Aiko walked over and put her arms around both girls' shoulders. "Do you like sushi? And have either one of you ever been to Brisbane?"

"You're completely sure about the external link not being to some old installation on the moon?" Fumiko queried, looking through Nabiki's eyes as they ate at the restaurant in Brisbane, all of them conferenced together.

"That's what Jun said. It could only detect the link when the computer was actively using it, it's apparently fairly high tech, not too far off the level of the SI units themselves. It says it's a variant on a technology the Kw'lyn Industries company used three or four generations of design ago. Now it knows about it and has cracked the encryption it can monitor it from a fair distance, though. I'll send everyone the encryption codes for it." She did so. "It thinks the computer was being externally influenced to run things like scans of their own group through whatever this external resource is which then filtered the results. For some reason it's specifically removing any reference to this weird brain damage or any magic associated with it. Wherever it is, though, it's definitely not on the moon. Jun says it's in some sort of fractional reality that can only be accessed if you know the portal coding for it. Kind of a pocket universe in popular cultural terms, although that's not really accurate, but it's good enough for now."

She nodded to something Ami had said, not really paying too much attention for the moment. The incognito magical girl was talking to Chou about their shielding technique, which was being used to keep anyone in the restaurant remembering the two additions to the party.

"What could it be?" Tamiko wondered. "Some enemy that's trying to control them for some reason? Influence them, perhaps? For what reason?"
"The problem with that idea is that the link is a very low level one directly bypassing the entire user interface, apparently, Jun says it's part of the design. The encryption is extremely good as well, it took nearly ten solid seconds to crack. That's amazing, considering it strolled through the MoD firewalls and encrypted files without really noticing, except to call them a good try for beginners." She snickered internally, remembering the dry tone in the voice of the synthetic intelligence. It had a definite sense of humour. "All of that implies that whatever is on the other end of that link is from the same source as that little computer is. In other words, it's not a hack, it's doing what it was designed to do. Which is something rather worrying."

"That entire story sounds wrong, somehow," Tamiko mused, "all that stuff about a kingdom stretching across the entire solar system and even beyond thousands of years ago. I mean, we have lots of evidence all over the place of ancient civilisations, Greeks, Romans, Sumerians, Egyptians, you name it, going back at least five or six thousand years. I've never heard of anything being found that could be as high tech as her story suggested. If it was magitech of that level, it would be very durable, I'd have thought. Something should be left. Probably a lot of it. Just think how much stuff we leave around that will be being dug up for centuries. Every landfill in the world will be a massive archaeological treasure trove." She giggled slightly at the thought.

"I really can't see some super-scientific and magical kingdom of the past being so good at cleaning up that absolutely nothing was left."

"Perhaps the enemy that destroyed them went around and cleaned up afterwards? Removed all the evidence on Earth?" They considered Aiko's suggestion.

"Seems a little unlikely. What would be the point, aside from anything else." Nabiki considered the idea some more. "No, I really can't see it. Or there being some big conspiracy to clean up history and delete anything that turned up in excavations and the like. It's just too messy."

"Magic could indeed erase all the traces, or at least make people forget them," 'Chou' interjected, looking away from the conversation Ami and Rei were having for a moment.

"But surely if there was some hugely complicated spell like that it would be detectable? Someone would have noticed by now." Nabiki glanced at her sister, who nodded slightly. "Unless the conspiracy is even deeper, and anyone who notices is also dealt with." Tamiko giggled again.

"You could go down that path to any depth you want, but I can't see any real way of proving it one way or the other," she said.

"True. It's also too complicated. Far too much effort to go to. The much simpler explanation is that this mythical ancient magical kingdom didn't exist. But Ami and Rei both seem pretty sure. Or at least, sure about that being what they were told. I'm not sure but I suspect Ami at least isn't totally convinced, now that she's thinking about it. Talking about it like that seems to have made her rethink a lot of things she was just taking on faith." Taking a drink of water, Nabiki ate another salmon roll, thinking about her words.

"It should be easy enough to check," Misaki suggested. "All we need to do is check if there really are any ruins on the moon." Nabiki looked at her sister, who gazed back, slightly surprised, then looked thoughtful.

"S'th'kx?"

"Sure? Why not? We know someone with several interplanetary spacecraft, surveying equipment, the lot. Everything you need to scan for some sort of magical ruins." The other woman sounded pleased with her own idea.
"It's a thought, certainly. Once we've looked into this current issue, we can go and have a word with him. There might be some problems we don't know enough about to realise are there, but it sounds like something worth checking." 'Chou' returned to the conversation with Ami and Rei, still listening to the one going on soundlessly in her head.

"The whole time travel thing worries me a lot," Fumiko said after a while.

"Not half as much as it worried Ranma," Nabiki replied. "You should have seen her expression. She's genuinely scared of the possibilities. I've never seen her scared of anything before." It was true, in all the time she'd known the gender-cursed martial artist, she'd never seen an expression of genuine fear cross her face except to do with cats, and it was different, that was a phobia, not a well-considered worry. "She knows or suspects something more about all this that we don't know, I think, something that's really put the wind up her."

"I wonder what that could be?" No one had an answer for Tamiko. Nabiki glanced at her disguised sister who looked back with an expressionless face, giving the impression she suspected but wasn't going to say.

"We'll probably find out when she gets back. I don't know if that's something I'm looking forward to or not." The middle sister sighed very quietly.

"What do you think about the whole reincarnation thing she mentioned?" Aiko asked, sounding puzzled. None of them replied for a while.

"It sounds very strange," Misaki finally answered. "I've never believed in reincarnation, myself, it just sounds too... I don't know. Neat, perhaps? The whole concept annoys me. But then, I'm not religious at all."

"I've met a ghost, or spirit, or whatever you want to call it, more than once," Nabiki told them. "A couple of different ones, actually. One of them was apparently a girl at my old school who died years before. But, I've got no proof of that, only what she told us. And it doesn't prove or disprove anything about reincarnation. Assuming she really was the spirit of this deceased girl, it kind of shows some ability to survive past the point considered death, with memories intact, but whether that could prove reincarnation, I have no idea. Way out of my field of expertise."

"Weird." Tamiko sounded intrigued. "Ranma mentioned that a couple of times but we never dug into it. Even so, it's not quite the same as what Ami was talking about."

"We'll have to wait until she gets back, I guess. What are the other girls doing at the moment? Any trouble?"

"Nothing so far," Fumiko replied. "I'm monitoring that young one with the purple hair. She's just sitting in a park at the moment looking worried and seems to be thinking hard. I kind of feel sorry for her. She's always struck me as someone who didn't really want to be doing what she was doing. I'm not at all sure the others like her very much, either. I've seen them look at her in a pretty nasty way once or twice. Not all of them, Ami seems to get on with her fine, and Rei isn't too bad either, but most of the rest don't quite give off the feeling they trust her. I'd love to know why."

"The two lesbians are driving around in a sports car and yelling at each other right now," Aiko reported, snickering. "They don't look happy. I thought they were lovers or something, but in the fight yesterday they were kicking the shit out of one another. I'm surprised they're actually sitting next to each other at all, to be honest."

"Usagi and her blonde friend are each eating enough ice-cream to drown both Ranma and Onkra"
"together," laughed Misaki. "The other one was questioning her on how she managed to get all healed so fast, she seemed very suspicious about something, her expression was quite amusing. Even though they went off together I'm not convinced that either one of them trusts the other right now. But they at least seem to be working on it."

"There seems to be a general breakdown of trust between all of them," the elder sister noted sadly.

"Damn right. Even the ones that are together seem to be having problems, and they give all the signs of totally hating the rest." Tamiko sighed. "My two are staying well away from each other. That Setsuna woman is getting her hair styled, it looked kind of lopsided where Fumiko blew half of it off, and she doesn't look very pleased about it. Keeps snapping at the stylist. She's very rude. The other one is powered up and bouncing around the rooftops in down-town Minato. Face like a thundercloud. I hope she doesn't find anyone to go after, the mood she's in she looks ready to kill someone."

"That could be awkward," Aiko muttered. "Are you close enough to stop her if that happens and we can't get to you in time?"

"Yep. I'm following her from about a kilometre back. She doesn't seem to have any idea I'm here."

"OK. Keep close, but not too close."

"On it."

Turning her attention fully back to the conversation in the room she was physically in, 'Azumi' met Aiko's eyes for a moment, noting the concern in them, then turned to Ami, who was talking to Rei. She listened for a while. "It all broke down so fast," the blue-haired girl said. "After we helped Fumiko and Tamiko stop the fighting, everyone else was just howling at each other. And us. They called us both traitors." She drank some water, looking upset and annoyed, then put the glass down and stared at it. "All sorts of little rivalries suddenly came out and got blown wildly out of proportion, I think. Usagi and Minako were screaming at each other about something, but at the end they went off together, still arguing. Setsuna, Makoto, and Michiru stomped off in one direction while Haruka and Hotaru went in the other. Michiru had a broken arm but even that didn't seem to bother her as much as the rest of them did."

"I can't believe Michiru and Haruka ended up against each other like that," Rei said, shaking her head and staring out the window. "They've been in love for years. Now they seem to have broken up."

"They're back together for the moment," Aiko told her, "although the way they're screaming at each other I don't know if that will last." The other woman looked curiously at her.

"I really want to know how you're doing that," she said. Aiko smiled mysteriously, nibbling a piece of duck.

"I know." She grinned, as Rei sighed. "Soon enough. Have patience."

'Chou' suddenly looked up. "Ah. Yori is back. She wants to meet us at the temple as soon as possible." Ami and Rei exchanged glances, then shrugged, giving up for the moment on speculating how everyone was getting all this information. She waved to the waitress, who hurried over, smiling.

"Hello, Pauline. We're finished, I think. Could we have the bill, please?"

"Certainly, Chou. It was nice to see you all again." The woman quickly retrieved the paperwork
and calculated the bill, handing it to the blonde, who looked at it, smiled, then handed over a handful of cash.

"Thank you once again. Please keep the change. We're in a bit of a hurry, I'm afraid." They all stood and left as Pauline waved, smiling at them, then blinked as the flash came. Shaking her head in amused wonder she went to put the money in the till.
Chapter 66

This worked better as one rather longer than normal chapter instead of two shorter than normal ones.

The thick plottens.

Agent Naito read the report from Fumiko again, snickering slightly at the dry description of what they'd had to do to the magical girls in the mall, thinking that the young lady had a talent for making the most extraordinary things sound normal. There was a considerable amount of sly humour buried in language that was otherwise fairly plain and descriptive. 'She's got a future as a law enforcement person, or perhaps a lawyer,' he mused to himself, 'based on her ability to write reports. I wish some of my own people could be this clear. All of Yori's friends seem good at it. I wonder if she runs courses in magical girl report writing?' The thought making him grin, he closed the file, then opened the one from the local police in the district in which the fight had taken place.

This one made the grin disappear again, as he inspected the photos of the damage to the mall, which was near enough to total to make the entire thing a write-off. Shaking his head in mild disbelief he read the police report and eye-witness statements again, feeling grateful that no one had been injured, although not sure how that had happened under the circumstances. 'Damn good thing Fumiko and Tamiko were there,' he thought, both relieved and saddened at what had happened. 'This is very bad. I hope Yori and her friends can deal with it.' Playing some of the recorded video from security cameras in the area, and a couple of news reports, he shook his head again. 'Good god. This could have been very bad. Sure hasn't helped those particular girls' public image, except for that blue-haired one that's friends with the others. Mind you, the other one seems to be helping Fumiko and her friends pretty effectively, there might be hope for her as well.'

Pulling up another file, he read it with interest, noting down some names in another window for the report he was preparing. He looked up as another agent came into the room, nodding to him. The other man walked over, glancing at the monitor and wincing at the images he saw. "Not good," he said sadly.

"No. Not at all. That group has always been difficult, but this... No one ever thought they'd lose it like that."

"They're one of the ones we have some information on, aren't they?" the other agent asked. Naito nodded.

"Yes. Their operational security has always been very lax, to be honest. Nothing even close to Yori or Aiko's team. Their disguise magic is exceptionally good, but they tend to turn it off in places they really shouldn't if they want to keep their secret. I'm slightly surprised very few people seem to have worked it out. I know Yori did in about an afternoon, she's said as much, although I also know she'd never tell anyone else. It took us a week or so to get the same information when they first came on the scene years ago." He pointed at the screen, showing an image of Fumiko and Tamiko, although he couldn't have picked out which was which from the blurred picture their magic presented to the camera, talking to two young women in the uniforms of the group in question.

"The one with the blue hair is Ami Mizuno, the other one is Rei Hino. They're both about eighteen. Ami is probably one of the smartest people in the country, based on her scholastic records. Rei isn't in her class but is pretty bright as well. From what I know, Ami has been having problems with her
group for some time, while Rei seems to be a more recent convert to common sense, but both of them seem to be firmly allied with Yori's friends in thinking that their own group is out of control and needs to be dealt with. Hopefully they can do that, somehow."

"If we know who they are, couldn't we grab them while they're, I don't know, powered down, is it?" The other man asked curiously.

"Then what? We might just be able to pull that off, I suppose, presuming that they don't have magic when they're not in uniform, something I wouldn't like to bet on, but what do we do after that? We'd have to get all of them at once, which would be difficult, then about the only option available would be killing them in cold blood. That doesn't sit well with me. Not to mention Yori and her friends, and indeed the other magical girl groups, would most likely take a very dim view of government interference of that nature. We need them too much to alienate them."

"I don't like the idea of killing them either," the other agent muttered, sighing.

"That aside, we've been given a complete hands-off directive from someone you won't believe," Agent Naito said, bringing up another document on the monitor. His colleague read it then whistled softly.

"Holy shit."

"Yep. Yori has some seriously highly placed friends, by the looks of it. She and her team have been given full authority to do anything they need to, to bring this all to a close. They would have done so anyway, I think, regardless of anyone in the government telling them anything at all, but this gives them official, if extremely secret, authorisation." Naito read the letter again, then closed the file. "I do not want to get between Yori and something she has an interest in, trust me. Authorisation or not, she and Chou are the de facto experts we have in relations between the magical world and the non-magical one, it would be a very bad mistake to fall out with them. People way above our pay grade clearly feel the same."

"Pretty impressive. Those girls have a higher security clearance than we do, by the looks of it." His colleague chuckled. Naito grinned, nodding.

"Apparently they do. I'd love to know how far up it goes, and how they met all these people in the first place, but I can live with never finding out. I'm just damn glad those young women are apparently on the side of law and order. More or less."

"You've had a lot of contact with them in the last year," the other agent noted curiously. "What are they like?" Naito swivelled his chair around and considered the other man for a moment.

"It's difficult to explain. Mysterious. Terrifying, definitely. Totally trustworthy, that's also part of it. They give off the feeling of complete confidence and competence, as well. When you're around them, you get the impression nothing is impossible. Whatever it is, they'll take a stab at it, and most likely succeed brilliantly. I can understand why they're so highly regarded by the people upstairs. I feel the same way. Yes, they can all be completely horrifying at times, when they're serious about something, but most of the time they're all just really nice, intelligent, and amazingly normal people to be around. I'm very pleased that I've built up a good working relationship with them. Even that horrific Ms Aoyama of theirs is astoundingly good at what she does, although most of the time that appears to be creeping you out to a truly incredible level." He grinned and shuddered at the same time.

"I've read your reports on her, this Ms Aoyama. She comes across as... well, deeply worrying, if nothing else. Who is she? Who does she work for? Yori's group, or someone else?" Naito shrugged
"I have absolutely no idea. Yori seems to know and trust her, but I have no idea how they met, or anything more about her. She's certainly not someone you'd want to annoy, though, whoever she is. Various things she's said in the past give the impression she works for some sort of alien version of our organisation, which seems to have an interest in our world, but even there I couldn't tell you anything more. All she ever says if you ask is 'That information is unavailable.' I've never felt it was a good idea to push."

His colleague leaned against the desk and thought about his words for a while. "I'm a little worried about the idea of some not only foreign, but actually alien, intelligence organisation having an agent here," he said in the end. Naito looked at him, then smiled slightly.

"I can understand that. It worried me at first as well. But I do think, as unsettling as the woman is, that she means no harm to us. The opposite, in fact. No, I'm pretty sure she's not human at all, but I am sure she does pretty much the same thing we do, just with rather different methods. Damned effective ones, though. I don't think she's a threat, unless we turned her into one. Which I think would be something of a mistake. It's much better all round to keep her on side and helping us, which she seems quite prepared to do. She's not the sort of person I'm ever going to invite home to meet my wife, but I can work with her." He shuddered a little. "I just wish she wouldn't sneak up behind you and look over your shoulder. You have no idea how creepy that is."

His co-agent grinned at the expression on his face. "I take it you do?"

"Oh, yes. Unfortunately. She scared me out of about five years life the last time. I had no idea she was there, the damn woman moves completely silently. I'm not even sure she breathes half the time. It's... not pleasant. But you can't argue with the results." The other agent laughed at the tone of his voice.

"They do seem impressive from the reports. That affair in the UK would have been much more difficult to deal with without her help, from your report. The MoD seemed happy with the results."

"They were, although very annoyed it had gotten to that point. Ex-minister Davenport is going to be spending a very long time in jail." Naito shook his head sadly. "It's a pity, he was a very respected mage at one point, but he made some really bone-headed mistakes. He's just damn lucky he didn't manage to kill anyone. Directly, at any rate."

"From what I read the Canadians were more than slightly annoyed at him, when they found out that he'd known the whereabouts of that damn portal bomb for months. After Halleckton, they seem to be going after anyone who might have been involved with pretty impressive intent."

Agent Naito sighed, glancing at his monitor as an email came in, then back at his colleague. "Very true. I think that it would be a very bad idea if Mr Davenport ever went to Canada, I'm pretty sure they'd lock him up for contributory damages on the spot. The Canadian Ambassador was at his trial and expressed the extreme irritation of the Canadian government about his actions, which certainly added quite a lot to his sentence. The British took it into consideration when they were prosecuting him. Pretty quick trial as well, they weren't messing around. He didn't argue about it, just pleaded guilty to everything. Ms Aoyama made it clear to him that if he didn't she'd deal with it herself, which seemed to scare the shit out of him, far more than thirty years in prison did."

"Hmm. Probably not a good idea to annoy her, then," his colleague quipped, smiling slightly.

"No." Naito grinned. "Hey, are you still coming over for dinner on Friday?"
"Damn right I am. Your wife is a remarkable cook." Smiling, the other agent pushed himself away from the desk. "I have to get back to work. See you later." Waving briefly, Naito swivelled his chair around again and resumed writing his report, smiling slightly.

Looking up as they all came in the door, Rei's grandfather smiled at them all. "Yori and her friends are in the room you were using earlier," he said calmly, handing Chou a tray with more tea and the appropriate accessories on it. She nodded, smiling and thanking him, then led the others back to the room in question, displaying a good knowledge of the temple layout, Ami noticed curiously. She glanced at Rei, who clearly had also worked it out.

"I wonder how many times they've been here?" she whispered to her friend. Rei made a small shrug. She seemed past the point of really caring. Entering their destination behind Chou, Azumi, and Aiko, the two stopped dead and stared at the people already in the room, before exchanging a long glance with each other. Yori looked up from where she was sitting at the table talking to her companions and smiled at Chou, nodding at the others. A moment later Ami and Rei felt the preposterously powerful wards go up around the room.

"Glad you're back. Guys, this is Hnther, and Lldnr'k, an old friend of mine. Hnther is someone I met more recently but he's a nice guy." Both of the people at the table inspected the newcomers with interest. Chou greeted them both, clearly knowing them, while Azumi and Aiko said something polite in a language neither of the others knew. Ami studied Yori's two companions with equal interest to that with which they were looking at her and Rei.

Neither one was human. She'd known that intellectually, but it was still a slight shock, used as she was to non-humans being opponents, not friends. Yori seemed totally at ease with them, as were Chou and the other two, chatting with the one introduced as Lldnr'k with no more worry than if he was her next door neighbour. Azumi was talking to the other one, Hnther, in that odd-sounding demonic language, laughing at something he said. "Weird," Rei said in her ear. She nodded. Hnther stood, rising to his full height of over two metres, walking over and looking down on them, his hooves clomping on the floor, then made something approximating a smile and greeted them in that odd language in a deep voice, tipping his head a little. The light glinted on his deep green scales in a peculiarly pretty manner.

"He says it's nice to meet you both and he hopes he's able to help," Yori translated. "Sorry, he doesn't speak Japanese, this is his first time here."

"Ah, thanks, I guess," Ami said uncertainly. She and Rei both nodded politely back. The huge demon was a very impressive sight, something a little like a classical European description of a devil, with hooves, a long tail, and horns. The head was more lizard-like than humanoid, though, with slit-pupilled eyes inspecting them in a manner that showed a keen intelligence and good humour. He was wearing a sort of formal robe, elaborately embroidered, with silver thread picking out interesting patterns against the near-black cloth.

"I, on the other hand, speak a large number of languages fluently," the other one said in a surprisingly high-pitched voice, with a hint of a laugh to it. He also stood, walking over and bowing to them, then holding out his hand. "I am Lldnr'k. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, ladies. Yori has explained that there is a potentially serious problem she feels my expertise could help resolve. Hopefully this is the case." Ami shook the offered appendage gingerly, feeling dry scaly skin and sharp talons.

'He's remarkably polite for an otherworldly humanoid crow,' she thought slightly manically to herself. 'Beautiful plumage, though.' Trying not to giggle at the thought, she nodded politely back.
"Thank you, Lldnr'k, I hope you can help as well. It's a very difficult situation." The temporal mage
nodded in an odd manner, his short beak not being conducive to smiling, but she got the impression
that was the intent of the gesture.

"We'll need to get both of these guys included in the security spell, Ami," Yori said, watching their
interaction with the two demons with a small smile. Rei was simply standing wide-eyed, apparently
unable to think what to say. Ami nodded absently, still looking at Lldnr'k and Hnther with interest.

"OK." Eventually she pulled her fascinated gaze away from the first demons she'd met outside a
combat situation, looking at the other woman, who grinned at her. "What do I do?"

"Feel that spell still in your head?" She probed gently, then nodded.

"Yes."

"OK. When I tell you, just sort of... push on it. With your mind. You'll see what I mean." Yori gave
her an encouraging smile, then turned to the two demons, talking to them for a moment. Hnther
nodded, stepping forward and lowering his head to her hand. It glowed slightly for a couple of
seconds. "Right, try it, Ami." She shrugged, doing as requested, finding to her surprise that
something happened. There was an odd sort of mental twitch for a fraction of a second, making her
wince slightly.

"Was that right?" she enquired curiously.

"Yep. Worked perfectly. OK, Lldnr'k, now you." The other demon sat down and allowed her to
repeat the process on him. Yori gestured to Ami who did the same thing again, once more feeling
the strange sensation. "Good. It took on both tries." She looked pleased. Hnther said something to
her and Chou, making them both turn to him and have a short conversation, then Yori nodded.

"He says, before anything else, he would like to examine you both, without any prejudice from
your story. It sounds like a good idea if you're willing." Rei and Ami exchanged glances then
agreed slightly nervously. "Don't worry, he's not going to hurt you," Yori said, grinning. "OK, Ami,
you first, I think. Same as before, just lie down on the sofa." Feeling a little uncertain, but trusting
that Yori knew what she was doing, the blue-haired girl did as requested, making herself
comfortable. Hnther knelt beside her giving her something that was probably meant to be an
encouraging grin, but which had rather too many clearly meat-eating teeth in it to be completely
comforting, then reached out and put his hand on her forehead. It was warmer than she expected,
the very fine scales on the four-fingered appendage tickling her skin slightly.

He concentrated, a feeling of _something_ tickling at the back of her mind for a while. His eyes
narrowed as he worked, giving the impression he wasn't completely happy about what he saw, but
he said nothing for a while. Eventually he removed his hand and simply inspected her curiously.
After a moment he gestured for her to get up then waved at Rei to take her place, which she did,
looking nervous. "It's fine, it only tickles a little," Ami told her friend. Still appearing not
completely convinced, the other girl lay back and waited. Hnther repeated his actions, going
completely still after a long moment, then turning to Yori and saying something that sounded
angry. She shrugged, nodding, not looking entirely surprised.

"What did he say?" Rei asked apprehensively, sitting up. Yori glanced at her, then sighed, an
expression of tiredness on her face.

"That someone or something has been tampering with your memories and mind for a long time.
Very delicately, but persistently, in a way that in his reality would be a major crime. Something
very similar to a form of mind control. He's not at all happy about it." Rei and Ami stared at her,
"Mind control?" they asked simultaneously. She nodded.

"Essentially. He says it's completely different from the sort of memory fogging and erasure that a cloaking spell like ours or yours uses. This is a deliberate rewriting of deep memories, on a level that can alter personality, intentions, all sorts of things that make a person that person. He considers it a huge crime, as does his own civilisation. They had problems with something along those lines a very long time ago on a massive scale, entire populations being controlled, which took a lot of lives to overcome. It's unfortunately fairly common, a number of realities have had similar experiences, which is why in many of them doing what seems to have been done to you would be an instant death sentence for the perpetrator, except in very specific cases surrounding either therapy or punishment for very severe crimes like murder or rape."

Ami stared at the other woman for a long time, then at the demon, who seemed both sympathetic and deeply angry. She glanced at Rei, who met her eyes with a frightened look. "What does that really mean?" she asked. Hnther looked at her, then spoke to Yori, who nodded and began translating for him.

"You are worried, and it's right that you should be," he said through her. "A great wrong has been done to you. But at the same time, it doesn't change who you are, don't worry about that. From what I can see the memory tampering is something that has been going on for a number of years, mostly adding memories that are not yours in a way that would make you would think that they are, although I am unsure to what end. The memories would not be as deeply ingrained as your legitimate ones, with practice you would be able to identify them, and if necessary I could probably remove them. I am reluctant to do so, however, as by now they are sufficiently integrated in the workings of your mind that removing them could well cause more damage than leaving them in place."

Inspecting them to gauge the impact of his words, he went on, "The more concerning part is that from what I can make out, whatever the source of the tampering, it is an ongoing process, something is still doing it occasionally, which is worrying. From what Yori has told us, it is quite likely that this is implicated in the mental instability your colleagues are experiencing, although I am not yet certain how. I will need to examine a more severely affected member of your team to gather more information." Yori stopped translating, looking at Aiko for a moment.

"Go and grab Usagi again, will you? I've lowered the wards." The brunette nodded, vanishing in the process of standing up from her chair. Lldnr'k made a small sound of surprise.

"That's a phenomenally good teleport spell," he noted, glancing at the black-haired magical girl, who smiled. "Almost no leakage at all, and so quick and precise. Very impressive."

"It's pretty damn good," she agreed. "We've been working on duplicating it for quite a while, but it's a complicated job."

"I can imagine, considering how insane your entire method of magical energy control is in the first place. Teleportation is a very high level magic at the best of times, that spell is beyond anything I've ever encountered. I will be very interested to see how you progress." Aiko reappeared carrying the limp body of the requested young woman, her twin pony-tails dangling to the ground. The blonde had a fresh black eye, making Ami stare and Yori sigh.

"What happened?" she asked. Aiko shrugged.

"Just as I got there the other one smacked her in the face. I can understand the attraction of doing it,
everyone who meets her at the moment seems to want to punch her, but I have no idea what brought it on this time. I thought they were getting on reasonably well. But she said something that wounded her friend up, her friend belted her, then stomped off in a huff. I got her from behind while she was trying to get up."

"Weird. OK, put her on the sofa, will you?" Rei got up as Aiko approached. Once the young woman was lying on the sofa, Yori rendered her more deeply unconscious, absently healing the black eye in the process, then nodded to Hnther, who leaned over her, putting his hand on her head and concentrating. Going still, he spent close to ten minutes doing whatever it was he was doing before leaning back with a small sigh.

"It's much, much worse with this one," he said through Yori. "There is evidence of serious memory editing that's been going on for a considerable time, probably on the order of six or seven years. There are a huge number of memories that have been forcibly implanted, pushing the real ones back or suppressing them, and also traces of personality modifications. I would judge that a lot of her mental problems are being caused by a conflict between her original memories and experiences and the implanted ones, which are not completely compatible in a number of ways. The brain damage you detected is almost certainly being caused by or massively amplified by the magic used to edit her mind. It's not uncommon in cases of this nature. You have to override the normal processes of the brain to force new memories in, which has unpleasant side effects in most species, this could well be one of them."

"Can we assume that the more severe the brain damage the more memory editing has taken place?" Azumi asked, Yori translating the question for him, then waiting for the answer. He thought for a moment.

"Most likely. It will probably vary somewhat depending on the individual, but it should give a fairly consistent relative guide."

"In that case, Setsuna must be even more badly affected than Usagi," Ami noted, looking at Yori. "You said she had the most severe damage."

"Yes. It was fairly extreme. We need to examine all of them, I think, but we're still no nearer working out who is behind all this or why." Yori was studying Usagi closely, rubbing her cheek with one finger, deep in thought. After a moment, she looked up. "I think we need to tell these guys the rest of the story now." Turning to the two mages, as Hnther retook his seat at the table, she began talking in the demon language. At first they both listened with interest, nodding occasionally, but as the story went on, Ami noticed that first Hnther then Lldnr'k became very still, in a manner that if they'd been human she would have termed deeply concerned. At one point the bird-like demon suddenly erupted in rage, jumping to his feet and walking rapidly in circles, swearing in several different languages.

Yori and Chou calmed him down, then got him to sit and listen again as they finished the tale, taking turns to fill in the details. He stared hard at them for a long time, then turned and looked first at Rei, then Ami, just as hard, making them exchange nervous glances. Eventually he made a sound a lot like a sigh.

"Oh, dear." Yori snickered at the deliberately mild words, making Lldnr'k shoot her a quick look full of alien amusement. Then he turned back to Ami and Rei, standing and walking over to inspect them closely from half a metre away. "I fear you present us with something of a problem, ladies, if what I suspect is true."

"What's that?" Rei asked with worried curiosity.
"Something that should be impossible, but too many things match..." He shook his head, snapping his beak in annoyance, the sharp sound making her twitch a little. "You, Ami, was it?" The mage looked at the blue-haired young woman, who nodded. "May I please inspect this computer of yours, and any other magical artefacts from the same source you possess?" She glanced at Yori, who made a little gesture that it was all right. After a moment she produced the requested items, handing a number of things over, including the computer, her communicator, transformation rod, and one or two other things. He took them with murmured thanks, looking at them intently, before going back to his seat at the table, placing them in front of him.

Pulling out a number of his own tools from somewhere about his person he quickly assembled an odd looking machine on the table, something like a cross between a microscope and a hat-rack, which he used to carefully examine each of her items for some fifteen minutes, while everyone else watched silently. Eventually he sat back and bowed his head in thought, mumbling to himself in a language none of the others knew, until looking up at Yori. "Fuck, I believe is the term in your language," he said quietly.

"Is it what you thought?"

"What I feared. Yes, I think so. I have no idea how, it should be impossible, but where that thing is concerned, impossible is a relative term." The mage picked up the computer, turning it over in his hands, tapping it gently with one talon and listening to the sound with his head cocked to one side. "It all fits, though."

Ami looked at Rei, who was looking as puzzled as she felt. "What fits?" she asked, curiosity warring with worry. He seemed to both know what he was talking about and wish that he didn't. L'dnr'k glanced at her, then around at everyone else. Chou was quietly translating in the background for Hnther, who looked as curious as everyone else did.

"All right, to understand this you need some background information on the nature of reality. It's somewhat long winded, but please bear with me, it's important." The demon looked around at everyone, who looked back. Yori motioned for him to continue.

"The nature of the multiverse is very complex," he began. "Portals allow access to other realities, but that is only the start of what's possible, if you know enough about it. You can think of the multiverse a little like a book on a shelf in a library. Travelling in time, at least backwards, is somewhat like moving from one page to another in the same book. Moving through portals is like going from book to book, in our analogy. But it's more complicated than that, there are other shelves, other bookcases, other libraries even, all of which can be accessed with the right techniques. It's a very bad idea to actually do it, of course, in many cases, but it's technically possible."

"Time travel opens up all sorts of possibilities, all of them potentially very dangerous. I have read some of your fiction so I know some of these ideas are known to your culture, things such as alternative time lines, parallel universes, concepts such as these are familiar to you." Everyone nodded. "They're all both correct and incorrect. The details differ although the basic ideas are right. A given reality does in fact have possible variant time lines, and it is possible to move between them, but it takes a very large amount of energy and an even larger amount of skill to do it at all, never mind safely. Generally, it's considered an extremely bad idea to even attempt something like that, the possible ramifications are very unnerving indeed. Get it wrong and the multiverse deals with it by erasing the entire timeline, if not the entire reality, to protect itself. It's not a deliberate conscious act, there is no intelligence behind it that anyone has ever been able to detect, but it definitely happens."
He laughed slightly. "The multiverse permits many things that you should never, in fact, try to do. You could think of it like it's giving you enough rope to hang yourself with, then cutting it off when you're dangling on the end. Portal travel is fine. It's built into the way the multiverse works, it causes no problems other than local ones like people you don't like coming through, it's perfectly safe from a structural standpoint. Time travel is right on the edge of safe. You can, if you know exactly what you're doing, observe the past, and in some cases, some form of possible future, although actually moving physically in time is a horribly bad idea. Which is why it's generally forbidden. Moving across time lines, though, is definitely crossing the boundary into There is no safe way to do it at all."

Lldnr'k paused to sip some tea, while everyone waited with interest, then put the cup down and went on. "It has been tried a few times in the distant past. It always ends very badly. A number of realities have been obliterated in very mysterious ways as a direct result, although nothing recently, since most places have long since decided that it's just too damn dangerous to attempt. However, when you bring time travel into play, the fact that something happened a long time ago doesn't mean it's not a potential threat tomorrow." He sighed a little, looking at Ami's computer, which he was still holding. "These items all have a variant temporal signature, which indicates they've travelled in time," he finally said. "But it's more complicated than just time travel. They are very old, I would estimate some four thousand of this world's years, but technically they haven't been made yet." Ami looked puzzled for a moment, then suddenly saw what he might be saying, as insane as it sounded.

"You mean they're from the future, don't you?" Appearing surprised, he nodded, glancing at Yori, who was smiling.

"Yes." Inspecting her again, he made the smile-equivalent. "You are as sharp as Yori said you were." Pleased, she smiled, then frowned again, as Rei looked confused beside her.

"Hang on. How can they be from the future and also be very old?" Rei asked slowly.

"The temporal signature indicates that the origin of the items is some thousand or so Earth years from now in their relative timeline, but at some point after they were made, they were taken back in time, possibly more than once." Lldnr'k explained carefully. After a moment, she nodded her understanding. "At this point in time, they have existed for slightly less than four thousand years from the date of manufacture, therefore are four thousand years old, even though they won't actually be made for another thousand years from our current point of view."

"All right," Rei said, frowning with concentration. "I think I see."

"There is another oddity about them. The future they come from is not, according to my readings, one that can be reached from the present." This time, everyone looked puzzled, except Yori, who put her hand over her eyes for a moment and sighed.

"How is that possible?" Azumi asked, meeting his eyes.

"It shouldn't be. The reason it has happened is, I suspect, due to a particular magitech device that should never have been built. It is responsible for more destruction than any other single construction in the multiverse that we know about. Entire realities have been deleted as a direct result of the damn thing. The people who made it didn't understand nearly as much about time manipulation as they thought they did, although they were exceptionally good engineers. We thought it had been destroyed, the thing is legend now, but somehow, it must have survived." He folded his arms and glared at the innocent computer as if he was trying to will it out of existence. "But I don't know quite how to prove it."
"It's this time machine of yours, or rather, your friend Setsuna's," Yori explained quietly. "I put a few things together while we were talking about it, which made me remember something I'd heard a while ago. Just an off-hand comment from a mage I was talking to three years or so back, about a magical-technological society that destroyed itself playing with time travel. Supposedly, three separate realities vanished totally and two more were basically sterilised completely, all life wiped out right down to viruses. It's almost a myth now, no one knows the coordinates to them any more, so it's not easy to prove. But the story matched some of the details you told us. Too well for me to be very happy about it."

"They were in many ways a very advanced species, the ones who made the accursed thing," Ldnr'k said, shaking his head. "Not as advanced in magic as some, or in technology as others, but the combination was remarkable. They had faster than light travel, a thriving interstellar culture, very high technology and powerful magic. I would judge they were perhaps one to one and a half thousand years in advance of the civilisation of this planet in most respects. But they also had very poor judgement."

He sighed slightly. "It all began, as these things often do, with a war. They bumped into another advanced species somewhere out in their particular reality, one they didn't get on with at all. We don't know who fired the first shot, or why, only that they were fighting for decades, in a war that killed billions, trillions possibly. Whole star systems were destroyed. Entire sentient cultures made extinct. In the end, the fragmentary records we still have about the whole thing show that someone had the bright idea to build a time machine, which would allow wholesale travel back in time, the idea being to loop back before the war started and make some sort of pre-emptive strike on the enemy before it was the enemy. A variant theory was that they thought they could advance their civilisation by taking back advanced technology several thousand years, then using it to pull the earlier civilisation up to the level of the later one, so that by the time they came back to the 'present' they were thousands of years more advanced. Repeat as necessary, so that when the enemy was encountered, they could just crush them."

"It didn't work out like that, did it?" Azumi asked. He shook his head.

"No. They were warned, a lot. There was a considerable amount of cross-reality travel between them and other places, many of which found out about the idea and were horrified. It's not the first time someone has tried something like that but it was by far on the grandest scale. But, unfortunately, they paid no attention. They did indeed manage to build their time engine, a remarkable achievement in it's own right. It fused magic and technology on a truly incredible scale, utilising several entire stars for the power source. Their best mages and engineers worked on it for nearly a hundred of your years before it was finished. To the best of my knowledge no-one has ever made such a complex machine for such a purpose before or since. For which we can thank every deity in the multiverse." Shaking his head, he seemed to be remembering something for a little while.

"Eventually, they turned the damn thing on. The real pity is that it worked. The builders were indeed able to create a trans-temporal gateway, which led back through time to the past. Unfortunately, it didn't lead back into their past, not the way they intended. Mistakes are not uncommon in time travel. Tiny errors lead to all sorts of unexpected outcomes. The gate they opened led to an alternative timeline, which should have been impossible, but the machine had so much power and computing resources available it was able to open and stabilise the gate. A large amount of people and equipment went through it, then they shut down the time gate, expecting to find that shortly something useful would happen. They were very surprised when apparently nothing at all did. So they tried again. And again. And again."

"The first hint that something had gone badly wrong was when they found their enemy had
vanished, completely, and more or less instantly. At first, they took this as a sign that the whole experiment had indeed worked to design, but it became evident that something much more serious was happening. Large portions of their interstellar empire began disappearing, basically written out of existence. The planets, the star systems, they still existed in most cases, but all traces of the civilisations on them totally vanished. They sent ships to investigate, some of which also disappeared, some of which didn't."

"By the time they worked out what was happening it was far too late to do anything about it. Their attempted time manipulation had caused a massive instability in time flow in their reality, which the multiverse was apparently attempting to fix by simply deleting entire timelines. But, by this point, the damage was so bad and time itself so scrambled that this only made things worse. The feedback mechanism that keeps time stable is delicately balanced, even small changes can cause huge repercussions if you're not careful. That's why interfering with time flows is banned, everywhere." Lldnr'k sighed.

"The influence of the time machine itself was keeping their reality more or less stable, far past the point it would otherwise have imploded. That was part of the problem, in fact, the machine forced a level of stability in it's locality, about half the galaxy, which would otherwise have healed over by deleting the timeline that produced it in the first place, which would have been bad for them but protected everyone else. The final result was the complete collapse of the normal flow of time throughout their reality, and the total dissolution of the reality itself, along with the two nearest neighbouring ones. The energy release caused sterilisation of two more that we know about that had portals open to the originating one at the time." Ami and Rei paled while even Azumi looked shocked.

"That was over thirty millennia ago in the normal temporal method of measuring things, although it gets difficult to be completely sure when time breaches of this magnitude are involved, as they can cause all kinds of odd temporal affects. For a long time, everyone thought that it was all over, but it slowly became apparent that it wasn't, not entirely. Certain effects and warnings became apparent, which eventually caused a growing suspicion that the time machine itself had, somehow, survived the destruction of it's own reality. We think it had been thrown completely out of the normal flow of time in some bizarre manner, if you like 'sideways' across the timelines and even realities, taking some of it's own reality with it. No one knows how, precisely. There have been rumours of it turning up in dozens of places over the last few thousand years, sometimes only briefly, sometimes for extended periods. Again, it gets difficult, because it's a damn time machine. Anything to do with duration, date, things like that, become somewhat... fluid... where such a thing is concerned."

"Now, the species involved was very similar indeed to yours, although not quite identical. The story that you told Yori and she passed on to us bears a very strong resemblance to accounts we have of the war they had, although some of the details differ from the records I've seen, which we can probably put down to translation errors and the sheer amount of time that has passed. I don't know about the names and specifics like that, there simply isn't enough information in the data, which is very old, but I suspect ultimately all of it is based on the ancient empire of this species. We don't even know their name nowadays." He looked annoyed at this. "While I don't have any absolute proof, I have an unsettling idea, which matches a lot of the observed data, as to what has happened and what is going on. It's all in the end down to that time machine."

"You think that it's the Space-Time Door that Setsuna uses?" Ami queried. He nodded.

"Yes. The description is far too close for it to be a complete coincidence. Not to mention that little hints of this scenario have occurred in the past. I think it may have tried before, but failed. It's failing this time as well although it may not know it. The problem is that the computer system built into it isn't truly sentient, it was never designed to be, although it's a very good problem solver. It
was designed to interface directly with the mind of a designated controller, who would guide it in its operation, while it provided the heavy lifting. I have a feeling that it's been running independently for a very long time, trying to fix the problem it caused, without being able to acknowledge that it's the root cause in the first place."

"How could it fix the problem of it's entire reality being deleted?" Azumi asked curiously, looking puzzled.

"Well, obviously, it can't. That's obvious to us, at any rate. To a computer, with vast resources but most likely no real common sense, it may not be. It merely sees a problem to solve." Lldnr'k looked irritated. "There are very few truly sentient artificial intelligences around, or at least ones an organic lifeform would recognise as sentient. It's an extremely difficult problem in computing few species have genuinely solved although many have tried. A mind isn't easy to build, especially a sane and well adjusted one. The analogue to a mind this machine possesses was neither sane nor well adjusted, even when it was first turned on. By now, with no telling how much local time has passed in whatever reality it occupies, it's probably completely fucking nuts even by the standards of artificial intelligence."

"OK, this is all very fascinating if not to say horrifying," Rei said, pouring herself some more tea with a slightly trembling hand, "but how does it tie in to our friends going crazy and all the rest of it? I still can't see it." Lldnr'k studied her for a moment, before nodding.

"Understand, this is at the moment only a guess, I can't prove it, but it fits what I know." She shrugged, waiting for him to continue. "I think, based on what Yori has said, the fragments I know about this machine, and some educated guesswork, that the device is attempting to guide your reality to become something very close to what it was created in. My guess is that it somehow found itself in your reality, recognised the similarities between it's creators and your species, then decided to intervene. On the evidence available, it has tried at least once, and failed." Everyone except Yori looked puzzled. He explained further. "Your equipment is from the future, but not your future, just a future. It tells me that there has been at least one previous attempt at modifying your reality which for some reason failed, therefore making it go back and try again. The items are definitely from a point some considerable distance past this one but along a path that cannot be reached from this one. In other words, an alternative future timeline."

"So, you think it's gone into the past, fiddled around to eventually end up with Ami, Rei, Usagi and the others, then manufactured various sets of opponents to guide them in the direction that would produce something very similar to the interstellar empire that originally created it?" Azumi asked slowly. He nodded with a sigh.

"Exactly. It's manipulating time to try and push this reality into congruence with it's creator's one, but it's not able to do it properly. I'm not surprised, it's essentially impossible. Even in it's own reality, in an alternate timeline, the number of variables that would need to be modified to make one timeline match another one are almost infinite, to say nothing of the reaction of the multiverse to such interference. My guess is that it's probably tried several times. There's no real way to know how many. It could be only once, other than the current attempt, it could be millions of times. Probably not the latter as in that case I suspect we wouldn't be having this conversation, as it's very unlikely that the temporal damage would have left anything behind, so it's most likely a low number of attempts. The last attempt clearly partially worked, creating this future that is feeding information back to the present, but it also failed, as that same future cannot be reached from this timeline."

Lldnr'k held up Ami's computer. "From the readings I get off this and these other items, they come from an alternate future that diverges wildly from the most likely path of this current timeline at
some point in the next few years to decades. Quite possibly as a result of whatever this purported world-altering disaster is. It's a temporally orphaned future timeline, which means essentially it's cut off from the past except via the time machine, which partially exists outside normal temporal flow and can reach both here and there. That's the same problem the original species had with their own attempts at manipulating their own time flow. It's almost impossible to do what they tried to do and get away with it. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that it probably is impossible, bearing in mind what happened to them."

"So what do we do about it?" Ami asked, glancing at Rei, who was looking very worried and upset. "Clearly, we can't let things go on like that, if you're right. Even if you're not, we still have the problem of our friends to deal with." She looked over at Usagi, sleeping peacefully on the sofa, with a sad expression on her face.

Shrugging slightly helplessly the demonic time mage looked around at them all. "I don't really know. I think, one way or the other, this damn machine needs to be shut down once and for all, but how to do that is beyond my knowledge. From what Azumi found out it's buried in a fractional reality, something that's slightly offset from this one, like a subspace storage pocket but somewhat more involved. Locating and entering it could be tricky. Never mind actually stopping the damn thing. Hopefully there would be something as obvious as an off switch, but that may be wishful thinking."

Rei was sitting staring at Usagi, a tear leaking down her face. After the mage fell silent, she looked up, then said, "So it's all a lie. All of the things we've been told, all the things we did, everything, possibly even our entire lives. Just made up so this damn device could fuck around with time." Ami put her hand on her friends shoulder for a moment, as Yori glanced at Chou with a sigh.

"That's one way to look at it, certainly, although I think a rather self-destructive way. The martial artist came over and squatted down next to the other woman, looking seriously at her. "In all probability, the background story you were told is wrong, true enough, and a lot of the enemies you have defeated were specifically targeted at you for reasons best known to this machine, but it doesn't change the fact that you, all of you, have succeeded on your own merits. You may not be reincarnated magical princesses from some huge interplanetary empire of the past, but you're genuinely very powerful and skilled magical girls of Minato, which is something to be proud of. There aren't a lot of us, but we've all made a real difference. You girls more than most, from what I know about it, even with the recent problems. We need to stop this thing, fix your friends as much as we can, then just get on with life." She held Rei's other hand for a few seconds, squeezing it. "Don't worry about the past, and things that have gone wrong, we can't change that. Just concentrate on doing good in the future."

The long-haired girl stared at her for a while, then slowly nodded, a slight smile briefly coming and going. "I suppose you're right. Thanks."

"No problem." Yori squeezed her hand one last time, then stood up. "We've had our problems in the past, but I've always felt you had real potential, pretty much all of you. That's what's been so annoying about all the stupid things you've done. Once this is all over we'll teach you to do your job without blowing up everything else around you, which will help." She grinned as Rei looked embarrassed, while Ami giggled.

"So what is the next step?" Azumi asked, as she watched Yori retake her seat. "I suppose we need to deal with the others first, then this damn time machine, somehow. And it still doesn't explain why they all went completely bonkers in the first place."

"It probably does, actually," Lldnr'k interjected. She glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "I
suspect that part of the manipulations the device has been doing involved implanting the narrative it has designed to make all this work, which has caused the brain damage Yori detected, as well as the traces of mental manipulation Hnther has found. In addition to that there is most likely some temporal effects at work. Traces of time manipulation are on all of these girls, which leads me to think it's quite likely the machine has been going back and editing their memories slightly in the past as well as the present, an extremely dangerous thing to do. It can cause a number of unpleasant mental issues. Temporal psychosis, you might call it. It's caused by the difference between what's actually happening and what the temporal manipulations suggest should happen, the larger the variance the worse the effects. Also, the closer to the source of the manipulation, the more pronounced the effect. This Setsuna woman, from what I've been told, is the interface between the machine and the rest of you, she's probably been very badly damaged by it."

"I would judge that trans-temporal memory adjustments would cause even more brain damage than otherwise," Hnther said, Chou translating for him, "It seems to me that there are several problems here directly affecting these poor women. The brain damage will certainly be causing severe issues with memory and mental state, although I am not qualified to say how bad that would be or what the treatment for it would be, that's more in Yori and Chou's field. The mental tampering is definitely a significant factor in the instability of your colleagues, if not the prime cause. Temporal effects would make both the previous problems much worse. All together, it's something of a minor miracle that they're functioning as well as they are. They must all be very strong-willed people to be able to still function at all."

"If you fix the brain damage, do you think that will help?" Rei asked hopefully, looking at Yori, then Chou. They exchanged glances for a moment, before discussing something with Hnther in the demonic language.

Yori finally turned to Rei and Ami. "It's worth a try, but none of us expect much of a change. It will probably stop it getting worse, though. One problem is that with the time device still out there, it will presumably still be interfering, which will ultimately cause the same issue again. Another problem is that the organic damage and the psychological damage are two completely separate things, even though they're associated. Even repairing the brain issues won't, in all probability, undo many if any of the mental problems. It should stop it getting worse, in some ways, but it may not. The problems might well be self-sustaining by this point." She sighed. "We've had some experience with physiological problems worsening psychological ones. Trust me, fixing the damage isn't an instant cure. This case is a lot worse than the last one as well. But it's certainly worth a shot."

"I can possibly undo some of the worst damage," Hnther supplied, looking somewhat uncertain, "some of the more conflicting memories can be suppressed which should have a helpful effect. I am very reluctant to actually remove any of them, from what Ldnr'k has said, their current personalities are a direct result of the tampering. That's not good, but erasing those memories would destabilise the personalities even more, which would be very bad indeed. Especially with the level of power these women have. Mages and high-level magic users are always much more difficult to perform this sort of activity on successfully."

"We have to do something," Ami told them firmly. "We can't just let it get worse. Someone, sooner or later, is going to die as a result of all this unless we stop it. I don't want to have to kill my friends to stop them killing someone else." She stared at the floor, depressed, adding in a whisper, "But I will if I have to." Rei hugged her for a moment. Yori gave her a sympathetic look.

"It's difficult, I know. If it comes to it, I'm prepared to do it, to save you from having to." Ami looked at her for a moment. Eventually she shook her head.
"It's our responsibility."

"Fair enough." The look in the black-haired girl's eyes was one of respect and sadness. "I desperately hope it won't come to that, though. There are a number of things we can do before we have to resort to lethal methods. Even simply shoving them through a portal to somewhere uninhabited might be a better idea. But, before any of that, we should try repairing the damage first, and see what happens."

Rei turned her head to look at Usagi, still sleeping on the sofa. "What do we tell them?" she wondered out loud. "Some of them are never going to believe any of this. Hotaru might, I think, possibly Makoto, but I very much doubt Setsuna or Usagi would, they're true believers. Most of the rest are as well, although possibly not quite as much. They're all sure they're reincarnated warriors from the Silver Millennium, learning the truth would be very damaging. Assuming it even is the truth. We still don't know for sure."

"We can find out," Aiko said, looking around at her colleagues. "We were discussing this earlier. We need to send someone to check out the various places on the moon that you think have ruins from this old kingdom of yours. No ruins, no kingdom." Rei exchanged glances with Ami, then looked at the brunette.

"How are you going to go to the moon, for heavens sake?" she asked incredulously. Yori grinned at her.

"That's easy enough. We can borrow a spaceship from a friend of mine." Both girls stared at her in shock.

"You... can borrow... a spaceship?" Rei managed. Yori nodded happily.

"Sure. I know a very good asteroid miner. I'll have to introduce you one day, he's a nice guy. But, before we go that far, we should try healing these girls up and see what happens. We can start with Usagi since she's right there." Jumping to her feet she went over to the sofa and knelt down, reaching out with her hands. Hnther and Lldnr'k both moved closer to watch, while Ami and Rei exchanged looks again, shaking their heads. These people were pretty weird even by magical girl standards, was the thought going through both their minds.

Her hands glowing purple, Yori concentrated on the blonde on the sofa, while Hnther and Lldnr'k watched, commenting to each other quietly in that demonic language. Chou came over to watch as well. "This is a little tricky," Yori mumbled to herself, moving her hands delicately around on the other woman's head for several minutes, before finally sitting back on her heels with a slight sigh of relief. "Got it, I think. Could you double check for me, love?" Nodding, Chou scanned the patient as requested, then smiled.

"It looks good. I can't see any residual damage, dear. Should we wake her up and talk to her, perhaps?" Yori rubbed her chin, considering the idea, before glancing at Ami and Rei.

"What do you think? She's your friend. How will she react?" Both girls looked at each other for a moment.

"I don't know." Ami studied the sleeping blonde. "Once, she'd have at least listened, but now...?" She shrugged helplessly. "She might listen, she might go nuts."

"OK. In that case, I think I'll just do this..." Yori prodded the girl in a few places, little flashes of purple light coming from her fingertips.
"What did you do to her?" Rei asked curiously, watching carefully.

Yori smiled slightly. "Paralysed her from the neck down, basically. It won't last long, but it should stop her doing anything hasty. Bit harsh but it's probably best to be safe." Rei nodded, looking impressed. "Right, let's turn her back on and see what happens." Touching the girl in the middle of her forehead, Yori did something, pulling her hand back as Usagi groaned, then stirred, moving her head slightly.

"Ow. My head," she mumbled, before opening her eyes. She spotted Yori immediately, her eyes widening, then beyond her Chou, Azumi, and Aiko. Looking at them in fear, she glanced frantically around, before noticing Ami and Rei, who watched her with sympathy. Her eyes widened even further when she saw L'dnr'k and Hnther, both of whom were inspecting her curiously.

"What the fuck is going on!" she screamed, sounding scared and angry, her head thrashing around on the sofa pillow. "What did you bastards do to me? Why can't I move? Ami, you fucking traitor, I know this is your fault. You're even consorting with demons now, as if that bitch Yori wasn't bad enough! I'm going to kill you!"

"Usagi, calm down," Ami said, trying not to show how much her friend's words hurt. She walked over, kneeling down beside the frantic blonde, who glared at her with hatred in her eyes. "We're trying to help. You and the others are ill. Yori fixed some serious problems in your brain, but we need to help the others as well."

"You lying cunt," Usagi hissed, staring at her with fury in her eyes. "I know you've always been jealous of me. This is your way of trying to take over, isn't it? Well, it's not going to work. I'm the fucking princess, I'll be queen one day, there's nothing you can do about it. I'm going to get out of this then I'm going to kill you and everyone else here as well. Helping demons, you traitorous bitch!" She spat at Ami, who flinched as it hit her face. "I'll kill you all, and anyone else who gets in my way, none of you stan..." Voice cut off abruptly as Yori touched her head again, sighing.

"So much for that," she muttered. "Not exactly the response I was hoping for." She looked at Hnther, who shrugged slightly, saying something that Chou didn't translate. The young woman nodded, sighing again. She had a brief conversation with him, then turned to Ami, who was wiping her face with a handkerchief. "Sorry, Ami. It doesn't look like it's produced any miracle cure. She's just as mouthy as ever, but I have to say more foul-mouthed than normal."

Both Usagi's friends looked sadly at her unconscious form. "This is really bad," Rei muttered, sighing. She looked at the two demons, then Chou, and Yori, before glancing helplessly at Ami. "What do we do?" Yori studied Usagi for a while, scanning her again, then nodding to herself.

"It definitely fixed the organic brain damage, so that's at least a good thing, I suppose. Perhaps some more time will make her brain settle down a little, she might still come around. I think we should probably sort out everyone else as well, then see what happens. If we can get even one or two to come around to see sense, they might be able to help us persuade the rest."

"Bearing in mind how hard they were trying to kill each other that may be wishful thinking," Aiko noted. Yori glanced at her, sighing.

"Yes, you're right, but it's still worth a try. I'm very reluctant to write any of them off before we try everything else." Turning to Rei, she waved to a chair. "Sit down and I'll sort you out as well, just to be safe." Slightly nervously the young woman did as requested, jumping a little when Yori put her hands on her head. "Don't worry, you won't feel anything. This shouldn't take long, the damage is much less in your case, but I'm interested to see if you notice any changes." The martial artist
grinned at her, then started working, as the two demons and Chou watched intently. A few minutes passed, then she stepped back. "OK, all done. Did you feel any change?"

"Not that I noticed," Rei said slowly, trying to work out if she could feel anything or not. Eventually she shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"The damage in your case was limited enough that I doubt you would feel it, except possibly by comparison after a week or two," Chou offered. "If Usagi was more cooperative we would probably find she could feel a difference, but as Yori said earlier, it's more than likely that by now the thought patterns that have led to this mental instability are fairly deeply ingrained. It could take some time to correct itself."

"If it does correct itself," Ami added gloomily, making Chou look at her, then after a moment nod sadly.

"If it does, yes. It's entirely possibly it won't, I'm afraid." They were silent for a moment, before Yori looked at Ami.

"I'd better do you as well, even though the damage is small." Shortly, the blue-haired girl was probing her own mind trying to determine if she felt any different. After several minutes she looked at Yori, who was watching her with interest.

"Nothing. I don't feel any different."

"I didn't expect you would, it hasn't affected you all that much."

"I wonder why?" Azumi murmured, looking at both Ami and Rei with an evaluating expression. "From what Hnther was saying, that implies that this time machine computer has been doing much less interfering with Rei, and almost none with Ami. I can understand that Setsuna would be worst affected, being closely associated with the thing, and Usagi because she's nominally the leader of the group, but it seems odd that Ami would be almost unaffected. And more, that Rei would be affected, but then be able to throw off the effects, at least enough to listen and form her own opinions. It doesn't look likely that most of the rest will react in the same way."

They all exchanged glances. "It's a good point," Aiko said slowly. "I can sort of understand Ami. I mean, you're a damn sight smarter than almost anyone, which might well help, if nothing else the machine might not have been able to do much fiddling with your mind without you noticing, but Rei is a little puzzling, especially since she's part of the core original group." She grinned at the other woman. "No offence meant about your intelligence, by the way." Rei laughed for a second or two.

"None taken. I know my own limitations, and I know full well that Ami is much smarter than I am." Her friend looked embarrassed but didn't say anything.

"It's more complicated than that," Hnther said through Chou, who was translating for him again. "All three of the young women I have so far examined have had fairly extensive memory interference, although the one on the sofa there had vastly more than the other two. The effect of the interference is undoubtedly reflected in the extent of the brain damage, but I don't think it's a completely linear relationship."

"I suspect the temporal effects are more important in some ways," Lldnr'k mused, tapping the side of his beak thoughtfully while examining Usagi curiously from close range, making Ami suddenly have a moment's malicious enjoyment of the thought of what she'd do if she suddenly woke up and saw the demon mere centimetres away. "In all likelihood, this one has a much larger temporal
mismatch between the implanted narrative and reality. Ami, for whatever reason, has very little mismatch, quite possibly because she's smart and observant enough to have realised a considerable time ago that things were not proceeding according to the stated plan, which would have ameliorated the effect very significantly. Rei, due to her grandfather's intervention and wisdom, is also likely to have been questioning it on some level for quite a while, even before consciously noticing something was wrong."

"Interesting," Hnther muttered, inspecting both girls closely. He nodded after a moment or two. "Yes, I can see that as a possibility. I don't know enough about this 'temporal psychosis' to know whether you're right, but based on what we've learned it's plausible. There is certainly much less outside interference present with them both as well. Perhaps they're simply not central enough to the imposed narrative, or possibly the plan was to bring them in more deeply later on, but because things aren't going as designed, that hasn't happened." He shrugged slightly. "We can theorise forever, but without more information we have no idea how close we are to the truth. Better to ignore that part for the moment and concentrate on corrective actions if possible."

"We don't even know for sure that this space-time door thing is indeed the time machine in question," Azumi noted, "although from what you told us it seems extremely likely."

"I'm certain it is," Lldnr'k told her. "Too many things match. I can't completely prove it without seeing the thing, but I would be very surprised indeed if it wasn't involved. The temporal distortions are so obvious, a very powerful time manipulation system is the only possible explanation, and that damn machine is the most powerful one ever built." he shook his head slowly. "No, there are just too many points of congruence for it to be anything else."

"I think we have to take it as read at this point that you're right. All we can do in the short term is try to repair the damage to the girls, then see if we can talk them around, or at least stop them killing themselves, each other, or more importantly, anyone else." Yori looked apologetically at Ami and Rei. "Sorry, I know how that last bit sounds, but it really is very important to stop them hurting any innocents."

"Don't worry, we both agree completely," Ami assured her. "I know what you mean."

"After you've healed the damage, what do we do if we can't persuade the others to see sense?" Rei asked quietly. "We're pretty much agreed we can't tell them the complete truth, it's unlikely they'd believe any of it, especially as we have no way at the moment of proving any of it. The state they're all in, so paranoid and suspicious, I think most of them would probably just take it as more evidence that there was some conspiracy against them." Ami looked at her, nodding thoughtfully.

"It's possible that Makoto might listen. Hotaru probably will. I don't know about the rest. We already know Usagi won't, if she won't Setsuna and Minako definitely won't, and I doubt the other two would either." She sighed, sitting down at the table and picking up her computer, looking at it for a moment, then stirring her other possessions around on the table with one finger. "This would be a lot easier if we could take their powers away somehow. I don't want to do that, but it would at least make the problem manageable."

"Can't we just take their transformation rods away?" Rei asked hopefully, "Or erase their memories or something?" She looked at Yori, then Hnther. "You know all about doing weird things to the mind. Is that possible?"

The demon sat down next to her, Chou sitting on the other side, then looked closely at her. "Yes, in a way, it is possible. Your own disguise magic affects perception and memory, Yori and Chou's does even more effectively, and I know they have their own memory fogging techniques that can efficiently blank short term memory. But you have to understand there is a very large difference
from stopping someone remembering what's happening now and removing memories that are months, years, or decades old. It can certainly be done in a number of different ways, but it's very tricky indeed to do without seriously affecting the mind in question. Your personality is the sum of your memories. If you remove some of them you inevitably alter the personality, quite possibly very severely. That's why such techniques are so tightly regulated. It's a small step from deep memory editing to mind editing, which is almost always a very bad idea indeed, and in most places an extremely serious crime."

He glanced at Usagi on the sofa. "I would be more than slightly reluctant to try anything of the sort with your friends except as a matter of extreme last resort. In the case of Usagi there the already altered memories are so deeply entwined with the real ones removing them would cause serious damage, I fear. Removing the original ones could make the problem even worse. The least damaging method would be to erase the last few years of her memory completely, resetting her to an earlier state, in the hope that she could eventually rebuild her personality, but it wouldn't be the same person at the end of the procedure. That's even assuming I could do it. She has very considerable magical abilities, as do all of you, which makes such things unreliable at best." Rei sighed, nodding her understanding.

"It may be possible to reduce the intensity of some of the more problematic memories," Hnther added after some thought. "Not remove them, just essentially lower the strength enough that the normal operation of her mind would eventually push them back to the point they didn't cause so many problems. It's a technique that's used in some forms of trauma therapy. I'm not hugely practised in the technique, so I'd have to look it up and probably consult with some colleagues, but it might be a partial solution. The effect would be a long term one, though, it would take several years at least to have any real effect. And, of course, we'd have to prevent this time device simply undoing the repairs."

"Well, then, what about the other idea? Take away their access to their magic by taking their transformation rods away." Rei was grasping at straws, something she was well aware of, but couldn't stop. Yori sighed a little.

"I don't think that will work. These artefacts of yours are quite powerful, but I don't think you really need them any more. They were how you all learned magic control in the first place, from what you've told us, although by now the ability is inherent. That's the way magic works. Taking them away, assuming we could, bearing in mind that they're stored in a subspace pocket in the first place, would most likely only be a temporary solution. In the end I think they'd all work out how to access the magic without using the things as a crutch." She looked at Rei, who seemed unconvinced. "I could probably teach you to access your magic without the rod in about ten minutes. I expect you'd work it out for yourself in a couple of days if you tried." The other woman stared at her, then shook her head disbelievingly.

"I know how amazingly good at this sort of thing you are but I'm really not sure you're right." Yori inspected her for a moment then smiled slightly.

"OK. I'll prove it. Go on, do your transformation thing and let me see it up close. I'm curious anyway." Deciding it was worth a try, Rei stood up and pulled out her rod, holding it up and calling out her transformation phrase, while everyone else watched closely. After the normal visual effects died down she put her hands on her hips and stared challengingly at Yori, who grinned.

"What a lot of effort to go to," she commented, glancing at Aiko, who rolled her eyes slightly.

"You guys never had to make so much fuss, did you?"

"Nope. We just will the change. Since Chou fixed that stupid clothing spell most people can't even
told the difference."

"I wonder why such a complicated effect was designed in?" Chou asked with interest, looking curiously at Rei. "It seems somewhat grandiose."

"That might well be the reason," Yori theorised. "To make it look impressive. It does, I'll give it that, but it's slow and tactically silly. Right, let's have a look." She approached Rei, holding her hand over the other woman's head, then moving it slowly down her body. "Hmm. Lots of spells, it's pretty complicated. Quite a lot of power there as well, but I don't think you're using all of it yet. Or not as efficiently as you should. Interesting. Ah, there it is." Her slightly glowing hand stopped moving, then backtracked a little. She made a small motion, her fingers seeming to blur a little, as if they weren't quite in the same space as the rest of her. Ami watched, fascinated, while Rei grunted a little.

"Oogh. That felt really strange. What did you do?"

"Located the transformation trigger. It's mixed in with all sorts of other crap, half of which looks completely redundant to me. Not a particularly efficient design, but I guess it works all right. OK, can you feel this?" She did something, making Rei wince.

"Yes. It feels weird."

"That's the activation node for the main trigger. Your little song and dance routine is basically a mnemonic to activate it, but it would be a lot better to simply trigger it directly. That's what most mages do with a preset spell. Close your eyes, that will probably help, and try to visualise what I'm doing. I'll trace it out, you should be able to feel it as I do, then try to remember it, OK?" Rei nodded, following instructions. Yori's rich voice, calm and controlled, was almost soothing.

"This is the main trigger, here. This node controls the light show, this one turns the perception fogging spell on and off, this one does the clothes from what I can see. This one here is the power-up node. The main trigger calls them in sequence when you perform that start-up phrase. Can you see them?" Rei slowly nodded again.

"I think so. Almost like something glowing inside me? But not inside me, at the same time. It's difficult to describe."

Yori sounded amused when she replied. "Magic is inherently multidimensional, although most people don't look at it like that, they hide it behind something simpler to visualise but more complex to actually do. Or less effective, at any rate. You're doing well. OK, watch what I do. I'm going to push a little energy into the memory spell and deactivate it. Don't fight it, just let it happen, or it won't, all right? I just want to show you the operation." Rei nodded once more. She felt the flow of something into her, making a small but perceptible change.

"See what I did?"

"I think so."

"Good. Now, concentrate on the same node, kind of push it with your mind. You have more than enough energy, it should activate easily enough." Attempting something she could barely understand, Rei tried to do what Yori requested.

"Nothing happened."

"You were close, but not quite right. Watch this, I'll do it again." Once more, the external energy flow did something to the little glowing points she could almost see somewhere very close. She
watched intently, her eyes squeezed shut, as Yori turned it on and off a couple of times. Finally she smiled.

"I think I see."

"Good, try it yourself." Once more, she prodded around inside her mind, this time feeling an almost familiar sensation. She grinned. "Very good, it worked that time. All right, now try the power up one." One by one, at Yori's urging, she gained control of each activation point, feeling the difference as they turned on and off. Finally she opened her eyes, smiling broadly. Hnther and Lldnr'k were watching her with great interest, as was Ami, while Chou, Azumi, and Aiko were looking pleased.

"Wow. That's amazing." Turning to Ami, she posed for a moment, then flipped the transformation on then off, taking less than a second rather than the normal long drawn out sequence they'd become used to. Her friend clapped, delighted.

"Well done." She glanced at her watch, then laughed, turning to Yori who was looking amused. "Nine and a half minutes. You were right." The other woman snickered.

"It sounds very big-headed I know but I often am about things like this." Ami and Rei giggled, while Chou sighed a little, making the martial artist glance at her and grin. After a moment Chou also giggled.

"It's true. She usually is. But don't tell her that."

"Most impressive, Yori," Lldnr'k said, radiating amusement. "You're a very good teacher. That was an extremely effective exercise in magic control."

"Thanks." Yori smiled at him. "I was pretty sure it was fairly straightforward. I know how Aiko and her girls do it, and I've examined a few of the other groups over the years. That sort of power-up method isn't all that unusual, although the power involved is much higher than most of the girls have." She looked at Ami, who was staring thoughtfully at her friend as she played around with her newly learned ability. "Want me to show you as well?" The blue-haired girl glanced at her, then closed her eyes. Thirty seconds later she transformed into her powered up form with a wide grin. Yori looked impressed, then chuckled.

"Very good indeed. I always thought you were pretty damn sharp, Ami."

"You explained it very well," the other girl said, looking satisfied with herself. She powered up and down a few times, then made the clothing change back while leaving the power boost in place. "I've wanted to be able to do this for years. I can't believe all that time it was only a few mental exercises away."

"The magic is a bit redundant but very clearly laid out in a modular form," Yori told her. "I guess that's not entirely unexpected bearing in mind it's essentially the work of a magical supercomputer, it probably thinks in terms of subroutines. We could most likely improve the spells quite a lot with some work, but they're pretty easy to follow. Much more than Aiko's team's magic was, that stuff was far more subtle. In their case the clothing change was deeply embedded into the main power up, Chou took a lot of study to unravel it and edit it out, but with you guys it's easy."

"At least we can get the benefit of the magic without being obviously associated with the uniform," Ami replied, looking glum for a moment. "After what happened I don't really want to do that any more."
"I can understand that." Yori smiled sympathetically at her. "But, you see the problem? It took me less than ten minutes to explain to Rei how to do the power boost without that rod thing. You just listened to my explanation then worked it out. How long do you think it would take your friends if they really had motivation to figure it out on their own?"

Nodding, Ami conceded the point. "Days at worst, I suppose, if they thought about it, which at least some of them probably would. Damn. There's no easy solution is there?"

"Afraid not. I really wish there was." They were all silent for a while, as Ami spent the time picking up each of her artefacts, looking at them, then stashing them away. She ended up holding the computer, balancing it on her hand thoughtfully and staring at it. Yori watched her, glancing at Chou and Azumi for a moment, before returning her attention to the blue-haired girl.

"If we can figure out a way to shut this thing down, what happens to us?" the girl finally asked, looking up.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. What happens to us? Our magic? Does it go away?" Yori studied her for a moment then shook her head.

"No, I doubt it very much. That device may have manipulated things to ensure you got access to magic in the first place, but it's not powering you. Your magic comes from the same place everyone else's does, whatever that is. Ambient magical fields, internally generated energy, that sort of thing. Even if we manage to shut it down it won't effect you. Once a magical girl, always a magical girl." She snickered at Ami's expression, adding, "Once the crazy has you it has you for life."

"I don't know whether to be pleased or upset about that," Ami muttered.

Azumi shrugged. "Be pleased. It's a weird lifestyle but usually pretty interesting." Her normally rather cold voice took on a warmer tone. "It has bad points, true, but I've found more good things about it myself." Glancing at her, Ami nodded after a second or two.

"I suppose you're right. I do enjoy it most of the time, except when we have a problem like this. I was just thinking it would be a solution to the others, if we could shut down this machine, even if I lost my powers as well. I could live with that if it meant no one would get hurt."

"That's because you're a good person, Ami," Chou told her gently. "But it's not a decision you'll need to make. You're a magical girl for good, with all the abilities, problems and duties that brings, I'm afraid. We all are." Looking at the blonde's calm smile, the blue-haired girl sighed slightly but smiled back.

"OK. You both obviously know what you're talking about where things like this are concerned. When this is all over I'd love to to talk about it and learn from you."

"Of course." Looking at the computer Ami was still holding, Chou turned to Yori, indicating it. "What do we do about that? It's much too useful a tool not to continue using it if possible, but this device can obviously monitor it and has been doing so since the beginning. Who knows how much information it's gathered on the entire situation using that little machine? Presumably it's already aware of something not working correctly, which is why it was filtering out all the signs that could have led Ami to discovering this much earlier, and Azumi breaking the link between them must have raised a flag." Yori nodded thoughtfully.
"Very true. I suspect that the time device is well aware of what's going on, but whether it will interfere I have no idea. As soon as we came on the scene it must have noticed, even if it can't directly affect us, for whatever reason." She glanced at Lldnr'k. "Why do you suppose that is? Ami mentioned Setsuna thought her all-powerful system couldn't even detect us." The time mage thought for a moment.

"As I've mentioned in the past, different methods of accessing temporal travel are usually incompatible, often to a dangerous degree, and utilising any of them leaves a permanent change to the temporal signature of the person or item in question. The method you used was unusual even in time travel techniques. I would dearly like to study this mirror artefact one day, it uses a very odd spell I've never encountered before. I'm sure that is why the machine can't track you, your temporal signature is different enough as a result to make it's methods ineffective, but why the rest of your friends are also invisible to it is something I'm not sure about. It implies you all have something in common that has passed on your variant signature or enough of it to have a similar effect." He looked closely at her, then walked over to inspect Chou, Azumi, and Aiko. Reaching out he gently probed them, then pulled a small device from somewhere and looked through it at the other three. Finally he nodded.

"Yes, you definitely all share something odd. Very strange. It's a linkage to some remote power source that has a very odd relationship to time, I've never seen anything like it before. Extremely powerful as well." He probed a little harder then recoiled as there was a faint snapping sound, along with a burst of magic that everyone in the room felt. "Appallingly powerful, and none too friendly," the mage added, shaking his head slightly dazedly. "What the hell was that?" Azumi shared a glance with Chou and Aiko, then Yori, who finally nodded.

"It's our security ward system. You just triggered a warning, it was being polite because it recognised there was no ill intent, but it doesn't like people prodding us too deeply." The silver-haired young woman smiled slightly. "It can be much less polite." The mage stared at her for a moment, then turned to Yori, who shrugged, grinning a little.

"It's true. The thing got a little... bigger... than we intended."

"Ah. One of those. Excessively complex spell that's almost taken on a life of it's own?" Lldnr'k asked curiously. She nodded.

"Yep. It's gotten really damn complicated, it's almost sentient."

"Hmm. I'd love to look at the spell but from what I saw it probably wouldn't allow it. I've run into this sort of thing once or twice before, but I have to say never at anything like that power level. Not even close. It's a little scary." Yori looked rather proud, making him laugh.

"You think that's the cause of the temporal interference?" she asked him.

"Definitely. You're all so deeply linked into it by the looks of things that your odd temporal signature has transferred throughout the entire system, more or less by accident. Anything linked in to the wards will share enough of it that a different time access method would have severe difficulty even seeing it, never mind interfering with it." He scratched his head for a moment with one sharp talon, smoothing the disturbed feathers down again, before adding, "It does suggest one possible method of keeping Ami and Rei out of the influence of the time machine if it's needed." Studying him for a second or two, Yori transferred her gaze to the two young women in question, then slowly nodded.

"Indeed it does. I'm not entirely happy with that idea just yet, but it's something to bear in mind, if we have no other choice."
Ami stared at her. "You're talking about adding us to the protection of this 'ward system', aren't you?" The martial artist sighed slightly.

"Yes. It could be done, but it's a big step, if nothing else in trust. You understand, I like you, overall, but with our past history, I'm not entirely sure yet that it would be a good idea. It involves sharing a lot of things that I'm not too comfortable with sharing right now." She glanced at Rei, then looked back at the blue-haired girl. "That said, you've shared a lot with us, so it would probably be fair. The security spell would help as well. I'll have to think about it."

"We don't have to decide right now, dear," Chou said, walking over to the other woman. "I agree, it is a large step, but if it becomes necessary, we should do it." Yori looked slightly unconvinced but nodded shortly.

"All right. In that case, we seem to have reached a number of decisions. Long term we need to find some way to shut this damn time manipulation device off for good. Short term, we need to heal up the other girls, then see if any of them come to their senses, then deal with the ones that don't, somehow. I'm still not sure how, but we can think about that while we're doing the first part. I guess we should put Usagi back, then grab the others and sort them out before we do anything else." Yori looked around at the others. "Does that sound reasonable?"

"Pretty much," Aiko replied for all of them. She indicated the computer Ami was still holding. "But the original question remains, what about that thing?"

Azumi stepped forward, glancing at Yori for a moment, then held out her hand. "Can I have another look at it, Ami?" The magical girl handed it over. "OK. I think..." Azumi studied it closely for a moment. "Yes. If you will allow it, I can make what I did earlier permanent, essentially reprogramming it to deactivate the external link completely. You'd lose access to some database functions, but I don't think anything too important, and it should stop the external interference." Ami thought for only a couple of seconds before nodding firmly.

"Do it. We can't trust anything the outside source is telling us anyway, so losing access to it is much less important than it losing access to us."

"It's going to know for sure that we're on to it if I do this," Azumi warned. Ami sighed.

"The damn thing must already know. As soon as you broke the link the first time, there's no way it could not have noticed what was going on if it's at all smart."

"True. OK." Staring at the computer for a few seconds, Azumi smiled when it made a plaintive little sound and displayed an error. Ami read it out loud.

"External override erased." She smiled, taking it back. "Thanks. Do you think there are any more back doors in it?" Azumi shook her head.

"Not that I can see. It's a very complex machine, but there only seemed to be one external control channel built into it, which is now permanently off. It should be safe."

Studying her for a while, Ami grinned. "I have to find out how the hell you're able to do that," she said, "I'm incredibly curious. And rather jealous." Azumi grinned back, her face warming a lot.

"I suspect you'll find out sooner or later. Be patient."

"Right then." Yori clapped her hands together, looking mildly pleased. "Something going right for once. OK, Aiko, let's put Usagi back and start getting the rest of them. Hopefully we can do them all before they work out what's going on. Let's do Setsuna next." Aiko grinned, walking over and
picking the unconscious blonde up. Yori did something to her head, then nodded, the brunette vanishing immediately. "She'll wake up in about a minute with hopefully no real memories of what happened here," the martial artist said, satisfied. Shortly Aiko reappeared with an unconscious green-haired woman draped over her shoulder.

"She saw me coming this time and started her transformation sequence," Aiko reported, smiling slightly. "You were right. It takes much too long in a combat situation. I nailed her when she was only half-way through." Snickering, Yori watched as her friend laid her victim out on the couch, arranging her neatly. Ami shook her head, amused.

"You're all having far too much fun with all of this," she noted, smiling. Yori grinned at her.

"We have to get all the enjoyment we can, bearing in mind how serious this is." Ami giggled, Rei beside her laughing out loud, before moving to look down at her erstwhile companion in arms.

"She looks quite peaceful like that," the black-haired girl said quietly, looking slightly sad. "Not like she's been recently at all." Ami put her hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Hopefully we can sort them out and make them at least not try to kill each other," she told the other girl. "I doubt we'll be a team again but I could handle it if they're not crazy and dangerous." Nodding, Rei moved out of the way as Hnther began examining Setsuna, looking serious, then very angry.

"This woman's mind is a complete mess," he growled, his anger coming through even Chou's translation. "How the hell she's even able to go about her day to day business is beyond me. She should be undergoing some serious therapy, not throwing magic around." He looked at Yori. "Once you've healed the brain damage I'm going to have no choice but to do some immediate work on her mind. I think she's about a week away from a complete psychotic break, if not worse. If that happens it will be too late to recover her mind. It's right on the border at the moment." Sighing, Yori knelt down beside him.

"OK. Let's see what I can do." She spent nearly ten minutes running glowing hands over the unconscious woman's head, before settling back, looking disturbed. "What a mess. I think I got it all sorted. Can you double check for me, love? I don't want to make a mistake with this one." Chou bent over the woman and spent a short while scanning her before nodding.

"It all looks good. There's quite a lot of residual traces but I think those will sort themselves out given time. We might need to revisit it in a few weeks, though, to be sure."

"I agree. Hnther, she's all yours." Both of them got out of the way as the mind mage got to work. He spent close to forty minutes gently probing Setsuna, finally removing his hands from her head and inspecting her face.

"I think that will do it for the time being. She still needs work, long term work, from someone better at therapy than me, but she shouldn't just snap now. At least from that source of trouble." He shrugged a little, frowning unhappily. "Only the gods know how much damage was done to her psyche over the years. It will take a long time even with good help to get over it all if she ever does. But that will help a lot in the short to medium term." Standing, he looked around at his audience. "I turned down some of the more egregious memory violations as much as I dared and moved a few things around. It should mean she's much less likely to be unthinkingly violent. I would suggest the best thing is to render her deeply unconscious, for at least half a day, to allow her subconscious to rework the memory patterns before her conscious mind starts interfering. Can that be done?"
Yori glanced at her friends then nodded. "I think so. We know where she lives. We can put her under for a fairly long time, then Aiko can take her home and put her to bed where she'll be safe. She should sleep until morning."

"Good. That should help a lot, although once again I'm not expecting any miracles. Just, hopefully, not the complete destruction of a mind." Hnther looked at his patient with anger and regret. "This all annoys me immensely," he muttered. "If the builders of that damn machine were still around I'd make it my business to see them punished."

"You're many millennia too late for that, my friend," Lldnr'k commented. "They were punished as severely as one could ever wish for, though, bearing in mind they no longer exist at all. Pity their work lived on after them."

"Indeed," the other mage grunted, still angry. Stepping out of the way as Aiko picked the green haired woman up, he watched through squinted eyes as she and Chou both disappeared with their burden. The two magical girls reappeared some minutes later looking pleased.

"She's nicely tucked up in bed with the doors and windows locked, very unlikely to wake for at least eighteen hours," Chou said, smiling gently. "Poor woman. I hope this helps."

"It should to to one degree or another. I hope. It probably can't make things any worse, at least."

Yori looked momentarily depressed, then visibly cheered herself up. "OK, which one next?"

"We could grab the blue-haired one, she's stomping around muttering to herself near her home. Her lover kicked her out of the car a couple of minutes ago and roared off swearing," Aiko told her. The brunette grinned a little. "She's got nearly as extensive a vocabulary as you do," she added slyly, making Yori look slightly embarrassed. Azumi giggled at the look on her friend's face. "Hey, it's a compliment." Grinning, Yori took the ribbing in good humour.

"OK, that sounds good. Do you think you can get her as easily as the others?"

"I think so, she doesn't seem to be paying much attention to anything at the moment. I can pop in behind her and drop her before she even..." Aiko stopped dead, looking worried, at the same time Yori, Chou, and Azumi all twitched.

"Oh, crap," Azumi said. The remaining people in the room looked curiously at them.

"What's going on?" Ami asked.

"That brunette one just spotted what's-her-name, Haruka, and is heading straight for her. She doesn't look happy. They're both near the park your friend Hotaru is still sitting in. It looks like she's picked up on it, she just powered up and is going towards them both. Fumiko and the others are moving to intercept them, but I don't think they're going to get there in time," Azumi shook her head. "Nope, they've all seen each other. Fuck. The blonde just powered up as well and jumped out of her car, it just smashed into a building, and she's firing at the brunette."

"We'd better go and help," Yori said, looking very irritated. "Before something major happens." Glancing at the two mages, she added apologetically, "I think you guys should stay here where it's safe, the mood they're in any non-humans are going to be targets. Quite a few humans probably will be as well." Lldnr'k looked at Hnther, then they both nodded agreement.

"All right. We can ask your grandfather for some more of that very nice tea, Rei," the crow-like mage said.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," Chou told them. She looked at Ami and Rei. "Are you coming?
We could quite likely use the help."

"It might make the situation worse, the mood they've been in, but I suppose we have no choice," Ami sighed with a look at her friend, who shrugged.

"Come on over here, then," Aiko told them, as her friends gathered around them. As soon as they were in position the entire group vanished. Hnther looked at Lldnr'k, who made a gesture of mild amusement.

"The wards are down, at least they remembered to do that," he said in Trade. Hnther laughed.

"Come on, let's find the priest and have a chat. I'd quite like some tea, and I'd also like to get some more information about what he's told his grand-daughter. It seems likely he's had quite an effect on her. It might shed light on ways to help the others." The two demons wandered off into the temple to look for the old priest.
“Eep!” 'Azumi' involuntarily yelped, ducking as a wild burst of lightning shot past her head the second they arrived. Everyone scattered, making less of a target.

“Fuck it, that crazy bitch is going to kill someone,” 'Yori' complained, watching the tall brunette take another shot at the blonde, swearing like a trooper in the process. The other combatant dived sideways, returning fire with an energy attack that levelled a small building housing a fast food business, which luckily had been occupied with people quick-witted enough to know trouble when they saw it coming and who had left via the back door as soon as they spotted the uniforms. The middle Tendo winced, glancing at her sister who was beside her, peering around the side of a more substantial building, neither of the participants in the fight having apparently noticed them yet.

“Damn it, this is ridiculous,” 'Yori' complained, as she watched the brunette evade the return strike in a blurringly fast motion, firing yet another lightning bolt at her former friend, now someone she was intent on killing, as far as could be determined from her actions. Her words indicated as much as well, consisting as they did of variants on the theme of 'Stand still so I can finish you off, you bitch."

“We're about twenty seconds away,” said Fumiko, sending her position and that of her two team-mates to the rest of them. There was a pause, then she swore. “Oh, damn it, that other blonde, Minako, just powered up and is heading your way fast as well. She'll get there about the same time we will.”

“Intercept her and deal with her,” 'Yori' told her, “I don't want them all getting together or we'll have absolute chaos. Make sure the neither of the other ones gets here either if they decide to be a nuisance, all right? We'll deal with these two. Three, I guess, if that girl in the park keeps coming this way.”

“She's stopped for the moment, she seems to be waiting for something,” Fumiko announced. “We're heading towards Minako, we'll be on her in five seconds.”

“Thanks.” The entire exchange had taken only a few seconds, neither Rei or Ami having noticed or heard any of it. They were both staring at their former team-mates in dismay. “Right, you two, your friend Hotaru is about three hundred metres that way, into the park, roughly in the middle. Go and see if you can stop her and talk some sense into her. Aiko, go with them, in case they need backup, that girl is potentially very dangerous. We'll deal with these two. Minako is inbound, about a kilometre away, the other guys have gone to intercept her.” Ami and Rei looked at each other, then 'Yori', before nodding agreement. Aiko joined them and the three girls vanished.

“What about the security spell?” 'Azumi' queried. 'Yori' glanced in her direction, raising an eyebrow. “I mean, if they talk Hotaru around and go back to the temple, will you need to include her in it so Hnther and Lldnr'k can explain things to her?”

“No, not yet, it only covers the things we learned from Ami and Rei. She already knows all that so it won't affect them. It's a good, comprehensive spell. Not to mention it won't stop Ami telling anyone anything she wants since it's her who holds the 'keys' to the spell.” 'Azumi nodded her understanding, impressed. Her sister-in-law went back to observing the two fighting magical girls, assessing the situation.

“OK. One of them is down for the count, so at least Setsuna won't be turning up. Usagi is a possibility, but I hope not. She seems to be wandering around talking to herself near her home.
Michiru is quite a way away as well, so hopefully neither one will get involved this time.” The martial artist sighed. “Let's shut these two idiots down before someone gets hurt.”

“We could open a portal to the firing range and throw them both through,” the middle Tendo suggested, watching in amazement as the lightning-throwing girl missed yet again, blowing up a small truck near where the other girl had been, before she had jumped, just in time, onto the roof of the building it was parked in front of.

“Don't tempt me,” was the response. “They're suffering from some serious medical problems or I'd have done that a while ago, but even so...” ’Yori’ groaned as the blonde threw herself somewhat inelegantly at the brunette from the three-story roof, pulling a sword from somewhere in the process and swinging it wildly. Makoto screamed in rage, ducking and managing to avoid the stroke that could well have decapitated her, then managing to tag her opponent with the tail end of a burst of lightning in return, which struck the end of her sword, crackling through it and making her stiffen in shock, before dropping it.

“They really don't seem to be very good at this, luckily,” 'Chou' commented mildly, looking somewhat concerned. “Their fighting skills have suffered considerably.”

“Too much emotion and not enough practice,” her husband responded. She shook her head, then took aim, firing a ki ball at the blonde's sword, knocking it twenty metres away just as she was reaching for it. This provoked a yell of anger, although she didn't respond to the new attack, merely wound up for another energy blast at her original opponent, who almost managed to avoid it, only being blown a few metres by a glancing blow. “BOTH OF YOU, STOP IT!” 'Yori' shouted in a commanding voice.

“Fuck off, Yori,” the brunette yelled back, not looking away from the blonde she was attacking. “This is between us.” She fired yet another lightning attack, with considerable power behind it, at the other woman, laughing like a deranged idiot when she scored a direct hit, blowing her through the front window of a shop with an enormous crash and a shower of broken glass. The few pedestrians in the area who hadn't already run for it left rapidly, charging past a news van that pulled up a hundred metres away.

“Stay inside the glowing area,” 'Chou' called, the cameraman glancing at her and nodding, before going back to his job. He was no idiot, he knew when to stay back.

Sighing, 'Yori' fired a substantial ki blast at the blonde who was winding up for another, even bigger attack, knocking her flat with a loud bang and scorching her clothes. She shot forwards and tagged the brunette who ducked slightly at the explosion, blows too fast for most people to even see rippling along her body, causing her to drop unconscious without a sound instantly. 'The middle Tendo smiled grimly, then felt something worrying nudging her sense of danger, turning to see the other girl had reclaimed her sword, having landed nearly on top of it, and was building up an attack. Before even 'Yori' could react she fired a huge blast of magic that shook the street, energy
rippling out at blinding speed from the weapon in a semi-circle, destroying half a dozen parked cars instantly and crashing into several buildings with the force of a small earthquake.

'Azumi' threw herself flat as the energy roared overhead, barely in time, watching with horror as it caught her sister in the side and threw her ten metres into the air. “Kasumi!” she shouted over the link, rushing to her sister, who landed on her side with a thud, none of her normal inhuman grace apparent. Behind her, 'Yori' let out a furious hair-raising growl like an enraged tiger, there was the screech of a ki beam firing, followed by a scream of agony, then dead silence, only the creaking of the affected buildings breaking it as they settled.

“I'm fine, sister, no major injuries. That was a very powerful attack, she must have used a lot of her reserves on it. I suspect it would have killed her friend, and definitely killed any normal person instantly. Luckily I managed to get a partial ward up just in time, but there wasn't any way to avoid it completely, from where I was.” 'Chou' sat up, wincing and holding her side. Her hand glowed as she ran it over her ribs. “That was very painful. I haven't been hit like that in a long time. It reminds me of some of Ranma's more interesting training methods.” Holding out her hand 'Azumi' helped her sister to her feet.

“Are you all right?” she asked with concern. The tall blonde smiled at her.

“I'll be fine. It was three ribs and some cuts, plus it knocked the wind out of me. It was a very powerful blast indeed.” The other woman looked past her to where it had originated, frowning a little. “Oh dear. I fear Ranma may have been pushed a little too far this time.” Turning to look in the direction her sister was looking, 'Azumi' stared.

'Yori' was standing over the slumped body of the other blonde, visibly glowing a baleful purple colour, emitting a cold aura that was perceptible from fifteen metres away, while the magical girl on the ground was staring at her in horror and pain. Her right arm was missing from the elbow down, the sword lying on the ground held in her detached hand, still smoking slightly at the wrist, the intervening bits completely vaporised. 'Chou' and 'Azumi' walked over, stopping a safe distance away. Squatting down very slowly, the martial artist didn't remove her gaze from the terrified one of the former combatant, who was whimpering in agony, fear, and incipient shock, all the fight gone out of her very suddenly.

“When I say stop, I mean fucking STOP! You are very lucky indeed that I am in a charitable mood or I would have removed your head not your arm. If you're incredibly lucky I might even regenerate it at some point,” she growled in a voice that resonated around the street as if she'd shouted it. No one dared speak. “You never, ever, attack my family or friends. This is your only warning. Do it again and you die. Understand me?” Haruka nodded, trying not to scream in agony, sweat beading on her brow. Reaching out the black-haired girl grabbed her upper arm above the cauterised wound, a purple glow rapidly surrounding the truncated limb and sealing it over with healthy skin. The blonde screamed in shock and pain, then slumped unconscious as 'Yori' put her other hand on her head for a moment.

Straightening up she looked around at her wife and sister-in-law, neither of whom spoke, then at Makoto. The brunette had regained consciousness and was sitting up painfully on the street, covered in dirt, staring at her former team-mate with stunned horror. Walking slowly over to her, 'Yori' produced an energy blade and pointed it at her from a metre away, the tip mere centimetres from her neck. The other woman flinched away, then froze at the look in the martial artists' eyes. “Do you want to keep on fighting, or are you going to see sense? I'm not in a good mood, so if you want to go on, I can save us both time and cut some bits off you right now.” Feeling the heat and the raw power radiating from the energy manifestation with a sense of worried terror, the brunette carefully shook her head.
“I'm done,” she said quietly.

“Yes, you are.” Before she could react, 'Yori' whipped her hand out and poked her between the eyes, a purple flash erasing her consciousness instantly. She tilted over to the pavement without a sound. Dismissing the energy weapon, the black-haired woman sighed, her glow fading away. “Idiots,” she mumbled, looking around at the half-destroyed street. 'Chou' approached her and hugged her for a moment.

“Thank you for not killing that poor girl,” she said quietly into her husband's hair. “She's not herself.”

“Damn lucky for her she didn't seriously hurt you,” the other woman replied as quietly. “Or she'd be a smoking hole in the ground right now.” They separated, smiled a little at each other, then the petite woman walked over to the blonde on the ground, looking down at her and shaking her head in annoyance. “Stupid, idiotic time machine. So much destruction and pain. When I figure out how, I'm going to take enormous joy in smashing the fucking thing into little bits.” She bent down and retrieved the sword, pulling the disembodied hand off it with ease, then flipping it onto the ground and vaporising it with a casual blast of ki. The sword she vanished. “I might give it back to her, I might not. If she can satisfy me she's worthy of it, perhaps.”

'Azumi' checked the time, noting with some surprise it was less than three minutes since they'd arrived. The amount of damage was impressive for such a short battle. She glanced over her shoulder at the news crew, who were still filming, glad she'd activated her bracelet. She wasn't keen on any of this being on the news. “What about them?” she asked discreetly, indicating the reporter and cameraman. 'Yori' looked up for a moment.

“They won't get much, we're both shielding pretty heavily,” she replied, a slight grin coming and going. Looking around at the destruction again she sighed once more. “What a mess.”

“Aiko, can you come and take these two to the temple, please,” 'Chou' requested.

“OK.” A second later the short brunette appeared next to them, looking around, then whistling. “Damn. It looks worse in person.” Bending down she picked up the blonde and slung her over her shoulder, waving to the brunette with her free hand. “Can you grab that one, Azumi?” she requested. The middle sister nodded, picking up the other unconscious woman, then returning. “Back in a moment,” Aiko said, before they both vanished.

The old priest looked up from a fascinating conversation with two of the most interesting people he'd ever spoken to, as Aiko and Azumi appeared on the other side of the room they had been using earlier, limp bodies on each young woman's shoulder. “Oh, dear,” he exclaimed, standing to examine the unconscious girls, then paled slightly when he noticed the blonde was missing a forearm and hand. “What happened to the poor girl?” he asked in shock.

“Yori did,” Azumi replied, looking grim. “This idiot pushed her too far. She tried a very powerful attack that came close to injuring Chou and nearly got me as well. That didn't go down well.”

“No, I can imagine it didn't,” the priest said, inspecting the new arrivals as they were carefully laid down, one on the sofa and one on the carpet beside it. “I warned Rei about that some while ago. Never get between Yori and Chou.” He smiled for a moment. “She healed the wound, I see.”

“Yes. I don't think she's in a generous mood right now, so this one may have to get used to having one hand for a while.” The silver-haired woman glanced at Hnther, talking to him in that demon language all Yori's friends seemed fluent in. He nodded, then bent over the girl on the sofa. “I told
him Yori would like him to look into their mental problems while we deal with the others,” she explained, looking at the priest, who nodded his understanding. “Neither one of them is going to wake up for some time. Sorry, we have to get back, Minako is being awkward, and we're not sure about Hotaru yet. Plus there's a lot of clean up to do after the fight these two girls just had. We need to check for anyone trapped in the rubble.”

“It sounds like they really got into it,” he responded.

“Oh, definitely. It will probably be on the news, there was a reporter and her crew there.” Azumi sighed, looking at the two girls that both Hnther and the other demon were examining carefully. “As if the mall wasn't bad enough, this is going to seal their reputation as irresponsible idiots, I suspect.”

“Such a shame. They were so promising a few years ago.” He followed her gaze. “I hope Yori and Chou and the rest of you can somehow help them, my dear.”

“So do I, sir. So do I.” After a brief smile at him, she and Aiko vanished again, as he looked away from the flash.

Ami glanced over her shoulder when she heard a weird screeching sound coming from back where Yori and the others were, wondering what on earth it was. The scream of agony that followed it made her think that perhaps she didn't want to know after all. Pushing the thought to the back of her mind, she returned to listening to Rei talking to Hotaru, who was standing with her weapon raised across her body at an angle, looking like she couldn't decide whether to use it, drop it, or just start crying. “What the hell is going on, Rei?” the younger girl said in a voice full of hopeless worry. “Everyone has gone nuts. They destroyed that shopping mall yesterday, like it was full of demons or something, but they were laughing! And you and Ami helped those other girls stop them. I don't know if I should be angry or grateful. They were all shooting at me as well, I had to block them all, I even had to shoot back a few times just to save myself. Afterwards Michiru called me a little freak and said she never wanted to see me again!”

She sniffed a little, wiping a tear from her eyes before gripping her weapon more firmly, raising it warningly as Rei took a step forward. “Stay back. I don't know if I can trust you.” Rei sighed a little.

“Hotaru, you can trust both of us. We're your friends. How many years have we known each other?”

“A lot.” The younger girl kept her pole-arm raised between them like some sort of barrier. “But I've known the others just as long, and they're all insane. How do I know you're not like them?”

“Do I look insane?” Hotaru inspected her team-mate carefully, chewing her lower lip.

“No. But neither did anyone else until yesterday.” She thought about it for a few seconds more. “Why did you help those other girls against our own team?”

“Because what our people was doing was wrong. Fumiko and Tamiko are Yori's friends, they were trying to stop the others killing someone. You know the reputation Yori has. She's not going to let any non-combatants get hurt, and she's not keen on combatants getting hurt if it can be resolved with talking. Her friends are the same.” Rei stopped to gauge the effect her words were having on her friend. “Ami and I have been talking to her, and her friends, for hours. They've worked out a lot of what's going on and why and they're trying to figure out how to stop it. They're not our enemies, they may be the only hope we have, Hotaru. Please put that down and come and
talk to them.”

The younger girl shivered. “I like Chou, but Yori terrifies me.”

“Me too, but at the same time I think I trust her. She's not so bad when you get to know her, and Chou is really nice.” Rei smiled at her friend. “Come on, Hotaru.” It seemed to be working for a moment, as the pole-arm slowly lowered, but suddenly it snapped back into position.

“Sorry, guys, I'll be back in a minute, I have to go help Yori,” Aiko abruptly announced out of the blue, vanishing with a flash as soon as the words were out of her mouth. All three of the others looked at where she'd been standing, listening, then at each other. They shrugged a little.

“She does that,” Ami commented.

“ Weird,” Hotaru mumbled, before apparently remembering the issue at hand, snapping her eyes back to Rei's, who sighed very slightly. The black-haired girl looked at Ami, frustrated.

“You try. I'm running out of arguments.” Stepping forward the other woman smiled at her friend.

“Hotaru, Rei is right. You need to believe us. Something is seriously wrong, yes, but Yori and her friends can help. The others all have a medical problem, aside from anything else, and there's a lot more to it as well.” She pulled out her computer, opening it, as Hotaru took a precautionary step back. “Look, you've seen me use this for years, right?” After a moment the younger girl nodded. “Trust me, I just want to scan you for a second, to check something. I think it will answer some questions. Is that OK?” Eventually, her team-mate nodded again, more warily, looking like she was on the verge of running.

Slowly and carefully, feeling slightly like she was dealing with a skittish animal, Ami scanned the other woman, then looked at the results. She sighed a little. Hotaru looked worried. “What is it?” she asked in a somewhat shaky voice.

“Yori worked out that something was affecting everyone, causing damage to their brains, at different levels. It's complicated, but we have a good idea why. The thing is that my computer had been... hacked, I suppose you could say, although that's not quite right, so it didn't show the problem. One of Yori's friends fixed the hack, so now it's accurate again. Look.” She turned it so the other girl could see the screen. “You see? I did a complete health check. It registering the various minor problems we already know you have, but here, it's registering something wrong with your brain. It's something called the amygdala, it's very important in forming memories and a lot of other things as well, including emotional development. Everyone has the same damage, to one degree or another. Setsuna and Usagi are very badly affected, Rei not too much, and I wasn't at all bad, but we all have it. Or had it, Yori has already fixed it in me, Rei, Usagi, and Setsuna.” Hotaru stared at the screen for several seconds, reading the report the small device was scrolling up next to some graphics illustrating the problem. Ami let her think it through.

“That's what's making everyone crazy?” she finally asked. Ami nodded.

“Partly. There's a lot more to it, but that's one of the serious problems. You're not as bad as Setsuna or Usagi, from what I can see here, but you're worse than Rei. It's making you paranoid and prone to anger, I think, if the others are anything to go by.”

There was another pause. “Yori can fix this damage?”

“Yes.”

Hotaru looked hopeful. “Does that mean that they'll go back to normal?”
Rei, Ami slowly shook her head, making the purple-haired girl's face fall again.

“It's more complicated than that. But it will help, even though it's not a complete instant fix.” She smiled sympathetically at her friend. “Just come back to the temple with us. We can explain it completely there, you need to hear it from Yori and her friends, it's too complicated to get into in the middle of the park.” About to reply, Hotaru twitched as Aiko abruptly reappeared a few metres away, a sudden look of fright crossing her face, then slowly diminishing. She took a couple of deep breaths.

“Are we being attacked?” she asked, raising her weapon a little. Ami studied her for a moment or two.

“Sort of. Like I said, it's really complicated. We need your help to fix things, as much as we can fix things, if we don't it's going to get much worse. People could end up dead. Including us.” Not looking completely convinced, Hotaru opened her mouth, then closed it again without saying anything. She looked around at all three women for a long few seconds, then sighed, lowering her pole-arm so the butt was lying on the ground, then suddenly dropped it and fell to her knees, tears running down her face. Aiko discreetly picked the weapon up and moved it to the side, out of immediate reach, as Rei and Ami both approached the girl and knelt down beside her.

“It will be OK, dear, we're going to fix this. Somehow. We have some very smart and powerful allies now, Yori and Chou are amazing. You wouldn't believe all the things they know, the things they can teach us. Trust me, they're all good people, and we need their help.” Ami hugged her young friend, who burst into tears, sobbing and hugging her back.

“I just want things to go back to the way they were before all this crazy stuff happened,” the girl cried. “Michiru thinks I'm a freak. Setsuna was looking at me in a weird way as well. Even Haruka was making nasty comments, much worse than anything I've heard for years. She wants to kill Makoto, she spent all last night talking about how the next time she saw her she was going to cut her head off, in a way that made me think she meant it. Usagi is just mean, and Minako was really scary, even worse than Haruka.” She looked up at the blue-haired woman holding her. “You and Rei are the only ones that are even close to normal. I'm scared about what might happen. If that mall yesterday had been open...” She shuddered. “We could have killed a lot of people.”

“I know, Hotaru. It worried me as well. It still does. But, hopefully, we can figure out a way around all this, with some help from some good people.” Ami helped her friend to her feet. “Come on, let's go back to the temple, you can rest there and get something to eat, then we can explain the rest of it.” She rubbed her forehead tiredly with one hand, looking worried. “It's not going to be nice to hear, some of the story is... upsetting, at best, but as far as I can see it's all true.” Looking worried again, Hotaru nodded silently.

“Oh, the other thing, Hotaru?” Rei smiled comfortingly at her friend. “Don't panic when you see Hnther and LiDrn'k, please. They're mages, friends of Yori, who really seem to know their stuff, but they're...” She glanced at Ami, who shrugged. “Well, they're a bit unusual.”

“Unusual, how, exactly?” Hotaru asked suspiciously.

“Um... They're kind of... um, demons...” Rei finally admitted quietly. The other woman gasped, then looked instinctively around for her weapon, which was on the ground five metres away with Aiko standing on it, just in case. “Don't panic! They're friendly, not evil at all. Honest, you'll like them,” Rei hastened to assure her. After staring at her friend for a long moment, Hotaru slowly relaxed slightly.

“Demons? Friendly demons?”
“Yes. Friends of Yori's. You know her and demons, she seems to know all of them, or at least they've heard of her. The ones that don't run away are all good friends as far as I can see. It's weird.” Ami giggled, making the younger woman smile a little, then nod. “These guys are really knowledgeable and genuinely want to help. They're both very worried about the problem. It'll be all right, trust us.”

It took some time, but the girl finally nodded. “OK. Since it's you, Ami. You're the smart one. I didn't believe it when Usagi called you a traitor.” Rei and Ami looked pleased, while Aiko bent down and picked up the magical weapon, handing it back to it's owner.

“Please don't start waving this around, Hotaru, or it will get very confusing.” She smiled. “I'll take you all back to the temple courtyard, so you can get over the initial teleport sickness without meeting new people as well. It'll be unpleasant for a few seconds but it passes quickly. Don't get freaked out too much.” Once the purple-haired girl indicated her understanding, the brunette walked closer, then teleported all four of them.

Gagging at the sudden nausea that swept through her, the youngest member of the group dropped to her knees, her head spinning, feeling someone supporting her, until the feelings subsided as quickly as they'd arisen. Raising her head she found Aiko kneeling beside her. “Feel better?”

“Yes, thanks. That was horrible.” The brunette grinned.

“It hits everyone different, some worse than others. But it only does that the first time, after that you're fine.” She helped the other girl to her feet. “Can I make a suggestion? Power down, it's probably best if you're not holding a lethal weapon when you meet Hnther and Lldnr'k. Just in case your reactions get ahead of your mind.” Thinking about it for a moment, Hotaru nodded slightly grudgingly, bending down to pick up her pole-arm from where she'd dropped it when the incredible sick feeling had swept through her, then performing the actions that changed her back to her civilian form, the weapon vanishing in the process.

Glancing at Ami and Rei, who were in their normal street clothes, she suddenly asked, “Why weren't you guys powered up? If I'd been more angry I might have attacked you, which would have been very bad without your magic boost.” The other two looked at each other, Rei grinning slightly, then Ami turned a little to the side and fired a magic blast at the wall of the courtyard, instantly covering it in a couple of centimetres of ice. She giggled as Hotaru gaped at her.

“How... I mean, what...” Her voice faded away for a moment. “How the hell did you do that?”

“I told you Yori could teach us interesting things. You wouldn't believe what she knows about magic. I have no idea how she's learned so much so young, but...” The young woman shrugged. “She knows an awful lot about all sorts of weird things.”

“You don't have any idea at all...” Aiko muttered, smiling weirdly. “Not a clue.” All three looked at her, but she didn't expand on the subject, although that weird grin stayed for a few seconds.

“Um, OK, then,” Ami slowly said, looking at the other woman with an odd expression, before turning to her younger friend. “Let's go and meet the two mages. We can explain what we know so far and what we think is going on, while they check you out. When Yori and the others get back, they can fill in the rest and heal your brain damage.” She put her hand on Hotaru's shoulder comfortably. “I think it's going to be all right.”

“For a given value of all right, perhaps,” Aiko added, looking unusually serious, but led them to the room in which two of their team-mates, a pair of demon mages, and Rei's grandfather all were. The elderly priest was deep in conversation with the demons when they entered. Hotaru stopped
dead, staring at the unfamiliar figures, her face paling, until Rei behind her gently prodded her further into the room.

“It's fine, they're friends, forget what they look like,” she whispered into the other girl's ear. After a long moment of staring Hotaru nodded slightly, still looking rather worried, but followed her friends over to the table. She looked around the room, abruptly noticing her two unconscious teammates, one on the sofa and one on the floor, looking oddly peaceful lying there. Ami followed her eyes when she heard the purple-haired girl gasp in shock, staring in sudden horror.

“Oh, my god, what happened to Haruka's arm?” she cried, rushing over to inspect the other woman, feeling queasy. Pulling out her computer she scanned the blonde, relaxing slightly when it told her there was no immediate danger.

“She did something very stupid that hurt Chou a bit. Yori didn't react well to that,” Aiko told her, coming up to her side and following her gaze curiously. Ami glanced at the brunette, who she noticed somewhat uneasily appeared completely unaffected by the sight of the maimed woman on the sofa, merely inspecting her with dispassionate curiosity. “Luckily for her, it was only a slight injury. She wouldn't be here if she'd seriously threatened Chou.” Aiko met her eyes for a moment. “If she'd somehow managed to kill her, none of you would be.” There was complete silence in the room for a moment, then she smiled a little. “But that would have been very difficult. Chou, like Yori, is extremely hard to kill. That said, it isn't a good idea to threaten either of them if the other one is around. They don't like it.” Turning, she walked over to Hnther and began talking to him in a low voice, while Ami glanced at Rei, shuddering slightly. The tone of complete confidence that Yori could wipe them all out was very unnerving, especially as she was absolutely convinced it was a simple statement of fact.

Rei gazed back, clearly sharing the feeling, then deliberately shook it off. “That's Hnther over there, talking to Aiko. Lldnr'k is the other one.” Glancing away from listening to the conversation Aiko and Hnther were having at the sound of his name, Lldnr'k hopped to his feet and approached them, causing Hotaru to hide behind Ami for a moment, until she got over her jumpiness. She was feeling very nervous.

“Hello, Hotaru. Aiko has explained a little about you. I think we should all sit down and talk for a while, until Yori and her friends return, hopefully without any more incidents like the one your friends over there precipitated earlier.” He gestured at Haruka and Makoto. “We can explain at least part of what we think is going on, although from the reactions of Ami and Rei earlier, you will most likely find quite a lot of it somewhat difficult. I apologise in advance for any distress we cause you, that isn't the intention, I assure you. It's an unfortunate side effect of a rather depressing situation.” Despite his very inhuman appearance, Hotaru couldn't help but feel the demonic mage was genuinely concerned both about and for her, eventually nodding agreement. With a look back to Rei and Ami, she took a seat next to him at the table, between him and Rei's grandfather, who smiled at her and poured her a cup of tea.

“Here, child, drink this. It may help.” Smiling slightly tremulously at him she took it and sipped from it for a moment. Rei watched for a moment, then sat at the table as well. Finishing talking to Hnther, Aiko moved back to Ami's side, watching as the two mages began talking, Rei helping explain some of what she'd heard. After a few seconds she turned to Ami.

“I'm going to have to get back and help Yori and the others. Call us immediately if anything bad happens, I'll get back in seconds.” Ami nodded.

“All right.” She glanced at Haruka for a second, wincing at the sight of her foreshortened arm. “Please try not to maim any more of my friends.”
“We'll do our best.” Aiko chuckled at the expression on the blue-haired girl's face. “Don't worry, Yori or Chou can fix it. Neither one is very happy with the blonde idiot at the moment, so it will have to wait until they're a little less peeved, but they'll do it. She'll be as good as new. Physically, at any rate.” Aiko looked at the woman on the sofa, shaking her head. “What is it with all your blondes, anyway? They're all very bad tempered and violent.” She shrugged, then disappeared. Blinking, Ami shook her head a little, moving to sit down at the table, just in time to see Hotaru begin to look very shocked at what she was being told.

Tamiko looked around, meeting her friends' eyes. “She's a pain in the ass, this one, isn't she?”

“Yep. Quick, though. I thought I had her then.” Misaki glanced at the small crater in the middle of the road slightly guiltily. “Whoops.”

Her sister giggled. “I won't tell Yori if you guys don't.”

“Like that will stop her finding out,” the other woman said, grinning for a moment, as the others laughed. “No, it was my mistake, I'll admit to it and take the horrific sarcasm that comes as punishment.” Tamiko burst out laughing, clapping her friend on the shoulder.

“She'll be fine, you know that. Just a bit... amused.” Ducking slightly without looking as a burst of magic only just missed her, coming from the garage on the corner of the road, she sighed. “At the moment we need to get this crazy girl off the street before she really hurts someone.”

“I wish we knew that cloaking trick,” Fumiko mused, sending a stealthed camera off to peer into the darkened interior of the building through one of the windows in the side. “Chou said we were nearly ready for it a few days ago. We should try to learn it as soon as possible, it would make this a lot easier.” The other two nodded reflectively.

“Good idea. OK, so how to we get her out without damaging the fixtures, then? If we go in she's going to go completely apeshit, she's right on the edge at the moment. Feel that?” Her friends could easily feel what she was talking about, the ki output of the magical girl betrayed extreme anger, paranoia, and fear. “Poor dear thing is scared of us,” she added with a toothy grin. Misaki snickered.

“Good. I never liked her much. Maybe we can scare her into fainting?”

“We need Yori for that. Or maybe Azumi. Ms Aoyama might be a little much.” They all exchanged glances, then laughed hysterically for a moment.

“Probably best not to actually scare her to death. That might be unfortunate.” Tamiko scratched her ear reflectively, studying the building in which their quarry lurked, muttering to herself and intermittently firing off one or other magical attack more or less randomly, not hitting much except the scenery. Looking over her shoulder the auburn-haired girl studied the two police cars that had drawn up at a safe distance, blocking the road and preventing anyone coming closer. “Glad they're hanging back. This would be even more awkward if there were any people in the way.”

“Everybody ran like mad as soon as they saw her coming,” Fumiko sighed. “I don't think she even noticed. They certainly have an impressive reputation now, but it's not the one they had a year ago. Not after that mall incident.” She thought for a moment, then fired a tiny ki ball into the vehicle entryway of the garage, which popped on the rear wall with a noise like a firecracker, provoking a wild flurry of magic in all directions and quite a lot of swearing. “Hmm. She's sure on a hair trigger.”
“Well, as much fun as it is annoying her, we can't stay out here all day doing it. People have things to do and this is causing chaos.” Tamiko shook her head in irritation. “Hey! Crazy girl! You going to come out or do we have to come in?” she called out in a loud voice. More swearing came in response, along with half a dozen blasts of magic.

“Those aren't her normal attacks, are they?” Misaki asked, avoiding all of them without too much effort.

“Nope. She seems to have moved past that. It feels like raw energy. I guess she worked out how to access her power without all those silly speeches.” Tamiko looked mildly impressed. “If she wasn't nuts I'd be quite pleased for her.”

“It's an irritating time for one of them to suddenly become half-way competent, though,” Fumiko noted, shaking her head, annoyed. “Just makes this more difficult than it should be. We could take her easily but we'd almost certainly cause a lot of damage. I don't want to do that, never mind what Yori would say afterwards.”

“If Aiko was here she could just pop in there and drop her before she knew what was going on.”

“She's kind of busy in the park, though. It looks like things are going well there, which is a relief, but it does leave us in a slightly inconvenient place.”

“Anyone but these girls I'd just charge in there and put her down, but that one has some serious power, I'm not keen on one of those blasts in the face. It would hurt, a lot.” Tamiko sent one of her own cameras closer, hovering it in the doorway, which the blonde inside didn't notice at all. “She's in the inspection pit. Good cover.”

“We should just lob a decent sized ki blast in there and pull her out of the wreckage,” Misaki muttered, irritated.

“There's already enough damage from today, I don't think that's sensible, but it gives me an idea,” her friend said slowly. She abruptly flinched, at the same time the others did, feeling the blast of ki/magic from the position they knew Yori and the others were, as well as what she saw on the small window feeding her video from one of ‘Azumi’s' cameras. “Shit. That was a damn stupid thing to do. Good thing Chou is fine.”

“Haruka doesn't look like she wants to play any more, though,” Fumiko replied, staring at the remote scene with slightly horrified fascination. “Yori suddenly went very scary again.”

“Serves the bitch right. I'd have done the same thing, myself, but I'm not sure I'd have aimed at her arm,” her sister muttered. “Chou is family.”

“Damn right. Oh well, at least they've got their two down. Looks like Ami and Rei will have Hotaru talked around in a minute or two as well. We're in danger of getting embarrassed here, there's three of us against one of her.” Fumiko glanced at Tamiko. “What was that brilliant idea?”

“This,” her friend smiled, sending a command to the stealthed camera via her SI. Seconds later there was a cry of pain from inside the building.

“OW! Fuck it, what was that?” They all giggled, watching the video feed as Minako rubbed her head. The invisible, nearly indestructible camera drone slammed into her side, making her yell again. “What's doing that?” she screamed, firing wildly around at nothing. Outside, all three girls were laughing wildly.

“My turn,” Fumiko cried, sending her hovering drone in, bouncing it off the back of the blonde's
“Fuck!” she screamed, whirling to look at where the blow had come from.

“These things are guaranteed practically unbreakable, right?” Misaki asked idly, sending the one she had spare that wasn't watching Usagi to harass the blonde. Another scream of rage came from inside the building.

“Apparently. Her magic might damage it, but she doesn't seem to be able to hit the side of a barn from inside the barn at the moment.” Tamiko watched the video feeds with hilarity, leaning against the wall they were next to and smiling. “Ooh. That was close.” Another yell came as a drone got Minako in the forehead. They amused themselves for a few minutes mildly torturing their opponent, who was in an absolute frenzy, trying to work out what was hitting her. None of the blows were hard enough to cause serious injury, she was much too tough for that, but they were still painful, as well as very annoying.

Eventually Tamiko nodded. “That should do it. Misaki, you want to take the shot? Make up for that hole?” The other woman grinned.

“Yes. Thanks.” She glanced at the small crater, amused for a moment. “Barely big enough for one duck.” As her friends laughed, she shot off at blurringly high speed, entering the doorway to the building and tackling the completely distracted blonde, who fell seconds later to a series of ki-enhanced pressure point attacks. Slinging the limp woman over her shoulder, she exited, grinning broadly.

“That was fun,” the tall girl said happily. “We should get some of these with spikes on, it would work even better.” Fumiko giggled while Tamiko looked thoughtfully at the camera sphere she had reclaimed and was holding.

“OK, let's talk to the cops, get the details, then get rid of this nuisance and go help the others. That building looks pretty bad.” Leading the way to the police cars, the auburn-haired young woman smiled at the sergeant in charge. “Hi. Sorry about all the noise and damage.”

He looked at her for a moment, then at Misaki, with her blonde burden. “No problem. Just make sure she doesn't come back. Please?” He sounded wistfully hopeful. Grinning, she nodded.

“That's the idea, if possible.” After giving him their contact details and requesting that he send them information on all the people affected by the short-lived fight, which had thankfully caused surprisingly little real damage although quite a lot of chaos, she called the others. Seconds later Aiko and 'Chou' appeared next to her, laughing.

“That trick with the cameras was inspired,” Aiko giggled. 'Chou' shook her head with amusement.

“Let's get her to the temple and make sure everyone is all right, then we can finish up at the other site,” the blonde said, still smiling. “I really shouldn't find that as funny as I did.” They were all laughing again as they vanished, causing the police and various spectators to blink a bit.

‘Azumi’ looked around as Aiko appeared a few metres away, feeling her ki signature instantly. “That seems to have gone fairly well,” she noted over the comm, having been watching with part of her attention the live feed Aiko had provided the rest of them of Ami and Rei's apparently successful attempt to talk Hotaru around.

“Not too bad at all,” Aiko responded, stepping up beside her as she went back to work gingerly
moving a crushed van out of the entrance of the building in which it was firmly embedded, a building they could both feel three people in, somewhere at the back. Grabbing the other end of the vehicle she helped. 'Yori' and 'Chou' were both on the other side of the street cutting their way carefully into the caved-in entrance of one of the buildings heavily affected by Haruka's magic attack, trying not to make the whole thing collapse completely, as it was fairly badly damaged. “I think she wanted to be convinced. She was emotionally all over the place, but then she's several years younger than the others, around twelve or thirteen I think, and a bit fragile in some ways. I don't think most of them treat her very well, even those two lovers that are nominally her adoptive parents from what Ami said. For some reason they don't seem to trust her as much as you'd expect, or perhaps they're scared of her. I don't know the whole story yet.”

“Bit odd, we should look into that when this is over,” 'Yori' offered, glancing over at them. “She's probably the most powerful of them all, at least potentially. I certainly don't want that sort of power running wild because she's scared of her friends.”

Down the street about fifty metres away the news crew was still filming them, the reporter excitedly describing the scene. 'Chou' had left the ward in place, except she'd flipped it around so that it prevented them approaching the potential danger zone, in case one of the buildings completely collapsed. The largest of them, an apartment block about four stories high, was making intermittent unfortunate noises as if to indicate this wasn't entirely off the menu. 'Yori' looked up as one particularly loud creaking groan accompanied a small shower of debris from about half way up. “This is going to go soon,” she said out loud, annoyed. “There are at least five people still inside it, at the top.”

“We've got Minako, she was hiding inside a garage and shooting at us, which made it a bit difficult, we didn't want to wreck the place,” Tamiko told them suddenly. All four of them laughed at the video their friends sent them showing the method they'd used to distract the magical girl so Misaki could take her down.

“Good, well done,” 'Chou' responded. She glanced at Aiko, grinning. “We'll come and make sure she's out for the near future then drop her off at the temple, but after that we need you here. We can clear up your site if necessary once we've got all these people out safely.”

“OK. We're standing by.” Leaving 'Azumi' to finish clearing the entrance now that the van was safely out of it with no further damage to the building, Aiko dashed across to 'Chou', the pair of them teleporting out immediately.

The disguised Nabiki pulled a few more large lumps of rubble out of the way, then wrenched the bent door off its hinges, entering the building. Looking around quickly she headed up the stairs towards the rear of the building, to where she could feel three ki signatures, radiating worry and mild pain. “Hello?” she called as she reached a locked door to an apartment at the back, the one across the hall standing open with clear signs that the occupants had left in a considerable rush. There was no answer, so she knocked, then tried the knob. It resisted for a moment then, as she turned harder, produced a small metallic crack sound and yielded. Pushing she found the door opened a few centimetres, only to fetch up against a security chain.

Sighing slightly, she reached into the gap and snapped it between her fingers, opening the door fully. A woman, about mid twenties, was sitting on the sofa in the middle of the room staring at her, two children less than six or so with her, one on either side. She was cuddling one of them, a little girl, who seemed in pain. “Who are you?” the woman asked, looking scared. The middle sister smiled at her.

“I'm Azumi. Don't worry, I'm here to help you. We need to get you out of this building, it's got a
lot of structural damage and isn't safe any more.” The woman studied her for a moment then nodded, looking down at her daughter.

“When the fighting started outside she got scared and ran into the bedroom, but she hit her head very hard on the side of the bed trying to hide under it. I'm worried she might have a concussion. That's why we didn't leave when everyone else did.” Moving closer, ‘Azumi’ knelt down and smiled at the little girl, reaching out to brush some dark hair away from a large bruise that was darkening on her forehead, marring the otherwise perfect skin.

“It doesn't look too bad, but my friends outside are really good at healing this sort of thing, they can check her for you and fix anything that's wrong. Why don't you pack a small bag and come with me. Once your building is checked over and any serious damage repaired, you can come home again.” Sighing a little the woman nodded again.

“All right.” She released the girl, who stared at the silver-haired young woman in fascination, her injury forgotten for the moment. Her brother was looking between his mother, who was going into the bedroom, and their visitor, not sure which one was more interesting. He settled for staring at 'Azumi'.

“Is that your real hair colour?” he finally asked. She nodded, grinning.

“Yep. Neat, isn't it?”

He laughed. “I like it. I like your coat as well.”

“Thanks.” Standing, she patted him on the head, looking around as a faint groan came from somewhere below them as the building gently settled. Bringing one of her cloaked cameras down from where it had been loitering above the street outside, she spent a few seconds having it scan the outside of the building, noticing with some concern that there were a number of cracks in the foundation that didn't look very good. 'Damn it. Those two idiots have caused god knows how many millions of yen worth of damage just to this one building, not to mention the others across the street,' she commented to Jun.

#The damage is considerable, Nabiki, but I don't believe this building is sufficiently structurally unsound as to be in immediate danger of collapse. It is still a good idea to evacuate it, though, just in case I'm misreading the situation. The buildings on the other side of the street are in much more danger of imminent destruction, however. I would judge that the one Ranma is currently entering may well reach the point of complete failure within half an hour. Complete evacuation is a matter of priority.# A slight note of worry entered the SI's voice. #There appears to be approximately five to seven people still inside that building. I suggest that you deal with these individuals as fast as possible then help Ranma immediately, as your sister and the others have not returned yet.#

'OK, thanks for the update,' she replied, then out loud said, “We need to hurry, miss, I have to go and help my friends across the street.”

“I'm nearly done,” the woman called, emerging from the bedroom moments later with a backpack, zipping it up. “Come on, kids, we have to leave for a while.” Both the girl and boy jumped off the sofa, the girl swaying a little and putting her hands on her head.

“My head feels funny,” she said faintly, then gently fell over, 'Azumi' neatly catching her before she hit the carpet.

“Damn. Yes, she's probably got a concussion. Let's go and get that sorted out.” Smiling at the woman, trying to project an air of competence, the middle Tendo led the mother and her son out of
the apartment, carrying the girl and pulling the door shut behind her. As a slight afterthought, a
quick burst of ki fused the lock shut, ensuring the door wouldn't be easily opened if someone tried
to loot the place. She closed the door of the apartment across the hall on the same basis, hearing it
latch as it swung shut. Shortly they were all out on the street. The woman looked around in shock.

“Good god,” she muttered. “Those stupid girls have wrecked the place.”

“Unfortunately, yes, they do seem to have caused a lot of damage,” ‘Azumi’ agreed, leading them
towards the news crew and away from the potentially dangerous buildings. “Don't worry, it will
get sorted out, and hopefully they won't be back.”

“I certainly hope not. They're a menace. Most of the magical girls are more or less OK, nowadays,
since that Yori girl turned up and took them in hand, but that group are seriously irritating,
especially recently.” The young mother sighed, looking around. “This used to be such a nice clean
street.”

She twitched slightly as 'Chou' and the other four girls suddenly popped silently out of nowhere a
few metres away. “Holy...!” Catching herself just in time she glanced guiltily at her children, while
'Azumi' smiled.

“Don't worry, these are my friends.” Her sister walked over as the others headed off to help 'Yori'.
'Chou' gave the woman a comforting and gentle smile, which made her visibly relax.

“Hello. I'm Chou. Now, let's have a look at your daughter.” The silver-haired young woman
lowered the girl in her arms to the ground, as her sister bent over her, her hands glowing golden,
running them carefully over the little girl's head. “It's nothing to worry about, only a moderate
concussion. Hold on for a moment while I deal with it.” The glow intensified as she concentrated,
the girl's mother staring in amazement, then faded after twenty seconds or so. “There we go. Good
as new. She's perfectly healthy otherwise.” Opening her eyes, the little girl looked up, staring wide-
eyed at the four faces looking at her, fixating on that of her mother. She held her arms up, making
her mother smile and pick her up.

“Thank you so much, Chou,” she said quietly, smiling at the blonde, who smiled back. “And you
as well, Azumi.”

“You're very welcome,” the eldest Tendo told her, looking pleased. “I'm sorry about being rude,
but we really must get back to work.” Waving to the children, who looked up at her with awe, she
and her sister headed back to the rapidly deteriorating building, which Fumiko and Tamiko were
just entering. “I'm going to try reinforcing the outside with a ward, it should help hold it up while
we evacuate it,” the blonde said, concentrating on her work. Soon a golden glimmer was apparent
across the entire front of the apartment building, the constant rain of debris halted for the moment,
although creaking sounds indicated it was still slowly coming to pieces.

“It was a pretty powerful blast that damn woman fired,” 'Azumi' commented, looking around at
the damage. “This is going to be expensive to fix. It's a good thing there were so few people
around. They got lucky again. No fatalities.”

“Yes. That luck won't hold forever,” the blonde sighed. “At least we've got three more of them off
the street, while it looks like Hotaru may be brought around as well, which is a good thing. I like
that young woman. She's got a lot of potential, I think, even though she hasn't had the easiest of
lives. Poor girl.”

“Just Usagi and Michiru to go, then?” They entered the building, heading up, probing for
casualties on the way.
“I suppose so. In theory we've done more or less all we can do with Usagi, but Michiru still requires healing and possibly some mental work from Hnther, although whether it will be any more successful this time I really don't know.” 'Chou' stopped, backtracking a couple of metres down the hallway, peering at the wall carefully. “There's someone unconscious on the other side of here,” she added, concern on her face. “He feels quite badly injured.” Prodding the wall gently both of them watched as it visibly moved, dust coming from the ceiling.

“Something collapsed on the other side, look at all the cracks in it,” the silver-haired woman noted. Her sister nodded. They found the door to the flat, breaking it open with no effort, then went inside, to find that several large and heavy book-cases which had been affixed to the walls without a lot of care had fallen over, throwing books all over the room.

“He's under all that,” the blonde said, beginning to move books around. Between them they quickly cleared a path to the unconscious man, who was in his late sixties, with a clearly badly broken leg and damage to his head from where something particularly heavy had hit it. “Oh, dear. That doesn't look good.” Bending over him she quickly scanned him. “Fractured skull, broken femur, a lot of blood loss, and nasty swelling of the brain. We got here just in time, he wouldn't have lasted another half hour.” Directing her sister to pull on the leg she quickly realigned the bones and healed them, before sealing the flesh.

“That amazes me every time I see it, sis,” 'Azumi' sent with a smile. The other woman glanced at her.

“As I've said, it's probably the thing I'm most proud of being able to do,” she replied silently. “Can you hold his head like this, please, while I do the skull fracture? Gently, don't press too hard, just hold it still.” The middle sister carefully followed her instructions. “Good. Don't move.” Golden light danced around slender fingers for half a minute. “That's done it. He's going to be fine, but the blood loss is too severe to immediately repair. I've pushed the marrow to produce new cells as fast as I dare, now he needs time to recuperate. Take him downstairs to one of the ambulances, please, while I keep looking.”

Several emergency vehicles had arrived in the last ten minutes, something they'd both noticed from the camera feeds on the street. 'Azumi' nodded. “OK. Back in a minute.” Shortly, outside, she approached one of the ambulance crews, who immediately opened the back and pulled out a gurney, helping her place the patient on it. She passed on the information her sister had noted, one of them writing it down, while the other checked the vitals of the man.

The paramedic with the clipboard smiled at her. “Thank you, miss...?”

“Just Azumi.” She smiled back slightly as he nodded, a look of recognition sweeping across his face. “You've heard of me?”

“I have. From Setagaya, I hear. Apparently you worry criminals a lot over there.” He chuckled. “Nice work. I heard you work with Yori and Chou sometimes, and those other girls. Glad you lot are here. That reporter over there told us some of what happened, it sounds like it got very out of hand for a while.”

“It wasn't ideal,” she admitted, looking around at the badly damaged street and all the destroyed vehicles.

“No demons at all this time? Just those two magical girls fighting each other?” She nodded sombly. “Damn. I'd heard they'd sort of lost the plot, that mall that got destroyed yesterday, for example, but this is a lot of damage for only two of them.” He looked at the wreckage for a moment, shaking his head. “What the hell is wrong with those crazy girls?”
“It's kind of complicated, but we're working on it,” 'Azumi' assured him. Waving, she headed back inside.

In the end they found five conscious victims and the man that 'Chou' had detected, with no other people being present. Sweeping the building twice to be sure, they collected on the street outside ten minutes later, watching as the elder Tendo carefully released the ward she'd erected. “I wish I could hold it up for long enough for everything valuable to be removed but it's going to go soon no matter what I do,” she said, looking mildly annoyed. A few seconds later the entire front of the building almost gracefully slid into the street with a rumbling crash and a huge cloud of dust and debris, making 'Yori' sigh and shake her head.

“There goes about a dozen peoples' homes,” she grumped. “Stupid girls. They just don't think how what they're doing is affecting completely innocent people.” Her wife put an arm around her shoulders.

“That's what we're for, dear,” she said softly, smiling a little. The black-haired woman glanced at her, then grinned.

“Guess so. Oh well, not much more we can do here. Everyone who was injured is healed, all the damaged buildings are evacuated, the emergency services seem to have everything else in hand, so I guess we can leave.” Looking over her shoulder she added, “I'm just going to have a word with Inspector Junpei over there, he looks irritated.” Walking over to the police officer who had been talking to some of his subordinates while waving a hand around at the devastated street, she smiled at him and began a short discussion. By the end of it he seemed in a slightly better mood, shaking her hand with a small smile of respect. Waving to him she rejoined the others. “I don't know him all that well but Sergeant Harada says he's a decent man. Not too happy about all this, though.”

“You can hardly blame him for that,” Tamiko laughed. She snickered slightly.

“No, you can't. It's a bit much, coming after what happened yesterday. Right. Any reason we need to go back to your garage?”

“Not really. There wasn't too much damage, I've already arranged to get details of the people whose property was involved, they seemed pretty pleased when we told them we'd sort out the insurance issues.” The red-head smiled. “I don't think they're used to magical girls cleaning up after themselves around here.”

“We're going to have to top up the fund at this rate.” 'Chou' glanced around, then sighed. “We didn't design it to cover all of Minato.” Glancing at 'Azumi', she produced a small smile. “Hopefully you and Uthryyl can start making the huge profit he was talking about soon, so we can funnel some of it into good works in the community.” Her sister laughed.

“It's not a bad idea.” Giggling, they moved to stand beside Aiko, the entire group disappearing immediately.
Chapter 68

Turning her head as she heard someone come into the room, Ami nodded to Chou, the blonde smiling at her in return, then glancing over to Hnther, who was inspecting Minako. “How is she?”

“Apparently somewhere between Usagi and Setsuna as far as the mental tampering goes. Haruka is about the same, perhaps a little worse. Makoto isn't as badly affected.” Ami sighed quietly. “Hotaru is odd, he thinks it should be worse than it is, but suspects that the healing ability she has is fighting it off in some manner.” She looked over at the purple-haired girl, who was watching her team-mates sleep with her head propped on her hands, her elbows on the table, frowning and deep in thought. “She didn't take it well but I think she believes us.” Chou shook her head a little.

“Poor girl, from what I understand this has been going on for a lot of her life. She's about four or five years younger than you, isn't she?”

“Four and a half. Too young for all this, really, but...” She shrugged.

“The crazy doesn't make allowances for age, unfortunately,” the older woman nodded. After a few seconds she went over to talk to Hnther, who straightened up and greeted her, looking pleased she was back.

Walking over to the table Ami sat beside Rei, who was watching Hotaru with concern, but turned to her friend. “I guess they're all back?”

“I think so.” Ami looked at her watch. “All that happened in about an hour. It feels much longer.”

“That's what I was thinking.” Rei sighed, turning in her chair to stare at the three unconscious women that once she'd called friends. “Do you think they'll be able to sort all this out? Make it go back to what it was?” Ami was silent for some time.

“No. I suspect they can probably fix the actual medical problems, Yori and Chou have amazing healing abilities, but I'm not sure about the mental issues. Hnther seems to know what he's talking about and isn't sure either.” The blue-haired girl sighed heavily, folding her arms and crossing her outstretched legs. “Even if, and it's a big if, by some miracle they manage to fix all the physical and mental issues, there's still all the stuff that's been done and said in the last few days. Like I said earlier, would you trust most of them after this?” Rei shook her head slowly and sadly.

“No, I guess not. The way Makoto and Haruka were screaming at each other, I don't think they'll ever forget it and go back to the way they were.”

“They've never much liked each other anyway,” her friend noted sourly.

“True.” They sat in silence for a while, until Yori and Azumi came into the room, the martial artist heading for Hnther and Chou, as the silver-haired woman came over to them and sat down. She gave them each a polite nod and a small, neutral smile.

“How are you both? I was quite impressed with how you talked Hotaru around,” she said quietly, glancing at the younger girl on the other side of the table who didn't seem to hear them. Ami raised one shoulder in a sort of dispirited shrug.

“I suppose we're all right under the circumstances. I've kind of expected something along these lines for some time, but I didn't expect everything else that went along with it. All the fighting, the damage, the anger.” Looking depressed she studied the three unconscious girls. “It's kind of
upsetting."

“I can well imagine. You have my sympathies.” Azumi smiled again at them, more warmly. “It can't be easy. Hopefully we can work out some method to minimise all the problems, but I don't think we're going to be able to cure everything.”

“We were just discussing that,” Rei offered. “We both think the same thing. Too many things have gone wrong, things we can't brush under the carpet.” The young woman glanced at Hotaru, who was still deep in thought. “At least we seem to have been able to help one person.”

“One is better than none, certainly.” Azumi looked up as Yori came over, Chou now bending over Minako, her hands glowing.

“We're going to heal their brains, then it might be worth waking them up one at a time and checking if anything has changed, although based on Usagi I doubt it.” Yori sighed a little. “Unfortunately. But it's worth a try.”

“How do we make sure that this sort of thing stops happening?” Azumi asked curiously. The martial artist sat down with them.

“I'm not sure. I don't think just telling them firmly to stay away from each other would work, they're not in listening moods, by and large.” She watched her partner work on the blonde lying on the carpet next to her brunette team-mate. “Hopefully, as their minds settle down, they'll be less prone to random violence, at least towards each other, but I have no idea how long that might take. It wouldn't surprise me to find they kick off like this again.”

“We can't allow that,” Ami told her, sure of this. “It's a damn miracle no one has been killed yet. People were hurt in the last one, next time, I'm pretty sure someone will die. That can't be allowed to happen.”

Looking at her for a moment the black-haired martial artist studied her. “People have been injured in several of your actions over the last couple of years, sometimes quite seriously,” she noted, looking annoyed. Ami glanced at Rei, both of them blushing.

“I know.” Her voice was small and worried. “I'm really sorry about that. I should have done something about it a long time ago, but...”

Yori nodded slowly. “It's not easy. I understand.”

“Until recently, I knew there was a problem, but I guess I hoped it wasn't anything serious, like it might fix itself. Then everyone started going really weird. By the time it was obvious it was only going to get much worse it was too late.” She rubbed her forehead tiredly. “Then things went completely crazy. And here we are.”

“We're both sorry we didn't ask for help months ago,” Rei added, sighing and looking at her hands. “Me more than Ami, at least she realised there was a problem. If it hadn't been for grandfather, I'd probably be lying over there next to Minako.” Yori laughed.

“Possibly. Possibly not. You certainly weren't as badly affected as most of them, you might have been able to work it out on your own, but I agree the old priest is pretty good. He certainly helped.” Looking over at Hotaru, who was sitting silently, not apparently paying attention, she asked, “Hey, Hotaru. How are you doing?” The younger girl twitched, slowly turning her head a few seconds later to stare at her. After several more seconds she finally sighed.

“I've been better.”
Yori smiled sympathetically. “I can imagine. I'm sorry about that. Are you going to be OK?” There was another pause.

“I'm still not sure. I've been thinking about everything that's happened, everything I've been told, everything I thought I knew. What are you supposed to do when you find out that half your life is a horrible lie?” The girl shook her head, leaning back in her chair for a moment and stretching, then slumping across the table with her forehead resting on her folded arms, her face hidden. “I'm so tired and confused,” her muffled voice said faintly.

Yori watched her for a while, exchanging a glance with Azumi, who shrugged a little. “I think it will get better. I hope it will, anyway. It's not going to be easy for you or any of your friends, but with some luck and a lot of hard work we should be able to fix at least some of the problems. You know the truth, and seem to accept it, which is a lot better than most of the others so far.”

“We don't even know for sure that what you think is the truth actually is the truth, though, do we?” the girl asked, not raising her head. “All we really know is that what we thought we knew is a lie.” Everyone at the table looked at her in silence.

“True. We're not sure of the details yet, but overall it seems like a pretty certain thing, what Lldnr'k and Yori worked out,” Ami finally said, quietly. “There's just too much evidence. We can prove it, or at least that the original story is a lie, by checking the moon for ruins, Yori says.” After a second or two, Hotaru raised her head, surprise in her eyes along with a hint of tears.

“Check the moon? How?”

“I know someone we can borrow a spaceship from,” Yori chuckled. The girl stared at her in amazement.

“A spaceship? A real spaceship?”

“Yes. He's got quite a few. Some of them are huge. He's an asteroid miner in his reality. When we were on holiday a couple of weeks ago we got a ride out to an asteroid he's mining metals from. Pretty cool. Azumi and a friend of ours you haven't met spent hours trying to throw a rock into orbit.” It was Ami's turn to look surprised, while Hotaru seemed speechless.

“That would be incredibly difficult,” she mused, “The number of variables that would affect an orbital trajectory would make it almost impossible to do by hand, even in a microgravity environment.” Yori laughed, amused.

“It took them quite a few tries. The asteroid was almost perfectly spherical, which helped, and Onkra has a good eye for things like that. She managed it in the end, got a rock about the size of a baseball to go all the way around. She was very pleased about it. Took the rock home with her.” Hotaru giggled at this.

“I sure would have. That's cool.” Looking at Yori, after a moment, she asked, “If you go to the moon can I come?”

The martial artist grinned. “Of course you can. The ship he'd probably use is big enough for a couple of dozen people. You can all come if you want.” Rei and Ami exchanged glances. “It's perfectly safe. Trust me,” Yori looked very amused at the slight sigh of defeat Ami produced, before smiling.

“Thanks. We'd like that.”

“Good. OK, Hotaru, let's have a look at you and sort out that brain thing, shall we?” Moving
around to the other side of the table, she sat next to the purple-haired girl. “This won't hurt, you won't feel anything much.” Hesitating for a second or two, Hotaru nodded, allowing Yori to put her hands on her head. As they glowed she gently moved them around, concentrating on her work. “It's not too bad. Worse than Rei, but nothing like as bad as any of the others. Your own healing abilities are clearly continuously repairing the damage, but they can't quite get ahead of it. Not bad.” She smiled at the girl, who smiled back, somewhat uncertainly.

“People are scared of my abilities,” Hotaru said in a small voice. “It worries them.” Yori looked surprised.

“Why on earth would anyone be worried about someone being able to heal? It's the greatest thing you could possibly do. Any idiot can fight, but it takes a lot of skill and practice to be able to fix medical problems. Be proud of what you can do, not worried about it.”

“People are scared of you, too.” Violet eyes met violet eyes. Yori grinned.

“Not because of the healing abilities, that's for sure. There are other reasons.” Ami choked back a sudden laugh, while Rei started giggling uncontrollably. Azumi was smiling widely, apparently highly amused.

“Oh, yes, there are lots of reasons to be scared of Yori. Terrified, even. But the healing is a good thing. I wish I could do it.” The young woman with silver hair looked slightly disappointed. Yori glanced at her for a moment, smiling a little.

“I keep telling you, you will be able to one day. You're not quite ready yet but I'm going to teach you, I promise. Look at all the other things you learned!” Azumi nodded slowly, grinning, as Ami, Rei, and Hotaru all looked curiously at her, wondering what those things were. “Right, all done.” Yori dropped her hands after one last check. “You're back to normal. Or as normal as any magical girl ever gets.” Hotaru giggled again, looking much happier.

“I don't feel any different.”

“You might notice a difference in a few days, you might not.” Yori shrugged, studying her closely, then smiled. “When this is all over one way or another I'll show you some interesting things you can do to improve your healing skills. Yours doesn't work quite the same way our does but it looks close enough that the techniques should mostly transfer over.”

Hnther motioned to her, causing her to stand and go over to him, talking quietly for a while, then discuss something with Chou, who was finishing up with Haruka, the last one to be healed. Her arm was still untouched, though. After a couple of minutes, Yori looked down at the three unconscious magical girls, rubbing her cheek thoughtfully for a few seconds with a finger, then looked over at Ami and her friends who were watching curiously. “Hnther has made a couple of adjustments to both Minako and Haruka, he thought they were close to a major problem like Setsuna was, only not as bad. Makoto needs long-term help, but nothing immediate. I'd like to wake them each up, one at a time, to see if anything has changed. Any idea which one to do first?”

Ami looked at Rei, then Hotaru, both girls looking uncertain. “Maybe we should go in order of severity of damage?”

“Hmm. Yes, not a bad idea. OK, then, Makoto first, then Minako, then Haruka last.” Bending down, Yori did the same thing she'd done to Usagi, taking the precaution of temporarily turning off conscious control of the brunette's body below the neck so she couldn't cause too much trouble. “Right. Let's see what happens.” She touched the girl between the eyes, a brief purple glow showing, making Hotaru stare, then stepped back. A second later Makoto stirred, opening her eyes.
Frowning slightly, apparently disoriented, she stared at the ceiling before swivelling her eyes around, catching sight of Yori standing a metre away instantly. Hnther was behind her, out of her range of sight.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathed softly, a momentary panic crossing her face, before she rolled her head to the side and saw her former team-mates staring at her from the table. Her face hardened when she saw Rei and Ami. “Traitors,” she muttered. Yori prodded her with her toe, scowling.

“Be polite.” The brunette flinched, looking worried when she suddenly realised she couldn't move.

“What the hell did you do to me, you insane woman?” she demanded.

“Just took a sensible precaution. Don't worry, it will wear off soon enough. Now, that aside, how do you feel?” Staring up at her in apparent disbelief, the woman on the floor finally snorted.

“How do I feel? Like I've been kidnapped and paralysed by some horrifying harpy and her friends, how else should I feel?” Appearing mildly amused, Yori knelt down on one knee and inspected Makoto closely. The other woman tried to move away, sighing worriedly when she couldn't.

“That aside, how do you feel? In your mind, I mean. All the feelings of rage, mistrust, that sort of thing, that you've been having for a while. Is it any better?”

“How did you...” Makoto shook her head. “No, this is some sort of trick. I'm not telling you anything, crazy bitch. Now, let me go!” She screamed the last words, making Ami twitch in surprise. Yori didn't react at all, merely continued to study the brunette for a few seconds, before sighing.

“She's really not very cooperative, is she?” the martial artist commented, glancing at the others. She looked back to Makoto. “I could make her cooperate, I think, but she wouldn't give us useful information then.” Her smile made the girl on the floor go completely white, then close her eyes for a moment, her lips moving in a sudden prayer.

When she opened them she yelled in shock, as Hnther was looking carefully at her from a short distance away, rubbing his chin absently. “Ahhh! Demon! Ami, you little bitch, why are you cooperating with demons? Hotaru, what's going on? Why are you just sitting there?” Thrashing her head vainly from side to side, she devolved into panicked swearing. Eventually, Yori sighed, reaching out and touching her head for a moment, making her relax and go still.

“Another one not being very useful. Damn.” She had a brief discussion with Hnther, who shrugged. “He's not sure it's going to be any better with the others. She has the least mental damage of the three of them, so if she's still acting weird, the other two will probably be as bad or worse,” she told the other magical girls. Rei looked disappointed but not surprised, Ami sighed, nodding, while Hotaru simply stared at the woman who was one of her adoptive parents, sadness on her features.

“Maybe I should talk to Haruka without the rest of you visible,” she suggested, looking thoughtful. Yori exchanged a glance with Chou, then looked at Ami and Rei. They all nodded.

“Certainly worth a try. OK, let's wake her up and we'll get out of your way.” She smiled at the younger girl. “Good luck.” She touched Haruka in a few precise places, repeating what she'd done to Makoto, then joined Chou and Hnther on the other side of the room, waiting for Ami, Rei, and Azumi to also stand with them. As soon as they did all six of them faded from view. Hotaru stared in astonishment. About to ask a question, she looked down as Haruka groaned, moving her head stiffly, before opening her eyes. A moment passed then she focussed on the purple-haired girl.
“Hotaru.” She licked her lips. “Where am I?”

“In the temple.” The younger woman looked at her with concern. “How do you feel?”

“Tired. Not good. I remember...” Her eyes widened as she attempted to look at her right arm. “My arm! That fucking bitch blew off my arm!” she shrieked, trying to move, unsuccessfully. Her adoptive daughter gently held her head still, waiting for her to calm slightly. “Why can't I move? Did it really happen?” Haruka looked up into the purple eyes of the younger woman, clearly wanting the answer to be in the negative. Hotaru slowly nodded.

“You attacked Makoto, or she attacked you, I don't know which one of you started it. Both of you were going nuts, shooting at each other and missing. You destroyed half a street. Several people got injured, some quite badly. At least one building collapsed.” Haruka gasped, then sighed. “I remember, I think. It's kind of blurry in parts.” She was silent for a moment. “My car! What happened to it?”

“Um, you sort of jumped out of it while it was moving.” Hotaru looked up to where Yori and the others were invisibly watching, before returning her attention to the older woman. “Apparently it's kind of wrecked.”

“Shit. I like that car. It was damned expensive.” The blonde now seemed to be avoiding the question of her arm, but her eyes kept flicking down vainly trying to see it.

“Yori, Chou, and Azumi stopped you fighting before anyone got killed, while Rei and Ami talked to me. I felt you both power up and I was coming to see what was going on. They persuaded me that it was best to leave it to the others.”

“Those traitors? Why would you listen to them? They turned on us, you know that, siding with Fumiko and Tamiko yesterday.”

“Yesterday? When we completely destroyed billions of yen worth of someone else’s mall, you mean? For no reason at all? When we could have been responsible for hundreds if not thousands of deaths? Would have been responsible if they hadn't stopped us? When they were the sensible ones, helping people do the right thing? Is that what you mean?” Hotaru leaned away, crossing her arms and glaring at the older woman, who at least had the grace to look embarrassed, turning her head away.

“I don't know what happened then,” she replied quietly, “it's all sort of... confused. But I know I was more angry than I've ever been in my life. Everyone was against me, except you. Those other bitches are scum.”

“They're your friends! You've known them for years. All the things we've been through, all the enemies we've face, how could you think any of them are 'scum'?” The purple-haired girl was heavy with sarcasm.

Flushing with mixed anger and embarrassment, her adoptive parent glared at her. “They were trying to kill me! And you. What was I supposed to think? They started it, after all.”

“No, you did,” Hotaru said fiercely. “I was there. I saw it. You were all twitchy, you fired at something that wasn't even there, then Makoto fired back. She didn't know what she was shooting at, neither did you, it was stupid. Everything that happened was basically your fault and hers.” She looked very annoyed. Haruka stared at her, then closed her eyes for a moment, trying to remember. “I can't remember it that well. Just being furious, and scared, and eventually kind of having fun
breaking things. It was... it was very strange.” Looking around as much as she could, she saw the unconscious form of someone beside her on what she realised was the floor, then in the other direction a hand hanging over the side of the familiar sofa she'd sat on many times. “Is that Makoto?” she asked, flicking her head to her right. Hotaru nodded.

“Yes. She's unconscious. So is Minako, on the sofa there.”

“I don't like being next to her.” Haruka frowned. “I don't trust her. Either of them.”

“Tough.” She looked shocked at the words coming from the young woman. “After what you've done you should be glad you're still alive and more or less intact.” Hotaru glared at her. “You blew up three buildings, half a dozen cars, nearly killed several innocent people, and most stupidly of all, hurt Chou in front of Yori! You're incredibly lucky to be alive. I felt the magic from several hundred metres away. You have no idea how dangerous she is. Ami's told me some stories...” She shivered. “You so don't want her angry with you, not like that. If it happened again she'd kill you on the spot, I have absolutely no doubt about it. She's terrifying.”

Haruka had been going paler and paler as the girl spoke. “I nearly crapped myself when she glared at me, I remember that,” she responded in a low voice. After a long pause, she added tentatively, “My arm...?”

“It's gone from the elbow down.” Hotaru looked sadly at her as she went almost green in shock. “She healed it up, but that's it. You really pissed her off. Ami thinks that if you're very apologetic she might be nice and regenerate it. But you'd have to mean it. She can tell.”

The woman on the floor couldn't speak for some time, only her mouth working without any sound coming out. “She can fix it?” she finally managed, sounding desperately hopeful.

“I can. If I want.” The new voice made her twitch as much as she could, rolling her eyes frantically around, as Yori came into view. She'd had no warning that the other woman was present at all. The blonde stared in worried, horrified fascination as Yori squatted down beside the kneeling Hotaru, putting a hand on her shoulder, inspecting her with cold emotionless interest. It was vastly worse than any look she'd ever received from Setsuna, who she'd always considered the queen of cold looks, but nothing like the gaze of death she suddenly remembered from the fight earlier. She swallowed heavily.

“Will you?” she faintly asked, staring into purple eyes that, while a similar colour to her adoptive daughters, were far more alien at the moment. There was a long pause.

“Perhaps. I might even give you your sword back. But, in return, this never happens again. You understand me? No stupid quarrels, no fighting in the street, no feuds with your team-mates, and most importantly of all, no putting innocent people in danger. Ever.” The voice was like something from the nasty nightmares you sometimes get at three in the morning in the winter, when you wake to find you've kicked the covers off and you're freezing cold. Haruka nodded shakily, not even considering lying or dissembling.

“I promise.”

Yori studied her for a few seconds longer. “I will hold you to that. Let me down, and...” There was no real threat, but Haruka had the sudden feeling she'd made a bargain that there was no possibility of going back on, without paying a price she was unwilling to. She swallowed again. Hotaru, beside Yori, was looking worried, leaning away slightly, not quite daring to push the hand off her shoulder.
“I promise,” she repeated. “I'll be good.”

“Great!” Yori instantly warmed, becoming apparently very pleased, not a trace of the deadly predator left, with a suddenness that made both Hotaru and Haruka stare. “Let's get you fixed up then. We've got an interesting story to tell you as well, it sort of explains all the weird things going on with you guys at the moment, but it also raises a lot of other questions.” She lightly prodded Haruka in half a dozen places and abruptly the blonde could move again. Standing, Yori held out a hand, which after a long moment, Haruka took with her left hand, having realised as soon as she'd moved the other arm that the damage was real. She paled, but resolutely didn't look at it, heaving herself up with Yori's aid. She tingled slightly all over with pins and needles.

“It'll wear off in a few minutes,” the other woman said, somehow knowing what she was feeling. Haruka nodded, then jumped when suddenly five other people were in the room. She stared at Ami and Rei, beginning to glare, until Yori cleared her throat meaningfully. Looking away from them quickly she noticed one person who definitely wasn't human.

“Gack. A demon!” She tried to produce her sword but only got the sheath, standing looking embarrassed with it in her hand, while Hotaru giggled.

“That's Hnther,” the younger woman said. “He's cool. He's a friend of Yori and Chou's.”

“He's a DEMON!”

Yori cast her a look complete with a raised eyebrow. “Yes. So? What's the problem? He's still a friend of mine, and a very respected and practised mage. His name is well know on several worlds.”

“But... but... Demon?” Haruka looked pleadingly at the black-haired girl, then her daughter, who both shrugged. “Oh, fuck it. This is one of the weirdest days of my life,” she finally grunted, putting the sheath away, walking over to the table and sitting at it, staring at the empty teapot in the middle. Hearing a sound at the door she looked up to see Rei's grandfather walk past deep in conversation with another demon, one who appeared to be some sort of bipedal bird, like a crow or something. The old priest was laughing as if he was talking to a good friend. She stared until they were out of sight, then looked at Hotaru for help.

“That one is called Lldnr'k, he's another mage and an old friend of Yori's,” the purple-haired girl told her, a hint of a laugh in her voice.

“He specialises in temporal magic,” Yori explained, “He knows more about it than anyone I've ever met. A real expert and a very nice guy. Now, let's have a look at that arm.” Not entirely sure she was genuinely awake, Haruka raised her right arm, shuddering at the sight of it, the way it simply stopped was horrifying. Yori held it and inspected it closely, her hands glowing visibly, which made Haruka looked a little worried, shooting Hotaru a helpless gaze. The younger girl ignored her completely, watching with complete fascination, wide-eyed. After a moment, Yori nodded.

“Yes, nothing particularly wrong here.” The blonde stared at her for a second. She grinned. “Aside from missing about half of it, of course. Let's fix that.” Looking queasily at her shortened arm, Haruka stared in disbelief as the glow strengthened, covering the end and making it go numb, then a few seconds later the arm silently began to slowly regrow. Her eyes were as wide as they could possibly go, switching every few seconds between her regenerating arm and Yori's face, which had a look of mild concentration on it. Glancing at Hotaru she noticed the girl was watching without even blinking, a smile of intense joy slowly spreading across her face.
A presence beside her made her look around to see Ami scanning the process with her computer. “Back off, you traitor,” she snarled, suddenly very angry again. Ami jumped, looking hurt.

“None of that, girl, or you'll have a hoof on the end of this and not a hand,” Yori snapped, danger in her voice to a level that made Haruka close her mouth so fast she nearly bit the end of her tongue off. She had no idea how much truth was behind the threat but didn't want to find out. It was becoming very clear that they'd all wildly underestimated what Yori could do, healing was one thing, this was something completely beyond that. She sat quietly as Ami followed the process, frowning slightly as she prodded the computer, and Hotaru watched with great interest. As the last of the fingers gently flowed back into existence Yori looked satisfied. “There we are.” Feeling came back into the entire limb with a rush, Haruka gasping at the suddenness of it, then cautiously flexing her regrown hand. She smiled slightly, clenching it a few times.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. Yori nodded acknowledgement of the gratitude.

“You're welcome. But remember what I said. You ever do anything like that again and there won't be anything left to regenerate. Got it?” She nodded herself, trembling slightly. There was a flat menace in the tone of the black-haired woman's voice that left no doubt whatsoever that she meant it and was more than capable of carrying it out.

“I understand.”

“Good.” Yori looked up as the old priest came into the room, carrying a new pot of tea and some more cups, Lldnr'k behind him, the demon looking at an ancient scroll with interest.

“I thought this might be a good idea,” the priest said, smiling gently as he put his burden on the table. Pouring it out he distributed the cups to everyone, Lldnr'k accepting his with an absent thanks, his eyes not moving from the scroll. Haruka stared at him, completely puzzled about not only the completely casual way the bird-like demon was making himself at home but by the same way everyone else was treating him and the other one, including the priest. Chou and a girl with amazing silver hair and weird amber-orange eyes were talking to Hnther in some language she'd never encountered before, while Rei was watching over Ami's shoulder with curiosity as she fiddled with her computer. No one seemed at all fussed by the presence of two non-humans in the room.

“You seem confused, child,” the old man said, sitting beside her. She turned her head and stared at him wordlessly, then looked around the room again.

“You might put it that way,” she muttered. Waving her hand around, she added, “There are two demons in the room and six magical girls not including myself, but everyone is treating it like some sort of party or maybe a weird business meeting. I got my ass handed to me earlier today, after something I still don't really understand, by the most horrendously dangerous person I've ever met, yet that same person just regrew my fucking hand!” The girl looked embarrassed as she realised she'd just sworn in front of a priest, but he merely chuckled. “You clearly know about us as well. But that doesn't seem to surprise you or worry you either. It's all very weird indeed.” The blonde sighed heavily, looking at her regenerated hand and making a fist, then wiggling the fingers. “Very weird.”

The priest pushed the cup of tea he'd poured for her a little closer on the table. “To take your points in no real order, yes, I know about you girls, I've known for years. As I told Rei, I'm a priest. I have been for a long time. Magic sensitivity isn't surprising under those circumstances, you girls are saturated with it, so it didn't take long to work it out.” He grinned at her look of dawning realisation. “I never said anything because it wasn't my place to, but with all the problems recently, I became involved.” Looking her up and down, he grinned again. “I do like the uniforms, by the
way.” She followed his gaze, realising for the first time she was still powered up, then after a moment's thought, shrugging slightly and turning the magic off. Her clothes returned to their normal version, making him laugh.

He went on, “Hnther and Lldnr'k are most interesting people indeed. I've never met anyone quite like them.”

“But they're demons!” she protested weakly. He looked puzzled.

“And? They're still people. Just not human people. Lldnr'k is at least two hundred years old, he's an immensely experienced mage with some very esoteric knowledge, which is why Yori asked him to help, and he's also a very interesting person to talk to. Hnther is younger but also very experienced. The fact that neither comes from this world is irrelevant.”

The blonde sighed, glancing at the demons. Hnther was still talking to Chou, the silver-haired girl having moved over to discuss something with Ami and Rei, all three of them studying her computer, while Lldnr'k was still reading the scroll with interest. “I'm having a lot of trouble with all this,” she mumbled. He laughed.

“Consider it a mind expanding experience. Everyone needs their preconceptions challenged every now and then. It keeps your mind sharp.” Looking over at Yori, who seemed to be demonstrating something magical to Hotaru, he snickered a little. “That one and her friends will challenge your preconceptions on a daily basis.” Returning his attention to Haruka he studied her. “You are very lucky, my child. You did the one thing I've warned Rei about doing, you got between Yori and Chou, yet somehow you lived. I'm impressed.” The old man sipped some tea, his eyes on hers. “Not with you, mind, but with her. She showed a lot of restraint. I doubt you'd get a second chance, especially if any of the other five are around.” Haruka shivered.

“No, she made that plain. I'm not going to try it again.”

“Probably for the best.”

She looked at her arm. “I still can't believe she could regrow it like that, without any trouble or fuss. I've never seen anything like it. Where could she possibly have learned to do healing like that?”

The priest followed her eyes, then looked over at Yori, still talking to Hotaru, both of them smiling. “I believe she and Chou worked it out themselves. It's certainly totally unlike any magic I have ever encountered before. I know they seem to be able to heal basically anything. Their knowledge of and control of biology is extremely impressive, possibly unprecedented.”

She watched the black-haired woman for a moment, before turning to study Chou, who glanced over, smiling slightly, then went back to her conversation with Hnther. “What are they? Not the normal magical girls, certainly.”

“Not even close. I don't know, to be honest. Your best friend, or your worst enemy.” He shrugged, smiling. “I suspect it's up to you. I do know that both of them are just about fed up with your group. These last excesses are all you're going to get before something serious happens. What that is, I don't know, but I have no doubt it would put a permanent end to the problem your friends currently seem to pose to the community. Even though there are extenuating circumstances, their patience, while remarkable, isn't unlimited. I would advise you listen to what they're going to tell you very carefully before making any decision on what you do next.” Haruka looked curiously at him, wondering what he meant by that.
Standing up, he smiled at her. “I have to get back to work, there are some people I need to talk to and I still need to sweep the yard. It was nice talking to you, child. Please, for your own sake, listen to them. They're not your enemies, unless you make that happen. Don't make a hasty decision. If you want to talk about it afterwards, you know where to find me.” Nodding politely, he waved to Yori, then left the room, heading to the front of the temple. She watched him go, before looking around to find Yori and Ami standing beside her, causing her to twitch as she hadn't noticed them approach.

“It's time to have a chat, Haruka,” the martial artist said, pulling out a chair and sitting. Ami did the same on her other side. Not sure which of them made her more uncomfortable, the blonde crossed her arms and looked uncertain, glancing from one to the other. The other conscious people in the room, including the two demons, all sat down as well, all of them looking at her, something that was making her very nervous. Oddly, the two demons were the least of it, mainly because she couldn't read their expressions, while the ones she could read were... odd. She felt magic surround the room, something she recognised as some sort of wards, vastly more powerful than anything she'd encountered in the past, which was also a bit worrying.

“About...?”

“Your place in the world, I guess you could call it, and the specific things you currently believe about it.” She became aware that both Yori and Chou were looking at her in a peculiarly sympathetic manner, which made her become much more worried than if they had been glaring. There was something unnerving about it. Looking at the faces of her former team-mates and her daughter she saw that they looked weird as well, like they were aware of something she wasn't going to like.

“What do you mean?” she asked tentatively.

Yori sighed gently, watching her face. “We've talked extensively to Ami, and to Rei, about your history, powers, and battles. Something about it wasn't quite right, but it rang a vague bell, one that worried me a lot. I called in Lldnr'k and Hnther to advise us, since various parts of the problems you girls represent falls into their respective areas of expertise. Between us, we've come to some frankly worrying conclusions, ones you need to know about. But you're not going to like it.” There was an unpleasant feeling growing in the pit of her stomach.

Staring at them each in turn, Haruka finally returned her attention to Yori. “I guess you'd better tell me, then. I can't stand the suspense.” Her weak attempt at a joke made the other woman smile slightly, as she leaned back in her chair, nodding agreement.

“OK. It's like this...”
“more mentally flexible, or the changes Hnther made worked better with her. It could be a combination of all those things.” 'Chou' didn't look away from watching the four girls, ready to step in if the argument became violent.

“It probably doesn't matter. If we can get her to accept it at all, that hopefully will be one more person from that group that's less likely to cause trouble. Ami and Rei are fine, I think Hotaru will probably be as well, but I'm not sure about Haruka yet. I have a pretty strong suspicion that even if she does accept some or all of it as truth she's not likely to be very friendly to those two again. Possibly less friendly than before, in some ways. She seems to blame them for a lot of it, which isn't very fair, the situation isn't their fault at all.” 'Yori' sighed slightly, watching the girls shout at each other. Ami was waving her computer, pointing at the screen with her other hand.

“Look, you damn idiot! You can see the damage in the scans from before Chou healed you. Your brain was a mess! Minako and the others as well. I've got before and after scans of all of them.”

“For all I know you faked that, you little rat! Why should I believe this stupid story? It's insane! A time travelling supercomputer from another universe manipulating us for years, jumping back and forth through time, to make things work out the way it wants it to. That's nuts!” Ami glared at the blonde. “Oh, I see, it's much more reasonable to believe that we're the reincarnated warriors from some ancient kingdom on the moon thousands of years ago, is it? Which, according to the story, also had a time travelling supercomputer. Or at least something that could manipulate time. I didn't believe it either at first, but to be honest it makes more sense in some ways than the story we've been told all this time. Both stories are nuts but the one Yori and the others came up with can at least be verified.”

“How!?” Haruka yodelled in a high-pitched voice, grabbing a handful of hair in frustration. “It's all complete gibberish. Demon mages, mind control, time travel, magical girls with crazy powerful healing powers, it's totally insane.” Ami stared at her for a long moment then abruptly broke down into a fit of giggles, causing the blonde woman to stare at her as if she thought she'd gone crazy. “After everything we've been through, you call this insane?” Ami finally managed to gasp out. “Listen to yourself. Our entire lives are insane! If anything, this is one of the more sensible parts. Pay attention to Yori and her friends. They know what they're talking about, I'm sure of it, much more than we do.” The blonde woman stared at her for a long moment, then at her adoptive daughter, who tried smiling hopefully. Throwing her hands in the air she stomped off to sit at the table, glaring at it with her arms folded, obviously trying to think it through. Ami looked over at Yori and Azumi, shrugging a little and sighing. “I guess that's about the best we can hope for at the moment,” the middle sister said.

“Probably. It'll take time for her to think it through. She's not as quick as Ami, and Rei had already begun realising that something was wrong some time ago.” 'Yori' looked at her, then 'Chou', who smiled before going to talk to Ami, taking her off to the corner of the room for a while.

“What do we do about Minako?” Turning to inspect the unconscious blonde, 'Yori' scratched her nose, looking uncertain. “Not sure. We've got one who's not cooperative, one who sort of is, then her. Based on the trouble Fumiko and the others had with her I'm not expecting anything very useful, I'm afraid. I don't think Hotaru will be any help, or the others, since she's not very friendly to them at the moment.” She thought for a few seconds. “I think we should probably wait on her. Take her home, stuff her into bed like Setsuna, then wait to see if she wakes up in a better frame of mind. Do the same with Makoto, I guess. With a little luck they'll calm down once their brains adjust to the healing. Hnther's work
will need some time to bed in as well in Minako's case.”

“We still need to heal Michiru,” Chou noted.

“True. I think we need to get these three out of here first though.”

“What about Hotaru?” ‘Azumi’ watched the purple-haired girl talking to Rei, seeming in a surprisingly good mood under the circumstances.

“I'm not completely sure. She seems to have accepted our version of events, more or less, although I can feel there's still a little doubt there deep inside. Not surprising, considering how long she's believed her original story and how young she is. I'd be amazed if she just took our word for it. And she's right, we can't prove it yet, even though it fits together so well.” ‘Yori’ glanced at her sister-in-law, smiling slightly. “She's not stupid. I think possibly the best course of action is just to let her go home with Haruka. They can talk it out. I suspect that Hotaru will talk her around, if only as far as keeping her head down.”

“After what you did to her I don't see her causing any more trouble.” 'Chou' looked up for a moment, meeting her husband's eyes. “She was absolutely terrified of you. She still is.”

“Good. I meant every word.” The martial artist's face was as expressionless as anything ‘Azumi’ could manage. “If she does anything like that again, it's duck pond time.” Her wife nodded slightly before going back to her conversation with the blue-haired girl. The middle sister watched the face of her sister-in-law for a moment, feeling a slight chill, then glanced at Haruka who was still scowling at the table.

“I hope it doesn't come to that,” she said.

“So do I. I hate killing. But if I have to, if there's no alternative...” 'Yori' made a small gesture. “Sometimes you have no choice. These girls are far too dangerous to be running around wrecking the place. Eventually there would be real casualties, quite possibly very large numbers of them. We can't allow that to happen. Ami knows that. She's quite serious about doing what would be needed to be done under those circumstances, although she'd hate it, and herself, afterwards.”

There was silence on the com for a while. 'Chou' walked over to Hnther with Ami, bringing him into the discussion, while Lldnr'k talked to Rei and Hotaru, all three of them watching Haruka. Eventually the blonde woman sighed deeply, looking up and around at the others. “I'm going back to the hotel. I need to think about all this.”

“Fair enough,” ‘Yori’ told her. “Would you like Aiko to give you a lift?”

“Where are your friends, anyway?” Haruka asked.

“Watching your friends.” The martial artist grinned as she snorted, almost amused. “Just in case. We don't want a repeat of this afternoon if we can avoid it. Everyone was a little too far away to intervene before it all went to shit.”

“No, thanks, I'll walk.” Haruka shook her head, standing up. “Do I get my sword back?”

“When I think you're ready for it.” ‘Yori’ inspected her. “Not quite yet.” The blonde didn't argue, looking subdued and worried.

“Hotaru? Are you coming?” Joining her at the table, Hotaru nodded.

“OK. Let's get something to eat then talk.” She smiled at her adoptive parent, who smiled back,
slightly unsure. They headed for the door.

“Haruka?” The blonde stopped, looking back at 'Yori'. “Don't forget your promise.”

“I won't.” She shivered slightly. “Ever.” Resuming walking she left the room, Hotaru glancing back and waving, before they headed down the corridor.

“Right. Let's get these two back home, then pick up Michiru and do her, then I guess we should wait to see what happens.” 'Yori' frowned a little, sighing. “God, what a mess this all is.” She moved over to the sofa and stared at Minako for a while. “Aiko, can you come and make a few deliveries, please?” she requested. The brunette appeared seconds later.

“Looks like we might have two more of this group that are at least willing to stop and think,” she said, looking around. 'Yori' nodded thoughtfully, still staring at Minako.

“Hopefully.” She looked up at Ami. “What do you and Rei think?”

The blue-haired girl considered her words carefully. “Hotaru is, I think, willing to believe, if we can provide some evidence.”

“I'll contact S'th'kx and arrange to get him and his crew and ship here as soon as possible, so we can check out the moon for these purported ruins.” Ami nodded, still looking slightly stunned, like she didn't completely believe that an alien complete with spaceship could be produced just like that.

“That should do it.”

“What about Haruka?” The girl looked uncertain.

“I... don't know. She seems to be listening, to one degree or another, but I'm not sure she really believes any of it, not really. Again, some actual provable evidence would help.”

Rei added, “I have to admit it would settle the last few doubts I have.” Everyone looked at her, making her seem slightly embarrassed. “Oh, I think it's true, but deep down...”

'Chou' smiled at her. “We understand. It's a lot to accept, your entire life turning around like that, just on our word. I'm glad you're willing to listen.”

“You make a worryingly good case,” the black-haired girl laughed. 'Chou' giggled.

Ami was inspecting her two unconscious former team-mates. “Even if she does come around to believing it, I somehow feel she's never going to be friends with us again. Not like before. She clearly doesn't trust either of us.” She looked at 'Yori'. “I think she might actually trust you more than me, oddly enough.”

“Why?”

“Well, I think she thinks we really did betray her. You and the others were never part of her team, so even though you've gone against us several times, there's no betrayal there.” Ami sighed a little. “It's weird and upsetting, but I doubt we'll work together again. Not as a team.”

“That's a pity but I suspect you're right,” the other woman replied. She shrugged a little. “Well, we can't do much about that, at least at the moment. Let's take these two home.” Aiko picked Minako up, while 'Yori' collected Makoto, both disappearing a second later.
The middle Tendo watched Ami, who was staring at the empty sofa with a slightly lost expression. She walked over, stopping beside her. “You look worried.”

“I am. Even if all this magical healing and mental adjustment actually works, there's no denying the fact that our team is finished. Usagi obviously hates me, and Rei as well. I never thought that would happen. She's been one of my best friends for years.” The blue-haired girl seemed very despondent. “I didn't have a lot of friends in the first place. I've got less now.”

‘Azumi’ smiled at her. “You've got more than you think.” Ami looked at her, surprised, then worked out what she meant.

“Thanks.”

“Growing up I didn't have many real friends either,” the silver-haired young woman mused out loud. “There were a lot of reasons for that, some good, some not, but looking back, it wasn't nice. I know people who had it much worse, though. Part of that was my fault, in fact. But, in most respects, in the end it worked out pretty well.” She glanced at Ami. “With a bit of luck it will for you. Rei is still your friend, I think Hotaru is as well. Haruka and the others, well... It's a shame, but people grow apart for much less reason than all of this. If we can somehow stop all the chaos, stop them from causing some huge disaster, even if they're not your friends any more you all might at least be civil to each other.”

Ami thought about her words for a while then slowly nodded. “I suppose you're right. Thank you.” She took a deep breath. “So, what next?”

“Yori and Aiko just put Minako to bed,” ‘Azumi’ told her, watching the live feed from the others. Ami looked curiously at her.

“Every time you guys do that it drives me nuts.” The middle sister grinned.

“That's half the fun of doing it...”

The other girl snickered. “How cruel.”

“Anyway, they're going to sort out Makoto, then grab Michiru on the way back. She's still wandering around near her home, looking very annoyed.” Ami shook her head.

“So curious...”

Laughing, ‘Azumi’ went to talk to Hnther.

Ami watched as Hnther finished inspecting Michiru. Chou translated his words as he looked up from the unconscious woman. “She's worse than Haruka, nearly as bad as Setsuna in some ways, although not quite that far gone. I still had to do some remedial work. It looks like it worked as well as could be expected.” He stood up, stretching. “Which is to say, nowhere near as effectively as I'd like, but well enough to keep her fairly sane for the time being. Most of these women need some serious work by someone with more experience in this sort of therapy than I have.”

“Do you know anyone?” Ami asked him. He looked at her, thinking, then nodded.

“I believe so. When I return home I'll make some enquiries.” After a moment, he added, “Realise, though, that such therapies, while effective, take a considerable amount of time and effort. It won't be an instant fix. In some cases, damage of this nature is permanent.” She looked at Rei, then back at him, nodding respectfully with a small sigh.
“I understand. Thank you for all you've done, even so.”

“You're very welcome.” He nodded back. “I feel it's something important, although I'd have done it anyway since Yori asked.”

Aiko picked the girl up and disappeared, everyone looking away as the by-now familiar flash came and went. A few minutes later she reappeared, sitting on the now vacant sofa and looking around.

“That's all of them. What do we do now?”

“Keep an eye on them all, wait until tomorrow, then see what they're like when they wake up.” Chou glanced at Yori, who nodded.

“Yep. Not much else we can do on that front. We still need to work out what we can do about the damn time machine but that's not something we can sort out right now.” Lldnr'k made an affirmative gesture.

“I will have to think about what could be done to locate the device and access it. I don't know how we can disable it even if we do manage to get access to it, I'm afraid, but I suspect some considerable force might be required.” Yori looked at her friends.

“We can arrange that.”

“I thought as much,” the demon mage replied, looking amused in his own way.

“What do you think will happen if we destroy it?” Azumi asked him. He looked thoughtful.

“I'm not entirely sure. It depends on how that is done, I think. There is little information available on it's method of operation these days, although I will attempt to locate everything I can on that subject, it may suggest some simple method to deactivate it. There is also the problem that it may not be very cooperative in it's own destruction. Although not actually sentient it probably has some form of defences and is most likely smart enough to use them. It was after all the product of a war. Bypassing them may be problematic.” He shrugged. “All I can do at this point is research it.”

“Do you think it will directly intervene?” Ami asked. “It must know by now that we're working against it. It probably knew the instant Azumi blocked the link in the first place.”

“Again, I'm unsure. In all likelihood it can't or won't make major changes, or it would have done so already,” Lldnr'k replied. “I suspect it's limiting itself to quite small nudges for the most part. Those can certainly add up considerably over enough time. More serious action would run the risk of immediately undoing whatever it has already done, if not provoking a major corrective action by reality itself. With luck we can essentially sneak up on it, so that by the time it realises what's going on it's too late. The fact that it apparently can't track or influence Yori or her friends will help this considerably. It's powerful but nowhere near omniscient, as all of this proves, since if it was smarter it would realise it can't possibly achieve what it's trying to do.”

After a second or two of thought, he added, “I will consult with some colleagues who may be able to suggest a suitable course of action.”

“Thanks, guys.” Yori smiled at both the mages. “It's been a lot of help having you both here. I should probably take you home now.” She looked around as Rei's grandfather entered, nodding to him. He smiled at her, then walked over to Lldnr'k.

“It has been a genuine pleasure talking to you and Hnther,” the priest told the demon mage, who looked pleased. “Any time you are in the area, please stop by. I would dearly like to continue our conversation.”
“I would like that as well, my friend.” Looking down at the considerably shorter old man, the crow-like demon clicked his beak, bowing his head. “It has been an honour talking to you.”

“I also enjoyed our conversation,” Hnther said through Chou. He smiled a little, fangs showing. “I will endeavour to learn your language so we might communicate more effectively in future.” The priest grinned at this.

“That would be nice, but it's a lot of trouble to go to.” Hnther casually waved this aside.

“I like learning languages. I may not be as proficient as my learned colleague, but then I don’t have the many, many years of extra experience.” Chou managed to get across the teasing tone of his words very well, smiling slightly in the process. Both Lldnr'k and the old man laughed.

“It is good that you recognise seniority, my friend,” Lldnr'k chuckled, Hnther grinning in response. Snickering, Yori formed a portal in the corner of the room, as Ami watched with amazed interest, quickly scanning it, shaking her head at the results.

“I still can't believe how easy you make that look,” she muttered. Yori looked amused.

“It's not easy, believe me, it took over a year and a half to come up with the spell.”

“It works remarkably efficiently, even though looking at it gives me a headache,” Lldnr'k remarked, “Your magic system is most fascinating. Assuming it actually is magic.” The black-haired young woman raised an eyebrow at him.

“What else would it be?” she enquired. He shrugged, ruffling his feathers in amusement.

“No idea. You aliens confuse me at the best of times.” Laughing, Yori waved him towards the portal.

“Come on. Let's take you home. I'll drop Hnther off on the way.” They both followed her through the portal, talking in the demonic language, while Ami scanned it as it closed. When it had popped out of existence, she looked around at the people left in the room.

“What an odd day,” she commented idly, making Rei look at her incredulously, then start laughing like mad. After a moment, Ami giggled, helping her friend to a chair, as she was having trouble standing.

“I'm hungry,” Aiko announced. She looked around. “It's nearly dinner time anyway. Should we go out, or order in?” Ami smiled at this.

“Good way to make things seem ordinary, Aiko,” she teased. The brunette smiled.

“Even in the midst of an existential crisis people need to eat. Do you like pizza?” Ami nodded, as did Rei. Aiko produced a menu from somewhere and flipped it to her, the blue-haired girl catching it and looking at it curiously.

“New York?” she asked incredulously.

“That place makes the best pizzas in the world,” Aiko told her, grinning. Staring at the brunette for a moment, Ami finally shrugged, looking over the menu, then handing it to Rei. They made their orders. “The usual for you guys?” Aiko asked, looking around at her friends. They all nodded. Rei showed the menu to her grandfather, who looked amused, quickly selecting a medium seafood pizza. Reclaiming the menu Aiko vanished, smiling.
“I can’t believe you lot order in from an entirely different country,” Rei giggled, still in an oddly good mood. Azumi glanced at her, amusement on her face.

“Pizza from New York or Rome, that sushi place in Brisbane, which is very good indeed, there’s a place in China that does amazing noodles...” She chuckled. “When you can teleport that easily, you tend to make use of it, a lot. Aiko is amazingly good at it.”

“A very useful ability, to be sure,” the old priest smiled. “You young ladies seem to have some most interesting skills.” Azumi grinned at him.

“You wouldn’t believe some of them. I’m still learning, but it’s a lot of fun. Most of the time.” She looked sad for a moment.

“Yes. I have been following the news about that affair in Canada. Extremely unfortunate, indeed. So many lives lost.” The old man sighed. “Such destruction. I’m impressed you and your friends were able to deal so professionally with it.” He looked at the silver-haired girl, who seemed momentarily lost in reflection. “If you ever need to talk about it, how it affected you, please feel free to come here.” She looked at him blankly for a few seconds, before smiling a little.

“Thank you, sir.”

He smiled back. “I’ll go and make some more tea, before your friend comes back with the food. Rei, could you help me clear all this away, please?” His granddaughter nodded, hopping to her feet and beginning to pile the surprisingly large number of cups onto a tray. Soon the two of them had left the room.

Sitting on the sofa, Ami stretched her legs out in front of her and relaxed slightly, for the first time in hours. Chou came over and sat beside her. She cast a glance at the blonde, who was smiling serenely, radiating the same calm she usually did. It was surprisingly comforting. “Do you think all of this work will have a beneficial affect?” she quietly asked the older woman. Chou looked at her, thinking for a moment.

“I do hope so. Unfortunately, the damage to most of your friends isn’t the sort of thing that just goes away when you remove the cause. The physical damage is easy for us to repair. The workings of the mind are much more complex.” She sighed very slightly. “Hnther is extremely good at his speciality, vastly more knowledgeable on that subject than either Yori or I, yet he’s not sure either. He thinks that in the short term, most of them should at least become much less aggressive and unthinkingly prone to anger, although that could take some time to take full effect. We will need to keep an eye on them for some days to weeks, in case we need to step in.” She paused for a moment. “I trust we can count on your help, and Rei’s, if that happens?”

Ami nodded. “Yes, both of us are prepared to do... whatever we need to. Like I told Yori, we feel it’s our responsibility.” Chou smiled sadly at her, putting her hand on Ami’s for a moment.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, for any of them. There are many options we have before the permanent ones. I would hope that perhaps isolating them on a barren world with supplies for a couple of weeks might be enough to get the more difficult ones past the point that they’re a danger to others. It’s a rather brutal approach but much less lethal than some.”

“I suppose that might work.” Ami thought about it. “It also runs the risk of making them even more paranoid and delusional.”

Chou sighed again. “True. Well, unless and until something that warrants a heavy-handed approach happens, we will have to wait and see. We’ll monitor them around the clock, if something
happens we should be able to step in before it goes too far.” Ami stared at her for a moment or two.

“How the hell are you doing all this?” she finally asked. “It's driving me completely nuts trying to work it out. As far as I can see it's not magic.” Chou smiled slightly mysteriously.

“I would like to be able to tell you but the time isn't quite right yet. Once we have some resolution to the current problem, though, I think we could probably let you in on it. We should be able to trust you, and probably Rei, although we'd have to insist on using the security spell. There are secrets involved that could hurt people who don't deserve it.” Ami sighed, nodding a little in understanding.

“Guess I'll just have to wait, then,” she mumbled. Chou giggled a bit.

“I'm sorry, I know how curious you are about things like this. Azumi is very similar. You remind me of her quite a lot.”

Ami looked at the silver-haired young woman in question, who was on the other side of the room apparently deep in thought. “She can be rather forbidding,” she commented in a low voice. “When she's not smiling she kind of gives me the creeps.” Chou giggled once more.

“That's definitely one of her special abilities. She's very good indeed at it.” The blonde looked proudly at Azumi. “She's learned a lot in a short time.” Ami watched the woman beside her, feeling that there was something about the relationship between the two that was eluding her, then dismissed it. She changed the subject.

“I hope Haruka comes around. I think Hotaru more or less has already, but Haruka is still not at all sure about any of what she heard.”

“Even if she doesn't really believe us in the end, it looks like she is at least much less likely to get involved in something regrettable. That's better than nothing, certainly.” Chou looked mildly satisfied about this.

“Yori made it pretty damn clear that she would take a dim view of Haruka getting involved in all this stupidity again.” Ami shivered at the memory of the young woman's voice and face when she'd been talking to her former team-mate. Chou nodded slowly.

“Yes, she wasn't at all pleased. I've seldom seen her like that. You have to push her very hard to make her react in such a manner, but it's possible. Threatening her friends is a sure fire way to get a dangerous reaction.”

“Dangerous is putting it mildly.” Ami shivered again. “She wasn't kidding about what she'd do if it happened again, was she?”

Chou looked at her for a moment, her face suddenly cold. “No. She takes threats to people she cares about very poorly and tends to deal with them in a way that ensures they won't happen again. That seldom escalates to lethal force but she wouldn't hesitate if that was the only option. Neither would most of us.”

Ami studied her, feeling mildly worried. “And you?” The older woman looked back for a handful of seconds.

“If there was no other way.”

Returning her gaze to her feet, Ami nodded a little. “OK. Thank you for being honest.” She liked the blonde a lot, but even so she found her quite worrying at times. She found Yori worrying
almost all the time, if not totally terrifying, although the last few hours showed she could also be very nice.

“Assuming we can get all this mess sorted out in an acceptable manner, what do you think you and the others will do?” Chou asked her curiously after a short silence. Ami considered the question.

“I... don't quite know. We've been a team of nine people for so long it hasn't quite sunk it that that's unlikely to happen again.” She fell silent for a moment. “I guess I'm stuck with being a magical girl, no matter what.”

“I'm afraid so. Does that upset you?” Chou was watching her with interest. Ami shook her head.

“No, not really. Despite everything I love being able to do what I can do. I always felt I was one of the least effective team-members, basically a side character, I guess, but talking to Aiko and Misaki a while ago made me rethink some of that. Yori showing me how to access the magic boost without all the fuss helped a lot as well.” She giggled a bit, making Chou look curious. “Not using all those flowery attack names also makes me feel much more professional, weirdly. They were... kind of embarrassing, to be honest.” Chou laughed.

“You're not the only ones to make such a fuss about attacks, giving them grandiose names and shouting them out when you should just be using the attack. Quite a lot of the girls do it for some reason. Even some of the high powered martial artists in Nerima tend to do the same thing. It's very inefficient.”

“It seems to annoy the hell out of Yori,” Ami giggled. Chou snorted a laugh.

“You have no idea. It's pretty much guaranteed to produce a short rant about how stupid it all is,” she replied, grinning. They smiled at each other.

“I suppose I'll keep doing what I've been doing, even if I need to do it solo,” the magical girl said, getting back to the original question. “Rei will probably help, and I think Hotaru might as well. I guess we'll just form our own group. There are still problems that need magical girls in Minato.”

“Unfortunately true. This area certainly does attract oddness on a daily basis. A lot of it is harmless but a significant quantity is anything but.”

“It's possible the others will end up doing the same thing. We might get three or four smaller teams out of this situation, which is a little sad, but as long as they're not attacking each other, it's better than the alternative.” Ami sighed, looking up as a portal appeared. Yori stepped through, not looking as it vanished with a pop behind her. She walked over to the sofa.

“Both the guys are back home, Lldnr'k is already researching the time device. He's very worried about it, I think. So am I.” She grumbled to herself. “Damn time machines. Never liked the things, even before all of this crap.” Chou patted the seat beside her.

“Sit down, dear, Aiko should be back any moment with some pizzas from that place in New York. There's nothing we need to do right now except relax and eat.” With a sudden grin, Yori dropped beside the taller woman.

“I could eat.” Across the room Azumi suddenly started laughing, turning to look at Yori, who seemed amused. She was still giggling when Aiko reappeared almost buried under a pile of pizza boxes.
Chapter 69

“You're right,” Rei pronounced in a satisfied tone, licking her fingers, “That was the best pizza I've ever had.” Aiko grinned at her, closing the box her own meal had come in.

“They're pretty amazing, aren't they? And not too expensive.” She'd disappeared to deliver the pizzas to the others, returning to find Rei and Ami were half-way through their own, yet still finished ahead of them. Yori had also finished very fast, practically inhaling the large portion at a rate that had frankly astounded the two girls. Azumi, Chou, and the old priest were still eating.

“Very nice indeed, young lady,” the old man smiled, carefully picking another slice out of his box. “I envy you your ability to travel so easily. In my day it was much more time consuming.”

The brunette looked amused at his words. “It's a lot of fun, I have to admit. All the magical girl things can be, but the teleporting is probably the best of them all, at the moment.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I assume that you are still learning new abilities? I know Yori and Chou both have a real gift for working out the possibilities of magic, as shown by the fact that what they use is barely recognisable as magic by now.” He grinned at the two people in question, Yori nodding sagely while Chou smiled gently. “I can feel your own magic is very similar.” Aiko raised her eyebrows slightly, looking at him with interest.

“Yes, we've all learned quite a lot of interesting things in the last few years. They come up with new ideas pretty regularly.” She glanced at Azumi, grinning slightly. “Even our newest friend over there has come up with her own techniques.” The silver-haired girl smiled at her, thought also appearing slightly embarrassed.

“One technique, and it was only an idle thought.”

Yori snickered. “It was brilliant, a genuinely remarkable breakthrough. Don't put yourself down.” Azumi shrugged, eating her last slice of pizza. “And there has been more than one technique. That was your best one, true enough, but you keep finding interesting things to do with the abilities we teach you.” Looking slightly puzzled, Azumi glanced at her friend.

“Such as?”

“Well, you remember how you got into that bomb shelter in Halleckton?” The girl nodded, looking thoughtful. “I certainly didn't teach you that usage of the technique, you worked it out yourself. You used the same thing when we were having that pleasant little chat with the gun-happy granny in Sydney.” Yori laughed. “It certainly impressed her.”

Azumi giggled, looking like she remembered something funny. Ami and Rei exchanged curious glances. “Do we dare ask what all these techniques are?” the blue-haired girl ventured. Yori looked at her for a moment, before nodding slowly.

“I suppose there’s no harm in talking about it.” She grinned in an evil manner. “After all, we know where you live.” Ami swallowed, not completely sure she was joking. “Azumi came up with the energy compression technique we all use now.” Holding out her hand, Yori produced a baseball sized sphere of the energy she and her friends commanded so easily, showing it to Ami, who whipped out her computer and scanned it with interest.

“Wow. That's weird. It's not actually magic, or not all magic, is it?”
“Nope. Mostly something called ki.” The priest sat up alertly, looking intently at the sphere with even more interest than he'd so far shown.

“That is remarkable. I have heard that advanced martial artists could utilise ki in their art, but it's very unusual to see a visible manifestation of the energy itself like that, it requires a truly impressive ki level, far higher than most people could possibly reach.” He stared at the black-haired girl's hand.

“Oh, it's not as rare as you might think, sir,” she told him, smiling a little. “Admittedly, we're out at the far end of the curve as far as this sort of thing is concerned but a substantial number of the martial artists in Nerima could probably learn to do this to one degree or another. Some of them already can, to an impressive level. Various other warrior groups can as well. There are a number of individuals in China, for example, with massive ki abilities. They are extremely dangerous if they want to be.” The priest was slowly nodding, still inspecting the ki sphere.

“I believe I may know one or two of the individuals you mention. One Herb, I think, he's some sort of half-human prince deep in the interior of China?” She nodded, looking impressed.

“Yep. He's one of the better examples. Very few people are more powerful than he is in ki abilities.”

Ami studied her. “Are you?” she asked, pretty sure she knew the answer. Yori produced a peculiar dark little smile that made her heart skip a beat or two, but didn't directly answer. She noticed with a chill that all three of the young woman's friends momentarily wore exactly the same smile. No one said anything for a few seconds. Rei's grandfather looked around, frowning slightly, then broke the silence.

“There was a rumour some years ago about an even more powerful person, I believe someone called Saffron, who was involved in an enormous mystical fight with a young martial artist from Nerima. Somehow, the martial artist won the fight, from what I remember, although there was a significant amount of landscape remodelling involved.” He studied Yori, whose face had gone blank. Eventually she nodded agreement.

“Yes. I heard the same thing. From what I was told it was a very close fight. Saffron was an extremely dangerous opponent, the martial artist was very lucky to have survived. He shouldn't have, in all probability, but he had a knack of pulling off the impossible by the skin of his teeth, from what I was told.” The priest rubbed his chin thoughtfully, still watching her. She stared back impassively.

“So I gather. I seem to remember he disappeared soon after that.” She shrugged, suddenly looking bored, idly rolling the ki sphere around in her hand.

“I vaguely recall something about that. It was a while ago now, the details escape me these days. He probably just decided to move somewhere less insane than Nerima. It's a weird place.”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, I remember it was, although I haven't been there in a considerable time. Perhaps I should visit, look up some old friends.” He grinned, although Ami could see that there was something slightly odd about his expression. She glanced at Yori to see something very similar in her violet eyes. It disappeared after a moment. “My apologies for interrupting your explanation, my dear. Please continue.” The old man bowed his head slightly, causing Yori to smile again.

“No problem. Anyway, the usage of ki in the martial artist community, at least at the very high end, is fairly common, although admittedly a lot of them don't really realise quite what they're doing. A few work it out themselves, others learn the techniques from more advanced teachers, but there are
a reasonable number who know at least something of it. This sort of thing, though,” she held up the
ki ball by way of illustration, “isn't very common at all.” She grinned again. “This is unique to us.”
The ball began to silently contract, growing small and brighter at the same time. Ami studied it
with great interest, remembering when she'd seen the same thing before, the time Misaki blew up
the portal the huge demon had come through after all the little bitey ones.

She scanned the ongoing process, surprised at the results. As the ball shrank the energy density
was climbing extremely rapidly, although the total energy quantity stayed the same. That made
sense, it fitted a volumetric ratio, which meant that halving the diameter of the energy sphere
would decrease the volume by the cube of that, or conversely increase the density given a constant
power by the same amount, a factor of eight times. The ball continued to shrink, eventually
reaching a size so small it was an almost dimensionless pinpoint of intolerably bright light, far too
bright to look at, casting stark shadows on the walls. She read the screen of her computer in some
disbelief, not entirely sure it could be correct.

“That's...” She shook her head, unable to complete the sentence.

“Holy crap,” Rei supplied helpfully, staring in shock. She could easily feel the danger radiating
from the point of light, although the initial sphere hadn't felt too worrying. She wouldn't have liked
to catch in in the face, but it wouldn't have done too much damage. This version of it, on the other
hand, gave the distinct feeling it would blow a hole completely through her.

Yori grinned, her face lit eerily from underneath, making the expression look far more dangerous
than it was meant to be. Both magical girls shivered slightly. The priest was watching warily, his
face pale, clearly also suddenly very aware indeed just how dangerous this young woman really
was. “Very impressive,” he managed after a few seconds. Lifting her hand the black-haired girl
looked at the tiny point of light, then flipped it into the air, making Rei squeak in shock and Ami
lean back instinctively. As it arced away from her it faded into nothing, the abrupt change in
lighting making everyone blink a few times. Wiping his brow, which was slightly damp, the old
man looked a little relieved.

“Yes, very impressive indeed. You came up with this method yourself?” he asked Azumi, who had
been calmly watching the demonstration with no visible sign of concern, as had Chou and Aiko.
The brunette, in fact, was smiling happily.

“It was my idea, yes,” the silver-haired woman admitted, nodding. “She worked out how to
actually do it. More or less immediately. Then she showed the rest of us.” Azumi looked mildly
annoyed. “It's not nearly as easy as she makes it look. None of us but Chou can get a compression
factor anywhere near that.” Yori snickered at her expression.

“You'll get it with time, I'm sure.” Glancing at the priest, she added, “It does take a level of both
power and control that very few people can manage, even if they're good with ki. I don't know if
any of the others we mentioned could do it, possibly at all and certainly to anything like that level.
I should look into it one day.”

Ami re-read the screen of her computer, still not quite believing what it was telling her. “How
much energy can you pump into that?” she asked curiously. Yori looked at her for a moment,
before glancing at Chou, who nodded slightly.

“A lot more than that. A hell of a lot more.” She looked pensive. “More than I could safely use
pretty much anywhere, let's leave it at that.”

“Worried about blowing up Tokyo?” Rei joked, only to swallow dryly at the look she got in return
from all four women.
“That's certainly a concern, yes,” Chou told her evenly, not looking like she was pulling her leg.

“Crap,” Rei whispered, looking at each of them in turn. “And you can all do that?”

“Well, Yori is something exceptional,” Aiko replied, looking amused, “but all of us know the techniques involved and practice regularly. We're not as powerful, certainly, but so far we've been able to deal with what we've run across.”


“Thank you,” Azumi told her, smiling slightly. Yori snickered at the look on her face.

“It's certainly a good technique. She's come up with others as well, like I said, but so far that's the best one.”

“How did you break into this bomb shelter Yori mentioned?” Ami asked curiously, shutting her little computer so she wouldn't have to look at the figures it was still displaying, which were making her nervous. Azumi smiled.

“I could have blown the door off but I was worried about the concussion killing the survivors inside. At first I thought I'd have to call Yori or Chou to get them to cut their way in with an energy blade, which isn't something I can do yet, but I had an idea.” Holding up her hand she looked amused at their expressions when it began glowing a baleful leaf green, emitting an aura of deadly energy. “I remembered something Yori showed me some time before that, and wondered what would happen if I put a lot more power into it. Like covering my hand in a ki shot, more or less. It worked surprisingly well.” Picking up her empty pizza box with her other hand, she made a fist with the glowing one, pushing it through the box with a faint hiss. The cardboard simply vanished where the glow touched it, the edges of the hole smoking.

“Cardboard isn't much of a target, obviously, but it works as well on steel, just more slowly.” Ami and Rei gaped at her.

“That's absolutely terrifying,” the old man said, sounding both impressed and worried. She shrugged.

“It's a simple little trick, to be honest, but it was useful a few times.” The young woman restricted the glow to her index finger, a small ball of green light encompassing the tip, running it back and forth on the edge of the box, which slowly fizzed away into nothing. Grinning, she added, “It's useful when you want to get someone's attention.”

“I can imagine it is,” he replied faintly, staring at her actions wide-eyed.

“It was a very clever application of ki energy that I hadn't thought of,” Yori told them, also watching, although with pride, not slight apprehension. “Not effective at range, of course, but there are times you need something that only works close up.” Chou giggled, wadding her pizza box into a remarkably small ball in an impressive show of strength, then closing her hands around it, a golden flash spearing out between her fingers with a faint pop. When she opened her hands again there was nothing but a small amount of fine ash. Yori looked amused. “Like that. Very useful for disposing of trash.”

“A most impressive demonstration of energy control,” the priest commented, looking at them all in astonishment. “I knew you all were very skilled but I had no idea quite how skilled, not in such esoteric activities. Magic is something I'm quite aware of but true ki masters, or mistresses, are much rarer than mages. I never expected to meet even one, never mind seven.”
“It's a little weird, in fact, a lot of magic users are surprised by ki usage,” Chou responded. She looked mildly puzzled. “We were quite surprised to find that none of the magical girls in Minato used it at all when we came here. But then, it tends to be associated with martial arts not the magical ones, after all, and the majority of the magical girls aren't really fighters. Not in that way. Although a lot of them are very dangerous even so.” She smiled at Rei and Ami. “No disrespect of your abilities is intended, of course.” Ami glanced at Rei, who looked back.

“No offence taken, Chou. I remember what happened the first time we ran into Yori. It was the sort of demonstration that sticks with you.” Yori smiled a little, looking satisfied, while her blonde friend giggled.

“So I gather. It's a pity it was necessary, though.” She looked around at the others. “I believe we should probably be getting back home now. The situation is, at the moment, under some form of control. We'll monitor all the girls in case something unpleasant should happen, which hopefully it won't.” The blonde sighed very softly. “I wish I could believe that.” Putting her computer away Ami nodded agreement to the sentiment.

“So do I. I can't help worrying that something bad will happen, though.”

“We'll know more or less immediately if it does and we can be here very quickly,” Aiko assured her. “Haruka and Hotaru are just talking now, I don't think we have anything much to worry about from them, unless everything goes really badly wrong. Setsuna, Makoto, Minako, and Michiru are all asleep and shouldn't wake up until tomorrow sometime. Usagi is still wandering around talking to herself, which is weird.” The brunette looked puzzled at something she could apparently see, making Ami once again desperately curious as to how they did that, then shrugged. “She's a strange girl, I guess. Anyway, she seems content to stay near her home. With any luck nothing will happen until tomorrow at the earliest. Hopefully, when they wake up they'll be a little saner and more reasonable.”

“If they aren't?” Rei queried. Aiko looked at Yori, who sighed, Chou putting a hand on her shoulder comfortingly.

“We do what we need to do to make sure the damage is kept to a minimum.” The girl frowned slightly. “Hopefully that won't need to be too excessive, if Hnther's work actually works we might just be able to give them a damn good talking to. I could even call in an expert in giving scary lectures.” She grinned in a worrying manner. “When she talks, people listen. They can't help it, even if they wish they could.” Aiko giggled behind her.

“They so desperately wish they could...” she laughed. Azumi was looking coldly amused while Chou smiled to herself. Ami shared a look with Rei.

“You're talking about this mysterious Ms Aoyama, I guess?” Nodding, Yori snickered.

“Yes, I am. She's very, very good at what she does. I suspect that even if your friends went totally insane they'd still listen to her for at least a while. People can't help doing that. You tend to remember her.”

“And what happens if you don't pay attention to her warnings?” Rei's grandfather asked slowly. All four young women stopped smiling, looking at each other for a moment.

“I'm... not sure,” Yori admitted, “That's never happened.” Her expression became rather predatory. “It would be interesting to find out.” Ami shuddered, the look on her face was deeply disturbing for a few seconds. She noticed that even the priest looked worried, his normal slight smile vanishing. “Anyway, that's something to worry about some other time. In the mean time, get some
rest, and thanks for all the help, guys.” She looked around at the two young women and the old priest.”It was nice to see you again, sir, even under the circumstances.”

His smile came back. “I was pleased to see you and all your friends as well, child. Don’t hesitate to drop by any time you’re in the area, even when all this is over. And thank you for introducing me to Hnther and Lldnr’k, it was a real pleasure to meet them. I hope I can again.”

“I'm sure you will. We still have this damn time machine to deal with.” The martial artist scowled. “It worries me a lot, even though Lldnr’k doesn't think it will directly interfere, at least in the short term. He's pretty sure it's probably badly damaged and not as powerful as it used to be, which is good, but even a partially working time machine is very dangerous. Possibly not directly but given enough meddling in reality the results could be very bad.” She sighed. “Mind you, if it goes that far, we'll never know.”

“That's still not a great comfort,” Rei told her. The girl laughed.

“That I know, believe me. It gives me the willies as well. Lldnr’k is going to do some research into some way to at least detect it's interference in real time, which he thinks is possible, and will give us a useful defence. He also thinks it might be more difficult to actually block it, the thing is subtle, although as we mentioned there is the possibility of adding you guys to the ward system if we have to. I'm still in two minds about that. There are... some awkward problems with it.” She shrugged. “We'll have to think about it. It might not be necessary anyway.”

Standing, Chou walked over and stood beside her smaller compatriot, smiling gently at Ami, Rei, and the old priest. “Don't worry, we'll find some way to resolve this situation, as best we can. I'm afraid that won't be in an ideal manner but hopefully it will be something everyone can live with.”

“I'd be happy if no one else gets hurt,” Ami told her. “Even if we never see the others again.” The blonde looked sympathetically at her.

“With some luck we may be able to come to a slightly better resolution than that but it's probably good that you're prepared for a non-optimal solution. It may be all we can manage.” Ami nodded glumly.

“I'm aware of the problems.” She sighed heavily, then smiled unhappily. “Thanks so much for everything you've done.”

“You're very welcome, Ami.” Chou put her hands on the other woman's shoulders, hugging her briefly. “We'll be in touch. You have our contact details, if you need anything, call.” Releasing her she stepped back, smiling at them all. Aiko and the other two joined her, the quartet vanishing as the three people left in the room averted their eyes from the flash. Ami shook her head, glancing at her friend.

“Interesting people,” she commented. Rei nodded slowly.

“Damn scary, though. I always thought we were pretty bad-ass, but the last few hours...”

Her grandfather moved to stand beside her. “I did warn you not to take Yori lightly. Or any of the people she is friends with. And never, never get between Yori and Chou.” She looked down at him, giggling slightly in a scared reflex.

“Oh, believe me, grandfather, after today, I'm listening very well indeed to your advice on that matter.”

“So is Haruka, I think,” Ami added quietly, the other two nodding reflectively. “I doubt she'll ever
forget today.” Smiling at the people beside her, she headed for the door. “I'm going home. After
everything that's happened I'm kind of tired. I'll see you tomorrow, I guess, Rei.” Turning right in
the hall she headed for the exit.

Rei watched her friend go, then turned to her grandfather. He smiled at her calmly. “Come on, my
girl, you can help me with the dishes.” She nodded, suddenly grateful for something prosaic and
non-magical to do, picking up the remaining pizza boxes and following him to the kitchen.

“Good god,” Soun exclaimed, watching the news. Akane peered out from the kitchen from where
she was helping Nodoka do the washing up.

“What is it, Dad?” she asked curiously. He pointed at the television.

“Those girls who destroyed that mall yesterday in Minato were at it again,” he replied, frowning
slightly. “Two of them at least. The one in green and that one with the short blonde hair. They
seem to be trying to kill each other.” Drying her hands the youngest Tendo came into the living
room, watching the screen with interest, followed by Nodoka. She gasped as the blonde set off
some sort of huge energy wave that crushed a number of vehicles and slammed into several
buildings which visible shook, debris falling from them. A figure flew through the air, dropping
heavily to the ground, to be joined by another one almost instantly. A weird screeching noise came
from the television as a flash of purple light illuminated everything, a scream sounding before
everything went silent. The reporter who had been describing the fight abruptly stopped talking.

“I think that was Chou!” Akane exclaimed. “It's difficult to be sure, their magic is making the
picture all blurry, but she's the right height and moves in the right way. I guess they don't feel like
allowing this to be recorded clearly, normally they're more visible than that.” Her father nodded
slowly.

“I believe you're correct,” he replied. “Is that Yori by her, then?” His daughter shook her head,
pointing at another figure, who was standing over the prone figure of the blonde, glowing a
virulent purple shade, fury clear even through the disguising magic and the camera.

“No. That is, I'm certain. Look at the colour of the glow. And she's in a really bad mood.” The
youngest sister shivered. “I wouldn't want to be in that magical girl's place. She just hurt Chou.
She'll be lucky if Yori lets her live.” They all watched as the indistinct figure that was clearly Yori
to anyone who knew her squatted down next to the blonde girl, who seemed to be in extreme pain.
There was an inaudible discussion which ended when the squatting figure did something to the
other one, who visibly slumped after screaming in pain, presumably either unconscious or dead.
The other one stood.

She moved to the brunette who was lying on the ground some metres away, the camera zooming in
to show her expression, which was one of fear and worry for her own life. The indistinct figure
produced a brilliant violet energy blade, confirming her identity as Yori, holding it close enough to
the brunette's neck it was clear she could remove her head with a simple twitch of her hand. The
other woman froze, listening very carefully, then shook her head as little as she could get away
with. The energy manifestation vanished, Yori tapping her between the eyes, causing her to also
fall unconscious. Akane released the breath she hadn't realised she was holding, looking at her
father with wide eyes. He looked back.

“I would not like to have that young woman annoyed with me,” he said slowly, returning his
attention to the TV. “She's a nice, friendly girl most of the time, but that clearly shows there are
limits you shouldn't cross.”
“I’ve always heard she was very dangerous if provoked,” Nodoka commented, watching the screen. “I think that was provocation. It seems to me a bad idea to threaten Chou, especially in Yori’s presence. They clearly care very much for each other.” Soun nodded, watching as Yori and the presumed Chou embraced for a moment, the other girl standing close. After a moment they separated, the shorter woman moving back to the blonde on the ground and bending down, picking something up. She fiddled with it, before dropping an object to the ground, firing a blast of energy at it.

“I wonder what that was for?” Soun asked curiously. Neither of the others had an answer. Seconds later a fourth figure appeared beside the three already there, causing him to smile. “Ah. That’s clearly Aiko.” Akane nodded, smiling as well. She liked the petite brunette, considering her a friend. Aiko spoke to the third woman, then each of them retrieved a body from the ground, before they vanished with the familiar flash.

The image switched back to the reporter, zooming out to frame her from the waist up, as behind her the scene changed to show a number of emergency vehicles with lights flashing parked in the street, various personnel moving about in front of a building that had partly collapsed.

“After stopping the fight between the two Magical Girls so effectively and rapidly, Yori, Chou, and their friends stayed on scene for close to an hour, evacuating and healing a number of casualties from the affected buildings. The fact that no one was permanently injured is once again credited to the professionalism of these young ladies. We are told that Azumi Ito, a magical girl who recently became active in Setagaya, was with them, aiding them in their task. She has been linked to Yori and her colleagues in a number of operations in recent months. Inspector Junpei of the Azuba-Juuban district police had this to say about the event earlier today.”

The scene changed to a segment clearly recorded earlier as dust from the collapsed building was still hanging in the air. A tall middle aged policeman was talking to the same reporter. “The damage to the street is considerable. Luckily, Yori, Chou, and their team arrived sufficiently rapidly after the fight began that they were able to bring it to a halt before anyone was killed, although I am told that without the remarkably effective healing abilities both Yori and Chou use so freely and effectively at least one fatality would have resulted. I am relieved to say that the young ladies managed to prevent this in a manner that should stand as an example to all magical girls.” He frowned slightly. “It is most regrettable that the local team appears to have become so dangerous to the very community they purportedly protect in recent months.” The reporter nodded, moving the microphone to her own mouth.

“Can you give us an idea of the damage, Inspector?” She held the mic out again.

“Nine cars, two vans, a delivery truck, and three motorcycles were destroyed in the altercation. In addition, one apartment build collapsed from the damage incurred although due to the prompt action of Chou it was held up for long enough for it to be evacuated. Three more buildings are damaged enough that the engineers tell me it will be some weeks before they can be repaired to a habitable level. A number of shops were badly affected as well, and there is considerable destruction to the street itself, with several areas requiring resurfacing and a number of street-lamps that will need to be replaced.” He smiled grimly. “Thankfully, the destruction is nowhere nearly as bad as in the previous case yesterday. It will still require some nine hundred million yen worth of repairs and insurance payments. An offer has been made from a fund set up to help those affected by mystical fights elsewhere in Minato to contribute towards the repair of the district.”

The reporter looked slightly surprised. “I believe that fund is in some way associated with Yori and Chou?” she asked, holding the mic out for him afterwards. He nodded.
“So I am told. I don't have any details available on that matter. I am, however, grateful for the generous offer, as the inhabitants of the street will also be.” He glanced away from the camera for a moment, then looked back. “You must excuse me. I have to get back to work.”

“Thank you for your time, Inspector,” the reporter replied, smiling at him, before looking back to the camera as it panned away from the departing policeman, who was heading towards a nearby car. “Inspector Junpei of the Azuba-Juuban district police.” The scene reverted to the same reporter, back at the later report.

“No further information is currently available on the whereabouts of the two magical girls who were involved in the fight that so severely damaged the street here. We have learned that another girl from the same team was stopped after a brief altercation by others from Yori's group, some distance away, apparently heading in the direction of this fight. She also appears to have dropped out of sight. The remainder of the team in question seems to be keeping to itself, something that many of the local inhabitants are expressing satisfaction about. A number of people we interviewed ventured the opinion that they would prefer it if they never reappeared, although the majority of them also suggested that they would be more than satisfied with Yori, Chou, or any of the others, feeling that they were more effective and much less damaging to the surroundings.” She smiled slightly. “We even had one interviewee remark that having met a demon once, he’d consider it a better neighbour than the local magical girl team. We were unable to interview any demons for their view on the situation.”

Soun chuckled, watching the rest of the report, turning the television off when the news went to the weather. “How remarkable. I wonder what the problem with those girls is? I recall that at one point they were very respected, from what I remember it's said they dealt with some major threats a couple of years ago or so.” His daughter nodded, sitting down across from him.

“That's true, they're considered some of the most powerful and rather mysterious of all the girls active in Minato at the moment. Although, there have been rumours on the internet for a long time that one or two of them were a bit difficult to deal with. Apparently they and the police weren't on particularly good terms in general.”

“I understand that Yori and her friends are the complete opposite,” Nodoka commented, straightening the bookshelf with a slight frown at how untidy it had become. “They certainly seem to me to be very effective and respectful to others. Those girls causing all the trouble could learn a thing or two from them.” The other two nodded in agreement.

“I must say that all of them have impressed me considerably, even taking the magic and the astounding martial arts into consideration. Very good people and very good citizens.” Soun smiled to himself at something. “Their parents must be proud of them.”

“Assuming they even know,” Akane giggled. “I wouldn't be surprised to find out that a lot of the magical girls are keeping it close to their chests, even with family.” Her father grinned back at her.

“Probably. I believe it's traditional.” Laughing, Nodoka went back into the kitchen to finish the dishes. He watched her go, then looked at his watch, rising to his feet. “Well, Akane, I have one last lesson to teach today then Genma and I are going to visit some friends. What are your plans for this evening?”

“Shampoo and I are going to do some more training, then go and see a movie. Some comedy spy one from the US that's set in the UK. It gets pretty good reviews.” She smiled a little. “I should take notes, perhaps.” Her father grinned.

“Have you heard from Adrian again?”
“I got an email a couple of days ago, things are still slowly working their way through the system. He said to be patient but he was sure it would all work out fairly soon.”

Soun looked pleased and proud. “I hope so, Akane. You're going to do us proud.” Smiling, he went out to the Dojo, leaving Akane thinking for a while until Shampoo turned up a little later.

Agent Naito watched the recorded segment again, shaking his head slightly at the sheer damage. When it ended he looked at his colleague, who looked back, also quite impressed and slightly appalled. “That's... disturbing. Both what happened and how it ended. I don't think I've ever seen Yori that angry, even after Halleckton.”

“Someone she cared about was threatened, if not in fact hurt,” the other agent noted. “From the reports I've read that's a guaranteed way of getting her undivided attention and not in a way that's likely to leave much more than ash. I'm actually somewhat amazed that this Haruka woman is still with us, missing arm or not.” He shrugged. “Yori must have had her reasons but to be honest I wouldn't have been at all surprised if she'd simply evaporated the threat. It's certainly well within her abilities.”

“Oh, definitely, she could evaporate a significant chunk of the city if she had reason to, I suspect,” Naito replied. “A lethal response would certainly not be something she'd shrink from if it was the only solution to the problem, either. She's no cold-blooded killer, she's a warrior, but she's certainly the most dangerous one I've ever encountered. If killing that woman instantly was the only way, she'd be dead, no question. Presumably it wasn't.”

“No one wants it to, but we can't have that team running rampant through Minato, trying to kill each other. Even if they don't succeed, the collateral damage would be crippling, leaving aside the likely fatalities. Our estimates suggest a minimum casualty count of upwards of five to seven thousand, if they got involved in an all out fight like in that mall, just based on the abilities we know they have. It's not unlikely that they have abilities we don't know about, which could be much worse.” He didn't look happy about this.

Naito admitted. “I know full well that Yori and her friends haven't shown anywhere near all the things they can do in public. Little hints come through every now and then which frankly amaze and slightly terrify me if I think about them. They're horrifyingly dangerous if necessary, although luckily more or less peaceful. If these other girls are
The other agent flipped through the report. “This other girl, Hotaru Tomoe, was intercepted in the local park by Aiko and two of her team-mates, that Ami girl and her friend Rei. They seem to be cooperating with Yori and her friends if not actually working with them now. They talked for some time then teleported away. Again, we haven't heard from them since. The other three from Aiko's team intercepted Minako Aino as she was heading towards the fight Yori dealt with, we're not sure what they did but it resulted in the Aino woman being taken away unconscious. That case didn't cause too much damage.”

“So that's six of them accounted for. What about the other three?”

“No idea at the moment. We got a rumour that Aiko ambushed the Setsuna woman at least twice, taking her away then bringing her back, but we haven't confirmed it, or have any idea what was behind it if it's true. The other two we don't have any information on.”

Naito nodded thoughtfully. “Interesting. I suspect that Yori may be doing some sort of research into the problem. Aiko was possibly collecting experimental subjects. Hopefully, if that's the case, they might have some idea about how to stop the problem.”

“Can you ask her?” His colleague looked curious. Naito smiled.

“I can certainly ask. Whether she'd actually tell me anything...?” He made a small shrug. “She's pretty protective of people in the magical community even if she's not happy with them. I'm certainly not going to try pushing. It probably wouldn't affect the rather good working relationship she and her friends have with us but why risk it?” It was the turn of the other agent to look thoughtful and nod.

“True. Leaving aside the fact that she has no reason to tell us, if she doesn't want to, technically she could truthfully say we don't have the clearance for it.” He grinned. “I wonder if she realises that?”

Naito chuckled. “If she's thought about what that authorisation means at all I'm sure she does, she's extremely smart, as are all her friends. Azumi more than most. It probably doesn't really mean much to her, though. They're all very private, they don't share much anyway, even to people they like outside their community.”

“Hmm.” His colleague pondered the issue, smiling a little. “We do meet some interesting people in this job.” Agent Naito grinned.

“Damn right. It's a hell of a lot of fun a lot of the time.”

Laughing, his friend left the room, leaving him to watch the video one more time, making notes in the process.

“Well.” Kasumi shimmered back to her normal appearance, sitting down gratefully. “What an unusual day.” Resuming her own form Nabiki looked at her sister with a certain incredulity, before grinning.

“That's a way of putting it, I suppose.” The elder Tendo giggled.

“I can't think of anything more descriptive.”

“It was pretty weird,” Aiko suggested, laughing. “I think it went as well as we could have expected, bearing in mind how screwed up most of them are, although I wish we could have
stopped all that damage.” Ranma was standing staring out the window in deep thought, but looked up at this, nodding regretfully.

“It wasn't ideal,” he admitted. “I should probably simply have shot both of them in the head with a decent sized ki ball then sorted things out later but bearing in mind the circumstances that seemed a little too brutal. It's what I'll do if it happens again, though. If not worse.” He frowned. “I'm not going to let anyone hurt my wife again, or any of my friends.”

Kasumi smiled gently at him, getting up and walking over to put her arm around him and lean her head on his shoulder. “I was in little real danger, dear. Even if that attack had hit me full on it wouldn't have killed me, only broken a lot of bones. You'd have healed me very quickly.”

“Nabiki nearly got hit as well and it would have caused her more trouble. She's not as tough as you, not yet.”

“She would still have survived. Not to mention that she didn't actually get hit, so everything is all right. It won't happen again, not from Haruka, she's certainly not going to risk upsetting you. She was absolutely horrified by what you told her.” Kasumi looked at her husband with slight amusement as he snorted. “And the way you said it. It was nearly as cold as anything Nabiki has come out with.” She glanced at her sister, who shrugged, smiling. “No offence, sister.”

“None taken. You're right. It was very impressive in an extremely scary way. I was taking notes.” The brunette giggled as Ranma began smiling.

Coming out of the kitchen with a glass of water, Aiko sipped it, watching them with a small smile. “I don't know where the next trouble from that lot will come from aside from it won't be Haruka who starts it. Whether she'll see reason in the long term I have no idea but I think you put the fear of Yori into her in a way that isn't going to shift easily.” She laughed, Ranma joining in with slight embarrassment. Separating from him his wife disappeared into their bedroom. He moved to the sofa and sat, Nabiki and Aiko doing the same.

“Thanks for everything you both did, guys,” he told them. “And you guys as well.”

“Nice to have, though,” her sister added, sounding amused. He snickered, shaking his head.

“I'm so very glad to have all of you as friends. As family. This would be a lot more difficult otherwise.” The martial artist looked up as Kasumi came back, having changed her clothes, sitting and leaning against him with a smile.

“Touching, dear, very touching,” she giggled. Everyone laughed.

“What's the next step?” Nabiki asked after a few seconds. Ranma and Kasumi looked at each other.

“Like we told Ami, I think all we can do now is wait, mainly.” He glanced at her, as she nodded. “I'll go and talk to S'th'kx about getting him and a crew here for doing some poking around on the moon. He might have some other ideas as well, he's the space expert, I don't know enough about it myself to be completely sure of the best way to proceed but I'm sure he will. Hopefully the rest of those girls will hold off on any more stupidity for a while to let us recover. Two incidents is two days is a little annoying. Hnther and Lldnr'k will probably have some more information fairly soon as well. Ultimately, we need to find this damned time device and shut it down for good.”
“That may be difficult,” Kasumi added, looking slightly worried. “I hope we can do it without causing any problems but we have to face the fact it may be hazardous.”

“No choice,” he replied, sighing. “It needs to be done and we're the ones who have to do it. Luckily we'll have a lot of help.” They were all quiet for a moment, thinking about it. Finally, Aiko stirred.

“Was it my imagination or did the old priest know something?” Ranma looked at her, raising an eyebrow. “About you,” she clarified. “There was something about his face and yours too. Like you were having a slightly different conversation than the rest of us were hearing.”

He smiled mysteriously at her. “It's not impossible he might have some interesting ideas, yes. He's pretty shrewd. I doubt he's worked it all out, though, not yet.”

“Aren't you worried?” Nabiki asked. He shook his head.

“No. Even if he did work it out, all of it, which is pretty unlikely since he doesn't know all that much about the Nerima parts, he'd never tell anyone. That I'm sure of. And he knows I know.” Ranma glanced at Kasumi, who looked back, amusement on her features. “And I know he knows I know. And...”

“OK, OK, we get the idea,” Aiko giggled, making him snicker. “So there's no danger.”

“Not from him. He's a good man and knows when to keep his mouth shut.” The black-haired young man smiled. “I like the guy a lot. He's certainly helped a lot in this case. Without him, Rei would quite likely have been much more difficult.”

“He seemed very taken with Lldnr'k and Hnther,” Kasumi smiled.

“I noticed. I think he doesn’t get to talk to many demons.”

Aiko laughed again. “Being a priest, I'm not entirely surprised.” She stood up. “I'm going to go get the others, it looks like Usagi has gone home now, so with some luck we won't need to hang around her all night. The others are all still asleep.” Both Tendos and Ranma nodded, having been keeping part of their attention on a number of live feeds from the cameras still discreetly watching the magical girls. The one covering Hotaru and Haruka was holding back enough to give them some privacy while still allowing them to see if anything untoward happened. As she vanished, they all closed their eyes.

“It's a bit annoying we have to be ready at any moment to go intervene,” Nabiki commented slightly grumpily. Her sister smiled at her.

“That is more or less our normal lifestyle, Nabiki. Admittedly it's not normally magical girls in a fight to the death, but we're on call twenty four hours a day in some ways. Luckily most days nothing happens or it's fairly minor but every now and then...” She shrugged slightly. Nabiki sighed.

“I know, I know. It just seems so... stupid.”

Ranma frowned a little. “That's true enough. This whole situation is completely nuts even by our standards. Haruka was right, it sounds crazy. Unfortunately, crazy or not, it's real, and there isn't really anyone else to deal with it. Us, Ami and Rei, Hnther and Lldnr'k, anyone else we call in, we all have our parts to play.”

“We do seem to be building quite the little disaster management team,” the middle sister noted with a smile. “We're going to have to come up with a logo and team motto at this rate.” He sighed,
looking at her with amused irritation.

“I am not starting some sort of idiotic magical girl organization, or union, or anything like that,” he said with good-natured exasperation, making both sisters giggle. “Life is complicated enough already.”

“We do seem to be heading that direction in some ways, dear,” his wife told him, leaning against him, then kissing him lightly.

“Magical Girls Incorporated,” Nabiki announced, grinning and waving her arms dramatically. “For all your supernatural disasters, call us.”

“Fixing them, or creating them?” he inquired with a wry smile. She laughed.

“Both, clearly. And we can have Magical Girls Import/Export as well, as a subdivision. I'll run that, you two do the main company. Aiko can handle the Transportation division. Misaki is Engineering, Fumiko and Tamiko can do customer relations, I'll have to think about Onkra's speciality but I'm sure there's a place for her, we're an all-inclusive sort of organisation.” She was laughing so hard by this point she had to stop speaking.

“Perhaps Space Operations, she seemed very taken by asteroid exploration,” Kasumi suggested, also laughing. “Ami could come on board in the Intelligence section, since you'd be busy with the interworld trade.” Ranma looked between them, shaking his head in loving amusement.

“You're both more nuts than I am,” he offered. They looked at each other then collapsed into giggles. When Aiko reappeared shortly afterwards with the others, they all looked around curiously. He smiled at them, shrugging when Aiko raised her eyebrows.

“They're both crazy,” he told her.

“Well, yes, I know that,” she replied with a grin. “We all are. What's the joke?” Sighing again he explained, which resulted in four more hysterically laughing girls. Shaking his head he got up to make coffee, laughter following him into the kitchen, where he busied himself, smiling.

“Ami would enjoy this, I suspect.” Aiko said quietly, floating on her back in the dark near the reef that surrounded the lagoon, intermittent motions making the water glow with phosphorescence. “Do you think we can let her in on it at some point?” Ranma, from where she was sitting with Kasumi a few meters away on the reef watching the surf break on the other side with a dull roar, looked over her shoulder at the brunette mermaid.

“I'd like to, I admit. I've always kind of both liked and respected her, she was the sensible one, and has the right attitude. The recent problems have shown that even more. Rei is sort of growing on me as well, so is Hotaru. I'm still thinking about it. Adding them to the wards would solve some problems, sure, but it would also create some potential issues. It makes me a little nervous telling anyone else about all this.” The red-head sighed gently. “Perhaps that's just habit, needless paranoia by now.”

“Unlike the needful paranoia you have in such large quantities, you mean?” her friend asked with a giggle. She nodded, smiling.

“Exactly.”

“I don't think it would cause any harm,” Kasumi interjected, “and might cause a lot of good. Showing them we trust them with such a large part of our lives would go a long way towards
making them trust us as well. Ami does, I know, but Rei and Hotaru are still a little worried about all this being some sort of... well, not trick, as such, but horrible mistake. Getting proof from the moon will help, of course, but anything else we can do we should. All three of them are decent people.” Her husband looked at her for a while, nodding slowly.

“You may be right. It's just a large step to take. And irreversible.”

“You took it with Uthryyl, look how that turned out,” Nabiki added, swimming up and floating with her head sticking out of the water, moving her tail and hands slightly to keep her in one place. The other three young women arrived seconds later, doing the same. Turning around on her spot the martial artist faced her friends and family, looking down at them, then nodded again.

“Very true and a good point. I made three friends for life, opening up all sorts of possibilities for all of us and them as well. But the situation is different in this case.”

“The security spell should minimise the risk, dear,” Kasumi told her gently. “Perhaps you should talk to Uthryyl about it as well. He always gives good advice. As far as I'm concerned, it's your decision, the biggest secret is yours, but we all have a stake in it and I think most of us are all right with those three knowing.” She looked around at the assembled women, who nodded silently. “It also opens up the possibility of teaching them some real fighting skills, something they need, as you've said many times.”

“I was going to do that anyway,” Ranma noted, smiling a little. “And see about getting Hotaru's healing working more effectively. We don't need to tell them everything for that.”

“It would make it easier, though,” her wife commented. She sighed slightly, slipping into the water and shimmering into mer-form.

“Agreed.” Flipping onto her back she stared at the brilliant stars for a while, the others silent, her crystalline blue eyes almost glowing in the dark. “I'll talk to Uthryyl, and think about it. There's no immediate rush.”

“Thank you, dear,” Kasumi said gently, joining her in the water and hugging her. “I know why you have so much trouble with this after all this time and I'm glad you're considering it even so. I'll go along with whatever you decide. It will be the right decision.” They embraced again, then the elder Tendo smiled in a different way, a flash of golden light and a muffled pop sounding from under the water. Ranma yelped in surprise as her wife shot away at high speed in a cloud of glowing bubbles, before following, giggling furiously. The five left behind burst out laughing, dispersing across the lagoon moments later.

'Circling high about the little atoll Nabiki looked down at it, watching the trails of light that were her friends and relatives swimming back and forth in the lagoon, before returning her attention to the view. A huge number of stars were visible from horizon to horizon, her enhanced vision in this form able to make out the colours of many of them, also resolving far more than an unaided human eye could otherwise manage. She smiled to herself.

'Despite everything, I'm very glad my life went this way,' she told Jun.

'I am pleased about that. I also enjoy the fact that we came together, which would not have occurred without you gaining these abilities, Nabiki,# the SI replied with a tone of satisfaction.

'What do you think about letting Ami and the other two in on all this?' she asked it curiously. The machine didn't respond for a moment.
# Ranma is of course correct that it is something of a security risk, always a potential concern. She has very good instincts for such things. # Jun finally said, sounding approving. # The safest course would be to keep the status quo for as long as possible. However, in my estimation, Ami would be a valuable addition to the circle of people built around your sister and her husband, she has a very high intelligence and considerable potential. I would judge the security risk to you, and the rest of your group, to be minimal in her case. Rei and Hotaru are more problematic. Both are also potentially very powerful, Hotaru more so than Rei. While they would be useful allies, it would be necessary to train both of them to overcome their own issues. I have no doubt Ranma and Kasumi could do this but it would take a certain amount of time.

‘Worth the risk?’

# In the long run, yes, I believe so. In the short term it could be annoying. # The SI sounded amused, making her giggle. # Ranma has a low tolerance for gratuitous ignorance, although a remarkable level of patience and capacity to teach when the student genuinely wishes to learn. Rei might trigger some responses she would regret if she allowed her temper to get the better of her in the manner seen in some of the interactions Fumiko had with them. I doubt this attitude would last long, though. # She could almost swear it was laughing. Giggling, she nodded, flapping gently to regain altitude for a few seconds, then resuming gliding.

‘We'll have to wait and see what she decides, I guess. Sis is right, the biggest secrets are hers, the decision should be as well.’

# What are your own feelings on the subject? # Jun asked curiously. She thought for a little while.

‘I don't mind, I think. I'm used to all this now. Telling another magical girl would be much easier than either my family or my non-magical friends, like Miki. Ami has similar problems, she'd understand the issues. In some ways it might be nice to compare notes. I like her, talking to her today made me think she could be a very good friend. She's clearly extremely smart and knowledgeable. She also needs friends. I remember what that was like.’ Falling silent, she headed away from the island, going south, just out of curiosity. The very beginnings of dawn were starting in the east, only visible because she was close to three kilometres up. ‘I'm not quite so sure about Rei yet but I think she means well, just is a little quick to judge. Like you said, Hotaru is very unsure of herself. I think she's had a hard life in some ways. She seems very nice, though.’

A faint flash of light at a considerable distance, nearly on the horizon, caught her attention. She turned in that direction, staring hard, wondering what it was. After a moment’s thought she resumed flapping, pushing her speed up to a little over a hundred kph, heading towards the distant light, which had settled down into a dim orange glow. A few minutes later she was close enough to see it clearly.

# It would appear to be a fishing boat, Nabiki. # Jun remarked. # The engine-room is clearly on fire. I believe the flash you detected was a fuel explosion. #

‘That looks bad,’ she said, speeding up a little. The large trawler was still many kilometres away, flames visible for a long distance.

# They are radioing a low power distress call, but I can detect no satellite emergency transmitter. It is unlikely anyone else can hear them. We are a very long way off any commercial routes, even for air travel, if their call was received it would take hours for a rescue craft to reach them. # Jun sent her the voice of a panicked sounding man speaking English with an accent she hadn't encountered before, frantically calling for help. The name of the ship turned out to be the Samantha James.
'I guess it's up to us, then.' She commed the others back on the island, feeding them video. "Guys, we're still on the clock, it looks like."

"We're on our way," Ranma replied. Seconds later six more flying forms appeared a few hundred metres behind and below her.

"That's the first time I've tried an air to air teleport," Aiko told them, sounding impressed with herself and pleased. "It worked pretty well but I was out a bit on altitude." They listened to the distress call which repeated itself, the man on the radio sounding scared and defeated.

"Let's get closer. Nabiki, let them know we're coming, then you help me with the fire. Kas, you and Aiko check the casualties, the rest of you go in the water, get their people out. There are a lot of sharks around these waters, which isn't going to end well if they turn up." As soon as Nabiki had joined them they teleported again, appearing half a kilometre to one side and three kilometres above the ship. All of them dived towards it, the middle sister reverting to Azumi at the same time Ranma and Kasumi took on their magical girl alter-egos. "Better use the bracelet this time. And no names. This is going to be weird even in magical girl terms," 'Yori' suggested. 'Azumi' nodded, activating it with a thought. She could feel similar magic from her sister and sister-in-law as they duplicated the effect themselves.

Matt looked out of the wheelhouse to the burning engine-room, flames pouring out of the aft hatch, then keyed the VHF microphone in his hand once more, even while speaking knowing it was pretty much hopeless. "Mayday Mayday Mayday, Trawler Samantha James, out of Tauranga, New Zealand, declaring an emergency. We have an uncontrollable fire in our engine room. Engines out, fire suppression system depleted, both life rafts damaged and unusable. Three crew-members are severely injured with life-threatening wounds. Two are in the water, condition unknown. Request assistance immediately. Mayday Mayday Mayday." He released the key, hoping desperately to hear a reply while knowing it wouldn't happen. They were at least a thousand kilometres from the nearest port and quite likely as far from anyone else with a radio. The likelihood of someone even hearing him was close to zero and as far as getting there before the boat burned to the waterline...

He shook his head, glancing back out the window to where his remaining crew were frantically pumping seawater onto the fire with hand-operated pumps, futilely attempting to bring it under control, then looked at the rear of the ship where he could see what was left of the long range antenna and the emergency locater transmitter, both of which had been destroyed in the initial explosion, which had destroyed the starboard ten-person life raft completely and partly melted the one on the other side. 'What the fuck happened?' he wondered for the hundredth time, having no idea how the engine room could have simply exploded like that. The engine was a diesel one, hardly likely to suddenly blow up, leaving aside the fact that diesel fuel wasn't easy to light. Unfortunately, it burned very well and very hot if you did manage to get it going. The fifteen metre flames coming out of the hatch showed that pretty well.

The steel deck was warping in the heat, the roar of the flames not quite covering the creaking noises and occasional cracks as welds snapped. Whatever happened, the ship was a write-off, he idly thought, not sure why he was even considering that under the circumstances. It was much more likely that no one would ever know what happened to them. Just another in a long line of mysteriously vanished ships in the South Pacific. Ducking involuntarily as the flames jumped higher with a loud thud probably caused by one of the emergency fuel barrels exploding, he raised the mic and repeated the distress call.

Giving up he dropped the mic to the chart table and headed to the door to help his crew battle the
fire, knowing it was the last thing he'd do. “Going down with the ship, I guess,” he thought, black humour suffusing him as he smiled grimly.

“Samantha James, your distress call received and understood. Medical and fire fighting aid inbound, arrival imminent. Please stand clear of the fire. Have your casualties ready for treatment.” He stopped dead in the doorway, his hand on the latch, then slowly turned to stare at the radio. It looked back placidly, the indicator lights showing the emergency battery was still operational. Diving for it as his shocked paralysis wore off suddenly he fumbled for the microphone.

“This is Captain Matthew Connelly of the Samantha James. Please repeat.”

“Aid is inbound. ETA twenty seconds. Clear the deck and stand by.” The female voice with a slight accent, Japanese he thought, sounded worryingly competent and rather cold. He stared at the mic in his hand for a long moment, then dropped it, diving out of the wheelhouse, yelling and waving his arms. His crew looked up from the fire fighting.

“Everyone get back! Clear the deck!” he barked, his voice suddenly full of hope. He pointed to his first mate. “Chad, get the casualties up at the bow, right now. Hurry.” The man looked shocked but dropped the hose he was holding, motioning to the other two men with him urgently, all three of them sprinting along the deck to the forward cabin. Flipping the switch beside the searchlight on the side railing he held his breath, smiling when it lit. Installing the forward emergency battery bank the year before had been a good idea. Pity he hadn't thought to connect it to the pumps. Swivelling the light around he panned it across the water, looking for the ship that had made the response. Nothing was visible. No navigation lights, searchlights, nothing. Puzzled, he looked around, cocking his head at a faint whistling noise, barely audible over the sound of the flames.

'What the hell is that?' he wondered. 'Sounds like something...’ He looked up. Faintly visible in the five AM dawn light, half a dozen or so shapes were dropping rapidly towards the ship. Very rapidly. Very rapidly indeed...

With a yelp he hit the floor as a series of loud bangs sounded in a ripple of noise, three or four on the ship, the rest off to either side. A number of splashes sounded immediately afterwards. Shouts of alarm came from the bow where his crew was gathering. Sitting up he looked at the deck in total shock, watching as the four... women? folded their wings and looked around. “Holy shit...” he breathed. Two of them headed towards the fire, which seconds later began diminishing, a huge cloud of fog or steam coming from somewhere, covering it and the female figures and hiding them from view with an enormous hissing sound. The deck became very cold for a few seconds.

The other two walked towards the bow. He jumped to his feet and shot down the ladder to meet them as they went past. The taller one stopped and smiled at him. “Hello. Are you Captain Connelly?” He nodded dumbly, staring in disbelief. She really did have wings, huge ones, covered in what looked like fine golden-blonde fur and neatly folded behind her. She held out her hand, which he took after a few seconds, hesitantly.

“We're here to help. The fire is nearly out, now, so let's see to your casualties.” Turning she walked towards the bow, her companion beside her, while he followed, staring in amazement. He noticed numbly she had a tail as well. Behind him the roar of the fire had stopped, only intermittent hissing sounds still coming from it. Chad and the other two crewmen looked at the two females as they walked over to the three other men lying on the deck, covered in what bandages they'd been able to come up with, two of them badly burned and unconscious, the other one with a crushed leg, soaked in blood. He was moaning in pain despite the amount of morphine they'd pumped into him.

“Captain?” Chad ventured, stepping back warily as the blonde knelt next to the crewman with the
bad leg. “What's going on? Who the hell are these... people...” His voice trailed off as he became more aware of the non-standard features of the two women. Eyes wide, he looked at them in shock, crossing himself and stepping away.

“They're help, I think. The miracle we needed.” Matt shook his head, looking around at his crewmen. “Other than that, your guess is as good as mine.” They stayed back, watching in renewed shock as the blonde woman put her hands on the injured man, a golden glow coming from between her fingers. He stopped moaning instantly, suddenly and deeply unconscious. “What did you do?” he asked, worried. She smiled up at him.

“I just turned his consciousness off for the moment. He was in a lot of pain. Does he drink much?” Beside him, Chad nodded.

“Too much. Whenever we're at home he's drunk most of the time, but he doesn't drink when we're at sea.”

“I thought so. Alcohol abuse can increase tolerance for opiates, which leads to it being inadequate at normal doses. The morphine you used wasn't enough to deal with the pain.” She returned her attention to the man on the deck, speaking quick Japanese to her colleague, who carefully applied traction to the leg, making the men watching wince at the squelching crack it produced as the bones realigned. They stared in amazement as the blonde winged woman ran glowing hands slowly down their friend's leg, which visibly healed in seconds. Shortly she rocked back on her heels.

“That should do it for now. I'll deal with the liver problems from the alcohol after these other two are fixed.”

Matt looked at Chad in shock, then both of them stared at the woman, who had moved on to the most severely burned man. “Fuck me,” Chad breathed almost inaudibly.

Two more females approached from the stern, the two who had gone to deal with the fire. One was quite petite, with very long black hair in a braid, but gave an impression of barely restrained danger, while the other radiated a cold competence, her silver hair glinting in the lights. “The fire is out,” this one said, her voice identifying her as the one he'd spoken to on the radio. She stopped beside him while the other one knelt beside the final casualty, her purple-glowing hands quickly beginning to turn blistered and seeping flesh back into healthy skin. The silver-haired one looked at him.

“Both your crew members who were in the water have been located, Captain,” she added, her voice calm. “Our people are bringing them aboard. One has a broken arm, the other is just cold and in shock. They'll be fine.”

Matt looked at her, then around at the other three. “Who are you people?” he asked, feeling faint. “And what?” She smiled slightly.

“We're friends. Luckily for you we were in the area.” Looking at him for a moment, she added, “You're a very long way from home, Captain. Tauranga is two thousand six hundred and twenty three kilometres that way.” She pointed off to one side without looking. For some reason he suspected she was accurate to the metre. “Do you normally go so far looking for fish?”

“It's not unusual,” he replied, wondering at the ordinariness of the conversation. “We haven't been in these waters before, though. It's a long way off the normal fishing routes. That could have been the end of us if you lot hadn't turned up.”

“Your ship is badly damaged,” she told him, glancing back towards the stern. “From what I could see the engine room is completely destroyed, the hull doesn't look too good either, although we
couldn't find any serious leaks. It's floating but that's about it.”

He sighed. “I know, it's beyond salvaging. The hull would need a complete rebuild after a fire like that, even if the engines were intact. It would be cheaper to scrap it and buy a new one rather than repair this.” He looked around. “It was a good ship. I've sailed on her for a long time. I'll miss her.” She smiled remarkably sympathetically at him, seeming abruptly less intimidating.

“I'm sorry about that. I wish we could have gotten here sooner, but it was complete chance we even heard your distress call.” She looked over her shoulder as three more women came around the wheelhouse, two of them helping his missing crewmen, both of them soaked to the skin and shivering. “At least you all survived.”

“That's something. But we're still... a little more than twenty-six hundred kilometres from home.” he smiled slightly at her, making her grin. “And probably as far from anyone else other than you. How are we going to get back? We can't fly.” The short woman who had just finished healing the burned crewman stood up, turning to him, as the silver haired one looked at her.

“There is a way but you're going to find it a bit odd. It's safe, though.” Her rich voice was full of amusement, making him slightly apprehensive. She grinned at his expression. “Don't worry. It will be something to tell your friends.”

“None of my friends will ever believe any of this,” he muttered. She snickered.

“Thereir loss.” Turning to the man with the broken arm she healed it in a few seconds. “OK, I think that's the last of the injuries. Let's see about getting you guys home.” Walking to the bow, she peered over the side, then looked around, before nodding. Curious, he followed her, glancing up at the sky which was slowly lightening. Soon the sun would rise. The water surrounding them was remarkably calm, not at all affected by the panic that had been on board only minutes before.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. She grinned.

“This.” Waving her hand theatrically in a gesture towards ocean in front of the ship, she looked amused as he gasped. Behind him he heard a couple of men swear before it went dead quiet, only the creaking and groaning of the ship moving slightly on the water breaking the silence. He stared at the glowing blue tear in space hanging in front of the bow, shock on his face, before looking at the winged woman, who seemed satisfied. A faint crackle came from the manifestation as it grew, reaching down to the water and up to above the highest point of the ship, before stabilising at this new size.

“That should do it.” Glancing at his gaping mouth, she gently closed it with one finger, before looking over her shoulder and nodding. Four of her companions slipped over the side, including the silver-haired one, with barely a splash. Matt was sure he'd seen them shimmer slightly as they vanished, their wings wavering out of existence. He grabbed at the railing as the ship jerked slightly then began slowly moving towards the glowing blue apparition.

“What the fuck is that?” he squeaked, pointing at the thing. She looked at it for a moment.

“Oh, it's a portal to another reality,” she explained casually. “They'll push your ship through, then we'll open another one to just off the coast of New Zealand and push it back. You should be fine then. It's very difficult to open a portal to a place in the same reality which is why we have to do it in stages like this. Annoying, but what can you do?” She shrugged slightly. He stared at her, then at the blue tear.

“Do we have to do anything?” he asked weakly. She shook her head.
“Nope. Just enjoy the ride. Not many people see this.” The bow of the ship entered the ‘portal’ with a louder crackling sound, making him and his crew all jump slightly. One or two of them moved away, heading back towards the other end of the ship. She watched for a moment with a smile, then went back to observing the progress of the operation. Steeling himself he closed his eyes as the blue glow reached them, then opened them again a few seconds later when he didn't feel anything. Brilliant sunlight greeted him, along with bright green water surrounding the ship. Looking around in shock he stared over his shoulder to see half the ship was still on the other side of the portal, more and more coming through steadily. His crew talked rapidly, looking around in amazement.

“Welcome to K’nn nine. It's an agricultural and recreational world in the K’nn grouping,” the woman beside him said, her voice full of laughter. He stared at her, then around at the view. “Look up,” she suggested. He did so, then froze, his crewmen going silent one by one as they did the same.

“Oh my god,” he breathed.

“Good, isn't it? Best ring system I've ever seen, from close up at any rate.” She chuckled. “Something else to tell your friends.” Behind the ship, as the stern slipped through, the portal closed with a loud pop. He jumped, looking at her smiling at him.

“Um, Captain?” Chad sounded worried. He looked over at the man, then in the direction he was pointing. Some sort of flying machine was approaching rapidly. They all stared as it zipped up, stopping dead a few tens of metres away, simply hanging in the air in a very improbable manner, emitting a faint hum.

“What the hell is that?” he asked warily. The young woman glanced at him. “Customs. Hang on a moment.” She waved to the aircraft, or spacecraft, or whatever it was, the thing looked like something out of an SF film. It moved closer, stopping five or six metres away. Through a darkened window he could see several figures moving around, none of them even as human looking as the flying women with tails were. Matt felt a chill as inhuman eyes inspected him. There was silence from the girl beside him for half a minute, then she nodded, waving to the aircraft again, which dipped it's nose slightly, before spinning around on the spot, shooting off into the distance at high speed and vanishing over the horizon seconds later. “That's all sorted out. They like to keep an eye on who comes and goes, just in case, portals opening where they're not expecting them attract a certain amount of official attention. Understandable really.”

“I can see where it would be,” Matt managed to say. She clapped him on the shoulder. “Right. Let's get you guys back.” Shortly another portal opened, enlarging in the same manner the first one had. The Samantha James headed steadily towards it. This time he kept his eyes open, finding the travel through the portal to be very anti-climactic, only a blue glow surrounding them for a second or so with no sensation. Once again they were in darkness, stars above showing through light cloud. A few kilometres away he saw familiar lights glimmering in the dark.

“That's Tauranga!” he gasped, pointing. She smiled. “Correct. We're about four kilometres off shore out of the shipping lanes. You can call for assistance and a tow from here.” The woman held out her hand. After a long moment he took it, shaking it gratefully although with a certain amount of stunned disbelief. “It's been nice meeting you, Captain. I'm very sorry about your ship. Hopefully you have insurance?” Matt nodded. “Good. With some luck you should be at sea again in the near future. It might be a good idea to check the fuel lines on your next ship. It looked to me like one of them had managed to leak into
the exhaust manifold, which produced a cloud of vapour that got ignited by a spark. That would account for the explosion. Like a fuel-air bomb, I suppose.”

“That would do it,” he agreed. A look of anger crossed his face. “I think I need to talk to the maintenance company who did the most recent refit. The fuel lines shouldn't go anywhere near the exhaust.”

“Good luck with that.” She smiled again, then turned as the four woman who had jumped over the side climbed back. “We'll be on our way now. We have to get back.” She waved to the rest of the crew who were watching from a safe distance, a number of shocked expressions present. One or two of them waved back reflexively. With a last smile at him she stepped up onto the railing, spread her wings, then leaped into the sky with a powerful flap, rapidly ascending into the darkness. The others did the same. Soon he was staring up at barely visible dots high above. A bright rainbow-tinted flash came, making him blink, and when his vision cleared he couldn't see anything but the stars. Feeling a presence standing behind him he turned to see his first mate staring up as well.

“What the fuck just happened?” Chad asked quietly. He shrugged helplessly.

“I haven't got a clue, except that somehow we're alive when we shouldn't be.” Walking towards the stern he stopped at the base of the ladder to the bridge, looking at the twisted and blackened wreckage at the rear of the boat, proof of how hot the fire had been. The poor vessel was beginning to list gently to starboard as numerous tiny leaks made their presence felt. He didn't think it would last more than another few hours. “Not a fucking clue. No one is ever going to believe this.” He started climbing the ladder, Chad following, shaking his head.

“We have the GPS, the logs will prove where we were I guess,” the first mate said.

“True. But it's still going to be one of those 'weird shit happens at sea' stories. Perhaps we should just keep quiet about that part. The fire is real enough, that should keep the insurance company happy. Or not. You know what I mean.” Entering the cabin he picked up the mic, glancing at his old friend. “I don't think anyone will believe that we went to another world or whatever it was. Never mind got rescued by flying Japanese girls.” Chad shrugged as he keyed the mic.

“This is the trawler Samantha James calling, we need a tow. We've had a fire on board. The engine room is destroyed, we are adrift at the following coordinates…” He read the figures from the screen of the GPS. “No casualties. Everyone is fine.” Releasing the transmit key he waited for a reply, suddenly smiling.

Relaxing into bed in her room, Nabiki rolled over and closed her eyes, feeling pleased. It had been a long and strange day, but overall worthwhile. She was asleep very soon after.
"Hello, Sergeant." The familiar voice made Harada look over his shoulder, smiling, as Chou came up and fell into step with him while he walked along the pavement. The blonde smiled back. "I haven't seen you since we left. How are you? And Emiko?"

"We're both doing very well, thanks, Chou. The baby is too according to the latest scans. How was your holiday?"

Looking pleased, the magical girl laughed. "It was very interesting indeed. We met a number of old friends, made some new ones, dealt with a few minor problems... You know, more or less the usual." Harada chuckled.

"I can imagine. Or perhaps I can't, you people know some very strange individuals." The tall woman laughed again.

"Oh, we do indeed. Some might say we are very strange individuals." She grinned at him. "I can't see it myself."

"I hope it was relaxing, at any rate. You guys deserved a break after that entire portal bomb thing, especially the way it ended." She nodded, sighing very faintly.

"That wasn't much fun, no. We at least managed to unwind quite a lot before we had to return early to deal with this trouble in Azuba-Juuban. That's being somewhat irritating." He glanced at her, then also sighed, more loudly.

"That, I'll agree with completely. I'm very sorry it's happened but very glad it happened somewhere else." This made her giggle a little.

"Yes, so am I. It would be beyond annoying to have all that damage here. Although there was enough from the earlier incident that Fumiko and Tamiko dealt with." She shook her head in irritation. "Poor Mr Singh. His curry restaurant required considerable work. It's only just reopened."

"He was extremely pleased about how quickly your contractors sorted it all out," the sergeant replied, shooting her a quick sideways glance. The woman beside him looked amused.

"Our contractors? It was the magical girl reimbursement fund who hired them from what I hear." She looked back with sly grin, causing him to snicker.

"And we all know who's behind that innovation even if the people involved don't like spreading it about, don't we?"

"It seems immodest to shout it from the rooftops," Chou said serenely, a twinkle in her eye. "Although, privately, we're both very pleased with how well it's worked out over the years. These recent problems have stretched it a little but it's managing." He grinned, wondering not for the first time what their source of income was for the fund, but too polite to ask.

"I saw on the news that the fund is involved in the rebuilding work in Azuba-Juuban as well. I didn't think it covered that area." Chou grimaced delicately.
"Normally it wouldn't, but there are... complex circumstances... covering the current issues with those girls. Since we were involved in the operation to deal with them we thought it best to help out. Sorry, I mean the fund thought it best." The young woman smiled as he laughed, nodding understandingly. "I can't go into the details at the moment, it's still ongoing and there are a lot of threads to tie up, but hopefully when everything is sorted I can give you at least a background report for your records, just to keep things straight. I know how interested you are in the magical girl politics in Minato."

"While sometimes it's a bit terrifying, overall I do find it very interesting," he admitted. "And it's sometimes useful. For a while now I seem to have been considered the de-facto magical girl expert in law enforcement. I get a surprising amount of enquiries from other police districts, the PSIA, and every now and then certain foreign agencies, through them. Recently M15, the RCMP, LAPD, and that Australian one, the ASIO, for example. For obvious reasons." He looked at her as she nodded. "I hope that doesn't bother you. I know how private you and Yori are."

She smiled at him, shaking her head. "No, it's not a problem. Most of what we let you know is public information, or at least nothing we have problems with being distributed to people with a reason to know. If we ever need to tell you something we don't want repeated, we'll inform you about it. Both of us feel we could trust you if that was necessary." Feeling oddly pleased, he nodded, a small grin coming and going.

"Thank you, Chou." They walked along in companionable silence for a few dozen metres, occasionally waving to people either one knew. "If you don't mind me asking, is it likely that the sort of incident we had last week will happen again?" he finally asked tentatively. The woman beside him sighed gently.

"I'm not sure. As I said, I'm not free to go into the details, but there were some extenuating circumstances. Not ideal ones but it wasn't entirely their fault. We're still working on the problem. It looks likely that we have stopped at least four of them from doing anything excessive in future, but the remaining five are... something of a complicated issue. Colleagues of ours, some very prominent specialist mages, are currently researching that issue. We've had a few possibly effective ideas but nothing concrete yet. It may take some time to resolve." She frowned at the pavement as she walked, thoughtfully. "Hopefully not too much time, but at this point we just don't know, I'm afraid."

"That group has managed to ruin their reputation fairly comprehensively with those two disasters," he noted glumly. "Three, if you count the one here, but that got dealt with very efficiently by Fumiko and Tamiko, so no one was too bothered after the fact." She nodded slightly, looking upset.

"Yes. They've been more trouble than normal for some time but that mall incident really was the last straw. The fight the next day was just adding insult to injury. Yori and I are both out of patience. Even though there are, as I mentioned, extenuating circumstances in play, if anything else happens we will have to deal with it very harshly. It will be the last such incident if it happens, I can assure you." Her normally light friendly voice had gone nearly as cold as that of that rather disturbing Azumi girl. He looked at her for a moment then nodded.

"Hopefully that won't be necessary."

"Hopefully." She didn't sound completely convinced.

As they reached a nearby coffee-shop, they spotted a small figure entering it, both watching for a moment. "Isn't that the demon who triggered the fight here?" Harada asked curiously. Chou smiled.
"Xrist. Yes. He's the biggest caffeine addict I've ever met. Harmless, pays well, but totally addicted to coffee." She laughed slightly, stopping in the door of the shop and peering in. Waving, she called something in that weird demonic language, giggling at the reply. Harada looked past her to see the little alien form of Xrist sitting on a chair, handing over a small glittery bar of gold to Hikaru, who pushed a large cup of his best cappuccino across the counter in exchange, appearing very pleased. Inspecting the gold, which was at least a hundred times the worth of the coffee, he opened the till and dropped it in, looking up and grinning at the sergeant.

"Hey, Tetsuo! And Chou as well! Would either of you like a coffee?" Harada looked at the magical girl, who shrugged a little, smiling.

"Why not?" They entered, sitting on either side of the demon, who raised his cup in salute to Chou, then took a deep drink from it, sighing in pleasure.

"Oh, that's good," he moaned in pleasure, his accent weird to Harada but completely understandable. The policeman grinned at the blonde over his head, before turning to Hikaru who was looking amused.

"I'll just have the usual, thanks," he said. Chou nodded when the owner glanced at her.

"The same, thank you, Hikaru," she requested politely. Turning away the man prepared the drinks, adding one for himself. He handed them over, before sipping his own. Turning his attention to the magical girl he waited politely until she'd tried her drink, nodding in pleased satisfaction.

"I hear you went on holiday," he commented. She smiled at him.

"Yes. Unfortunately we had to cut it short due to the problems in Azuba-Juuban, which is somewhat annoying, but we had a good time." He nodded understandingly.

"I saw the news. Looks like Yori was a bit pissed off." Inspecting her, he asked, "Are you all right? That magic the other girl used looked damn powerful."

"I'm fine, thank you, Hikaru," she replied, smiling a little. "It was quite painful but not serious. I'm just a little embarrassed I didn't manage to get out of the way in time." He chuckled at this.

"From what I know those girls are very dangerous." He took another sip of coffee. "Not as dangerous as you or Yori, clearly, but nothing to play around with."

Xrist nodded vigorously, looking up. "They're completely crazy as well," he added. "I really thought I was going to die that time they chased me. Didn't even stop to ask questions, they just opened fire as soon as they saw me. If it wasn't for all that fancy prancing about they do I'd never have been able to escape." He sighed as the three humans exchanged amused glances. "So unfriendly. It doesn't make a good impression on visitors, that sort of attitude." Grumbling slightly, he drank out of his cup, putting the empty vessel back on the counter. "Can I have another one, please?" he asked brightly, showing dozens of tiny gleaming fangs in an ingratiating smile. Hikaru grinned and refilled his cup.

"Those girls are somewhat quick off the mark," Chou agreed, nodding to the demon. "With a bit of luck, though, we should be able to resolve the problem fairly soon."

"I hope so," Xrist said acerbically. "None of my friends dare come here at the moment, in case they pop out of the woodwork again and start shooting at them." He shook his head in disgust. "I've got half a mind to complain." After a moment, he looked puzzled. "Who would I complain to?" he asked, looking around at them. They all exchanged glances again, before starting to laugh.
Agent Naito picked up his desk phone when it bleeped at him, putting it to his ear without looking away from the report he was reading. "Naito."

"Ah, Agent. Good, I wasn't sure if you were in the office at the moment." The deep voice of the Director-General made him blink slightly, unsure why he would be calling.

"Hello, Director-General. What can I do for you?"

"We have an interesting operation for which your presence was requested. You may well find it fascinating, although it's somewhat unusual even by Special Activities Office standards. Would you come to my office immediately, please? This isn't something we can discuss over the phone." The voice sounded intrigued, slightly puzzled, and also weirdly amused, all at the same time. Naito lifted the handset from his ear and looked curiously at it for a second before putting it back.

"Certainly, sir. I'm on my way." He was already shutting down his computer. Shortly he stepped out of the elevator on the ninth floor, looking around curiously, as it wasn't somewhere he spent a lot of time, before heading to the Director-General's office. Inside, the man's secretary, a pretty woman he happened to know could shoot you between the eyes at fifty metres with no effort at all, smiled at him.

"He's expecting you, Agent," she told him, waving to the inner office door. "Go right in." Nodding his thanks he pulled the door open, entering and glancing about. Spotting the man he'd come to see behind his fairly impressive desk, he walked over, only to stop when he saw who was sitting in a chair on the other side of the desk, someone who had been hidden by the high back until he got close enough.

"Hello, Agent," Yori said with a wide grin. He smiled back, suddenly sure that this operation would be very weird. Then he looked worried, suddenly sure it would be very weird. She snickered at his expression. "Don't panic. You'll like this one. We'll even make sure you get enough sleep first."

Chuckling, he glanced at the Director-General, who waved him to another chair with a small smile.

"I've been very impressed with your work on the portal bomb case, Masao," he said, leaning back in his chair. "A lot of people were. We've learned a lot in the process of dealing with those damn terrorists as well, things we've wondered about for a long time, at least in part due to your activities, and professionalism in dealing with the... special talent." He glanced at Yori with another tiny smile. She saluted him with a forefinger, grinning.

"Thank you, Sir. It's been very interesting, I have to admit, although somewhat tiring." Yori giggled a little, causing him to smile as well. "But I've enjoyed it, overall, even though several times I've been scared shi...," he stopped, glancing at the black-haired girl, who giggled even harder, "um, quite significantly," he finished. The Director-General looked at him for a long moment, then nodded again.

"Quite. I can understand your feelings, reading about the various missions has been very... enlightening." He flipped open a folder lying on the desk in front of it and leafed through it for a few seconds. Naito recognised some of the contents as reports he'd written. "Nevertheless, you have acquitted yourself with honour. Your actions reflected well on this organisation internationally, we have closer and better ties with several foreign governments as a direct result, and we've also worked more closely with that same special talent than ever before. Well done indeed."
"Thank you again, Sir." Pleased, he glanced at Yori, who had stopped giggling but was looking amused, then looked back to the Director-General, who closed the folder, placing his hands on it and appearing mildly annoyed.

"This most recent series of problems in Minato, however, threatens to potentially be very bad. Yori and her team have, from what I've been told, brought an end to the most egregious issues, somewhat suddenly going by the news, but I'm also informed that there are other matters in play that could make a bad situation much worse. I haven't been informed quite what those matters are." He cast the magical girl a curious look. She shrugged apologetically.

"I really am sorry about it, but I can't mention much about the situation for a number of reasons. All I can tell you is what I already have."

"Hmm." He looked mildly irritated. "Despite your undoubted remarkable abilities I still find it somewhat curious that you have, technically, a security rating higher than mine, especially as you don't even work for the Japanese government." Yori grinned mysteriously.

"I know some interesting people, who I've helped out in the past. They seem to feel they owe Chou and me a few favours."

"And you keep track, right?" Naito quipped, making her snicker again, looking at him for a moment.

"Yep."

The Director-General gave the impression of someone who was bursting with curiosity but was suppressing it manfully. Naito felt much the same way, although he knew Yori well enough to realise there was no hope of finding out any more without her cooperation, which clearly wasn't going to happen. After a few seconds, the man behind the desk nodded a little.

"All right. Obviously my interest in this matter will have to lie unsatisfied." He turned his attention to his agent again. "Despite the lack of a full briefing, what I've been told is still rather surprising, even under the circumstances. Yori and her girls are going to be doing some investigating very soon, which although they don't strictly require the presence of a PSIA agent for, apparently feel it would be politic to have. As a favour to us, essentially, so we don't feel left out." He smiled more broadly for a few seconds, apparently finding this funny.

"It seemed polite," Yori agreed with a slight laugh in her voice. "We asked for you as we know, like, and trust you." She grinned at Naito, who felt unexpectedly pleased by the compliment.

"Thanks very much, Yori."

She waved a hand grandly. "Think nothing of it, my dear man." Her voice was suddenly one of the most upper-crust ones he'd ever heard, making him stare, then laugh loudly.

"Have you ever wanted to be an astronaut?" she asked in a much more normal tone of voice, but one that had extreme amusement in it. He stopped laughing and stared at her curiously.

"What?" he asked, taken aback by the non-sequitur. She grinned.

"You're going to love this, I think." Pulling a small plastic box from thin air she tossed it to him. Catching it deftly he looked at it, then her, before carefully opening it. Inside was a small device, completely unfamiliar to him. He picked it up and looked curiously at it, turning it over in his hands. Made of something that looked like a cross between a metal and a ceramic, matt black, it was curved and perhaps fifteen centimetres long by five wide, only one thick or so except in the
middle of the outer curve, where a three centimetre hemispherical bulge protruded. It was much lighter than he'd have thought likely from the size. After a moment he looked up at the black-haired girl who was watching him with interest.

"What is it?"

She looked amused. "A spacesuit."

There was a long pause.

"A what?"

"A spacesuit. Honest. It's good for three to four weeks of life support, anywhere from five hundred or so degrees centigrade to absolute zero, in quite severe radiation flux as well. You could walk around on Mercury with it on, assuming you didn't fall into a pool of molten lead. That would hurt." He stared at her, then at the Director-General, who was looking as surprised as he felt. Yori snickered at their expressions. "It's not from around here, of course. Don't lose it, they're not enormously cheap." She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Not hugely expensive, though. Good value for money, let's say." The two men stared at each other blankly, making her laugh.

Agent Naito gaped at her for a while, then stared at the device in his hand, turning it over again. Suddenly he looked suspicious. "Hold on. Why do I need a spacesuit?"

"Well, you're hardly going to be walking around on the moon without one, are you?" She looked taken aback, raising her eyebrows. "Do PSIA agents know how to survive in a vacuum?" He stared hard at her, while the corners of her mouth twitched. Eventually she giggled.

"The moon?" The rest of her words suddenly caught up to him. She nodded, grinning.

"Yes."

He stared again. Then he pointed vaguely upwards. She nodded again.

"That's the one." Reaching out she repositioned his numb arm. "More that way, though." He couldn't seem to be able to remember how to breath for some seconds.

"What...?" Words failed him as he looked helplessly between the girl in the chair and the Director-General, who seemed to be enjoying himself now. "How...? I mean, who...?" She started laughing again. "But...?" Shaking his head firmly, he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get to grips with things. Taking a deep breath he opened them again and fixed her with his best steely gaze, causing her eyes to widen in mirth, but she politely stopped laughing and waited. "Could you please explain?" he asked very carefully. She nodded, an amused look on her face.

"Of course." He waited. "We need to go to the moon to look for something. Evidence, you might call it. It's key to resolving this case with the magical girl group, although I'm not at liberty to explain quite how at the moment." She smirked a little. "That information is unavailable." Her impression of the horrifying Ms Aoyama was good enough that he shivered for a moment, which clearly amused her. "Technically, since the people who will be giving us a lift aren't part of any nation on earth, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 doesn't really apply, but we thought it would be a nice gesture to offer a representative of the Japanese government the chance to observe. If anyone ever does complain about it, you're covered then." She grinned at him. "I thought you'd like the opportunity to be that representative." His mouth had been hanging open more and more as she explained, while his mind was going in circles. This was the weirdest thing yet in a recent career that had been very weird even by his standards.
"It's not something we will insist on, Masao," the Director-General told him. "It's purely voluntary. But it was felt you're the best person for the job for a number of reasons." He studied his subordinate. "There is also an increase in security rating by two grades as part of the operation. That brings a small raise with it." Naito switched his gaping stare to the man for a moment, then back to Yori. It took some time before he could work out what to say. Both of them waited patiently while he tried to get his thoughts in order. Finally he closed his mouth.

"Um." He paused again. "The moon? How do we get there?" Yori shrugged.

"In a spaceship, of course."

"You... have a spaceship?" he asked, somehow not as shocked as he felt he should have been. The girl chuckled.

"No, although Fumiko really wants to get one. I keep telling her we don't have anywhere to keep it. But I know a guy who has quite a few. It took me a few days to get in contact with him, he was out," she grinned again, "quite a long way out, but I managed it two nights ago. He's fine with it. Nice guy, you'll like him. Asteroid miner by the name of S'th'kx." Naito stared at her, stunned and lost for words. He glanced at his superior who looked slightly lost as well.

"Can you explain more about this?" the Director-General asked politely. She thought for a moment, clearly trying to work out the best way to do so.

"OK. You know I've told you in the past that a lot of the 'demon worlds' are better described as 'alien worlds'?" Naito nodded, recalling some of their conversations over the last few months. "Some of those worlds are considerably higher-tech than ours is. Some are based on magic, some on technology much like ours, some a mix. S'th'kx comes from a world called K'nn four, it's one of a group of fifteen worlds in several different realities linked by a network of portals. It's pretty close to some of the stuff you'd find in one of the better SF books." She stopped to see if they understood. Both men exchanged glances, then slowly nodded.

"Good. The K'nn worlds do quite a bit of space travel locally. They don't currently use faster than light travel, although they know about it, but they do a lot of zipping around in their own systems. S'th'kx is a major asteroid miner, his company is one of the most profitable on K'nn four, and he has a small fleet of in-system spacecraft ranging from some little exploration ships up to a few large bulk transporters. They mine metals from asteroids, refine it, then ship it back. The sort of thing people here have vaguely talked about for decades but we don't have the technology to do yet."

"And these people do?" the Director-General asked with fascination. She nodded.

"Yep. They're around a century or two ahead of us in most areas of technology. Very good at antigravity systems, something they rolled out quite a while ago. All his ships use it. They're no good for really long distance travel, like to other stars, but for exploring a solar system they work fine. The drives they use can get up to about eighty percent of the speed of light although they don't normally go much past ten percent, apparently the time dilation above that gets irritating. Even at ten percent light speed you can go anywhere in a solar system in fairly short periods of time." Yori smiled. "When we visited he took us out to a captured asteroid they were mining, it only took a few hours even though it was several million kilometres away. The moon is no trouble." Naito stared at her for a while, not sure whether she was playing some weird joke on him.

"So you're going to bring an alien spaceship, complete with aliens, to Tokyo?" he asked after a long pause. She grinned at him.
"No, that would cause... a number of problems." He nodded slowly, thinking that was putting it mildly. "Not to mention get other countries really wound up. Probably not an ideal situation. The idea is somewhat different. We go to K'nn four, get in his ship, he takes off, then we bring it back through a portal around the other side of the moon. He's fitted one of his ships with a very good stealth system so no Earth-based radar system or telescopes will detect it." The girl looked amused as they stared at each other again. "They have some very cool toys. Anyway, we deploy a load of probes, poke around for a while to see if we can find, or much more likely, not find, what we're looking for, probably land and walk around for a bit just for fun, then come home the same way. No one but us knows about it. Although the next people to land on the moon might find some odd footprints..." This seemed to cause her considerable amusement.

She studied him for a moment as he thought about what he'd heard. Eventually the magical girl asked, "So. Interested?" Thinking about it some more, he finally looked up.

"When?"

"Tomorrow, around lunchtime. It would be for two to three days, in all probability. There won't be any real discomfort, his ship has full gravity control, so no zero g unless you want it." She smiled. "It's a lot of fun, but not for everyone." Naito thought some more, weighing the 'spacesuit' device in his hand, then grinned.

"Why not. I've done some damn weird things with you lot so far and I'm still around. Going to the moon sounds like fun." Yori chuckled, pleased.

"Good. I think you'll love it. Bring a camera." She looked him up and down. "And I'd suggest something less expensive than that suit. The environment suit forcefield allows external objects to penetrate it under the right circumstances, although it keeps air in and excess temperature and illumination swings under control. Moon dust gets everywhere, from what I've been told, you'll have trouble washing it out." The girl laughed as he looked at his suit. "Although you'd look cool standing on the moon in a nice suit and sunglasses." After a moment's thought, she added, "Bring sunglasses." He chuckled.

"We'll sort out some equipment for you, Agent," the Director-General said, smiling slightly. "We're very curious as well. Special equipment division has started putting together what you'll need."

Yori stood. "I'm going to have to go. I'll call you tomorrow around eleven or so. Aiko will pick you up and bring you to us, then we'll set up the portal." With a nod and a smile to both of them she faded from view as she walked towards the door, which opened slightly, then closed. Naito watched with an amused grin.

"She gets a kick out of that invisibility trick," he murmured, then turned to the Director-General.

"Interesting woman," the man said, also watching the door, his eyebrows up in surprise. "I've read about that but it's very impressive to see it in real life." He turned to Naito.

"Please pay attention to everything you can. We're not concerned about Yori's private business, we've been told very firmly that it's not something we need to worry about, but we are very interested in anything you learn about these other worlds, their technology, whether they're friendly, that sort of thing. I think the friendliness is probably a given, considering they're doing Yori this as a favour, but considering how much more portal travel there seems to be to Minato in the past few years, we want to learn as much about it as possible." The agent nodded thoughtfully.

"I understand. We do seem to be having a lot more visitors recently. That demon Uthryyl that's
apparently a good friend of Yori's has been through at least half a dozen times in the last year, from what we know, for example. He's apparently got commercial agreements with one or more local traders in Minato and is doing considerable business there. Around Yori and Chou's area the locals are so used to demons they don't even seem to notice it unless you point it out." He shook his head in wonder. "Go into any coffee shop and you might well meet one, although a lot of them are disguised in different ways."

The other man looked amused. "There has been a lot of otherworldly attention in the last few years. Luckily the majority of it seems peaceful, due mainly to the unusual young lady who was just here and her friends. It's certainly boosting the economy a surprising amount in some specific fields. They seem to pay very well. Though the tax office is getting a little confused about some of the receipts they've been given by a few merchants from what the reports say."

Naito laughed for a moment. "I could see that being difficult to explain."

"Apparently, certain parties in the government are considering setting up an official if discreet finance branch to try to organise this interworld trade. I'm not convinced they'll have much luck unless they can find one or more magical girls to help, it's a long way out of their field of expertise, but people are beginning to notice. They seem to think overall it's a good thing but there are worries about the possibility of dangerous items being imported, items that are sufficiently different we wouldn't notice them until too late. Weapons, drugs, that sort of thing. The portal bomb plot showed how dangerous magic could be, up until then it was so esoteric a subject not many people outside that community really understood that."

Nodding thoughtfully, Naito considered it. "I can see that being a worry. I think, like in so many other things to do with the magical world, the person to speak to is Yori. She and her friends know far more about that sort of thing than anyone else I know, and more to the point will actually talk to us about it. Some of it, at any rate. It's a rather closed world, it would be very difficult to get information on it without the cooperation of someone on the inside. Very dangerous, as well, if the approach was wrong." He shuddered slightly. "Believe me, some of the people I've met through those girls are... disturbing. You would not like to get them annoyed with us. It wouldn't end well."

Opening the folder the Director-General flipped through the pages, before pulling one out and reading it. "Such as this Ms Aoyama, I think?" Naito looked worried.

"Oh, she's right at the top of the list. Seriously, don't do anything she would interpret as hostile. You have no idea. Neither do I, but having met her a few times, I think it would be very bad. Whoever she works for isn't someone we want to get on the wrong side of. Neither is she." His superior made some notes, nodding.

"We were given the same advice by Sir Alan in the UK. He seemed impressed. And more than a little intimidated."

"I'm not surprised. She's absolutely horrifying in some very disturbing ways, although to be fair I don't think she's at all hostile. The opposite, really. Just very, very cold and emotionless. It's like dealing with some sort of android. One that's swallowed a dictionary." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. "But I'm pretty sure she's alive. Just... not very human."

"Your reports suggest Yori gets along with her very well." Naito smiled a little.

"Yori is even more horrifying, when she wants to be. Ms Aoyama is the creepiest person I've ever met and undoubtedly one of the most dangerous. Yori is the most dangerous. Quite possibly by a substantial margin. Chou is right behind her. I'm glad they get along so well with us, to be honest, it would be very awkward if they didn't."
The Director-General looked at another page from the folder. "I would have to agree. Some of the things I've read about are truly worrying. She's also got some very interesting friends. Even the ones I know about are difficult to believe. I'm fairly sure there are ones I don't know about that are even stranger. It would be very interesting to find out how she met them all."

"It would indeed. But I'm sure as hell not going to ask." Naito stood up, putting the small device Yori had given him back into the box, which he slipped into his pocket. "Is that all, Sir?" The man looked up from his folder, closing it, then nodded.

"Yes, thank you, Masao. Go down to Equipment and get the package they should have ready for you, check everything is there, sign the paperwork for the clearance upgrade, then go home and get some rest. You're going to have an interesting few days." He smiled more widely than the agent had ever seen before. "I'm rather jealous. I wanted to go into space when I was young, but it never seemed likely to happen. Take care and enjoy yourself, this is an extremely unusual opportunity."

Naito headed for the door, grinning.

"They always are when those girls are involved, Sir. Unusual, and often very scary, but more fun than you'd think likely." He left the office, shaking his head in wonder. "The moon?" he whispered to himself as he headed to the elevator.

Picking up her phone, Ami looked at the caller name, then smiled a little. "Hello, Azumi," she said.

"Hi, Ami. I hope you're all right?" The voice of the silver-haired girl was genuinely curious. Ami nodded to herself, then realised the other woman couldn't see it.

"I'm fine, overall, thanks. Still kind of stunned by everything the other day, but glad it's been five days now without any more problems." She sighed. "I was half-expecting something horrible to happen."

"I understand," Azumi replied. "So was I. Your friends seem to be lying low at the moment, though."

"Setsuna talked to me a couple of days ago. I tried discreetly probing her to work out how she was feeling. I'm not entirely sure about the results. She was... I guess the best word for it is a bit absent-minded. More than normal. Kept losing the thread of the conversation, like she wasn't really paying attention to me, then looked a little surprised when she noticed I was still there. It was kind of weird. She's been a little vague for quite a while but that was different." She sighed quietly. "The weirdest thing was she actually smiled at me when I left, which is practically unique in my experience. I got the impression she forgot about me as soon as I was out of the room, though."

"How about the others?"

"Don't you already know?" the blue-haired girl asked with amusement. Azumi chuckled.

"We've certainly been watching them, yes, but I'm interested in your opinion."

Nodding to herself, Ami replied,"Usagi refuses to talk to me now. I called her a few times. The first time she just swore at me for about five minutes straight then hung up. It was a bit of a shock, I didn't know she knew that many swear words. I didn't know there were that many swear words!" Azumi seemed to find this quite funny. "After that she won't answer. Michiru didn't swear at me, much, she just told me to 'fuck off and die' then hung up. Makoto was more friendly, but that's not saying much. She talked for a while, very stiffly, like she didn't really know me and resented me calling her, then made an excuse and left."
"I'm genuinely sorry to hear all that, Ami. It's not easy losing a friend, never mind that many at once and in such a horrible way." There was real sympathy in the voice of the other woman.

"Thanks, Azumi, for saying that. No, it's not easy. But I guess it's life." Walking over to the window and staring out at the early evening scene Ami sighed once more, shaking her head a little. "Not much fun." They were both silent for a moment until she shook herself out of the mild funk she'd fallen into. "Hotaru came around to talk yesterday. She said Haruka still doesn't actually believe everything, but she's not totally disbelieving it either. I think she's basically very confused." The young woman laughed somewhat sadly. "I'd prefer it if she believed but I'll live with sufficiently confused not to be a threat." Azumi giggled a little.

"Not ideal but better than nothing."

"Rei's been spending a lot of time talking to her grandfather. He's giving her some very good advice. She seems a lot calmer than she was the day after, well, the day after. When she'd slept on it she started having second thoughts for a while, but he talked her around."

Azumi sounded amused. "He struck me as a pretty smart guy."

"He is that. A little bit perverted but nothing nasty." Ami giggled herself. "I like him, even with that. If nothing else he knows how to keep his mouth shut."

"You'd kind of expect that of a priest, I'd think." There was a short silence. "Yori asked me to let you know she's contacted S'th'kx. We're on for a little field trip tomorrow around lunch-time. It will take perhaps three days. Do you still want to come?"

Somewhat surprised, Ami paused for a long moment. Eventually she smiled. "Go to the moon? Damn right. Leaving the ruins or lack thereof out of it I'd love to see it."

"Good. It should be very interesting. Can you contact Rei and Hotaru as well, let them know, and find out if they still want to come? Aiko will come to the temple tomorrow around eleven to pick you guys up. You get a trip through a portal out of it as well." She laughed, while Ami looked surprised. "I'll explain when I see you."

"OK. That sounds interesting."

"It will be, believe me. Space travel is pretty fascinating. OK, See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Azumi. Bye." The other woman disconnected, leaving Ami to put her phone down and lean back in her chair, thinking for a while, before getting up to rummage through her closet and pack a small bag, slightly disbelievingly. "The moon?" she whispered to herself, looking out the window into the evening, at the relevant celestial body. A smile crossed her face.

"Ready to go?" Aiko asked, looking around the courtyard. Ami nodded, glancing at Rei, who looked apprehensive but excited. Hotaru was hopping from foot to foot like she needed the toilet.

"Let's go!" the younger girl chirped, a huge grin on her face. Aiko laughed.

"We're going, hold on." She glanced at Ami, who was smiling to herself. Turning to the old priest, she nodded to him. "We'll be back in about three days. I'll make sure we get a message to you if there are any delays, so you don't worry about Rei."

"Thank you, my child," he said gravely, bowing slightly, then grinned impishly. "Have fun. Bring me back a moon rock."
"I will," she promised with a laugh. Turning back to the three girls she waved them over. "Come on, a little closer." When they were arranged correctly she waved to the old man, before all four of them disappeared with a bright flash. He opened his eyes, smiled to himself, then picked up his broom and began sweeping again.

Looking around the field they'd appeared in, Naito asked, "Where on earth are we?"

"North of Tokyo, in a discreet place to open a portal," Yori replied, turning to look at him from where she'd been talking to Chou. She grinned a little. "No disrespect but we didn't want to do this from our home. Security, you understand." He chuckled, nodding.

"I do." Glancing around he saw that Azumi was there talking to three girls he recognised from the reports he'd read recently, but Fumiko, Tamiko, and Misaki weren't present. "Are the others coming?"

"Unfortunately no, not this time," Yori told him. She frowned a little. "We can't afford to take everyone in case the other girls go off again. We can get back pretty fast but it might not be fast enough." He nodded again, understanding the problem.

"I'll bet that annoys them."

"Oh, immensely. Misaki is half-wanting something to start so she can take it out on them for making her miss this trip, I think." The magical girl laughed for a moment as he smiled. "We'll arrange another one sometime."

"Can Aiko teleport that far?" he asked curiously. She studied him briefly then turned to inspect the brunette, who shrugged a little.

"I don't know," Aiko replied. "I want to find out, though. That's one of the reasons I'm going. We thought it would be safer to try it from the other end. If it turns out it's out of range, I'll end up floating around somewhere between the moon and the earth. I can either teleport back or they can come and pick me up. The suit generator will keep me safe even if it doesn't work."

Yori waved him over to the three new faces, familiar to him from various reports but not ones he'd ever seen in real life. "Guys, meet Agent Naito from the PSIA. Be nice to him, he's a friend." They all inspected him carefully, Ami curiously, Rei slightly apprehensively, and Hotaru looking both interested and worried. "Agent, I suspect you already know something about the girls here." She grinned as the other women looked suddenly cautious. He laughed a little, nodding.

"I do, as it happens. Ami Mizuno, Rei Hino, and Hotaru Tomoe. Three magical girls from an original team of nine who became active over a period of time starting some five or six years ago. A team that has had... certain awkward issues recently." Yori seemed satisfied while the three girls all appeared shocked. Ami looked at Yori with clear anger in her eyes.

"Did you tell him all that?" she demanded. Yori sighed, shaking her head.

"No. You guys did. I told you your operational security was horrible, a long time ago." Ami blushed a little at this. "The PSIA worked it out ages ago. It took them longer than it did Chou and myself, but they're not stupid. The Special Activities Office keeps tabs on several dozen magical girls in Minato and a few other places, as well as Neriman martial artists above a certain skill level. Their remit is to watch, learn anything that they can which doesn't pose a danger to the civilian identities of the girls in question, investigate the aftermath of magical fights, make sure nothing dangerous falls into the hands of people who aren't qualified to have it, that sort of thing." Naito
was looking at her with almost as much astonishment as the three girls were. Yori glanced at him, smiling a little.

"I do my homework," she answered his unspoken question. Returning her attention to Ami while he thought about how many other questions that raised she waited.

"So, they're watching us?" Rei asked slowly. She stared at Naito, not in a completely friendly manner. He took a step back, somewhat unhappy about having any magical girl annoyed with him, especially these ones. Yori snickered.

"Yep. They'd have to be idiots not to, bearing in mind what's been happening. And they're anything but idiots." Rei flushed a little. Hotaru, beside her, looked at the older girl, then Yori.

"Who watches them?" she asked quietly. Suddenly grinning, Yori pointed at herself. "I do." Her face abruptly became very dangerous for a moment. "They behave themselves."

Unable to resist the opening, Naito quipped, "Then who watches you?" As soon as the words left his mouth he had second thoughts, while Yori slowly turned to inspect him, her face blank. He swallowed a little. After a few uncomfortable seconds, she smiled widely and indicated Chou, the blonde looking amused.

"She does." The black-haired girl chuckled. "And if you want to be really worried, Ms Aoyama watches everyone." She laughed as he looked around, noticing that the three girls quickly did the same, unable to help themselves. "Feel paranoid yet?"

"Very much," he shuddered. Glancing at Ami, he asked, "Have you met her yet?"

"No," she replied, looking slightly worried. "But I've heard stories..."

Naito took one last look over his shoulder, meeting Azumi's eyes, noticing that she seemed extremely amused by all this. "Trust me, they don't do her justice." He returned his attention to the young woman with blue hair. "The PSIA does indeed keep itself informed on what information is available on the various high powered individuals in Minato, Nerima, one or two other places. There are a couple in Kyoto, for example. But we don't interfere, or poke too deeply into private lives or where it's clear we're not welcome. There are unambiguous orders from very high in the government that magical girls are to be left alone."

He grinned for a moment. "Not that we actually could do much in most cases. Luckily, with almost no exceptions, it's never been much of a worry aside from the collateral damage, which in recent years has gone down a lot. You understand why." Ami cast a glance at Yori and Chou, who were watching with interested looks, then nodded slowly.

"I do, I think."

"The magical world and the non-magical ones don't overlap all that much," Naito added thoughtfully. "In fact, recently it's become clear they don't overlap nearly as much as we thought they did. We've learned more in the last year than in the previous twenty, mainly about how little we really know about it. That said, we have very good people in the field and we've picked up quite a lot of things. The identities of your group wasn't very difficult if I'm honest. Yori is correct, your security leaves a lot to be desired." Ami didn't look happy about this but nodded, an embarrassed expression on her face, matched by similar ones that Hotaru and Rei were wearing.

"So I've been told. We relied too much on the anonymity spell and not enough on common sense."
"Over the years we've intervened in a couple of places where your civilian identities could have become public knowledge," Naito told her after pondering it for a moment. She looked surprised. "It serves the best interest of you, us, and the country as a whole," he explained. "Magical girls, even somewhat... overenthusiastic... ones serve a very important function in society. One that could be made awkward by certain things being more widely known. There are people who feel very strongly that it's the least we can do considering what you girls do for us. We're not your enemies, trust me."

"You can trust the Agent at the very least," Yori assured them as they looked a little dubious. "He's a decent man and very good indeed at his job. That's why he's here in the first place." She grinned at him as he stared at her. "I've read your file. It's very impressive, especially for someone who has no magical abilities. Although I'm becoming concerned that you may need some more advanced hand to hand combat training." He went pale as she snickered.

"How did you get his file?" Rei asked curiously. Yori gave her a look. "I know certain people. Some very interesting ones, but I can't say anything more about it. When we started working so closely with the PSIA over the portal bomb thing I researched anyone involved, I like to know who I'm dealing with." She shrugged. "Old habits. Like a friend told me, I'm a professional paranoid. It's basically true."

"Even if you didn't know people I guess Ms Aoyama could get you my file, or anything else you wanted," Naito commented, mildly amused rather than worried. She giggled.

"Probably. I though it was best to do it more or less above board, though. Overall, like I said, we trust the PSIA a lot. You guys have treated us decently, we intend to do the same back."

Agent Naito smiled at the young woman. "Thank you. Terrifying as it it at times, it's been enlightening and a lot of fun. And very tiring. I'm glad we're doing this at a sensible time of day for once." Yori and Chou both laughed. Pulling the box she'd given him the day before out of his pocket he opened it, looking at the small device inside. "So, how does it work?" Yori picked it up and showed it to him.

"You put it on your upper arm, here, like this, then press this point here, sliding your finger down like this." She suited action to words. He twitched a little as something happened. The view rippled a little, before clearing. "It's active. You put it into standby by pressing here, but you'll have to do it, it won't allow someone from outside the suit to when it's on as a safety measure, without an emergency override." She indicated another slightly raised point on the outside of the device. Looking at it he poked it. Once more his view rippled. The device seemed to be firmly adhering to his arm when he experimentally tugged it.

"It'll stay put under more or less any circumstances like that. You can press the same control to activate it manually, or it will activate automatically if the environment becomes sufficiently hostile it's necessary. Mainly depressurisation but it will also work for toxic gasses or smoke. It's a very nice design." He saw that she was already wearing another of the devices, as were the others. "OK, activate it again." He did so. "This control here on the other side turns on the control interface. It's mostly voice driven with eye-trackers incorporated, for species like ours. S'th'kx's people use something a bit different. Try turning it on." Pressing the tiny switch he jumped when he found a translucent display hanging in space in front of him half a metre away.

"Wow." He looked at it in awe. "That's amazing."

Yori grinned. "It's pretty good. The tech is fairly primitive by their standards, but it's incredibly reliable and effective. This thing can keep you alive for a long time, assuming you have enough
water and food. More advanced ones deal with that as well but they're much more expensive. This is a fairly basic but good one. OK, you can look at a control and then tell it to operate. There's some built-in help available from that icon down there in the bottom right. Just look at it, then say 'instructions'. To stop it say 'pause', or 'stop'. 'Continue' or 'resume' will restart it. It should be pretty self-explanatory. The computer isn't hugely smart but it's good enough to understand any command you're likely to need. Have a play with it while we get the portal open."

Feeling like he'd walked into a movie, Naito experimented with the interface, finding it as intuitive as the girl had suggested, smiling to himself at the sheer wonder of it all. A crackling sound made him look around, to see the glowing blue tear in reality that was the portal. Yori inspected it carefully then nodded her satisfaction. She turned to the others, Chou and Azumi standing either side of her. He poked the button that put the device he was wearing into standby and listened.

"All right. We're going to K'n'n four first. For first time travellers, it can be a bit of a shock. The people there look a bit like very large insects." She watched their faces. The younger girl with the purple hair, Hotaru, gasped slightly. Yori smiled at her. "They're very nice people. Forget what they look like. Most of them don't speak Japanese, although S'th'kx knows a few words. Any of the three of us can translate for you. Don't overreact when you see them, all right?" She was looking carefully at Hotaru, who nodded after a moment, slightly embarrassed.

"I'll be nice," she said. Yori grinned at her.

"Of course you will. It will be a surprise but you'll enjoy it." She glanced at the portal for a moment. "The other end of this thing is in one of their designated arrival areas. It will be very busy outside the portal room, the city is very crowded, so be warned. A bit like Tokyo during a major event. We'll go somewhere quiet then Aiko will teleport us to the space port. They prefer not to have that happen in the portal area for some reason. OK, Let's go." She turned to the portal and disappeared into it, followed by Azumi. With a slightly nervous look Ami went after them. Rei grinned and walked confidently through, towing Hotaru, who suddenly looked worried. Chou smiled, then turned to Naito.

"Shall we go, Agent?" she asked politely. He chuckled, picked up his case, then followed her in, Aiko bringing up the rear.

"Holy shit," Hotaru said for the third time in five minutes, turning in a complete circle and staring at everything wide-eyed. Naito knew what she was feeling, as he was feeling exactly the same thing. "Look at them all!"

Behind them, Azumi laughed, while Chou, Aiko and Yori were talking to the two metre beetle that was S'th'kx. He was gesturing with four limbs at the same time, his antenna waving about, explaining something that was apparently very funny. None of the three women seemed to have any trouble reading the very alien body language, as at ease in his presence as they would be at home. Naito caught Ami watching in wonder, then went back to looking around, taking another photo with the remarkably expensive Hasselblad medium format camera the PSIA had supplied him with. The silver-haired woman had looked at it with interest, commenting that it was very similar to the ones NASA had sent to the moon in the sixties, which seemed appropriate. He’d found it amusing, as well as proof she knew a considerable amount about photography, something the camera she’d lent him in Australia had suggested.

Everywhere he looked there were spacecraft. Big ones, little ones, absolutely huge ones. Something the side of an oil tanker lifted gently into the air with a bass hum that made his eyes vibrate in his head even from half a kilometre away, turned surprisingly gracefully through ninety degrees, then
rapidly accelerated into the distance, climbing steeply. He could see that there were clear traffic lanes in the sky, inbound and outbound ones in different directions. Larger craft seemed to be segregated from smaller ones, which mainly went straight up.

Off to one side a little one, a cone some five metres across and four high, lifted a metre or two, then vanished upwards so fast it disappeared from sight as if it had teleported. A long drawn-out rumble followed it, the sound trailing the spacecraft by a large margin. Whipping his eyes up he was just in time to see it disappear into the clouds high above. All four of the observers had their hands over their ears as a result of the rapid departure.

"He was in a hurry," Azumi noted once the sound died away. "Apparently they're not supposed to go transonic so close to the ground. S'th'kx seems annoyed about it." Glancing behind him he saw the alien looking upwards with his antennae curled back, radiating clear irritation, while Yori chuckled at something he'd said. She said something back which made him visibly shrug, still peering into the sky, before returning his attention to her. Waving with one limb towards a ship about fifty metres across, he started walking towards it, Yori beside him. He still appeared irritated. Chou smiled, then turned to the others, pointing at the ship.

"That's the one we're going in. Come on, let's go on board." Everyone followed as she and Azumi led the way. Reaching it S'th'kx prodded a panel beside a hatch which irised open silently, then went inside. They all trooped after him. When they were inside what was obviously an airlock he poked another panel, which caused the outer door to shut and the inner one to open. Inside, another of S'th'kx's crew was waiting, talking to the miner for a moment, before they both headed for a ramp to the next level of the craft. Yori watched, then turned to the little party.

"We'll be taking off in a few minutes. He's going to get launch clearance. Come with me, we can watch the outside view from the lounge. They have some truly excellent cameras on the outside and some incredible projectors." She grinned as she started walking, clearly knowing her way around. "We can get a view later from the windows if you want, but the cameras are probably better in most ways." Azumi, Aiko, and Chou followed her, glancing casually about in a manner that also suggested this was something they didn't see as anything unusual, while the remaining three girls and Naito were staring at everything with huge interest. Ami pulled out a small device from somewhere, opened it, then waved it around, staring at a display on it. The PSIA agent watched, wondering what it was.

Arriving at a door some way down the curving corridor, which followed the outer skin of the ship, Yori did something that made the door open, waving them inside. The room, which was about eight metres across at it's widest point, was shaped a little like a pie slice with the point missing, the wall at that end, the inner one, following a noticeable curve. The room was completely bare otherwise. Chou went to a panel on the wall next to the door, touching it, which caused it to display a number of odd icons and some text in a very strange looking language. She manipulated some of the icons, then tapped a control. Four of the eight people jumped a little as the floor extruded a number of seats scattered around the room, silently and efficiently, while the lighting changed from the rather clinical bluish colour it had been into something indistinguishable from true sunlight. The blonde smiled at their look of surprise.

"The environmental controls are quite extensive. S'th'kx is using the same system some of the better hotels do, it can adapt to most species' comfort very well. This should be comfortable for everyone." She moved to one of the seats and sat down, waving calmly around. "Take any seat you want." After a few seconds, Ami grinned, heading for a seat next to the other woman, feeling it curiously, then sitting down.

"Not bad," she remarked. Her friends, more tentatively, did the same.
“Very comfortable,” Rei commented approvingly. Hotaru bounced on her seat a little and smiled, staring around with great interest, clearly very pleased and excited.

“I can’t believe I’m in a real spaceship,” she said in a slightly squeaky voice. “An alien spaceship! On an alien planet!” Yori laughed from her position by another control panel on the other side of the room, glancing at Naito, who didn’t say anything although he was once again sharing almost exactly the same thoughts. She clearly knew this, judging by her expression.

“It’s kind of cool, isn’t it?” she asked the younger girl, who nodded quickly, not stopping inspecting everything in the room. “Glad you came?”

“Oh, yes,” the purple-haired girl breathed, grinning like an idiot. “This is amazing.”

“Wait until you see what happens next,” Yori chuckled, her finger poised over a control. “Anyone get upset by heights?” The three girls looked at each other, Rei slightly worried, then glanced at the others. Naito, wondering what was going to happen, sure it would be unusual, shook his head slowly.

“Not really, Yori. Why?”

“Watch.” She poked the virtual button, grinning as the lights dimmed and the floor vanished completely. They jerked in surprise, looking around, then Ami carefully reached out with one foot and tapped it on the floor. It was still there judging by the sound, but it appeared totally transparent, instead showing the concrete-like surface of the spaceport ground.

“It’s a screen?” she asked, wonderingly.

“More or less. It’s actually a projection system producing the image, the floor is nothing special.” Azumi turned to her, sitting down on the other side of Chou and relaxing. “Like Yori said there are cameras on the outside of the ship in several places, you can route the live view from any of them to all sorts of places. The ones on the bottom are the best for the next part.”

The voice of the asteroid miner sounded. Yori replied, having a short conversation, then nodded.

“Right. Here we go. You’ll like this.” She was smiling, clearly enjoying herself. Chou and her two companions were watching the floor with interest. Ami looked at Rei, her eyes slightly wide, while Hotaru giggled, then they all followed the others’ eyes. Naito did the same.

There was a pregnant pause, followed by a very slight vibration and a faint, deep hum. The ground slowly began to drop away from them without any other sensation of movement, accelerating steadily as the ship ascended, much more slowly than the small one earlier had done. Everyone watched as the view rapidly expanded to encompass nearby ships, then the entire spaceport, which was immense, then parts of the vast city it was on the outskirts of. The effect was like looking over the side of a hot air balloon, one that was moving at impossible velocities, with nothing between them and the ground but an ever-increasing amount of empty space.

Despite not finding heights at all worrying, unlike many people, Agent Naito couldn’t help but tense as their altitude increased rapidly. Hotaru, he noticed when he tore his gaze away from the view for a second, seemed almost frozen with a mix of fear and enormous enjoyment, while Rei and Ami seemed both fascinated and somewhat apprehensive, the former looking very slightly pale. Azumi and Aiko were watching with obvious enjoyment, Chou with her normal serene calmness, while Yori was watching him, smiling slightly. He smiled back, causing her to wink, then went back to staring down.

They had entered the clouds, the view going dark and misty for a moment, then clearing into
brilliant yellow-white sunlight, brighter and whiter than at home. Their speed was still increasing. Yori turned back to the control panel, manipulating it some more, which had the effect that the walls and ceiling also vanished, making Hotaru and Rei both gasp in shock. Ami looked around, a slow grin creeping across her face. Naito found he'd unconsciously grabbed his seat with both hands, forcing himself to relax, slightly embarrassed. Looking around he saw that they were now high enough that the curvature of the planet was clearly visible, the sky above them quickly darkening.

"How high are we?" he asked curiously.

"Thirty thousand metres, moving at Mach five." Yori glanced at the control panel she was standing beside, then looked back to him, amusement on her face, before returning to the display. "Mach six now... Seven... Eight..." Outside, there was a slight glow building up above them, forming an increasing conical shock wave some distance away due to the air turning into a plasma as it was violently pushed out of the way. "Mach fifteen... Eighteen... Twenty..." She kept calling out the speed while the others watched the view. The glow became steadily brighter, obscuring the view for a few seconds, then began to die away. "Above the atmosphere now," Yori commented. Below them K'nn four was a large bright sphere, unfamiliar continents and oceans clearly displayed, a little more than two thirds of it in sunlight, spanning half the view.

"He can really pour on the speed now," Azumi said, smiling at Naito. "The force field that acts as a heat shield also deflects small objects, so there's no chance of hitting anything." Although there was still no sensation of movement other than the view outside, the faint vibration increased slightly, while the planet began to fall away amazingly quickly. Ami made a sound of surprise.

"Holy shit. How fast can this thing accelerate?" she asked, her voice shocked. Yori chuckled.

"Pretty damn fast. I think the limit is around, hmm, about a hundred and fifty G in our terms. It's got a huge drive, much bigger than it needs just for moving the ship around. This is a mining scout, designed for towing fairly large asteroids around the place at sensible speeds. When it's not pulling a few billions tons of rock around it's a very quick little ship." Turning the control panel off she walked across the invisible floor unconcernedly, a very strange thing to see, dropping into a seat next to Aiko and looking around with interest. She pointed. "That's pretty cool." Everyone looked and Ami made another slight gasp.

"That's... A space elevator?"

"Yep. That's how they used to get into space. When they invented cheap antigrav it fell out of use quite fast except for tourism and very low value incoming bulk cargo. The ships are just much more convenient for most purposes." Agent Naito stared at the distant thread of light that rose from the planet an improbable distance into space. The sight was very impressive. Longer by a considerable margin than the diameter of the planet itself, it must have been immense to be visible from such a distance.

"There's a very nice restaurant at the midway point," Chou put in. He stared at her, then back at the slender construction. "We could go there on the way back if you'd like, Agent." Raising his camera he took a photo, suddenly remembering he was still holding it, having forgotten in the shock of the take-off.

"That could be... interesting, Chou," he replied quietly, not sure whether he liked the idea or not. He noticed the planet was now about six times the visible diameter of the moon at home, obviously a considerable distance away, a surprisingly large number of objects apparent around it, one or two quite large. He pointed at one of them. "What are those?"
"Other spacecraft in orbit, a couple of high altitude space stations, things like that." Yori looked to where he was pointing, squinting a little. "I think that particular one is an experimental interstellar spacecraft they've been playing around with for a while. I heard about it when we were last here. They leased the drive from a higher-tech world, it's cheaper than designing and building their own by a long way, then built the rest of the ship around it. The drives are pretty large so the ship has to be as well. That thing is about fifteen kilometres across or so." She shrugged. "Sorry, I don't know much more than that about it. S'th'kx could tell you if you're interested."

"You can just lease an interstellar drive?" he asked with shock. She nodded, looking amused.

"Apparently. It's not exactly cheap, plus there is a hell of a lot of paperwork, there are all sorts of interworld treaties and regulations about transferring advanced technology around the place, but that sort of thing happens all the time even so. Interworld trade is very important." Making a mental note to write all that down as soon as he had a moment he took a few more photos. Just the last hour had made it very apparent both he and the PSIA had no idea at all how complex what happened on the other side of a portal really was. Casting a quick look at the four magical girls who clearly found this all interesting but nothing particularly unusual he marvelled at the things they must have encountered. He wondered how many other people walking around in Minato knew about all this, or came from another world, such as this one. Shaking his head a little in wonder he went back to watching quietly.

A little while later S'th'kx and Yori had another short conversation. "All right, we're going to head for an empty bit of space some distance away where the portal won't cause anyone any problems. It'll take about an hour or so." She grinned. "They're a little touchy about portals, they rely absolutely on them but as a result they have a lot of rules about where you can open them. Big ones are something they want well out of the way of anything important just in case. No reason not to cooperate." By now K'n'n four was a disc of light in the distance. "Anyone want something to eat?"

Chou was suddenly holding a large basket of food, looking pleased. "The food from the processors on board is very good, but I made this lunch to get us started." Azumi sat up, peering into the basket with interest, then made a small sound of pleasure, pulling out a bottle of wine.

"Ah. This is one of the good ones from Australia." The blonde smiled, getting up from her seat and heading for a table that abruptly appeared out of the floor. Naito jumped, looking over his shoulder to see Yori standing by the relevant control panel. She grinned at his surprise.

"It takes a little getting used to," she said with amusement.

"All of this does," he replied, waving his hand around the room. "I still can't believe it." Walking back to them she laughed gently.

"It can be a shock if you just think of portals as something that throw demons at you. Think of them as bridges to alien planets and it makes more sense, although it's still something of a surprise if you're not ready for it. Hopefully you'll get used to it pretty quickly." The black-haired woman grinned, looking at the view, and the table and chairs protruding out of what looked like empty space. "I'll admit it can be a bit unusual." He followed her eyes, chuckling.

"That it can. But I'm glad I came."

"So am I." There was a pause before she added slyly, "You'll have a lot of interesting things to put in your report to the Director-General." Laughing, he nodded, accepting a small glass of wine from Chou.

"Indeed."
After a short but pleasant lunch, Chou cleared everything away and vanished it, the table collapsing in an almost organic way back into the floor. "We're nearly ready," Yori commented, turning away from a conversation with S'th'kx who had come into the room. "We're in position, stationary at the target zone. Chou and I are going to set up the portal. It will take a few minutes, this is going to be a big one and it needs some careful work, so we're doing it from the command deck. You guys can watch from here. Once we're through, we'll go into orbit around the moon and deploy the probes. See you in a little while." She, the blonde, and the alien insectoid all left the room. Naito watched them go with a shake of his head, the manner in which the two young women walked off with an honest-to-god alien as if he was someone they'd known all their lives still surprised him when he thought about it.

Turning, he caught Azumi watching him with a smile. "It takes a while to get to grips with all this," he told her, waving at the room and by extension, the entire spacecraft. "Even after all the things we've done, things you and the others have shown me, travelling in a spaceship from an alien world is a bit... odd." She laughed, waving him to the seat next to hers. He took it.

"I understand what you mean, Agent, believe me. I'm new to some of this as well. The first time I went through a portal and saw what was on the other side was... well, it wasn't what I was expecting, let's put it that way. But, you do get used to it surprisingly quickly, as Yori said. Part of that might be that I'm just that weird," she grinned as he chuckled, "but a lot of it is because it's so strangely normal." He stared at her, then at the lounge full of magical girls in the alien scout-craft moving through space in a different reality, then back at her. An eyebrow went up.

Giggling, she nodded. "I know what you're thinking. But yes, normal is probably the right word, as odd as that sounds. Oh, at first everything is almost overwhelmingly strange, true enough, then you talk to people and find that that's exactly what they are. People. Some of them are big insects, some are lizard-like things, some have feathers, or hooves, or scales, but in the end most of them are a lot like us." She grinned. "Some of my best friends are demons, or aliens, however you want to put it."

Naito laughed, looking around the room, then back at the silver-haired girl. "I think I understand. Having a language in common probably helps quite a bit as well."

"Learning Trade was a good thing, that's true," she replied, leaning back in her seat. "It wasn't easy and I still miss a word every now and then, but I'm glad I put the effort in." She glanced at him. "If things go on the way they are perhaps the PSIA should be teaching it's agents demon languages."

He chuckled, shaking his head in mild wonder.

"It might be an idea. Do you have some sort of language course available?" The young woman laughed for a moment.

"We could probably come up with something." She glanced up, making him look at her, then around at the others. Aiko was also giving the impression of listening, while the three remaining girls clearly could sense something happening but didn't seem to know exactly what it was. Ami had her little hand-held device out and was fiddling with it. "They're just starting the portal." Azumi pointed to one side, causing everyone to look. "Over there."

Sure enough, a few hundred metres away a glowing blue rip in reality was forming, stabilising for a few seconds, then steadily growing. It wavered a little when the growth stopped before snapping into full form, much larger than anything Naito had seen before. "How big is it?" he asked curiously. The girl beside him thought for a moment.

"About eighty metres across," she said. "That should be comfortable." They noticed that the portal suddenly seemed to be growing again, but he worked out immediately that the ship was moving towards it. Quite slowly, at not much more than a walking pace, the ship approached the glowing
tear in space, slipping through silently. A brief blue glow suffused the room then the dark of space reappeared, the stars in visibly different positions. White light from the other side of the projected view made them turn and look, wide-eyed.

"Wow," Hotaru managed after a few seconds. Naito looked at her as her friends nodded silently, before raising his camera and taking a number of photos. Lowering it again he simply stared at the half-full moon that filled a large part of the view, presenting a face he'd never seen before.

"The 'dark side' of the moon," Aiko commented. "Not at all dark, but it looks kind of weird." There were far more craters visible than on the side they were used to. Taking another couple of photos he studied the image.

"That's incredible," he finally said. Looking at Azumi he saw she was watching with a smile that looked as wondering as his was. It wasn't often that he saw a magical girl, especially one of Yori's crew, genuinely amazed, but she clearly was.

"This is one of the coolest things I've ever experienced," she finally said. Hotaru was standing as close to the wall as she could get, studying the image of the moon with a huge smile, while Ami and Rei were sitting down simple watching in amazement. Looking over his shoulder he saw the portal had disappeared once more. Shortly the ship began moving closer to the moon, which grew steadily until it was half the view, one side blindingly bright, the other easily visible but much darker, out of the direct sunlight. The terminator between them was a razor-sharp line with no atmosphere to diffuse it. The motion of the ship changed, becoming a sideways drift, which they all quickly felt as the ship being stationary and the moon surface moving past underneath them.

Naito found that at some point, without him noticing, out there had become down there, now they were so close, and had a sudden very slight attack of vertigo. A noise from Rei behind him made him look, to see she looked mildly ill, presumably feeling the same. "It's a little much isn't it?" he asked. The young woman, her long black hair, nearly as long as Yori's, waving behind her, nodded.

"It suddenly hit me. That's the moon! Being in space on the other side of a portal is one thing, weird and amazing as it is, but there's something weirder about being in orbit around the MOON!"

She grinned, shaking her head in wonder. He studied her for a moment longer then went back to looking out at the view, knowing what she meant. He took some more photos.

"I hope you have a lot of film, Agent," Azumi remarked. He smiled at her, indicating the case on the floor.

"A couple of dozen 70mm cassettes, seventy shots on each. The PSIA is quite keen on making sure this gets documented, it's a remarkable opportunity." Raising the camera he added, "They even made sure this would work in a vacuum."

She grinned at him, then glanced at the moon again. "If it breaks we could probably go and steal one of the Apollo ones, I think they left some behind when they left. They might still work."

"This is a much later model," he chuckled. "You wouldn't believe how much it costs. I didn't."

"Probably best not to drop it, then," she replied. Everyone looked up as Yori re-entered the room.

"We're in a circular orbit about sixty kilometres up," the martial artist reported in satisfaction, glancing around. "S'th'kx is going to launch a fleet of survey drones soon, a few hundred of them, which will scan the entire surface in something like two days. Once he's done that, we'll monitor them for a while to make sure everything is working to plan, then we could go and look around if anyone wants to." Hotaru immediately put her hand up, giggling. Azumi and Aiko were nearly as
quick off the mark, followed by the others in short order. Yori snickered at their behaviour, putting her own hand up. "Me too. All right, if you like you can come and watch the probes launch from the command deck. The view out the windows is pretty amazing." She left again, followed by Azumi and Aiko, the others coming after.

Naito found himself walking beside Ami, who kept looking at him. She'd been doing that since they arrived, looking away when he spotted it, seeming slightly embarrassed. "Is there a problem, Ms Mizuno?" he asked politely. She twitched a little before shaking her head nervously.

"No, um, Agent Naito, not really. It's just that I've never met a secret agent before, and finding out the government knows about us as well... it was a little disturbing. No offence."

He smiled at her. "Don't worry about it. I can understand that. I'm not really a secret agent, I'm not a spy, although my division of the PSIA isn't very much in the public eye, by design, of course. Like Yori told you, we're not your enemies, in any way. While your recent... issues... have been rather annoying, we're leaving it in the hands of people much better qualified than we are to deal with it properly. We will just watch, and deal with any clearing up that needs to be done. Not that there normally is much with Yori and Chou involved, they're better at that sort of thing than we are." She giggled a little, relaxing slightly, as they walked up a ramp.

"They do seem to be frighteningly competent, I have to admit. If not just frightening." Ami glanced at him. "Did you know them before the portal bomb thing?"

"I knew of them, certainly, but I never met either one of them before. They've had dealings with us on and off for years but that was the most complex by a long way. It had some long-term ramifications that are still working themselves out, both with us, and globally. The implications for the financial world are quite startling. It might take years to finish." The girl nodded slowly, apparently understanding what he meant, which didn't surprise him based on her records.

"I haven't heard the whole story, I suspect, but what I have heard sounded very unpleasant indeed. Good thing it's over." They arrived at the top section of the spacecraft behind the others, finding it was a roughly conical room, circular in shape, with windows forming a band around almost the entire circumference, including a round one in the ceiling. The controls were sparse, mainly a number of flat panels as in the lounge downstairs, on a larger scale, which had whatever control section necessary on them at the time. It was a clean and elegant design, Naito thought, as he watched S'th'kx and three other of his species working around the room. The miner was talking to Yori, both of them studying a display, with Chou looking over the shorter woman's shoulder. All of them dispersed to investigate the room, which was about six metres across, looking out the windows at the view. Although the cameras and projection system they'd experienced so far were remarkable, there was something indefinably more immediate about looking out a transparent window at the same scene. Naito found himself standing between Azumi and Hotaru watching the surface of the moon drift past, smiling slightly and wondering how he'd managed to find himself in this situation. Raising his camera, which he'd brought with him, he took some more photos.

"Do you think they'd mind if I took a couple of the control deck?" he asked Azumi, who glanced at him, then called something to S'th'kx. The captain didn't look away from his task, just waved an arm and called something back.

"He more or less says knock yourself out," the silver-haired woman laughed. Smiling, Naito carefully composed a few shots, grateful for the good lighting, then went back to looking out the window. Leaning forward he tapped on it curiously.

"I always thought putting windows in pressurised vehicles was considered a bit dangerous," Hotaru
commented, watching him with interest. She also tapped on the transparent surface. "It might break."

"Not these windows," Azumi assured both of them. "I've seen this before, they use the same thing on that space elevator. The windows are made of a synthetic laminated diamond material about ten centimetres thick. It's more than tough enough to take practically anything. An anti-tank shell would bounce off." Naito looked impressed while Hotaru tapped it harder, listening to the sound with a smile. He got the impression she was curious to see what would happen if she hit it as hard as she could, which, being a rather powerful magical girl, was very hard indeed, but was too polite to try. Something he was to be honest rather grateful for. Catching his eye she grinned for a moment, making him pretty sure he was right. He grinned back.

"Having fun?" he asked. She nodded rapidly.

"How couldn't I have fun?" the girl asked, looking around quickly, her purple hair flying about. Her expression was of great enjoyment. "Look at all this!" The girl watched Yori talk to the alien captain with huge interest, and, if Naito wasn't mistaken, a small amount of hero-worship. He hid a smile, wondering what Yori had done to attract that sort of attention. Something impressive, probably. Noticing Azumi watching them both with a small smile, he looked back, amusement on his face, then began taking more photos.

Hotaru was the first to notice it, gasping in delight. He looked at her, then to where she was looking, his eyes widening. It took several seconds of watching the Earth rise over the moon before he remembered the camera, raising it to his eye and taking shot after shot, grinning like an idiot.
Chapter 71

As has been requested a few times I have appended a list of most characters to the end of this chapter, more or less in the order of introduction. It is based on my own character document, necessary for keeping track of all the people who keep turning up. I will move it to the end of each new chapter as the story progresses.

765k words in nine months. I'm astonished. I never expected it to grow to this size, or anywhere near it. The worrying thing is that there's still a lot to go, banging on the inside of my head, trying to get out. Whether I can keep up an average of 85k words a month I don't know, it depends on free time which I seem to have less of recently, but we'll see...

Akane dialled her sister's number, looking out the window as it rang. She could see the moon was visible, high in the sky, a pale shadow of it's normal brilliance during the day as it now was. Inspecting the pearlescent half-full globe with mild interest she turned away when Nabiki answered. "Hi, 'Biki. How's things going?"

"Pretty well, Akane. I'm just out on a little trip for a few days with some friends."

"Rika and Maiko?", the young woman asked.

"Yes, they're here, and some other people I know. It's a little out of the way, I'm a bit surprised you can reach me. The view is amazing though." There was a faint, suppressed excitement in her older sister's voice. Akane smiled.

"I hope you're getting some good photos."

"Yes, and some video as well. I bought a new camera on holiday, it's pretty damn good." She fell silent for a moment, making Akane think she was talking to someone else. "Anyway, how are things with you and Dad?"

"Everything is going well here too, the Dojo is coming along well, Dad and Uncle Genma are very pleased with the progress of their new students. While you were on holiday Adrian and Matt came over, Aiko brought them, to talk to Shampoo and me about the progress of the situation in Hollywood. Adrian seems very pleased with it."

Nabiki laughed gently. "Yes, Dad mentioned that. How do feel about it? Second thoughts yet?"

"'Biki! Of course not. When I set my mind on something I see it through to the end." Both of them started giggling. "All right, I know that doesn't always hold true."

"Name one time when it did?" her sister asked sardonically. Akane thought for a moment.

"When I grew my hair longer than Kasumi's?"

"OK, I'll give you that one. It didn't last long, though, did it?"

Akane groaned. "Blame the pig. It was his stupid bandanna and that idiotic iron cloth technique. I was lucky it was only my hair."

"Indeed you were. But I seem to remember you weren't all that grateful at the time." Akane flushed a little.
"No." She fell silent for a second or two. "I was wrong. I wish I could apologise."

"Bit late now. Never mind, one day you might have a chance." Nabiki seemed momentarily mildly sad, then cheered up. "So? How is the Hollywood thing going?"

Shaking herself out of the minor melancholic mood she'd fallen into Akane smiled. "Pretty well. They were saying they'd want us over in a few weeks for three or four days. That would be in, hmm, about ten days or so, I guess. I hope Aiko is OK with taking us there." She giggled. "You get used to having a magical girl teleport you around the place awfully quick." Nabiki laughed for a moment.

"I can imagine. If I had access to one I'd be bouncing around all over the world. Maybe go to the moon or something."

Laughing, Akane looked back out the window. "I don't think she could go there. It would be pretty cool though. Anyway, how would you breath?"

"I'd figure something out. Buy a spacesuit on the internet, maybe." Nabiki was giggling furiously.

"You'd need at least two of them. One in extra-small." Grinning, Akane returned her attention to her room, idly moving a few things around on her desk, pushing some of them into a drawer. "But, yes, it's going well here, I think. Matt said he wanted to have us try some driving stunts which sounds fun. He'll arrange some training for a couple of days. Then we can do a few proper scenes in front of cameras and everything, to see how we handle it, and also to show to the various studio executives who need to be convinced. Fingers crossed, but I have a good feeling about it."

"I really hope it all works out, sis. Let me know how it goes."

"I will. When are you next back in Nerima?"

"Not sure at the moment. Rika, Maiko, and I are going to be travelling around for a little longer, visiting some more people. I might pop down to see Miki in Osaka as well. I haven't talked to her for a while. But I guess I could come home first, there's still close to a month of vacation time left."

Smiling, Akane leaned back in her chair. "That sounds fun. I hope you have souvenirs for everyone! And we'll want to see some photos. Give my best to Maiko and Rika, OK?"

"Will do. Love to Dad and the Saotomes."

"Even Genma?" Akane giggled, as did her sister.

"I'm feeling generous, I'm in a very good mood. Even him."

"Great. See you soon. Have fun. Bye, 'Biki."

Her sister's smile could be heard in her voice. "Bye, Akane. See you soon." Hanging up Akane put the phone on the desk, then leaned back with her feet up, staring at the moon.

"Teleport to the moon?" she wondered out loud, then laughed. "Yeah, right. Magical girl or no magical girl, that's a little far-fetched. Neat idea, though."

She got up and left the room to find something to eat.
look out the window at the surface of the moon only a few tens of kilometres away. 'A real alien spaceship, orbiting the moon, and I'm on it! That's just...' She shook her head, unable to come up with anything. '...Weird,' she finally managed, smiling internally. 'Not how I thought all this would end up a month ago.' Ami was scanning everything with her computer, walking around in a daze of information, which ended up with her bouncing off one of the crew-things, who had turned from his console just as she walked past paying insufficient attention. Crew-insects. Whatever they were called. Rei made a note to herself to enquire as to the name of their species, grinning as she watched the alien and Ami do a little dance of 'You first. No, you first, I insist,' both of them getting in the way of each other.

Finally the alien, visibly exasperated, stopped, carefully picked Ami up with all four manipulating limbs, causing her to squeak in shock, then pivoted in place, putting her down behind him, before walking off shaking his head. Even through the species barrier Rei got a good impression of what he was thinking. Ami was red with embarrassment, carefully putting her computer away and paying more attention to her surroundings. Turning away to hide a grin she caught Chou watching, smiling gently, and nodded to her. The blonde smiled more widely, nodded back, then went back to talking to Yori and S'th'kx, who seemed to be trying to decide something.

Sidling up to her blue-haired friend, giggling quietly, Rei whispered, "He seems nice." Ami looked quickly at her, still red, but also giggled a little.

"That was a bit unexpected," she whispered back, quickly moving out of the way of the other crew-member at the same workstation as he joined his colleague, casting the two young human women an apparently curious look on the way. "Can you believe all this?" she added, more loudly, waving her hands at the scenery. Rei looked around, grinning.

"No. Not yet. I keep feeling like I should be pinching myself." Ami helpfully pinched her just to see what would happen, which was in fact a loud yelp, causing everyone to look at them. This time Rei was the red-faced one. "Don't do that, Ami!" she muttered out of the side of her mouth, waving in a friendly manner to S'th'kx, who stared at her for a moment, then said something to Yori, making her grin and nod. The two girls watched as he went back to whatever he was doing, his antennae waving around in an amused fashion.

"Hotaru certainly seems to be enjoying herself," Rei commented, watching the younger girl, who was running around the control deck looking intently at everything, every now and then stopping to admire the moon. Ami nodded, smiling.

"Definitely. I'm glad she came. She's been down every since... what happened last week." The other woman sighed. "It's a pity Haruka refused to even think about coming. She's still pretty sure this is some elaborate trick." Rei shook her head in mild disbelief at the thought.

"It would have to be the most elaborate trick in history in that case. I mean, aliens, interplanetary spacecraft, government agents, implausibly powerful and skilled magical girls... This is like some weird sort of movie, in most ways. Something a comic book company would come up with." They exchanged glances, laughing. "No, even before we do the scan, I'm pretty sure by now that Yori and all her friends are right and we've been wrong all this time. They simply have too much evidence on their side. I suppose we have to check, but..." She shrugged. Ami nodded slowly.

"I'm forced to agree. I was pretty much convinced the first time we spoke. Their story is much better than ours, aside from anything else, no matter what Haruka thinks." She looked around again. "But I'm glad it gave an excuse for all this. It almost makes what happened worth it."

"Almost." They were silent for a while. Glancing at Agent Naito, who was staring at the moon
with a definite air of excitement, a small grin playing about his lips as he took yet more photos with his remarkably elaborate camera and talked to Aiko, who seemed happy as well, she asked in a low voice, "Speaking of government spooks, what do you think of Yori's pet one?" Ami followed her gaze and frowned very slightly.

"I'm still not sure. He seems nice enough, true, and obviously very intelligent, but I'm not completely happy about the idea that the government has a department that's been watching us all this time."

"It would bug the hell out of Setsuna if she knew," Rei giggled. "You know what she's like. Or was." Ami grinned momentarily, nodding.

"Oh, wouldn't it freak her out?" She looked back at Agent Naito, who was talking to Chou as the blonde explained something to him, pointing at various screens around the main control area. "I guess he's OK. Yori seems to trust him, as much as she trusts anyone who isn't one of her group, which is quite an endorsement. I'm not exactly overwhelmed with happiness about the whole thing but I suppose it's already happened. May as well make the best of it."

"Hotaru seems to like him, after being a bit worried at first. He just accepts her for what she is which must come as a nice surprise." Rei watched the purple-haired girl bouncing around the room, stopping to examine the camera the government agent was holding, before dashing off to peer into a corner of the room at something or other.

"What do you think about him?" Ami asked.

Rei thought about it for a while. She'd been quite irritated when she found out that the government was watching them, but surprisingly quickly found she just couldn't bring herself to care all that much. Yori and her friends had clearly also been watching them, for nearly as long, and with much greater success, yet that seemed to be working out surprisingly well. After a few seconds, she tried explaining this to her friend. Ami listened, nodding thoughtfully. "I think what I'm saying is that it's too late to worry about it. If anything bad was going to happen it already would have." For a moment she looked sad. "It already has, in a way. It wasn't anything to do with Agent Naito or the government, it was all our own problem, if not our fault. I haven't got anything against him as a person, certainly. I don't know him well enough to either like him or dislike him."

Yori looked over to them, giving Rei the uncomfortable impression she'd heard pretty much every word and making her slightly embarrassed, but merely waved them over. "We're ready to launch the probes. Come and have a look." All the humans clustered around the console S'th'kx was working on. He pointed out the window at a part of the ship, which due to the conical shape and their position near the tip of the cone, was easily visible. A hatch irised open, there was a pause of a few seconds, then a rectangular object emerged, moving out and clear of the ship. It was a dull dark grey in colour, perhaps two metres long by about a quarter of that across, with faint lines on its surface that described equal sized squares. Rei counted quickly, finding it was divided into twenty-four squares in the long dimension by six in the other two.

Once it was roughly a hundred metres away it slowed to a halt. There was a slight pause, then the object exploded in slow motion, separating into hundreds of little cubes. She stared, realising that each of the square markings on the original object were in fact dividing lines, the thing was actually a cluster of these little cubical probes. Eight hundred and sixty four of them, each one only around eight or nine centimetres across. The swarm of probes rapidly dispersed, heading with clear purpose in every direction, and closer to the surface of the moon. Soon they had all vanished from unaided sight. "Wow. That was impressive." Glancing at Ami, she saw the other woman felt much the same. They both looked at Yori. "How many of those things does he carry on board?"
She passed the inquiry on to S'th'kx, who immediately replied. "Sixteen blocks like that and four larger ones of high-speed long range probes, he says. They deploy the long ranges ones to look for asteroids then the short range ones like those to survey them when they find them."

"Do they have much of a failure rate?" Ami enquired curiously. "To have so many of them seems rather over-redundant."

"Apparently they're actually very reliable. He said they're so cheap they go for massive overkill to speed things up." Yori grinned slightly. "I like that approach." Azumi and Chou looked amused while Aiko began laughing.

"You're not kidding, are you?" she chortled, looking up from the display on which the progress of the probes was shown to smile at her friend. "Massive overkill describes you pretty well."

"I'm not cheap, though," Yori snickered.

Smiling at her partner, Chou turned to them. "The probes will cover the entire moon within an hour, in a low orbit. They'll scan the surface at very high resolution, building up a visual map, as well as determining the material, mass concentrations, buried voids, a lot of parameters such as those. Mostly things relevant to mining, which isn't surprising, but it will also show anything else like energy sources, even magical ones. A full scan will take about two days but we should get a preliminary one in a few hours." Ami nodded while Agent Naito listened curiously, clearly wondering what they were looking for. After a moment, he cleared his throat. Chou glanced at him calmly.

"You have a question, Agent?" she asked politely. He nodded.

"Would it be possible to get a copy of that data in a format we can read?" he asked, looking slightly uncertain. The blonde looked at Yori for a moment.

"I believe we could arrange that, subject to first reviewing it for what we're looking for. To be honest, we're not expecting to find it, but if we do, we may have something of a problem..." She looked at Rei and Ami, who nodded very slightly. Hotaru didn't seem to be paying attention, she was staring at the various screens while S'th'kx was bringing up images from a number of the probes, checking their operation.

"I must confess to being very curious but I can contain it," Naito commented, making Chou smile.

"Well done, Agent. I appreciate how mysterious we're being from your point of view but I'm afraid it's unavoidable. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Chou. You have your secrets, as do all the magical girls." He grinned. "You're just a lot better at keeping them than some are." She giggled, glancing at Ami, who frowned slightly, wondering if she'd somehow been insulted. Rei nudged her, winking when she looked.

S'th'kx sat back, seeming satisfied, as far as Rei could determine, then after a few seconds turned to Yori and talked to her for a while. She looked interested, bringing Chou and Aiko in on the conversation, then Azumi. The five of them talked for a while, while the rest wondered what they were discussing, before Yori nodded. Leaning forward S'th'kx manipulated some more controls, with the result that a larger version of the same probe fleet popped out of another hatch, turning away from the moon then accelerating hard into the distance, vanishing from view almost instantly. Everyone watched it go. A second later another one did the same, heading in a different direction. Another one repeated the action in a third direction.
"What was that?" Ami asked curiously.

"Three of the long range probe blocks I mentioned. S'th'kx suggested that as long as he was in the neighbourhood it might pay to run a deep scan, just in case anything interesting was out there. Those things will drop probes all over the place, all the way out to Jupiter or so, he says. In a day or two they'll be as far as the orbit of Mars. He'll leave a relay station in orbit around the moon, logging the results. We can interrogate it from back home. If anything turns up we can come back and investigate." Prodding some more controls, the captain watched with the rest of them as a half-meter diameter sphere came out of yet another hatch, heading off towards the moon and fading from view as it went. "It's reasonably stealthed, not as well as the ship, but no one will see it. We'll bring him back in a few months to retrieve it and the probes when the scan is finished."

Yori looked pleased, while Agent Naito and Rei and her friends all exchanged glances. "Um, are you expecting to find anything?" the government agent asked tentatively. Yori shrugged. "No idea. It seems like a good idea, though. He's an asteroid miner, after all, he thinks in terms of large high-speed lumps of metal and rock whizzing around the place. Back home they've located and cleared all the ones that might be a hazard to navigation or inhabited planets. He gets a little nervous thinking about the possibility of something like that here." She looked thoughtful. "Frankly, I get a little nervous about that as well now the subject has been raised. So, the probes. Better safe than sorry. He makes a compelling case."

Agent Naito nodded his understanding, looking slightly pale at the concept. "I would tend to agree. Nothing like an asteroid in the face to ruin your day."

"Even a little one," Azumi suggested.

"Doing a full scan of the entire asteroid belt would take years and a lot more probes than that," Chou added, "but those ones should be capable of detecting anything in a dangerous orbit or that stands out for some reason, over the next six to twelve months. The results will be interesting regardless." She smiled at the PSIA agent. "I think we can get you that data as well."

"Thanks, Chou. The PSIA is going to be a little surprised by all this, I think." He grinned. "I know I am."

"Ah. Surprise is the spice of life, or so I'm told," Yori quipped.

"My life is very spicy indeed, then," he retorted with a wide smile, making her start giggling.

S'th'kx stood up, seeming pleased, as far as Rei could work out. For the first time he left his work to study them curiously, having only glanced at them before, due to being busy. After a moment, he turned to Yori and said something. She nodded. "Ami? Can you come with us for a little while? It's a matter of a key." Rei looked at her friend, who nodded slightly, understanding. All three of them disappeared down the exit ramp. Hotaru's attention was diverted from the various displays as Ami followed the other two out. She was about to speak when Rei shot a glance at Agent Naito, who was also watching, then turned back to Hotaru, raising a finger quickly to her lips. The younger woman got the message and swallowed her question, nodding slightly. The man didn't notice.

Ami and the other two came back about twenty minutes later. S'th'kx kept looking at her, then Yori, seeming quite taken aback if Rei was any judge of alien body language. Her friend was smiling slightly, she noticed. Not saying anything, the other woman rejoined her friends, while the captain went to his position, Yori with him. "Well, that part is done now. All we can do is wait for the probe swarm to finish it's work." The black-haired young woman looked around with a grin.
"Who wants to go and have a look at the moon?" Rei knew without looking that Hotaru was the first one to have her hand up, raising her own with enjoyment and a feeling of excitement bubbling in the pit of her stomach, catching sight of Ami beside her doing the same thing at the same time. Glancing at the captain Yori nodded, causing him to turn back to the controls and fiddle with them. Shortly they were moving again, going lower.

Giggling furiously, Hotaru jumped again, putting some effort into it, arcing high above the dusty grey surface. "Don't overdo it, Hotaru," Ami's voice came over the comm system built into the environment suit generator. She sounded both mildly worried and nearly as excited as the younger girl was. Turning her head she could see the short-haired woman bounding around on the surface, going at least as high as she was, falling along a parabolic path at a speed that looked much to slow to be real. Returning her attention to her own jump, she watched the surface slowly rise to meet her, throwing her timing off enough that she stumbled when she landed and did an involuntary double somersault in a cloud of moon dust.

Sitting on the moon, running handfuls of the dust through her force-field-protected fingers, Hotaru was suddenly happier than she'd ever been. She looked around at the scene, almost unable to believe where she was, but only had to glance up to the half-full Earth to prove it.

Grateful that the suit generator blocked enough of the blindingly bright sunlight, and all of the radiation she was sure was flooding the area, she bounced to her feet, giggling again. Her hands were somewhat dusty, the gritty feeling odd but yet more evidence she was somewhere truly unusual. Brushing them together she only succeeded in spreading the moon dust more evenly over them, giving up after a few seconds. She stared at her footprints on the surface, walking carefully along heel to toe, leaving a nice set that were incredibly sharp in the airless environment. Smiling to herself she carefully bent down and left a perfect pair of hand prints at the end of the string of footprints, the suit making sure she came to no harm from touching the otherwise scalding surface. Satisfied, she straightened up, hopped sideways to leave the trail intact, then turned and bounded back towards the others.

That government man, Agent Naito, was taking a lot of photos as he sauntered around the surface in big low-gravity steps, grinning like a twit. He seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. She grinned when she saw he'd changed his clothes from the more casual clothing he'd been wearing on the ship to a nice black suit and white shirt and was wearing a pair of wraparound sunglasses. Yori was watching him and laughing. She caught Hotaru looking at them. "I warned him that the dust would probably ruin his suit, but I also said it would look cool to wear it and the glasses while walking around on the moon. I was right." She snickered. "Apparently he couldn't resist."

Agent Naito glanced at her, a pleased expression on his face. "Of course I couldn't resist, Yori. I'm on the damn moon! That's worth a suit."

"You can probably claim it as a valid expense on a mission," Azumi's voice sounded, an amused tone in it. Hotaru looked around, wondering where she was, finally spotting her on top of a ridge some hundred metres tall half a kilometre away. She waved, the silver-haired girl waving back. "I'd think that the first Japanese representative on the moon is owed that."

"What about you girls?" Agent Naito asked, chuckling.

"Magical girls don't count. We do insane things on a daily basis," Azumi responded. He laughed.

Handing Yori the camera, he asked, "Can you take a few of me, please? I don't know if I can ever show them to anyone but it would be nice to have them."
She obliged, having him stand looking heroically into the distance, point at the earth, lean casually on the spaceship which was neatly parked near a small crater that S'th'kx, two of his crew, and both Chou and Aiko were poking around in, and even standing on his hands, a feat made easy by the low gravity. He was laughing during most of this, having a hard time keeping a straight face, not helped by Hotaru rolling around giggling. He grinned at her before taking up another pose, his back against the ship with his legs crossed at the ankle, looking like he was waiting for a bus. Even Yori was giggling at this point.

"If Japan ever gets a manned space program, one day these photos are going to come to light and really embarrass everyone," she laughed. "Ah. That's the last one on the roll. You'll have to go back inside to change it." He took the camera from her, thanking her, then activated the airlock as they'd all been shown how to do, disappearing back inside the ship. Yori turned to Hotaru who was sitting cross-legged on a large boulder, watching, tossing a brick sized lump of moon rock from hand to hand in slow motion.

"I think I like him," she said. Yori grinned.

"Good. He's a very nice guy." Moving over she sat beside the younger girl. "I hope you're having fun."

"So much fun I can hardly believe it," Hotaru responded, a wide smile on her face. "No matter what happens, thank you so much for letting me come. This is the best thing I've ever done."

"You're more than welcome," Yori responded, appearing pleased.

"And thanks for letting me be the first one out, as well." Hotaru laughed. "One small step for magical girl kind..." Chuckling, the older woman smiled at her, then looked up as Agent Naito came out of the ship again, carrying his camera in one hand and a smaller case in the other. Coming over to them he handed the camera to Yori, who accepted it carefully, then opened the case, putting it on the ground. The lid popped open much faster than he was expecting, a puff of air from inside blowing dust around until it dissipated, all of them watching as the dust dropped to the surface much faster than it normally would.

"Whoops. Forgot about the 'no air' part of being in a vacuum," he laughed. "These suits are so good you don't even notice." Hotaru watched with interest as he pulled out some transparent containers, opening them carefully to allow the air inside to escape.

"What are those for?" she asked curiously.

"The PSIA wanted me to get samples of the moon dust, some small rocks, things like that. They're curious, for one thing, and if we ever need to bribe JAXA they'll come in handy." He grinned while Yori snickered at the thought.


"It was the Director-General's idea. He thinks ahead, a lot like you do. Just in case scenarios. This is just in case one day we need some lunar samples." Kneeling down he carefully scooped some dust from the surface into a container, making sure to get only the top layer, from where it was undisturbed by their footprints, then sealed it, checking the label was correct. Returning it to his case he handed the camera to Yori, who accepted it carefully, then opened the case, putting it on the ground. The lid popped open much faster than he was expecting, a puff of air from inside blowing dust around until it dissipated, all of them watching as the dust dropped to the surface much faster than it normally would.

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Watching him for a moment, Hotaru smiled, then hopped to the ground, following, with Yori behind her. Chou glanced up from where she was kneeling, examining an orange patch on the crater floor curiously. Agent Naito spotted it and headed in that direction, pulling out another container for a sample. "I seem to remember the Apollo astronauts found orange material," the blonde commented, watching as he filled the container. He nodded.

"Yes, it was Apollo seventeen, I think. Some sort of volcanic glass. I guess this is probably the same sort of thing." Holding the container up he checked it was full, then put the lid back on, placing it into the case. He stood again, turning to study S't'h'kx and his crew who were clustered around some sort of device the captain was holding, looking at it intently. "What are they doing?"

Chou looked to where he was staring, then smiled. "Mining habits die hard. He's checking for anything interesting from a mineral point of view. That's some sort of deep scan device. So far, he says it's full of boring light elements like magnesium and silicon, nothing worth very much, although there's more than enough oxygen and water to make a base here practical given the right hardware." Naito nodded, returning his attention to his sample jars. He headed off in another direction towards an unusually dark patch of soil.

Looking at Hotaru, Chou smiled. "You certainly seem to be making the most of this, Hotaru," she said, amusement in her voice. "I'm very glad. You seemed rather unhappy last time we spoke, which is understandable. I hope this has cheered you up."

"It has, very much, thanks. It's a dream come true. And a hell of a lot of fun. I mean, look at that!" She pointed at the Earth, visible low in the sky, much larger than the moon seen from the other end. You could just about make out the outlines of Australia and Eastern China above it, with many clouds visible through the haze of atmosphere. "It's just... so damn amazing." Turning she looked at the spaceship sitting quietly on the surface, then further around her friends jumping about in the distance, with S't'h'kx and his people looking up every now and then with what looked like amusement. "So amazing."

The blonde woman followed her gaze, nodding with a small smile. "It's very impressive, I have to agree, and something I didn't expect to do. I'm glad we did though." She grinned as Rei did a slow triple somersault in the middle distance, Ami trying the same thing but only getting two and a half turns in before she bounced off the lunar regolith in a shower of dust. Rei landed much more gracefully, turning and apparently laughing her head off. "They seem to be enjoying themselves," she added, watching as Ami sat up rubbing her head, then picked up a piece of moon rock and threw it at her friend, who caught it, looking at it, before putting it in her pocket.

Aiko wandered over taking large slow-motion steps, grinning as she did. "This is huge fun," she said happily. "Like walking around on one of those inflatable fun rides, only a thousand times better." Stopping she hopped into the 'air', getting a couple of metres up, then gently dropping down again. "Nearly as good as flying." Hotaru wondered what she meant but got distracted when Azumi jumped clean over the spaceship and landed beside them, laughing.

"I could practically get into orbit here, I think", the silver-haired girl said.

"Not quite, we're strong, but not that strong," Chou replied, looking amused. "But you could certainly go a very long way if you really tried."

"Have you tried teleporting yet?" Azumi asked Aiko.

The other woman shook her head. "Not yet. I was getting used to the landscape and the low gravity before I tried it. I need some time to kind of get the area in my mind properly. It's difficult to explain to someone who doesn't teleport, but it's important. I'll need another half hour or so, then
I'll try some short range stuff, just around here, to get the hang of it. Once I'm happy I'm basically 'calibrated' I'll try a jump home. It'll be good if it works."

"Do you think you can go that far?" Hotaru asked, amazed. Aiko shrugged a little.

"I should be able to. As far as I know there's no actual distance limitation if you have enough power, not with this spell. It's a very weird one, apparently, not at all like the 'normal' methods of doing it. I know that jumping from one side of the planet at home to the other is as easy as going from room to room aside from requiring a little more energy. The moon to the Earth is about thirty times the maximum distance I can go on the same planet, so it shouldn't take much more than that difference in energy, which is no problem."

"Assuming a linear relationship between distance and energy requirement," Ami's voice cut in, as she bounded up, Rei beside her. Aiko glanced at her, then nodded.

"True enough. But as far as I know it's linear, or if not, more on the lines of an inverse exponential function of some sort. It's possible the energy per unit of distance might go down with very large distances, but worst case it should only stay the same. There's only one way to find out. The magic didn't come with a manual." She grinned. Ami laughed for a few seconds.

"I can imagine. Ours did, but it was the wrong one." Hotaru started giggling, as the others smiled.

"Yori thinks it should work, and even if it doesn't won't go wrong in any dramatic manner. As far as she and Chou could work out from the spell, which they've studied very closely, if you try to do something dangerous it just doesn't work at all. Some sort of fail-safe built into it." Aiko looked relieved about this fact. Ami studied her for a moment, then glanced at Chou, who nodded.

"It's an exceptionally effective, efficient, and well designed bit of magic," she confirmed. "I wish we knew who came up with it originally, but whoever it was lived a very long time ago."

"Do you mind if I scan your attempt, Aiko?" the blue-haired girl asked curiously. Aiko laughed.

"Not at all. Help yourself, I'll be interested to see what your device finds out."

S'th'kx and his two crew-members came over, having a short conversation with Yori and Chou before heading back into the ship. "He says he's getting hungry, this place is very boring mineralogically, and he'd meet us inside when we're tired of bouncing around like idiots." She laughed, as did Chou. "I think he was hoping for something interesting. He was smiling when he said it."

"How can you tell?" Rei asked, genuinely curious. Hotaru grinned at her.

"Didn't you see it? The angle of his antennae, that shows amusement. It's pretty obvious. When he curls them right back he's annoyed, waving them shows interest." She shrugged as her friends looked at her in astonishment. Yori snickered.

"Very well observed, and exactly right. You've got an eye for this sort of thing." Feeling pleased, the younger woman smiled back at the older one, who she was becoming very fond of.

"Thanks." Looking around, she spotted Agent Naito poking about in some rocks and bounded off to see what he was doing.

"Right. I think I'm ready. Ami, if you want to scan the process, I'll jump just over there by that big rock for the first test." Aiko pointed. Looking at her computer screen, Ami fiddled with the
controls for a moment, before nodding, satisfied.

"Any time you're ready, Aiko." A moment later the brunette disappeared, reappearing with no measurable time delay more or less in the place she'd indicated.

"Hmm. Not quite right. OK, I'll come back." Once more the flash and she was standing where she'd started from. "Better." Looking around, she pointed to the ridge Azumi had been standing on earlier. "That should do." Once more Ami nodded. The flash came and went and Aiko was standing right on the top of the outcrop, seeming pleased. "Got it. Bang on. OK, I'm going to double check with a few longer jumps. See you in a moment." She vanished again.

Thirty seconds later she reappeared in her original position, smiling. "Got it locked in. Great."

"The readings are very interesting," Ami noted, scrolling through the information her machine was giving her, looking at it intently. "The efficiency of the spell is remarkably high. Pity about the bright flash, if you could suppress that somehow it would be even more effective in a fight." Yori glanced at her, nodding approvingly.

"Very good. That's the right sort of thinking. We've been trying to work out a method of either not dissipating that last little bit of energy or perhaps either storing it, emitting it in some non-visible wavelength, or damping it out with a counter-spell. It's a tricky problem." Ami thought about this for a moment.

"I'd be interested in talking to you later about that. Your magic method is... very weird. And fascinating. Would that be OK?"

"I think so," the other woman replied after a glance at her partner. "It would be quite interesting to see if you have the same problems a lot of traditional magic workers do with it. Actually learning it might be problematic but it's worth looking into when we get this all resolved."

Aiko looked between then, grinned, and pointed at herself. "Look at me. This is about me at the moment. I'm going to do something amazing." She giggled. "Or completely fail to do anything at all. One or the other." Yori laughed softly, turning to her friend and bowing slightly.

"My apologies, Aiko. Please, proceed with the experiment."

Chuckling to herself, Aiko looked at the Earth, visible in the far, far, far distance. She frowned slightly. "Hmm." After a moment she nodded in satisfaction. "Ah. I think that's it. It feels like I have a lock. It's taking a lot more energy than normal but about the right amount for a linear increase." Ami watched with interest. "I'm aiming at the place we left from for the first attempt," the brunette said. Taking a deep breath, the petite woman nodded sharply, then as everyone closed their eyes, vanished.

"Holy shit!" Rei squawked in shock, rubbing her eyes. "Fuck me, that was bright!"

"My eyes! My eyes! The spacesuit, it does nothing!" Hotaru moaned, laughing slightly at the end of the sentence but still blinking furiously.

"Ow." Yori shook her head.

When she could see again properly, Ami checked her scan results. "Well, it dissipated about thirty times the energy, which makes sense, I guess. That was an extremely bright flash. I'm glad my eyes were shut."
"The question is, did she make it?" Agent Naito asked, sounding worried, still blinking. His sunglasses in conjunction with the suit generator had left him less flash-blinded than the rest.

"Yes, she did," Chou replied, appearing to listen. "But she's puking her guts out at the moment. It would seem the distance is enough to trigger the first-time response again, rather vigorously." Four people looked at her in wonder.

"I have to find out how you do that," Ami muttered to herself. The blonde gave her an amused look.

A couple of minutes later, Aiko reappeared, staggering slightly. Azumi immediately moved to support her friend. "Thanks." She shook her head. "God, that was horrible. Much, much worse than the first time."

"Do you think it will do it next time?" Agent Naito asked, wincing as he seemed to remember his own reaction the first time through a teleport. Looking like she couldn't believe what she was doing, Aiko stepped away from them.

"Only one way to find out." She waited as everyone both closed their eyes and turned around, then jumped again. Seconds later she was back, grinning widely.

"No. At least that part works the same. I'm damn glad about that, it would be very unpleasant to go through that each time." Looking around, she added, "Anyone want to go through just to get it over with?"

After a moment, Yori sighed and stepped forward, accompanied by Azumi. "All right. It's not a bad idea. Back in a moment, guys." Once more they all turned around. Ami kept her eyes open this time, noticing with some surprise that the flash was bright enough to illuminate the outcropping that Aiko had used in her first test, as well as some taller hills behind it.

"I wonder if that's bright enough to see from Earth?" she mused. Chou followed her gaze.

"It will confuse people quite a lot if anyone notices, I suspect," she giggled. After a moment she winced. "Oh dear. Azumi reacted even more badly to the teleport than Aiko did. Yori is more or less OK although she fell over."

"Not much phases her, does it?" the PSIA man said, smiling. Chou laughed with a nod.

"No, it doesn't."

Several minutes later the three women reappeared, Azumi looking quite green, which clashed with her hair and eye colour horribly. "Oh, god. That was absolutely revolting." Yori appeared mildly unwell, while Aiko seemed fine.

"Anyone else? Probably best to do it this way around, so you can throw up with breathable air around you." Chou stepped forward, joined after a moment by Rei. Hotaru looked at them, then at Ami, before sighing and joining them.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Agent Naito groaned, slowly moving to the purple-haired girl's side. Ami nodded.

"Probably." She also joined the group. Yori and Azumi, who seemed to have recovered, grinned at them and waved.

"Oh. my. G..." Rei's exclamation was cut off by retching sounds. Ami, on her hands and knees in
the grass, wasn't really listening. All around her she could hear unpleasant noises telling of a
number of severely annoyed digestive systems complaining about the forces of nature being so
cruelly twisted. When she was finally empty, she dry heaved for a moment or two, before
staggering to her feet, feeling weak, idly noticing the suit generator had disengaged now they were
in a breathable atmosphere again.

"That was very unpleasant," Chou said beside her, not looking at all well. She pulled a couple of
bottles of water from nowhere, handing one to Ami, then opened the other one and swilled her
mouth out a couple of times before draining the remainder. Ami did the same, spitting a few times.

"That's one way of putting it," Hotaru groaned, rolling over onto her back, managing to avoid the
vomit on the grass.

"Thank god it only happens once," Rei mumbled. Chou gave each of them a bottle of water, then
moved to help Agent Naito to his feet. His sunglasses had fallen off and he was pale and sweating.
Giving him some water as well, having helpfully opened it first, the blonde bent down and
retrieved his dark glasses.

"I don't think I've ever felt that sick before," he moaned, bending over and putting his hands on his
knees as another spasm came and went, luckily without anything else making an appearance.
Slowly straightening, he drank some more water. "I really hope that won't happen again."

"It won't," Aiko assured him, looking at the man in sympathy. "It is pretty horrible but that should
be the last time.'

Handing his glasses back, having cleaned them, Chou turned to Ami and the others. "Does anyone
have any lasting symptoms?" There was a chorus of weak 'No' answers. Pulling out her computer,
which she'd left scanning to record the teleport, Ami inspected it, somewhat surprised by the
results. As far as the little magitech device could determine the transit time of the long range
teleport was essentially zero, no different than a normal one, a few of which she had recorded in
the past.

"That's weird," she muttered, looking at a graphic it provided her. Sensing Aiko beside her she
showed her the result. "It take the same time regardless of distance. And that time is so short it's
basically no time at all."

"Interesting," the brunette said, looking at the screen, "Very interesting. I wonder if there even is a
distance limitation? Assuming I had enough energy available, of course."

"Based on this, no, I think you were right, the process gets more efficient as the range goes up. The
ratio between the energy output from the moon and a local jump is actually slightly less than the
ratio of the distances. I'd need more data to plot a curve but I wouldn't be surprised to see it
eventually levelled off. Whether that would allow arbitrarily long jumps I don't know." She looked
away from the screen, meeting Aiko's eyes. "I still can't figure out how it deals with the
momentum, the velocity difference between here and where we were is very significant, never
mind the amount of gravitational potential energy involved. But then, it's magic." She grinned as
Aiko laughed, nodding.

"That it is. I gave up worrying about it a long time ago. But if you ever work it out, I'd love to hear
it. You're one of the very few people who might stand a chance of understanding the mechanics of
it all. You should talk to Chou and Yori about that one day, they've raised the issue of magical
efficiency several times." Aiko looked over to the blonde, who smiled at her.

"Shall we go back?" she asked.
"May as well. OK, you all know the drill, take your positions." Ami made sure she was standing in the right place then closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, just in case, but in the end only felt a mild disorientation. Her environment generator beeped quietly at her to let her know it was active once more and the abrupt drop in gravity told her she was back where she'd started from. Opening her eyes she looked around, grinning. Even with her lifestyle, the idea that you could go from somewhere in Japan to standing on the moon so easily was a bit surprising.

"A successful test, I think," Chou commented, glancing at her, then at Aiko, who grinned and nodded.

"Damn right. I was a little worried about it at first, I know you guys said it wouldn't work if it was actually dangerous, but..." She shrugged apologetically as Chou laughed gently. "There's always a first time to be wrong."

"Luckily, this wasn't that time," her friend responded. They smiled at each other, before walking over to Yori and Azumi, with the others following them. Azumi looked perfectly normal now, obviously having recovered.

"Has everyone had enough of wandering around for the moment?" Yori asked, looking around. "I'm getting hungry, so we could have something to eat, then maybe go and look around somewhere else. Azumi suggested having a look at the Apollo landing sites."

Ami smiled, and also noticed how Hotaru and Agent Naito's eyes lit up. "That sounds like a good idea," she exclaimed.

"I think so." Yori grinned, then looked more serious. "I think we should institute a rule that we look from a distance, though. Those are important historical sites aside from anything else. It would be dishonourable to damage them." After a moments thought they all nodded one after another.

"So no stealing a NASA souvenir then?" Rei joked, sounding slightly disappointed. Ami gave her a severe glance.

"No. Leave the space toys alone." Rei giggled as her friend folded her arms and stared hard at her.

"Aww. OK, I guess being here is good enough."

"We could have a look at the Russian landers as well," Chou suggested. "We can find them easily enough." They headed back to the spaceship, looking around one last time.

"This is an interesting place," Hotaru smiled, bending down and picking up a few fist sized moon rocks, juggling them carefully, a task made easy by the low gravity. Watching with a smile Ami agreed.

"You were right, this damn dust gets everywhere," Naito complained, brushing his suit off, feeling the ship vibrate subtly as it took off, heading for orbit again.

"It's a little toxic as well, so don't breathe it," Yori advised, watching with a grin. He stopped mid-brush, looking suspiciously at the cloud of dust hanging in the air.

"Toxic? Now you tell me." She chuckled.

"Don't worry. The environmental system will decontaminate the place pretty fast. We'll check everyone before we leave and make sure there's no damage." He watched as something suddenly
seemed to notice the dust, which fell to the floor much faster than it should have and vanished slowly into it. Slightly worried in case the floor decided to eat his shoes as well, he headed towards the room he’d been assigned, deciding to change into something less dusty. "Put your suit and anything else covered in dust into the storage unit like I showed you," Yori called to him. "It will remove the dust but it won't damage anything." He nodded, waving over his shoulder as he poked the appropriate control, watching as the door irised open, then stepping through. Inside the small but reasonable sized cabin he quickly changed, following her suggestion. The small cupboard-sized storage unit emitted some faint, slightly disturbing noises for a few minutes, then displayed an icon on the display on the door he'd learned meant basically 'Task complete' and pinged at him.

Opening the door he found everything inside spotless, as if it had been polished. The suit still smelt oddly like gunpowder, a smell he'd heard was associated with moon dust but had never expected to encounter first-hand, but seemed clean. After inspecting it closely he folded it and put it back in his case, pulling out another magazine of film and changing the depleted one on the camera. Sitting on the bed, which although slightly odd in size, was the most comfortable one he'd ever encountered, he reached for his notebook and a pen, quickly jotting down more notes and observations for his report. At the rate his notebook was filling up he expected the report would be more akin to a book.

'An SF one,' he mused, grinning, while he tried to think of the right way to describe the teleportation sickness. In the end he settled for 'very unwell', laughing slightly at the massive understatement. Putting the notebook and pen away he lay down on the bed for a short rest, staring at the ceiling of the compartment while he went over the last few hours in his mind. Thinking of bounding around in lunar gravity while wearing ordinary street clothes he laughed out loud. 'I must have the best job in the world,' he thought, grinning wildly. 'I'm very glad I met all these people, as terrifying as it is sometimes. They're going to do amazing things, even more amazing than they have so far, I suspect.' Recalling the way Hotaru had opened up, laughing like she was happier than she could believe, he grinned again. 'Nice girl. I hope Yori and the others manage to sort out the problems with her group.' Rolling to his feet he straightened his clothes, picked up his camera, then went to find the others.

In the common room he stopped dead, staring at the table, which was now considerably larger, required as it was covered in food. Some of it was obviously alien in origin, a bowl filled with spiky blue things that looked a little like deep fried sea urchins, some odd looking vegetables, one of which he could swear was looking back at him, strange seeming mugs with some type of brown liquid in it, steaming gently, but the other things...

Walking over he watched with amazement as S'th'kx cautiously picked up a slice of pizza from a box with a New York address on it, inspecting it curiously. After a moment, and a quick query to Chou, who told him something, he did the alien equivalent of taking a deep breath and tried a little. There was no reaction for a moment, then he squeaked happily and shoved the entire slice into his mouth, his antennae waving frantically. Chou giggled, glancing at Yori, who was doing much the same thing, grinning at the same time.

The PSIA man stared, then laughed, shaking his head. "You went to New York from the MOON to get pizza?" Aiko smiled at his expression.

"Yep. And Brisbane for Sushi, Hong Kong for ramen, a place in London that does a damn good chicken vindaloo, and Hobart in Tasmania for some of the best fish and chips I've ever had." She laughed out loud at his look of astonishment. "Hey, I just found out I can do interplanetary teleportation! I needed to celebrate. Miso soup?" The girl handed him a bowl which he took slightly dazedly. "Chou made it. It's the best I've had, her soup."
Shaking his head, he muttered, "Every time I think I've seen everything you girls can do to surprise me..." Trying the soup his eyes widened. "Wow. This is good." He grinned at Chou, who smiled back appreciatively. "Magical girl, unbelievable healer, incredible martial artist, and now chef? Is there anything you can't do?" She laughed gently, looking mildly embarrassed.

"I like cooking. I've done it since I was little."

"Well, you're damn good at it, that's all I can say."

"Thank you, Agent. It's nice of you to say so." She delicately spooned some curry up and tried it, nodding in satisfaction. "Yes, you're right, Aiko, this is very good indeed. We'll have to go there sometime."

"There's a really nice Sri Lankan restaurant next door, and an amazing Thai place across the street as well. I don't know why the UK has a reputation for bad food, I know some amazing places there." Aiko ate some ramen, smiling happily. "Did you know that chicken tikka masala is a British invention? And it's the most popular dish in the country on average?" Naito exchanged glances with Chou, both of them smiling. Aiko certainly liked finding interesting places to eat, distance no object.

Beside Yori, S'th'kx had finished half a large pizza, looking pleased himself. Naito found he was becoming quite aware of the alien body language much faster than he'd expected. They still slightly surprised him, they did after all look very different from humans, but he'd realised early on that under the, to him, unusual exterior were some very intelligent and decent people. Hotaru seemed to have picked up on it almost immediately, clearly at ease with the aliens, and was currently offering one of the other crew-men some fish and chips, trying to express in mime how good it was. He looked at her, then the plate she was holding out, before visibly shrugging and trying some. Shortly he'd finished the lot and was looking speculatively at the bowl of curry.

Grinning, Naito turned his attention to the less recognisable food. "What are those?" he asked, pointing at the blue spiky things. Azumi glanced at him, then them.

"Damn good, actually. Some sort of flash-fried seasoned vegetable. They're a very popular snack on the K'nn worlds. Try some." He did, cautiously at first, then more eagerly.

"Hey, those are very nice. A bit like a cross between a roasted nut and a pear, if that makes sense." She laughed.

"I know what you mean. I ate dozens of them the first time I was here." She looked thoughtful. "That reminds me, I need to pick some more up. I finished off all the ones I got last time." Looking at Chou, she grinned. "We need to go shopping before we go back." The blonde smiled, eating one of the blue things herself.

"That can be arranged, I'm sure."

After the lunch was finished, they cleared the remains away, Chou carefully storing the left-overs somewhere or other, before making the table go away and the seats come back. Yori went off with S'th'kx and his crew, presumably heading back to the command deck, Azumi and Ami accompanying them. Slumping into a seat which obligingly reconfigured itself to allow him to lie back, Naito smiled the smile of a well-fed man. "That was a damn good meal," he said quietly. "Thank you, Aiko, and you, Chou."

"You're very welcome, Agent," the blonde said gracefully.
"Call me Masao, Chou. We've known each other for long enough and gone through enough to dispense with the formalities. Same goes for the rest of you." He grinned at her and Aiko, then leaned back, closing his eyes.

"Thank you, Masao. That's good of you." Her gentle voice was as soothing as always. Thinking once more how she'd make an exceptional doctor just based on how relaxed she could make you by talking to you, leaving the healing abilities out of it, he drifted off into a pleasant postprandial doze, a smile on his face.

"I'm telling you, Mike, I saw it! It was this weird rainbow shimmering sort of flash, right up there on the upper quadrant of the visible limb, near the horizon. It was bright enough to show up even with the illumination from the sun, but I'd never have seen it if I wasn't looking at exactly the right place."

"There's nothing there now, Chris. I can't see any evidence of a new crater, or any ejecta. You sure it wasn't your imagination?" Mike leaned back from the eyepiece, rubbing his eyes for a moment, then looked again. "Are you sure the camera was off?"

"Yes, damn it. I was realigning the scope and just happened to be looking through it when it happened, I hadn't re-engaged the computer yet, so there's no record. I can't believe it. The first time something interesting happens in a year of staring at the moon and I don't have any proof." Chris sighed, slumping at his desk, his head in his hands. "No one will ever believe me. Even you don't believe me." His friend and colleague snorted with amusement, still looking through the telescope.

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, Chris, all I'm saying is that I can't see anything..." He stopped dead in shock, blinking as his eyes recovered from the pinprick of brilliant light, with a rainbow fringe, that had come and gone in an instant. Chris looked up at the sudden interruption.

"What?" he asked. Mike stared harder, adjusting the controls slightly, zooming in and altering the focus.

"Hmm?"

"What? You were in the middle of saying something then you just stopped." Unable to see anything else, Mike turned to his colleague.

"I believe you." Chris stared at him for a moment.

"It happened again, didn't it?" His colleague nodded slowly.

"Yes. I have no idea what it was, but it was exactly as you described it. At least this time we have a record." Chris' face froze, then very slowly fell. Mike gazed at him for a long few seconds, his heart sinking.

"You did re-engage the computer and camera, right?" There was no response except a long-faced look. "Right?"

"I got distracted trying to see it again and forgot!" Chris wailed, banging his head on the desk. "Fuck it!" Mike sighed in a long-suffering manner, reaching over the desk to the telescope control console and pressing a couple of buttons. As the computer took over the control of the telescope, recording high-resolution images to disk, they stared at the monitor, hoping that whatever it had been would happen again.
They were still watching fruitlessly when the sun came up.

"That's incredible," Ami breathed, watching the solid-appearing totally realistic model of the moon slowly rotating in the middle of the control deck. Reaching out she waved her hand through it, grinning as she felt absolutely nothing, but still managed to make the sphere rotate faster as if she'd touched a real object.

"The projectors are pretty damn good," Yori agreed, standing beside her. "Almost all the data is in now. S'th'kx says it will be complete in about an hour. But we have enough to be sure there's nothing there." She looked at the captain who was at a nearby console, asking him something. He adjusted some controls on his screen, looking at the projected model as he did. It changed colour, dimming down considerably, with spots in bright colours appearing in a number of places. "These are all the places with elements consistent with artificial construction. Every one corresponds to known or suspected landing or crash sites from American or Russian missions, except this one, which is the recent Japanese one." She reached out and spun the projection, showing how many there were. Dozens of coloured patches appeared all over the surface.

"Wow. I hadn't really realised how many things we'd dumped on the moon," Ami commented, watching with fascination.

"There are rather a lot. I was surprised as well." Circling a place on the projection with her finger, Yori made a fist and pulled back, causing the projection to zoom hugely, as if they were only a few hundred metres up. "This is the Apollo 11 site, for example."

"The resolution is amazing." Ami leaned closer. "You can see the footprints perfectly."

"Ground resolution is about a millimetre or so. They don't bother going higher for a mining survey, this is the highest resolution the probes we used can normally do. But it has all sorts of data other than the visual stuff." Once more she made a request and the image changed. "That's water ice, for example." Huge patches of colour appeared over much of the surface, concentrating at the south pole.

"Good grief. There's a hell of a lot of it. I always thought the moon was dry."

"It's all under the surface, but S'th'kx thinks it's more than enough to run a number of large bases given the right technology." They spent some time going through different spectral ranges, looking at the underground details as well, before Ami sighed, half in resignation, half in wonder.

"It's definite, then. Nothing from the 'Silver Millennium' at all."

Yori shook her head slowly. "No. No magical or other high energy power sources, only a few low output radioisotope ones slowly decaying away in some of the Russian and American landers. No large scale construction, on or beneath the surface. Nothing bigger than the descent stages of the Apollo missions. All sorts of things of interest to scientists but there's absolutely no trace of anything connected with your mythology, I'm afraid. Not that I was expecting there would be, it would have been quite a surprise, but I think this proves it beyond doubt." She turned as S'th'kx told her something, nodding her understanding. "That's the last of the data feed, the scan is complete. Nothing in the new data either."

With a gesture Ami reduced the projection to the rotating sphere, a metre across, that she'd first seen, then folded her arms and stared wordlessly at it for a while. Yori said nothing, just watching her, letting her think. Eventually she looked at the petite woman. "Thank you. I believed you all along, but there was still a little voice at the back of my head saying 'What if she's wrong?' This has
put that to rest." She shook her head slowly. "I hope it will do the same for the others. Rei and Hotaru will believe it, I know, but I'm not sure with the rest. Haruka, perhaps. Possibly even Setsuna, although I'd never have thought that likely until last time we spoke. But I'm pretty sure Usagi will just think it's a trick, even assuming I can persuade her to look at it in the first place, and the rest of them may well feel the same."

"If this doesn't convince them nothing we say will, I guess. It doesn't really matter. As long as they don't do stupid things and break the scenery they can believe anything they want to as far as I'm concerned." Yori grinned, although there was an edge of sadness to her expression. "It's a pity but we can't force it on them." Turning and talking to the captain for a moment, she took the pair of two-centimetre cubes he handed her, giving one to Ami and vanishing the other. "This is a full copy of the raw data. Your computer should easily be able to access it. I can get you a portable projector when we go back to K'n'n four as well, if you want. That can reproduce what the ship one can do."

Accepting the storage cube Ami nodded, smiling. "Thanks. I'd like that."

"No problem. Let's go and show it to the others. Now I'm certain there's nothing in the data that could breach the subjects covered by the security spell I can show Agent Naito as well. I'll have to get the PSIA a projector too and make sure it has an interface that they can access with their computers. That shouldn't be too difficult."

Heading down the ramp they went to the common room, where everyone else was talking, looking at the view. Agent Naito was chatting to Rei, while changing the film in his camera, nodding as the girl pointed at something in the distance. Chou, Hotaru, and Azumi seemed to be enjoying a joke, the younger girl laughing so hard she couldn't stand up, with Azumi grinning widely. The blonde glanced over as they entered, smiling, then got up and walked over. "Ready for a snack?" she asked. Ami nodded, as did Yori, who looked pleased.

"Yes, love, please, that would be great. Some coffee as well, I think." Shortly they were sitting down staring at the projected image in the middle of the room, sipping coffee. Ami took Rei and Hotaru to one side and went over her conclusions, knowing Yori had discreetly shielded them from the government man, who didn't seem to notice, or perhaps was simply polite enough not to. He clearly didn't want to get involved in their private business which she appreciated.

"So there really is nothing?" Hotaru asked, watching the model rotate slowly. Ami shook her head.

"No. Absolutely no trace of anything not either natural or man-made, very recently. Lots of debris from both the Americans and the Russians but that's it." The violet-haired young woman sighed with a small nod.

"I understand. Despite everything I was sort of hoping..." She shrugged, sighing again. Rei put her arm around her shoulders.

"In a small way I was as well. But I think it's better this way. Now we know. It probably means Yori and her friends are right about everything else as well, which hopefully means there is some way to deal with it all."

"Guess so," Hotaru mumbled, closing her eyes in apparent disappointment for a second or two, then opening them and looking around. She saw Yori watching them sympathetically, smiling briefly at the other woman, who smiled back then resumed talking to Agent Naito. "Oh, well."

"It's a shock, I know, but we'll get through it," Ami told her young friend, sure she was right.
"We've got some very effective allies now. If anyone can work it out it's them." She grinned at the others. "And we got to walk on the moon, for god's sake! How many people can say that?"
Giggling suddenly Hotaru cheered up. "That's true. It was fantastic."

Rei nodded her agreement. "Very true. I still can't believe it." Smiling at the younger woman, she dropped her arm. "Come on, let's have something to eat and look at that model. It's pretty impressive." They felt the magic Yori had put around them vanish as they walked over, Ami smiling her thanks. The other woman grinned. Handing her a cup of coffee, she pointed to the table. "Still some pizza left, and some of the food from the processors as well. That sort of custard stuff is pretty nice on those weird pink fruit." All three of them headed for the food.

Finishing his coffee Naito put the cup down, turning back to the extraordinarily detailed projection of the moon floating in space a few metres away. "I still find that remarkable," he commented to Chou, who smiled at him, looking to where he was. She nodded her agreement.

"It's a very interesting result, certainly. The data cube Yori gave you has a lot more information stored on it that can't be represented visually so easily, of course, but the projection is fascinating."

"Can I really get a device that can project it like that to take back home?" he asked curiously. She laughed gently.

"Easily. It will take a little bit of custom work to have it equipped with a suitable network interface to allow it to be linked into a computer at the PSIA but S'th'k'x knows where we can get that done in a very short period of time. They're quite used to having to deal with alien data formats as a result of trading with so many different species' native computer systems." He shook his head in wonder.

"It's amazing to me how matter of fact you lot are about all this. Even after the last two days." Waving his hand, he indicated the entire room and the spaceship beyond it. "All this is... very strange. But a lot of fun. I've very glad I came."

"So am I, Masao. We're all glad we could show you something more of the world we know, without it being associated with some hideous emergency." He grinned as she giggled. "Not everything on the other side of a portal means harm. In fact, very little of it does. You just tend to remember the bad bits."

"When it's trying to eat you it does tend to stick in your memory," he chuckled. The young woman nodded, smiling at the comment.

"I can imagine it would." She studied him for a moment. "Have you begun your report yet?" she asked curiously.

"It's difficult to know where to begin." Moving to a seat he sat down, Chou sitting beside him. Looking at her, then the projection again, he shrugged. "I've been taking a lot of notes, of course. I assume you both know I was asked to pay very careful attention to everything about these aliens, what was on the other side of the portal, all that sort of thing." She nodded, smiling gently, not looking either surprised or upset.

"Yes, we know that. It would be the obvious and responsible thing to do in any case."

"The Director-General, and by extension the Japanese government, is both extremely curious and somewhat worried about the amount of interworld activity in Minato, which is steadily increasing, more and more rapidly recently. Particularly around your area." Chou nodded once more.

"We're aware of that. We know most of the people involved. While I can't say why the hostile incursions seem to be increasing, the friendly ones, which vastly outnumber them, are mostly
because less travellers are being attacked since we cracked down on that sort of thing rather heavily. Word gets around. For some reason Minato is much easier to create an inbound portal to which is why so many end up there, although so far no one seems to be able to say why that should be. We have a number of things on our world that are in high demand in other ones, chocolate and coffee being the two most obvious items, although there are a lot of travellers that are inordinately fond of ice cream as well." She laughed as he shook his head in wonder. "There are quite a few other goods as well that are traded. Precious metals are currently the main trade goods in the other direction."

"That would explain the fairly significant amount of gold and silver entering the system from Minato recently."

"Indeed." She inspected him thoughtfully for a few seconds, apparently trying to decide something. "We have been talking about other trade activities with Uthryyl in recent weeks. It's still in the preliminary stages but there are some intriguing possibilities. It turns out that there are a number of plant-derived chemicals that have a considerable value to certain other species, much higher than even coffee or chocolate, which are already quite valuable. We've been looking into acquiring useful quantities of these compounds to use as trade goods. Azumi particularly is quite interested in seeing what could be arranged. She and Uthryyl have an agreement over trade, more comprehensive than the ones he has with a few merchants at home."

Naito looked at her for a moment, then turned to peer at Azumi, who was talking to Hotaru. She glanced back, clearly noticing the attention. After a couple of seconds he returned his gaze to Chou. "In exchange for what?" he asked. "Chemicals go out, what comes back?"

The blonde smiled a little. "Oh, mostly useful things. One of the items discussed was mattresses like the ones you've spent the last two nights in. Art, as well, both ways probably. Both our species have similar enough tastes to make that entirely feasible. Possibly movies and books as well in the outbound direction, Uthryyl's people quite like our literature." She smiled at his look of mild astonishment. "Oh, yes, and we shouldn't forget the fusion reactors."

"..."

Naito stared at her in total shock, not sure he'd heard correctly.

"...Fusion...?"

"Reactors, yes," Azumi's voice came from beside him, making him jump and squeak in shock. She was grinning when he recovered and glared at her.

"Don't do that!" he muttered, before remembering what they were talking about. "Fusion reactors? Really?"

"Yep." She sat on the floor in front of them both, cross-legged, looking pleased and amused. "I'm still researching it at this end, but Uthryyl has everything at the other end pretty much ready. There's some export documentation from his world that still needs finishing but that won't take all that long now." Naito became aware he was gaping at her with his mouth hanging open and closed it with a snap.

Azumi chuckled at the look on his face. "I was talking to Uthryyl some months ago and the subject came up. We looked into it a bit more when we were on holiday. There is a world that can provide us with as many of the things as we want in a pre-built, turnkey operation, completely fail-safe format, ranging from a small ten megawatt unit up to something in the multiple gigawatt range. Uthryyl can provide the helium-three fuel as well in whatever quantity we'd need. He worked it out
and came to the conclusion that ten metric tons a year would provide the entirety of the energy requirements of Japan. That's about a hundred and seventy cubic metres. A cube about five and a half metres on a side." The PSIA man found he was gaping again.

"No pollution, no dangerous waste products, practically no noise. Just uncrate it, configure it, fuel it, and turn it on." Azumi studied his face, which had gone a funny colour, for a few seconds. "Do you think that would be something the government would be OK with?"

Several minutes passed in silence. Ami and Rei wandered over, clearly wondering why Naito was looking so shell-shocked. Eventually he asked, "You're serious?"

"Completely."

"All our energy requirements?"

"Correct."

"And all they want is some processed plants?"

Azumi grinned. "Pretty much. We're still looking into that part of things, there's quite a lot involved in it, but we have a list of chemicals, several of which we've already located, and there are a number of others that look possible. They're worth a very large amount to the right people. Much more than gold or platinum would be to us, because they're much rarer on other worlds."

He shook his head while Ami glanced at Rei, then both of them looked curiously at Azumi, who was smiling. "The deal would go through Uthryyl, who is probably the only trader at the moment who could arrange it. He's a major player on a number of worlds, a very close friend, and totally trustworthy."

There was another long pause. "You're seriously suggesting that we can buy alien fusion reactors from another world and run Japan with them?" He was still having trouble with the concept. Azumi smiled while Chou began giggling.

"That's the basic idea. We're not sure yet whether we'd sell them outright or long-term lease them. There are pros and cons to both methods. The things are completely sealed and basically maintenance free, at least on the smaller end of the scale. The larger ones need a certain amount of intermittent servicing, something we could arrange training for local technicians for, or simply have the manufacturers technicians come and do. They'd be supplied on a contract that ruled out tampering with them, not that anyone could do much except damage one to the point it stopped working. The basic design is nearly a hundred and fifty years old and incredibly reliable, they come with an unconditional guarantee that's good for about fifty years and as far as I can find out no one has claimed on it in close to twice that. They just work."

Ami was looking somewhat shocked as well by this point, having realised what they were talking about. She sat down and listened intently.

"The fuel can be supplied in more or less any desired quantity. It's completely safe except for being a deeply cryogenic fluid, but our people already have a lot of experience in handling bulk cryogenic substances, industry uses them in large quantities for all sorts of things. We've been trying to work out the issues with introducing this sort of technology for a while now, technically it's quite easy, but politically it could be an absolute minefield. I was hoping to get everything sorted out from the practical side of things before I mentioned it to anyone locally but Chou seems to have let the cat out of the bag slightly early." The silver-haired girl gave her colleague a mildly exasperated look which provoked a small giggle and a shrug.
"It seemed like a good time to tell him, Azumi. It won't go to anyone who shouldn't know at this point and he's the first one we'd have talked to anyway." Chou smiled at Naito, who felt slightly surprised yet rather pleased. "I assume it won't go to anyone who shouldn't know?"

He nodded. "I'll make sure of that. The Director-General will be very interested, though, I think." Privately he was thinking, 'He's going to have kittens. We thought something interesting might happen but this is beyond belief! Cheap practical fusion power, just like that? The government will offer them anything they want for that.' He could see that both women had a fairly good idea what he was thinking, judging by their expressions.

"The oil companies, and the nuclear ones, are going to have a fit when they find out," was what he said. Azumi shrugged, smiling a little.

"Tough. Burning fossil fuels isn't sustainable, something they damn well know. It's not like the demand for oil will disappear, it's much too useful for all sorts of things other than fuel. Burning it is criminally wasteful if you look at it like that, it's far more valuable in the long term as a raw material for plastics, fertiliser, drugs, you name it."

Nodding slowly, he smiled a bit. "True enough. I don't know they'll see it that way though. Not at first."

"As far as the nuclear industry is concerned, again, we need some of the things they produce, but fission power plants and nuclear weapons aren't particularly helpful in the long run. The fusion units are proliferation proof, can't be made into weapons, and we can make sure we only supply them to applications that are non-offensive. None of us have any problems with defence systems but Uthryyl himself wouldn't supply them to anyone who was going to use them for offensive purposes. He feels rather strongly about that. Personal history." Azumi looked slightly sad. "It's a long story, not mine to tell."

"Well, I think it's an amazing idea, myself. I'm pretty sure most people would agree. But I also think there are going to be all sorts of ramifications from cheap clean power. It will have to be dealt with carefully." Azumi nodded her understanding.

"That's what I thought. It's a way off yet, although we can get a unit or two for evaluation easily. Perhaps the PSIA would be able to suggest the best way forward. I think it's important that we go ahead with it, though, even if there are problems as a result. The problems with sticking with what we have are going to be a lot worse if what I've been finding out about it are even half-way true. Climatic shifts, pollution, political instability, you name it. Energy costs are the driving force behind a hell of a lot of world-wide problems. Even cheap clean drinking water, which low-cost energy would make possible almost anywhere, would make an enormous difference to a vast number of people."

"The situation in places in the middle east could be improved a lot by cheap water," Ami suggested, looking fascinated. They both looked at her. "A lot of the tensions there are caused by the limited natural resources, from what I can see," she added. "Water is essential but scarce. That causes nasty problems. Make it available and a lot of problems go away, there and elsewhere."

"It's a good point," Chou agreed. "A lot of African countries also suffer from the same problem. If you have to spend half your time or more looking for water and food, you don't have a lot left to learn about the world, which perpetuates poverty and strife. It feeds on itself. Something as simple as clean water available everywhere would fix a lot of problems."

Naito shook his head slowly, staring at them all. "I always thought you lot would change the world in some manner but I wasn't expecting this sort of thing, and not so soon." He grinned as Azumi
laughed. "I'll put it in my report."

"It should be an interesting one," Chou remarked with amusement.

"My best one yet," he agreed happily. "Maybe one day they'll be a best-seller." All four women laughed at this.

"We can expand to the rest of the world in time. In the long run we could hopefully switch away completely from fossil fuels. There are some interesting battery technologies that are applicable to transportation," Azumi told him. "But that's for another time. Right now, getting some big fusion plants up and running is the thing I'm interested in. When all the paperwork is sorted out at Uthryyl's end I'll let you know. As I said, I can get an evaluation unit without too much trouble. I would think that there would be people interested in playing with it."

"Most likely," he replied dead-pan. Ami and Rei went back to Hotaru, the blue-haired girl glancing wonderingly at the silver-haired one now and then. She grinned, rising to her feet.

"It's going to be fun, certainly."

He chuckled as she and Chou walked off, heading back to the table, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Walking onto the control deck, Ami glanced around, smiling at Rei and Hotaru, who were watching the view again, before heading towards Yori. She was speaking to S'th'kx and one of his crew, as they worked on a pair of consoles next to each other. Her expression was one of curious worry. "So, what's going on?" the girl asked. Yori looked up for a moment.

"The long range probes found something weird. Out past the orbit of Mars, about half-way between there and the asteroid belt." Ami felt her stomach lurch.

"Is it dangerous?"

Yori shrugged. "We're not sure yet. It's in a stable orbit, so that's good, it's not heading this way at least, but there's definitely something odd going on. S'th'kx is sending the probe closer under manual control to have a look." The mining captain looked at her and said something, causing her to nod and reply. "It's in position. He's bringing the image up over there." Indicating the point in space where she'd seen the moon data projected, Yori turned to watch, as did everyone else. A few seconds later an image of a very slowly tumbling something appeared, getting steadily larger.

"An asteroid?"

"I think so. A little one if that data is right." Yori read the alien text across the bottom of the projection with a frown. "Still a damn big lump of rock though. About a kilometre across." The image swelled continuously as the distant probe approached it's target. Looking between the projection and his console S'th'kx made careful adjustments, finally indicating satisfaction. He turned to watch the image directly, walking closer. After a moment his antennae stuck straight up, then laid down over his back, something Ami hadn't seen before. He said something in a low voice. Everyone watched in surprise, before Ami turned to Yori.

"What did he say?"

The young woman was staring at her friend with an odd expression. After a moment, she looked at Ami.
"Roughly translated, it was 'Well, fuck me..."
'What the hell is that?' Shampoo thought to herself, stopping in her tracks, staring at the small furry thing with an inordinately large number of excessively large and sharp teeth that had just scuttled around the side of the building at the end of the alley she was walking down in Minato. She was there having decided to risk going for a shopping trip. It also stopped, staring at her, its head on one side. 'It looks a bit like one of those little monsters from that silly American film, what was it called again? Something about not getting them wet...' The creature cocked its head the other way, its large ears moving around. The expression on its furry face was more one of puzzlement if anything. They watched each other from about twenty metres apart for a few seconds. When she didn't move, just stared at it, the thing quickly looked around, returning its attention to her every now and then, in quick jerky movements like a bird.

Taking a cautious step forward the Amazon studied the thing carefully. It was too small, less than about two thirds of a metre tall, more or less bipedal although with a long tail, to look particularly dangerous, but the speed of the motions and the size and number of the teeth made her wary nonetheless. As did the fact that she'd never seen or heard of anything like it before. When she moved it snapped its gaze back to her, tensing slightly, so she froze again.

'Is it some weird sort of animal? Maybe it escaped from the zoo or something...' She mused on its origins. 'It would almost be cute if it wasn't for the teeth.' Not sure whether she should approach it, run away, or call for animal control, she jumped when it suddenly darted sideways and opened its mouth a preposterously large distance, taking a bite out of a telephone pole. Chewing loudly, crunching noises coming from the metal and wood in its mouth, it looked at her again, tilting its head curiously. Her face paled.

'Um. Not so cute. Not at all.' The thing took another bite out of the pole, which creaked loudly before very slowly tipping over with a series of cracking sounds, ending up at a forty-five degree angle, only the wires at the top holding it up. Shampoo paled further and took a step back. 'Very uncute, in fact. More like very dangerous. What the hell is it?' The little monster took a couple of quick steps towards her, making her twitch and step back again. Taking this as encouragement it ran at her. Yelping, she turned and bolted, hearing quick little steps behind her.

"Gahh! Monster!" she yelled, unable to help herself, then felt embarrassed. Pulling a pair of chúi out of ki space she darted around a corner, stopped, flattening herself against the wall, then waited. As the thing dashed around the corner in pursuit she lashed out at it, knocking it head over heels into the opposite wall. "Ha!"

The little creature sat up, shaking its head and looking stunned, then after a moment its eyes focussed on her. It growled.

"Um..." The sound was much more intimidating than it should have been from something so small. She stopped looking pleased and instead looked worried. Stepping towards her slowly, the thing growled again. "Oh crap."

The creature dived at her, making her yelp again, drop one of her chúi and jump straight up, to grab the edge of the roof two stories up and swing herself onto it. Rolling to her feet she peered down, seeing it looking up at her, chewing on the club she'd dropped. She grinned at it, waving in a mocking manner. "Missed me!" Turning around to see where she was she stopped dead.

"Oh, fucking crap..."
The six other identical little monsters arrayed behind her stared at her, all cocking their heads in a way that wasn't even slightly cute any more. One of them was in the process of swallowing the remains of a TV antenna, the base of which was sticking up, ragged and chewed, from the roof beside it. Behind her, she heard claws scrabble on brickwork as the one from the alley climbed the wall. It was still growling.

As the sound grew steadily louder, and closer, she looked around, trying not to make any sudden move. 'Not good. Now what do I do?' the lilac-haired woman thought frantically. Putting her remaining chúi away she stared around for a weapon. All she had other than the club was a knife. Pulling it out, even knowing it wasn't a particularly good option right now, she held it ready while moving slowly along the roof, away from the little creatures in front of her and the one that had just topped the wall behind her.

That one made a croaking noise, causing the others to look at it, then return their attention to her. One or two of the new ones also growled. "Uh-oh." She moved faster. They followed as a group. "Go away, you little bastards," she mumbled, frantically looking around. People attacking her, that she was perfectly comfortable with, but whatever these damn things were, it was a little unexpected and well out of her comfort zone.

All of them were growling now, a low rumble that raised the hairs on her neck. It was quite intimidating. Feeling foolish about being scared of a pack of knee-high whatevers, she nonetheless couldn't help it, the way they casually ate things that were normally inedible was more than slightly intimidating. Feeling a loose tile under her left foot, she bent and picked it up, not taking her eyes off the creatures, then bounced it accurately off the head of the one in front as hard as she could. It dropped like a stone, it's head completely crushed, while the tile exploded into fragments. The remaining six things stopped, looking at the dead one, then pounced. Seconds later there was nothing but scraps of fur. They'd even eaten the broken pieces of tile.

Shampoo went white as they all looked at each other then returned their attention to her. They charged.

She ran for her life, swearing at the top of her voice in Mandarin. Minato was totally insane! All she'd wanted to do was go shopping.

"Oh for fuck's sake!" Tamiko sighed heavily as a blast of magical energy shot over her head and impacted on a large truck, punching a hole all the way through it from back to front, yet totally missing the small furry thing eating one of the vehicle's wheels. The creature jumped, scuttling off under the damaged truck, while the twelve-year-old girl in the fancy dress looked guilty, lowering the elaborate staff with the glowing blue gem held in a fixture at the top, from which the magic had come. "Will you for god's sake at least try to aim, Chiyoko?"

"Sorry," a small voice said. Hearing a sound behind her the girl whirled, raising the staff and letting off another blast, which made the old lady coming out of a shop scream and hit the pavement as the door she was holding in one hand partially evaporated in a cloud of mystic energy.

"At the goddam demons, you little twit!" Tamiko screeched in rage. Chiyoko blushed, lowering her weapon once more. Shaking her head in disgust, the red-head hurried over and helped the elderly woman to her feet, retrieving her shopping and handing it to her, before brushing her down. Both of them gave the young girl filthy looks. "I'm sorry, Mrs Shizuka. She's a bit..."

The old woman nodded. "Yes, we all know about Chiyoko." She glared at the girl who looked away, pretending she wasn't present, busying herself with the embroidery on her sleeve. "She's a little over-exuberant."
"And a fucking terrible shot," Tamiko muttered. The old lady smiled very slightly.

"I would have to agree." She looked around at the half-dozen smoking holes in the scenery. "Did she actually hit anything at all she was aiming at?" she whispered. Tamiko shook her head.

"No. Unless she was aiming at that truck," she whispered back. "And the mail box. And the street-light. And that poodle." They looked in the last direction, both wincing. "Poor thing."

"Never liked it, too yappy," the old woman said. Tamiko stared at her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Not a problem any more."

"Not really, no." Mrs Shizuka looked around. "Where are your friends?"

"There are a lot of these little demons this time, they're all over the place. Misaki and Fumiko are chasing them around near Roppongi, they got into one of the bars and it got pretty wild. It turns out that they're even worse when they get drunk." She sighed. "And swallowing two bottles of extremely expensive brandy is enough to make one very drunk." The old woman smirked at this.

"Was there a lot of alcohol present?"

"Oh, believe me, more than enough." Shaking her head, Tamiko suddenly went stony faced as the sound of the magical blast came again, followed by tinkling glass. The sounds died away.

"Sorry."

Turning very slowly the red-head fixed the young girl with a deathly glare. "Do that again and I'll take that damn thing away from you for good," she grated. Chiyoko looked at the ground, kicking it with the toe of one boot, while trying to hide the staff behind her back. Since it was at least thirty centimetres longer than she was tall this was fairly ineffective. After glaring at the girl for another few seconds, Tamiko returned her attention to Mrs Shizuka, who was smiling again.

"At least the little swine don't seem to go after people unless you really provoke them. They eat damn near everything else otherwise. Hopefully, we can contain th..." She stopped, looking puzzled, then stared off to one side. After a second or two the old woman and the young magical girl also heard what she'd noticed, a faint yell growing rapidly closer, underlaid by an odd noise that seemed to be a mix of a growling sound and a rushing noise like rapid raindrops. All three of them turned in the direction it was coming from.

"aaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaa!"

They pivoted to watch the athletic young woman, long lilac hair streaming behind her and her silk clothes somewhat tattered and torn, pelt past at remarkably high speed. Tamiko opened her mouth, then closed it again as a horde of the little monsters ran past in a pattering of tiny feet, not sparing them a glance. The continuous multi-voiced growling rising from the swarm was very unnerving. They watched Shampoo disappear around a corner in the distance, the demons following. Sighing, Tamiko pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oh, god."

Mrs Shizuka patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. "I have the greatest confidence in you and your friends, Tamiko. I'm sure you can sort it out." Smiling, she nodded to the young woman, glanced at the much younger one with a faint sigh, then went on her way. Tamiko sagged a little.
"Right. Come on, Chiyoko. DO NOT fire that damn thing until I tell you to, got it?" The girl nodded as she trailed after Tamiko, both of them headed in the direction the panicked Amazon had vanished in, from which screams were coming.

"Every fucking time they go away to enjoy themselves, the entire district goes to hell..." Tamiko mumbled under her breath as they ran, overtaking the local news van that had pulled out of a side street and was heading in the same direction.

Behind them, the small demonic creature climbed out from under the truck, looked quickly around, then went back to finishing off the tire.

"Good grief," Fumiko muttered, watching Shampoo pirouette gracefully on one foot, smacking two of the little demons with Chiyoko's magic staff hard enough to splash them across the front of the restaurant on the other side of the street. She moved to avoid the splatter. Chiyoko herself was watching, crying, and nursing a black eye where the Amazon had caught her a solid blow in the face when she'd relieved the magical girl of her weapon the second time she'd nearly been hit with the blast from it.

Momentarily more worried about and scared of the wild magic than the demons, she'd pounced on the younger girl, confiscated the staff after a short and very one sided battle, spent mere seconds trying to figure out how to make it produce one of the coruscating and very effective, presuming one could actually aim, beams of magic, then sworn viciously and resorted to using it as an improvised pole-arm. In this she was remarkably successful, having accounted for some eighteen of the small vermin in the last ten minutes.

"She's pretty damn good, isn't she?" Misaki commented approvingly, ducking as another little demon flew overhead in pieces. Shampoo yodelled an Amazon war-cry and chased three of the things which took one look and ran for it. The local reporter and camera crew observing from a safe distance panned to follow her, wondering who the somewhat bedraggled girl was, but quite impressed with her bloodthirsty attitude.

"Not bad at all," Tamiko agreed, grinning. "Aiko said she was impressive when she got going. I think those little shits caught her by surprise and without any real weapons. No idea how she made them attack her like that, though. She certainly seems to mean business now." All of them watched as the lilac-haired girl brought the staff down in a one-handed overhand strike that crushed another mini-demon flat with an unpleasant crunch, bouncing the weapon off the pavement and into her other hand with which she executed a sideways sweep that finished off a second one. Misaki clapped, grinning. The third lunged for her ankle, mouth gaping, but expired with a loud bang as a ki sphere from Fumiko removed its head.

Glancing over Shampoo nodded acknowledgement of the aid before turning to the final pair of micro-monsters. They lasted about thirty seconds. As the last one perished she lowered the end of the now somewhat gooey staff to the ground and sighed heavily, slumping in exhaustion. After a moment she walked slowly over, limping slightly and dragging the staff loudly behind her over the pavement, handing it to Chiyoko without looking. The young girl took it quickly, then looked disgusted as it slid out of her hands to clatter on the ground, trailing demon innards.

"Oh, yuck!" she exclaimed faintly, staring at her hands. Tamiko snickered. Snickering turned into giggling when the girl turned and threw up. Fumiko and Misaki exchanged glances, shrugging slightly, before looking at Shampoo.

The Amazon woman was scratched and bloody, her clothes in tatters and bluish demon blood all over her, but seemed surprisingly happy. "Good workout," she muttered, wiping some of the worst
of her erstwhile opponents off her face and hands, flicking it to the ground. Chiyoko, who had just
turned back, wiping her mouth, stared in horror then vomited again. Tamiko was now weak with
laughter.

"Hello, Shampoo. It's been a while," Fumiko grinned, glancing at her team-mates. She stuck out her
hand. "What on earth started all that?"

"Hi, Fumiko. I have no idea, really. I was just going shopping and one of those things jumped me.
It kind of snowballed from there." Shampoo shook hands then looked around. "What the hell are
they?"

Jerking her thumb at Chiyoko, Misaki looked amused. "They're her demons. Or she's their magical
girl. We still don't know which way it goes. They tend to turn up together, things get eaten, or
blown up, or normally both. She's not a good shot."

"I noticed," the other woman muttered, glaring at the young girl, who looked nauseous, yet guilty
at the same time. She dropped her eyes. Very gingerly picking up her staff she began wiping it
down with a handkerchief, casting Shampoo evil looks, which the Amazon ignored completely.
Tamiko was watching with sparkling eyes, barely able to prevent herself giggling again. "Does she
always blow holes in everything but the damn demons?" Shampoo asked acidly.

"Yes," three voices chorused. Chiyoko sighed, keeping her eyes on her staff, but flushed. She
couldn't deny it, not with the craters and holes all around them as evidence.

"Sorry," she mumbled. Everyone ignored her.

"That seems to be the last of them," Fumiko said with satisfaction, looking around. "Misaki and I
got about thirty-six or so in Roppongi, Tamiko did another twenty over that way, you got..." She
counted corpses quickly, raising an eyebrow, "twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five of them here,
and Chiyoko got... One." They all looked at the girl, who sighed again. "And two trucks, a lamp-
post, a mail box, a shop, three cars, a motor-cycle, a greenhouse, five windows, and Mr Ishikawa's
poodle." She shook her head. "He's not going to be happy about that."

"It was a very annoying little dog," Tamiko noted. Her friend nodded absently, watching Shampoo
brush entrails off what was left of her clothes. She pulled a large towel from nowhere.

"Here." Taking it gratefully, the Amazon wiped as much demon blood and guts off herself as she
could.

"How's your leg?" Fumiko asked her. Shampoo looked down.

"It stings a bit. Those little bastards bite."

"They do indeed. I hate the fuckers. I always get nibbled, normally." She grinned a little. "This
time you seem to have stood in for me." Shampoo giggled, reaching down and prodding the
toothmarks on her leg, grimacing a bit.

"It's not too bad. I've had worse. It'll heal." The three girls looked approving at her matter-of-fact
attitude. "My clothes are a mess though," she added, frowning down at herself. "I liked that shirt, it
was a nice one."

"Come on. let's go and get you cleaned up, find you something to wear, then look for some food." Tamiko
waved towards the end of the street. "There's a decent restaurant down there. My treat." She
smiled as Shampoo nodded happily. "We just need to get rid of all these bodies, that won't take
long. Chiyoko?" The young girl looked up. "Go home. Your mother will be calling me and
complaining again if you don't. Remember what happened last time?"

Wincing, the girl nodded. "She wasn't happy."

"No, she wasn't. She'll see this on the news again then blame us for dragging you into it, which isn't exactly fair. I really can't deal with your mom yelling at me on top of all of this, it's going to be annoying enough dealing with all the damage." Chiyoko sighed, looking around, then nodded once more, resting her staff over her shoulder and waving good-bye.

"See you next time!" she called back cheerily as she left. Tamiko's face fell. Laughing, Fumiko guided her friend towards the nearest body, which Misaki was in the process of dissolving.

"She means well, you know," the tall girl snickered.

"I know. I just wish she'd learn to aim..."

Giggling, Shampoo followed, shaking her head in wonder. Minato was a very strange place.

"Thanks for helping with the clothes," Shampoo said, looking down at herself. Fumiko had taken her to a clothes shop she knew the owner of, who had seemed remarkable casual about a goo covered, scratched, and bleeding young woman requiring replacement garments. It wasn't the sort of thing she normally wore, being nice jeans and a decent cotton shirt, but it had been inexpensive and fitted well.

"No problem. You helped with those little bitey bastards, after all, so fair's fair." Fumiko grinned at her. "Thinking of taking up the magical girl lifestyle?"

Shampoo paled, shaking her head vigorously. "No fear of that, believe me. I've seen some of the things you lot fight on the news. Those irritating little animals were one thing, but the bigger ones?" She shuddered. "Nope. No way. I know my limitations."

Tamiko laughed, spooning soup into her mouth. "You did a very good job, Shampoo. You may not have any serious fighting magic but you're a damn efficient warrior." The red-head smiled as the Amazon looked pleased.

"Thanks. Considering where it's coming from, that's quite a compliment."

Misaki laughed slightly. "It's true, though. Those things are more irritating than really dangerous but twenty-five of them, one after another? That must be some sort of record."

"Where do they come from?" Shampoo asked curiously, reaching for the soy sauce. Tamiko and Fumiko glanced at each other, shrugging slightly.

"We don't really know. Not from a normal portal, that's certain, but other than that..." Tamiko looked puzzled. "Even Yori can't work it out. Chiyoko wanders in every now and then, either following the little devils, or being chased by them, but we've never figured out how they get here, or to be honest what her relationship to them is. She doesn't seem to know either. It's kind of weird even in magical girl terms."

"She seems nice enough but she really needs to learn to shoot straight," the Amazon commented. Tamiko sighed heavily.

"God, I so wish she would. She's absolutely terrible at it. She normally does manage to either finish them off or chase them away, but there's always holes all over the place. That magic staff of hers is
pretty powerful. It seems to be able to blow a hole in almost anything. Luckily she's never hit anyone with it."

"Unless you count small yappy poodles," Misaki chuckled. Tamiko shook her head in disgust.

"I don't, but it's going to be hard to explain. Mr Ishikawa liked that little thing even if no-one else did." She put her spoon in the empty bowl, pushing it to one side. "At least it was quick. Nothing left except the hind legs and the tail." Fumiko winced a little.

"She nearly got Mrs Shizuka this time," Tamiko added, looking annoyed, before laughing a little. "She sure ducks fast for a seventy-five year old."

"If someone is shooting magic energy beams at you I guess you'd be pretty quick at getting out of the way," Shampoo suggested, smiling slightly. The auburn-haired young woman grimaced, nodding.

"Very true. Oh well, hopefully the girl will stay away for a while this time." She grumbled to herself for a moment. "It's always when Yori and Chou are out of town that all this sort of crap happens. Very annoying."

Finishing her duck, Shampoo moved on to the fish stew, nodding appreciatively. "I heard they'd gone on holiday recently. Then there was all the trouble with that other magical girl group. Did they go back to finish their holiday?" Tamiko looked at Fumiko and her sister for a moment.

"No, they're away on... I guess, business, is the best way of putting it. They should be back in a day or two. Aiko and Azumi are with them."

"I haven't met Azumi, although I've heard a few things about her over the last few months," the Amazon said idly, before chewing and swallowing. "Apparently she's new at the magical girl thing but is quickly building quite a reputation."

Fumiko snickered. "Oh, she's doing that, all right. She's damn good, actually. Very quick to learn, a hell of a lot of potential, very smart. And pretty creepy some of the time. People tend to surrender at that point."

"Yori can do that as well," Misaki laughed. "Incredibly well."

"Oh, she's nowhere near as genuinely scary as Yori is, but she's pretty cold and unnerving even so. Not as bad as Ms Aoyama, though."

"No one is as bad as Ms Aoyama," Shampoo whispered, trembling for a moment. "Or at least I desperately hope so. If they are, I never want to meet them."

All four girls exchanged a glance of understanding. Internally, Tamiko and her friends were giggling, although they fully understood the Amazon's point. Nabiki was family, but even so, Ms Aoyama was horrific...
Clearing her throat, Tamiko attracted Shampoo's attention. "Are you looking forward to this Hollywood thing, Shampoo?" The Amazon blinked a few times at the change of subject then smiled.

"Yes." She looked curiously at the red-head. "You know about that?"

"Yep. It was Yori's idea, she told us all when she came up with it. Aiko has been having fun taking you guys back and forth, or bringing the studio people here the other week, and she's told us what's going on. It sounds like it's going well."

"It is, I think. Akane is very excited about it all, as well as being very nervous. She keeps saying she's afraid she'll wake up one day and find it was all a dream." Shampoo grinned. "I was a bit unsure myself at first but now I really do think it's going to happen, and be a lot of fun. I'm really looking forward to it. It will be a little strange being so far away from everyone else I know, but Akane will be there, the people we've met are very nice, and even though America is weird, that part of it seems interesting." She looked slightly uncertain for a moment. "The only difficult part is I'll have to get better at English pretty fast. I want to learn it, that's one of the reasons I'm looking forward to this, but I'm really not good with languages."

"You pick them up fast when you're immersed in them, trust me," Tamiko noted, picking up her bottle of beer and taking a drink from it. "You'll be fine."

"Hopefully," the Amazon responded, smiling as she thought about the future. "Even Great Grandmother seems to think so."

"You should make sure you get a recording of the news later. That camera crew probably got some good footage of you in action. It might be useful for your résumé." Misaki grinned as Shampoo looked embarrassed yet thoughtful. "You didn't even notice them, did you?"

"I was sort of busy," the Amazon replied with a smile. Her face fell slightly. "Great Grandmother is going to be very amused about it all. She'll probably critique me and tell me where I went wrong as well." The other girls laughed.

"Yori does the same thing, only probably worse." Fumiko grinned at her.

They talked for another half hour, until they'd finished the meal, then Shampoo looked at her watch. "Thanks very much for the clothes and the food, you guys. It's been fun, except for the being chased by a horde of ravenous little demons part of the day. That was a little unexpected."

The other three laughed.

"You get used to it," Misaki replied.

"With all due respect, I'd prefer not to. My life is bizarre enough already." Shampoo snickered. She stood up. "I'm going to have to get back. I didn't even get a chance to go shopping, in the way I wanted to." She shrugged slightly. "Perhaps next time." Shaking hands with them all she smiled. "It was nice seeing you again. Are you going to be able to make it to Nodoka's garden party?"

Tamiko nodded, smiling. "I think so. We haven't heard the exact date so far, I think Akane's sister Nabiki was going to pass it on to Yori when she knew, but it should be possible. When Yori gets back I'll ask if she's heard anything yet. It sounds like fun though."

"Nodoka is a very good cook. The food will be nice." Shampoo and the three girls walked out into the sunlight after Tamiko paid for the meal. "Nabiki is still on holiday as well. Akane said she heard from her a couple of days ago, she should be back soon." Checking her watch again she
added, "I have to go, the next train is in ten minutes. Say hi to Yori, Chou, and Aiko for me, please?"

"We will," Fumiko assured her. "Give our best to Akane. Hopefully we'll see you all in Nerima at some point soon." They waved as Shampoo turned and jogged off towards the train station, glancing at each other with amused smiles, then headed off to catalogue the damage.

"What do you want?"

The tone of voice wasn't friendly. Neither was the expression. The woman with green hair sighed, looking at the blonde, who was glaring at her. "May I sit?" she requested politely, indicating the other chair at the café table. There was an uncomfortable pause but in the end the other woman nodded curtly.

"If you must."

"Thank you." Setsuna sat down, glancing at the waitress who was approaching. "Just a coffee, please." The waitress smiled and reversed her course, returning quickly with a cup and various accoutrements. Waiting until she'd left, Setsuna picked up her coffee and sipped it, a slightly lost expression on her face. Haruka watched her with hostile curiosity. She didn't look well. After another sip, the woman across from her put her cup down, her hand trembling very slightly in the process.

"You wanted something?" Haruka asked, studying her former team-mate over her own drink.

"Just to talk." Setsuna's eyes flicked around in a way that the blonde would have sworn was nervous, if she didn't know her better. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Haruka looked around, seeing nothing, before looking back to the other woman.

"A sort of very faint hum." Her table-mate glanced around in quick motions, even looking up. "I keep hearing it. But there's never anything there." Listening, the blonde eventually shook her head.

"I can't hear anything. Only the normal sounds for a café."

Her companion seemed to listen carefully for a moment, then shrugged, apparently dismissing the subject. "I just wanted to talk," she repeated.

"You said that."

An expression of slight puzzlement crossed the older woman's face. "Did I? When?"

Haruka sighed faintly. "Just now."

"Oh. Yes, right, I remember." Setsuna picked up her coffee and sipped it again, before looking at the cup with a bemused expression, then carefully putting it down. "Did I order this?"

"Yes. Less than five minutes ago." Studying the other woman, Haruka asked, "Are you feeling all right?"

"More or less." She paused. "I think so. Can you hear something?" Glancing around suspiciously, she added, "A faint humming sound? It seems to be following me."

Staring at the woman who had steered their group for several years, Haruka wondered if she was entirely sane. It wasn't the first time she'd wondered that but it was the first time she'd seen
behaviour that could suggest it was anything more than an idle thought. "No. You already asked me. I can't hear anything."

"OK." Picking up her coffee again Setsuna drank some more, leaning back and looking around. "It's a very nice day."

The blonde looked at her weirdly. This was strange even under the recent circumstances. "Setsuna? Are you sure you're all right? Only you're acting very... ah... odd." The green-haired woman looked up from examining her half-empty cup, slightly surprised.

"Oh, hello, Haruka. How are you?"

Putting her own coffee down and massaging her forehead, which was beginning to ache, Haruka sighed heavily. "I'm fine, thanks, all things considered. A lot on my mind but otherwise well. Now, back to you. You said you wanted to talk."

"Did I?" Setsuna looked thoughtful. "I wonder what about?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," her companion mumbled. More loudly, she snapped, "I have no idea. You're the one who approached me! Concentrate, will you? What... did... you... want... to... talk... about...?" She enunciated the words slowly and clearly. Setsuna appeared insulted.

"There's no reason to be rude, Haruka." She shook her head in irritation. "What were we talking about?"

Haruka groaned, banging her head on the table.

"Can you hear a sort of humming noise?"

"Gaaaahhh!"

Roaring with laughter, Cologne stared at the TV, watching the mid-afternoon local news. The sight of her great-granddaughter waving a clearly mystical weapon like a baseball bat struck her as deeply funny for some reason. The way she'd mugged the young magical girl to acquire it was even funnier.

"How many is that so far?" Mousse asked from beside her, grinning widely.

"Nineteen, I think," she replied, laughing again as Shampoo belted one of the weird little demonic animals clear across the street and into a lamp-post, which it slid down limply in a trail of body fluids. The old woman nodded approvingly. "Good form. She's not bad."

"I thought she was going to be a stunt woman not a magical girl," the young man chuckled. They heard a sound outside of someone coming up the stairs, turning to see Shampoo entering the living room. She was wearing different clothes than she'd left in that morning, not surprising assuming the news report was accurate. Smiling a greeting at them her eyes moved past to fix on the television, as she stopped dead in embarrassed surprise.

"Oh. You've seen it," she mumbled. Cologne chuckled.

"I have indeed, child. To be honest, while I'm somewhat surprised by your new career choice, you seem well fitted to it." She grinned as the young woman sighed in exasperation.

"I'm not planning on becoming a magical girl, Great Grandmother, trust me. Hollywood is fine."
She shrugged. "It's much less insane than Minato. Or even Nerima."

"From what I gather a lot of people think Nerima is weirder than Minato," the old woman replied, looking amused.

"Mainly people who have never been to Minato. Trust me, it's nuts. I've been there twice and weird things happened both times." Shampoo limped to a chair and slumped into it, watching herself on the TV. Cologne and Mousse exchanged glances and smiles.

"That poor little girl seemed very upset that you stole her magical staff from her," Cologne remarked slyly. Shampoo winced a little.

"Yes, she wasn't happy about that. She's a terrible shot. I had to take it away before she killed me by accident trying to get those little monsters, then it seemed like a good idea to use the thing. No idea how to make it shoot those energy beams but it made a pretty good club." They watched her recorded past self pull off a neat one-two blow with alternating hands on two different demons. Cologne nodded approvingly.

"Very nicely done. You're not as rusty as I feared you might be." She looked at the younger woman who was looking mildly annoyed at the back-handed compliment, grinning. "But you clearly need some more practice. They made a bit of a mess of you."

"They bite." Shampoo crossed her arms defensively. "A lot."

"Even so. Perhaps I should work out how to train you against such things."

Shuddering slightly at the thought, knowing what the elder was like, Shampoo shook her head quickly. "I don't think that's necessary. It's not like I'm likely to run across those little bastards again. I hope."

"Even so." Grinning, Cologne relented her teasing. "In all fairness, child, you did very well from what I can see. Most people would have had a lot of trouble with those little demons. How many did you get?"

"Fumiko counted twenty-five. She was quite impressed." The lilac-haired woman smiled. "They bought me lunch afterwards and these clothes. Mine were a little past being usable. Aside from anything else I don't know if demon blood washes out."

"You and Akane between you seem to have met a surprisingly large number of magical girls in the last few months, after going years without meeting any of them," her grandmother said. Shampoo laughed.

"I know. It's weird. It's also all Akane's fault in the beginning. Or perhaps Ryoga's. But I think it's worked out all right, even if I have ended up fighting demons on TV." They watched as the reporter summed up the fight, listing some of the damage. Behind her they could see Shampoo walking off with three indistinct figures.

"They'll be making action figures of you next," Mousse suggested, smiling. "At least people can see what you look like. Those other girls don't come out in pictures." The young woman got a mildly intrigued look for a moment, then shook her head.

"I doubt it. I'm not famous, or magical. Just a normal martial artist and warrior." She giggled as he smiled at her. "Perfectly normal."

Chuckling, Cologne got up, turning the TV off. "Come on, girl, let's have a look at that leg and get
it cleaned up. I made a new batch of the healing ointment, by the looks of you it's called for." Shampoo followed her downstairs while Mousse went into the restaurant to get back to work.

Grumbling to herself, Haruka helped Setsuna into her house, holding her erect. She was quite tipsy, having suddenly decided she needed a beer or five. This hadn't improved her coherence at all, not that it seemed all that good at the moment anyway. Despite their recent problems Haruka couldn't just abandon her, they had too much shared history, so when she'd finally fallen over she'd picked her up and called a taxi.

Carrying her up the stairs to her room, she dumped her on her bed, looking around curiously. There were notebooks all over the place with torn out pages littering the floor. Picking one up she flicked through it, finding it full of incomprehensible diagrams and apparently meaningless text in several languages. Shrugging, she put it back. Setsuna was mumbling something, tossing her head from side to side. Suddenly she opened her eyes, sitting up in bed.

"Oh, Haruka. Have you come home?"

The blonde sighed quietly. Her former friend seemed to be very vague since Yori and those demon mages had done what ever it was they'd done to all of them. She kept forgetting what she was talking about, sometimes in the middle of talking about it, which was very disconcerting. "I brought you home. You remember the taxi? You got a little drunk."

The green-haired woman nodded slowly, licking her lips in an introspective manner. "I could do with a beer," she commented, slurring her words a little.

"No, you couldn't," Haruka sighed. "You said that something like seven beers ago. Trust me, you've had enough."

"OK," the other woman said cheerfully, falling back into a supine position. Seconds later she was snoring. Staring at her, Haruka shook her head, not entirely sure what had happened. After a moment she arranged the woman on the bed slightly more neatly, removed her shoes, pulled the covers up, and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs the door opened and her former lover entered, stopping dead as she spotted the blonde. Her face darkened as she glared. "What the fuck are you doing here, you bitch?" she enquired in a very unfriendly tone of voice.

"Just bringing Setsuna home. She got drunk and couldn't make it herself." Haruka reached past Michiru for the door. The other woman held on to it, preventing her opening it.

"I'm not sure I believe you," she said suspiciously. Haruka sighed once more, reflecting that she seemed to be doing a lot of that recently.

"I am sure I don't care whether you believe me or not. I'm going home. Or back to the hotel, which I guess is the same thing." She pulled the door harder. "Could you let go, please?"

"Why were you and Setsuna together in the first place?" Michiru asked, her tone of voice suggesting that she suspected the worst. "Plotting against me?"

"No, of course not. What happens to either of you is something I simply don't care about any more. She just turned up out of the blue and wanted to talk."

"About what?"
Haruka shrugged. "Not a clue. She doesn't seem to be able to remember what she's talking about from one word to the next. You should have her see a doctor, there's obviously something wrong." She yanked hard on the door, ripping it out of the hands of her former lover, who yelped a little then looked at her with an evil glare.

"I should have killed you in that mall when I had the chance," she said through gritted teeth.

"You didn't. Too late now." Haruka stepped through the door. Behind her she felt a burst of magic as Michiru powered up, muttering her transformation trigger. She stopped but didn't turn around. "I wouldn't. You wouldn't like what happened next."

"You think you can take me?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. We'll never know. I'm not going to fight you. I made a promise, one I intend to keep." She looked over her shoulder at the somewhat puzzled face of the other woman. "But I know that if you start anything, Yori and her friends will stop it. Probably permanently. I wouldn't be surprised to find out they're watching us right now." Michiru looked quickly around.

"I don't see anything," she muttered.

"Like that means anything with that lot." Haruka snorted, resuming walking back to the road. "Trust me, if you or the others do anything else to annoy them, it will be the end. I know for a fact that we've all use up all the grace we're going to get." She stopped as she reached the pavement, turning and looking back at the woman she'd loved once. "I'm out of it. You do what you want, I can't stop you, but stay away from me and Hotaru. For your own sake if nothing else." She turned away and walked off. Michiru watched her go, confusion in her face, before closing the door.

Unseen, a small spherical alien drone hummed very softly as it repositioned itself to see in through the kitchen window and resumed watching from a position some ten metres away.

Shampoo looked around, embarrassed, to see four pairs of eyes looking back at her with interest. She slid the garden door shut, blushing a little, then sat beside Akane. "You saw the news," she stated. They all nodded in unison.

"Why were you fighting demons in Minato, Shampoo?" Nodoka asked curiously. The Amazon grinned a little.

"It wasn't something I planned on doing, believe me. It just sort of... happened." She shrugged a bit. "All I wanted to do was go shopping. Minato is a very strange place indeed."

"You acquitted yourself well from what I saw," Soun told her, looking impressed. Shampoo smiled.

"Thank you. Being chased down the road by about two dozen of the little swine wasn't much fun, but by the end it was a decent exercise. Not one I really want to repeat but sort of fun in a weird, messy way." She looked at Akane, grinning. "Adrian would have loved it for one of his films I think." Her friend grinned back.

"From what I saw on TV I think you're right. It looked pretty spectacular."

"Did you have to be so rough with that poor young girl when you stole her staff?" Nodoka asked, although she was smiling. Laughing, Shampoo nodded.
"Unfortunately I did. She really didn't want to let go. But I needed it more than she did at that point, not to mention how bad a shot she is with the thing. You should have seen the place. Holes everywhere. Tamiko said she got some poor man's poodle as well, which was a bit unfortunate."

The Saotome matriarch looked slightly green.

"Oh dear. That poor thing."

"It would have been pretty quick. Her magic energy beam things were pretty destructive. One shot only just missed me and went right through a car next to me." Shampoo shuddered at the memory. "She's awfully young to be in charge of power like that, especially as she can't aim it very well. Tamiko was almost tearing her hair out over it. I get the impression they have a history."

She spend the next half hour telling them the story. "Is your leg all right now?" Nodoka asked at the end of it, concerned. Shampoo looked down at the limb in question, nodding.

"I'm fine. It wasn't much of a bite really, I managed to get it off me pretty fast, before it could start chewing." She winced a little. "You really don't want them chewing on you. You should have seen what one of them did to a telephone pole. Two bites and it was in two pieces." She smiled at the older woman. "It's a good thing all that training toughened me up a lot. A normal person would have lost the leg."

"It sounds very nasty even so. I'm not surprised you ran at first, without any weapons to hand and up against so many of them. Even with your fighting abilities something so dangerous must have been awkward to deal with."

Standing, Nodoka smiled at her. "Would you like some tea? I was just going to make some when you came in."

"Thank you, that would be very nice." Nodoka headed for the kitchen.

Soun smiled a little at a thought. "Akane would probably have used mallets under the same circumstances." His youngest daughter grinned at him.

"Possibly. I only seem to be able to do that properly when I'm really very angry, though, and I don't get that bad any more."

"Something we're all very grateful for," Genma joked, quailing slightly at the evil look she shot him, before laughing. Shampoo giggled at the look on both their faces.

"A weapon would have been helpful a little earlier in the day, I have to admit. I need to work on the hidden weapons technique so I can carry something a little bigger than this." She produced her remaining chúi. Soun nodded approvingly.

"Very good, even so. I know how good Mousse is at that technique but he's not only gifted at it but has been practising since he was a child, from what the Elder has told me. How long have you been learning it?"

"Only about a year. It's extremely complicated to get right. It took me months to produce a stable ki pocket in the first place. Making it bigger isn't easy but I'm slowly getting it." She flipped the club in her hand then vanished it again, frowning. "One of those things ate the other one. That's my best pair. I'll have to get replacements now."

Akane giggled at her expression of irritation. "At least you got your moment of fame on TV out of it. If it only cost you a club and some clothes that's not much to pay."

"I guess so." She giggled as well. "Misaki said I should get a recording of the news segment to
show to Adrian."

"It's an idea. We didn't record it, but I bet Sayuri did. She always records the news in case some magical girl things happen. I'll call her." Pulling out her phone Akane dialled, then had a brief discussion, smiling at the end of it. "Yes, she recorded it, she's happy to do you a copy. She wants to talk to you about the girls as well, in case you learned anything for her scrap book."

Laughing, Shampoo shook her head. "Nothing like that. We just chatted over lunch. They're really nice people." Akane jumped to her feet.

"Come on, let's go and see her. Then we can practice."

"Wait until after your tea," Nodoka told her, coming back from the kitchen with a tray. The youngest Tendo glanced at her then nodded, sitting down again.

"OK, Auntie Nodoka. I forgot in all the excitement." Smiling at the girl, the elder woman put the tray down and began handing out cups.

Sergeant Harada read the report Tamiko had emailed him for his records, grinning to himself and shaking his head. "Interesting. Very interesting." Picking up his desk phone he thought for a moment then dialled a number, waiting for it to be answered. "Hello, Norio, It's Tetsuo. How are you?"

"Hello, Tetsuo. I'm very well, thank you. It's nice to hear from you. How are you and your wife? And your child? Know what it is yet?" His old friend sounded pleased.

"Fine, thanks. Emiko is doing well. The baby is coming along nicely, so to speak." He laughed a little. "Should be arriving on time. We've avoided know what it is so far."

"Want a surprise, I guess?"

"Something like that."

"You'll enjoy being a father, although it's a lot of work. So, what can I do for you? Still looking into Akane Tendo and her associates?"

Harada chuckled a little. "Not as such, but something happened earlier today that I thought you might find interesting. Have you seen the news?"

"No, I've been too busy to watch TV, I'm afraid. We had a couple of attempted armed robberies this morning. One of them ended badly for the robbers, a local martial artist was wandering past at the time and intervened. He's an idiot but still pretty dangerous. He thrashed all three of them while reciting bad Shakespearean dialogue. Pretty funny. I'll send you a copy of the surveillance video. The other ones got away, we're still looking for them."

His eyebrows up, Harada laughed. "Thanks. I'd like that. Would you like to borrow some magical girls? I could asked a couple I know, they might enjoy a field trip." His friend snickered.

"That would also be very funny but it might raise awkward questions. We're not as used to them here as you guys are. Thanks for the offer though."

"OK. Anyway, that Chinese girl, Shampoo, Akane's friend, got involved in an incursion a few hours ago. Apparently she was here shopping and somehow got caught up in it. She handled it very well from what I'm told, after some initial panic and running around screaming." He laughed again,
reading the remarks Tamiko had made on the subject. "Running very fast, being chased by quite a large number of demons. Only little ones but they're a real pain in the ass, sometimes literally. They bite."

"Is she all right?" Norio sounded intrigued and mildly concerned.

"Oh, she's fine, aside from a few scrapes and toothmarks, from what I was told. She's not magical girl tough but my contacts say she's still damn hard to damage."

"Very true. All those wildly overpowered martial artists are, it goes with the territory. Good thing in a way, they'd be killing each other on a regular basis otherwise, what with throwing each other through buildings and the like. It makes them kind of hard to discipline though. Threatening them with a weapon either amuses them or irritates them, neither of which is very helpful."

The sergeant chuckled. "I'm familiar with the problem. It's even worse here. Most of our girls could probably take a grenade to the face and just get pissed off. I'm not going to try, though. Aside from anything else most of them are friends."

"So what happened?"

"She ran into some of our regulars and another, very young, girl who seems to be connected to these little demons. They always turn up more or less at the same time. She has some sort of magic-powered staff weapon she shoots at them with. Note I said 'at' them." He sighed. "She's not a good shot. There are usually a lot of holes in the surroundings by the time she'd finished."

Norio started laughing at the tone in his friend's voice. "Does that happen a lot?"

"Luckily, no, it's fairly rare, but it always causes a certain amount of excitement. This time, Tamiko, one of the group who are friends of Yori and Chou, managed to stop her wrecking more than a handful of things, then got her under control. They were just trying to deal with one of the demons when Shampoo turned up being chased by something like a couple of dozen of them. Long story short, she jumped this other girl when she nearly got shot, took her staff away from her, then used it to pulp all the demons. From what I heard she was enjoying herself quite a lot."

There was silence for a moment then hysterical laughter. "Oh, god, that's brilliant. I wish I'd seen it."

"It was on the afternoon news. It'll probably be on the evening news as well." Harada snickered for a moment. "It was pretty funny. She's got some good moves and clearly knows how to fight. Much better than most of the girls do. You could see she'd had some serious training in combat."

"From the time she could walk as far as I know. She's extremely talented and extremely dangerous. And very good looking."

"Yes to all of those. Our girls were very complimentary about her abilities. Apparently they know her and Akane, after that trouble we had last year they seem to have kept in touch. They helped clean her up, get her some clothes, then bought her a meal. Everyone seems to have come away happy. Except for one man, who is extremely upset about a missing poodle." He thought for a moment. "Mostly missing."

"Do I want to know?"

"Probably not."

"From what I've heard Ms Tendo and Shampoo are likely to be going off to Hollywood soon. That
could be a bit of a relief for Nerima, frankly, although to be fair since that problem in your area she's improved out of all recognition. I don't know what happened but it was damn effective. 

Hardly a major incident since."

"Some sort of long-term medical problem. Yori and Chou discovered it when they were healing Shampoo, Akane, and that Hibiki boy up and fixed it. It was apparently a major contributor to her anger issues."

"Thank them on behalf of the Nerima police next time you see them, will you?" Norio requested, sounding amused and grateful.

"I'll do that. I knew about the Hollywood thing. Aiko, one of the girls from this team, has been teleporting them back and forth. It seems it was Yori's idea to introduce Akane to a movie director she knew in LA. It's all going well from what I know."

"That girl seems to be involved in a lot of very odd things."

"You wouldn't believe half of it." Chuckling, Harada shook his head. "It's remarkable, what that lot get up to. Anyway, they wrote me a report on it even though it's out of my district, they know I like to keep track of this sort of thing. Would you like a copy of it for your own file?"

"Yes, please, Tetsuo, that would be interesting." Norio laughed slightly. "It will be nice to have something for the young lady's file that isn't random public damage."

"It was very targeted public damage, but well meant," the sergeant laughed. "Nothing too serious, luckily. Quite likely due to Shampoo's actions. OK, I'll email you the report. I have to get back to work, but it was nice talking again. I'll try to get out to Nerima sometime soon. Or you could come here. I could show you around, introduce you to some of the special talent."

"That might be interesting. Hopefully I could get away sometime before Christmas, but it tends to be pretty busy around these parts. As you know."

"I do indeed. Take care, Norio."

"You as well, Tetsuo. Give my love to Emiko." The distant phone hung up and Harada put his own receiver down, closing the report and emailing it to his colleague. Once that was done he got up, heading out to see what was going on in the community, smiling slightly.

"What's the deal with the asteroid?" 'Azumi' asked curiously in Trade. S'th'kx looked at her for a moment, then went back to staring at the projection. A request to the crewman on a nearby workstation caused the image to expand and rotate, shifting through several colour changes. He inspected it closely, reading the text running down one side of the display, his antennae slowly rising again, but still seemed shocked. After a few seconds he went to his own workstation and brought up some more information on several displays there. Everyone watched him, wondering what was going on.

Glancing at the alter-ego of Ranma, 'Azumi' raised her eyebrows. 'Yori' shrugged.

"No idea," she said out loud.

Eventually, S'th'kx turned from the console and stared at the projection again, before looking at them. "Two things stand out about that thing," he said quietly, pointing at the projected image.

"Those are?" 'Yori asked slowly.
"The first is what it's made of. That's the largest find of exotic stable post-transuranic elements I've ever heard of. It's value is... almost unbelievable." Everyone who understood Trade stared at him, then at the projected asteroid, slowly tumbling in space several light-minutes away.

"Um, what?" 'Azumi' asked. He looked at her, then at the asteroid.

"As elements become heavier, past element 82, lead, they're unstable and mostly have shorter and shorter half-lives, to the point some of them barely exist at all. But, go far enough, make them heavy enough, they suddenly become stable again. Some of them incredibly so. Those elements are extremely rare in nature and very expensive to synthesise, but a fair amount of high tech absolutely requires small quantities of them, things like anti-grav drives, advanced energy generation systems, even interstellar drives. Those particularly use a lot of the very heavy elements, both as a starting point for creating negative mass and in the construction of some of the engineering systems to control it." He waved an upper hand at the image.

"They're mostly so dense that on planets you won't find them outside the inner core, they sink right to the inside as the planet forms. However, we sometimes find small amounts of such elements in the asteroids we mine, ones that are particularly dense, normally. That one you visited is pretty rich in them, relatively speaking. The entire asteroid, which is several times the diameter of this one, has perhaps three to five hundred tons of exotic matter in it, spread pretty evenly through the entire thing. We'll have to take it completely to pieces to extract all of it but it's well worth it, the stuff will account for nearly half the total value of the find." 'Azumi' nodded slowly while 'Yori', 'Chou', and Aiko listened intently. Rei and her two friends were looking blank.

"OK. It's worth an awful lot." S'th'kx waved his antennae in agreement. "So how much is in that thing?"

"According to the preliminary probe results, it's about two hundreds of a percent by volume exotic matter." He stared at her for a moment, allowing her to work it out.

#Nabiki, assuming an average density for the material of the asteroid and taking account of the much higher density of stable exotic matter, that would work out to approximately one hundred and sixty thousand metric tons of such material. S'th'kx is completely correct, the value of such a find to a civilisation like his is almost beyond belief.# Jun sounded genuinely shocked. #It is close to the total amount mined in the entire K'nn grouping in the last forty years.#

'Azumi' had gone white, staggering backwards to lean against a console, staring at her friends. All of them had clearly received the same information from their SIs. 'Chou' had a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock, while Aiko had begun gently swearing in several languages. 'Yori' was staring at the projection with a totally blank expression, looking as taken aback as her sister-in-law had ever seen her.

"Depending on which elements it actually contains, the value could go up or down by an order of magnitude, but even with the least valuable ones, it's enough to buy entire planets, albeit small ones," S'th'kx continued once he saw they'd worked it out. "I've never in my life heard of anything remotely like it. It's the find of a lifetime. Several lifetimes." No one said anything for a while, although Ami looked intensely curious, seeing the expressions of the others. Rei and Hotaru exchanged glances, shrugging, before watching again.

Eventually 'Yori' stirred. "OK. That's one thing that stands out. What's the other one?" Her friends and family stared at her for a moment. She sounded fairly calm about finding out they'd just discovered the richest vein of anything, possibly in human history, completely by accident. S'th'kx looked at her, then the projection, before reaching out and manipulating it with the interactive interface. A few quick practised gestures froze the rotation and zoomed in on one particular place...
on the surface, where some odd protuberances could be seen.

"The engines."
Chapter 73

My apologies for the long gap since I last published a chapter. I've been very busy on other things recently, which hasn't left me much time for writing and even when I had a few moments, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to really have it flow properly. It's taken longer than normal to wrestle the next few chapters into submission, forcing me to kick at least one of them in the knee damn hard, which is a little cruel.

The good news is I've got some thirty to forty thousand words written at the moment, which needs tidying up a little but will form three to four chapters. Hopefully I'll have time now to get back into my more normal schedule.

More than 800k words! At this rate it could top a million by the first anniversary of the story start, which is simply incredible, thinking about it. For a part time hobby, especially. I'm very grateful for all the reviews and for everyone who's stuck it out so far. Not done yet, though.

I've moved the character list into it's own chapter, which should end up being the last one on a rolling basis if I've done it right.

"It's got engines?" Ami stared at the projection in disbelief, then looked at Yori. She and her friends had spent some minutes talking incomprehensibly to S'th'kx, apparently receiving information that was somewhat shocking, judging by their reactions, before switching back to something the others could understand. Ami wasn't sure that the part about the engines was the only thing that was odd about the asteroid but it was still very odd indeed. Yori nodded, pointing to part of the projection.

"He says these are a form of anti-gravity drive, according to the readings from the probe. Not one he's seen before but the overall configuration couldn't be anything else, including the materials they're made of. At the moment they're shut down, there's no power readings from any active system on the asteroid. It seems to be cold and dead. But they don't look damaged so the assumption is they're functional, just off."

"Who put them there?" Rei asked, fascinated. Yori glanced at her.

"It certainly wasn't anyone from Earth. The tech is at least a hundred and fifty years more advanced than anything we have. It's on a par with that of the Krennish, although it's not theirs either." Rei nodded, having asked and found out that this was the name of S'th'kx' people.

"Real aliens? From our reality? Some sort of probe or ship from somewhere else?" Hotaru asked slowly.

"It's not completely impossible but it's not likely for a number of reasons." Yori studied the image again for a moment, discussing it with S'th'kx. "He can't see any indications of a drive capable of interstellar travel. That set of engines is enough to accelerate the asteroid, not as fast as this ship could do, it's nowhere near as powerful as the ship's drive from what he can tell, but it could certainly push it around fairly well. But there's no life support, no indications of any crew space at all, nothing like that. Presumably it's automated." She turned to Ami. "There's another thing that makes it unlikely."

"Which is?" The blue-haired woman was very curious, but had a growing sense of impending doom. Yori sighed.
"There's a distinct magitech signature coming from that installation. It's a familiar one, one we've seen before." She looked at Ami, who understood instantly. Pulling out her computer she held it up questioningly. Yori nodded. "Exactly. It's from the same source."

"Oh, crap." Everyone looked at Hotaru, who gazed back, slightly embarrassed. "You mean it's something the time device is responsible for?"

"Looks that way. Either it made it or it came with it from its own reality. There's only one thing any of us can think of that it would want a self-powered asteroid for, as well."

Ami stared at the image of the distant free-floating mountain. "It's a weapon, isn't it?"

"Most likely." Yori scowled, also watching the asteroid. "I have a feeling that it's something to do with this ill-defined future disaster. Either as the main cause or a backup plan. Everything it's done to date has been to drive a specific narrative, to the point of quite likely influencing demons to attack you girls in the name of some weird back-story, just to push our reality to be as close as it can manage to its original one. It's impossible, as we discussed before, but that doesn't seem to have stopped it trying. I have a feeling that this is part of that plan in some way. Luckily, a part that hasn't activated yet."

"So, we need to make sure it can't activate it, ever," Rei growled. "How do we do that? Can we go and destroy the engines?"

Chou looked at her. "That's what we were discussing. The quickest way would be to go through a portal back to Krennsh space, then return through one closer to it. That would only take a short time. We're just a little worried that the time machine would detect us and possibly take action. Assuming it isn't monitoring us at the moment via you girls." Ami, Rei, and Hotaru exchanged uneasy glances. The blonde smiled a little at their expressions.

"There's not much we can do other than proceed. We can't allow that thing to stay there. It was pure chance we found it in the first place. But that's the sort of weird coincidence that happens around people like us." Rei laughed, nodding.

"Tell me about it. OK, so we go there, blow the damn thing to bits, then go home." She paused, looking abruptly worried. "But is it the only one?"

Yori shrugged. "No idea. I doubt it bothered to make many, one would be enough and it would probably have had no reason to expect anyone would discover it. Personally I suspect that's it. But we'll arrange to get a lot more long distance probes here, S'th'kx can bring a couple of dozen swarms like the three we used already just from stock, and blanket the entire system with them. It will still take years to go through everything in detail even with tens of thousands of probes around the place but it will certainly give us early warning if anything odd starts to happen. It was incredibly unlikely that we'd even find this one so soon but that's what happens with us. The Magical Girl Coincidence Effect I guess."

Ami nodded absently, still studying the image. The distant probe had moved closer, slowly swinging around the asteroid, scanning it more thoroughly. "This is real-time?" she asked curiously, suddenly thinking how far away the thing was, not having considered it until now in the shock of the discovery. It was a weird thought, that she was watching a live picture of something so far away.

"Yes. They use a subspace link for communications, not radio, there's practically no delay," Azumi told her. "It's remarkable technology."
"I'll say. I'm very impressed." She turned to the others. "What do we tell Agent Naito? He's down in his cabin at the moment, but he'll notice if we suddenly go haring off past Mars after an asteroid."

Yori sighed a little. "That's a small problem. He's not aware of any of your story and to be honest at the moment I'd like to keep it that way. I gather you would as well?" All three of them nodded. "So we need to come up with a cover story. It's a little difficult to drop him off, although that would be the best solution, he'd wonder what was going on. I don't want to actually lie to the guy. He's a good man and a friend. We could probably trust him fine, but I don't want this getting back to the PSIA, even though I don't have any problems with them. Too many other people would eventually find out. He'd be honour bound to report what he saw as a threat to both Japan and the entire planet. We don't want you girls getting any more attention than necessary, it will only make a difficult problem more complicated, and worry a lot of people unnecessarily."

"What about that security spell?" Ami asked. "Surely that's the whole point of it?"

"It is. But it only works if you accept it willingly. It's a lot to ask of the man, he has other, possibly conflicting, loyalty oaths he is serious about. I don't want to put him in that position if I can avoid it. It's easiest if we can just... sort of not bring it up." Looking annoyed and upset, Yori shook her head. "I wish I could simply tell him but at the moment it's just not a good idea."

S'th'kx suddenly yelped, turning to his console and operating some controls rapidly, talking to Yori and her friends at the same time in a tone of voice that sounded worried. Whirling, the young woman asked a quick question. The answer didn't seem to please her judging by the ferocious scowl that crossed her face.

"Well, we have a cover story. An asteroid heading for Earth." She glared at the image, which showed the asteroid was visibly slowing its roll, stabilising itself. Seconds later it began very slowly accelerating, the probe following it. Ami went white. "Looks like it saw the probe or something. It's activated the backup plan."

Feeling the slight vibration that indicated the ships had engaged it's drive, Naito looked up from his notes, wondering what was happening. After a moment he closed his notebook, putting it back in his case, then got up to investigate. There was no-one in the common room so he headed up to the control deck, nodding to one of the crew as he passed. The alien cheerfully flicked his antennae at the man, going about his business, making Naito grin at the matter-of-fact way they interacted after only three days.

At the top of the ramp he found Ami and her two friends deep in discussion, watching a projection in the middle of the control deck which seemed to show a misshapen lump of rock, scale unknown, clearly moving judging by the symbols to one side of it and underneath, which although he couldn't read he realized showed position and velocity merely by context. Yori, Azumi, and S'th'kx were also talking about something with considerable interest, the alien apparently working something out on his panel. Chou and Aiko were observing. Walking up beside them he looked curiously at them, the blonde turning to smile at him as he approached.

"Hello, Masao."

"Hi, Chou. What's going on?" She frowned very slightly.

"S'th'kx discovered something unusual a little while ago. It turned out to be an asteroid, a bit over nine hundred metres in diameter, which we have found out is on a trajectory that would intersect the orbital plane of the Earth in a worryingly short period of time." Naito felt his heart skip a few
beats and the blood drain from his face.

"It's going to hit the Earth?!" he squeaked, fright making his throat close up. She smiled a little.

"It would if we didn't do something about it. Don't worry, we're in a ship specifically designed for this sort of operation. We can deal with it. S'th'kx knows exactly what he's doing." Heart-rate slowing, but still feeling faint, Naito swayed a little. She caught him under the elbow and stabilised him. "It will be fine, Masao, don't panic. Something else for your report, that's all." Glancing up, she nodded to Yori, who was watching with concern. The other woman went back to her discussion after a considering glance at Naito.

"We're going to portal back to S'th'kx's reality, then come back here much closer to the asteroid, which will save more than a day of travel time. Once we match velocities we can grapple it and slow it down, then we just have to decide what to do with it." Chou smiled at him again. "This is what S'th'kx does for a living. He feels that the asteroid itself may have some value as well, due to interesting minerals, so he'd like a closer look even if it wasn't posing a threat."

Nodding, still shaky from the shock, Naito managed to recover and stand up straight. "God. You had me really scared for a moment there, Chou."

"I'm sorry, Masao. I didn't mean to upset you. We only just found out." She smiled gently at him. "We've retrieved the lunar probes and are moving to put the moon between us and home so we can open the first portal. When we're back in Krennsh space we'll go back to K'nn four, pick up a number of long range probe swarms, then come back here. S'th'kx suggested we should increase the probe numbers, if there's one asteroid on a dangerous course there could well be others. We were lucky, very lucky indeed, we happened to detect this one so quickly. It could be very nasty if we missed one."

"How much damage would something that size do?" Naito asked, staring at the image. "If you had missed it?"

"It's not a planet-killer," Ami told him, coming over and following his gaze. "But it's certainly a civilisation-fucker-upper. It would be very bad." She pulled out her little computer and made some calculations as he watched. "Depending on what it was made of, how fast it was going, and where it hit, the results would range from a pretty damn impressive tsunami to a very large crater with massive blast damage. It's very definitely something to avoid. Even leaving aside the direct damage, long term results from dust in the atmosphere, evaporated water, fires, that sort of thing, would kill millions if not billions." She snapped the machine shut. "Very bad," she repeated soberly. He'd gone pale again, he could feel it.

"Fuck."

"Pretty much," she agreed. "Good thing we're in an alien asteroid mining spacecraft, isn't it?" Her wry grin made him laugh despite himself.

"Yes, good thing." They exchanged an amused look.

Shortly the craft slowed to a halt, hanging in space some two hundred kilometres above the 'dark side' of the moon, which they could see out the window. Naito hurried back to his cabin and retrieved his camera. Returning, he found Yori and Chou staring out the window in the other direction, visibly concentrating. Seconds later the familiar sight of a portal appeared. He raised the camera, taking pictures as it steadily enlarged, finally stabilising at the same size it had the first time. The ship headed slowly towards it, slipping through with no fuss. Once they were on the other side the two magical girls dismissed the portal, looking satisfied.
"That was smoother than the first time, dear," Chou said, smiling slightly. "I think I can see a way to reduce the power requirements for a large portal as well, based on the experience of making those two." Yori looked intrigued. They were soon in a discussion of some esoteric form of magic that left everyone else behind.

Moving to stand beside Ami, Azumi grinned. "They can keep this up for hours," she commented, laughing a little. Ami was listening, trying to follow the discussion, but gave up as there was simply too much she didn't have the background to understand. "No one else can work out what the hell they're talking about, which isn't surprising, they invented most of it themselves. But it seems to work. Chou is apparently very good at working out how to make the magic more efficient."

Watching for a few seconds longer, Naito finally tuned them out, turning to the silver-haired girl. "So what happens next?"

"We go back to K'nn four as fast as possible, load up on probe blocks, then go after that asteroid. We've got plenty of time, it's moving fast but it's got a long way to go so it's not a huge emergency, but we want to deal with it as far away from home as possible. No sense waiting until the last minute. This isn't a movie." She grinned as he laughed.

"If it was there would be a timer somewhere prominently counting down the seconds and we'd succeed with about two left." He chuckled at the thought. Both Ami and Azumi began laughing themselves. The blue-haired woman opened her computer, fiddled with it, then showed them a neat little count-down clock. It beeped irritatingly once a second in an urgent alternating high and low tone.

"Like this?"

"That's the one." Shaking his head in amusement he watched as she turned the thing off, grinning, then put it away. "Good thing there's nothing like that around. I'd be getting worried again. They could feel the drive engage as the ship started vibrating gently, accelerating hard. It seemed to be moving faster than they'd experienced before.

"We'll be back at the spaceport in under an hour," Azumi told them, "then it will take about twenty minutes to get the probes on board. S'th'kx has lots in stock, he's calling ahead to get them ready right now." Indeed, the captain was talking to someone that wasn't present, sounding calm but urgent. "He can carry about two dozen blocks in the launch bays. As soon as we've loaded them we'll go back, so we should be in the vicinity of the asteroid in about, hmm, perhaps two and a half hours or a bit less. Nothing much we can do now except wait."

"I may as well get back to my notes," Naito told them. "I seem to have some new things to write down." He left them grinning as he went back to the cabin, still recovering internally from the shock of what he'd found out.

'I'm damn glad those girls are around,' he mused with a small shiver. 'If they hadn't been...’ It didn't bear thinking about, so he tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, not to.

Standing in the loading entrance of the main cargo bay, Rei watched as a pair of ground vehicles drew up next to the ship, floating half a metre off the ground. They settled to the concrete, several people climbing out and moving to the rear of the delivery trucks. S'th'kx was standing next to the ship, directing his people in unloading the probe blocks that were stacked neatly on the flat beds of the vehicles. "Come on, we can do this quicker than waiting for them to use those cargo lifters," Yori said from behind her. "Aiko, you and Azumi come with me, the rest of you stay here. We'll pass them up."
Jumping down with the other two, she called something to S'th'kx, who looked over, then nodded, instructing his people to stand clear. Shortly the probe units were being passed hand over hand into the cargo hold and stacked neatly to one side. They were fairly heavy but nothing that any of the girls couldn't handle easily. The ground crew watched, impressed, as a job that would have taken them half an hour was done in less than a third of that time. When they were all loaded and checked, S'th'kx had a quick word with the ground crew chief, then waved everyone back into the ship. Minutes later they were climbing through the clouds.

"That didn't take long," Rei commented, sitting in the common room, somewhere that had become very familiar to all of them in the last three days, watching the planet fall away behind them. She was privately amused how easily she took the experience the second time. You really did get used to almost anything. "Hey, those things have drive units, why not just fly them into the cargo bay?"

Yori shrugged a bit. "Apparently they're optimised for high speed travel when they're in one block like that. All the drives act together to accelerate the entire swarm at several hundred G. Fine control on the ground isn't what they were designed for, so it's easier to just move them around manually."

Chou giggled. "S'th'kx said he should hire us for cargo work, we're much quicker than his normal crew." Grinning, Rei leaned back in her seat and relaxed.

"It's an interesting thought. Not what I had in mind as a career path, I'll admit, but then, neither was magical girl."

"It generally takes you by surprise from my own personal experience," the blonde told her, looking amused. "But it's worth it in the long run. Even with the associated problems." She looked around at the others, smiling to herself. "They're far outweighed by all the good things." Jumping lithely to her feet, she clapped her hands. "Right. Let's have something to eat before we have to make a new portal."

Just over an hour later they gathered in the control room again. Chou and Yori discussed the changes they'd made to their spell in a low voice for a minute or two, working out the final details, then began concentrating. Ami was watching with interest, recording the process, shaking her head at the results her little machine gave her and looking puzzled. Rei grinned as she watched. Her friend was always studying everything, it could be quite funny to watch, since she got so caught up in it. At least this time she was standing still.

Soon the portal had stabilised at it's final size. "That was definitely better," Yori remarked, looking pleased. "Well done, love. We should be able to make quite a large one using that method." Chou smiled, turning to watch as the ship entered the glowing blue hole in space. Seconds later they were through, the portal disappearing immediately.

Once they exited the portal, S'th'kx began working the console, peering out the window as he did. The cargo bay door opened, a steady stream of probe blocks exiting, orienting themselves in different directions, then vanishing into the distance at high speed. It lasted for about five or six minutes. Agent Naito stood by the window photographing the action, having difficulty focussing on them judging by his muttering. When it was over the captain looked satisfied, closing the door again. He talked to Yori for a moment, then she turned to the others. "Twenty six swarms including the one he had left, plus the three we did earlier, with twelve hundred and eighty probes per swarm. Thirty-seven thousand, one hundred and twenty of the things. In a week or so they'll be everywhere in the entire solar system."

"How long will it take to map everything?" Rei asked curiously.
"Years, to any level of detail, even with that number," Chou responded, watching the screen in front of the captain with interest. "But looking for asteroids moving in dangerous orbits that could be a threat to Earth will take much less time. He says within six months, with that many probes, they should have mapped all the dangerous asteroids that could intersect the planet in the next fifty years or so fairly adequately. In a year or two we'll have a good idea of the orbits of practically everything above about fifty metres in diameter. Anything less than that isn't a serious risk. Less than about a hundred and fifty metres is dangerous but not enormously serious. Above that you start getting into worrying territory."

"People have been talking about setting up a near earth object scanning facility for years," Naito said, also watching the console, before taking a picture of it. "Not a lot has come of it so far. Aside from anything else it's expensive and no one wants to spend money on something many people don't really think could happen."

"They'd change their mind if this thing gets through," Azumi said, not looking impressed.

"The ones that lived, certainly," he chuckled, "but it would be a little late then." A moment later he asked, "Speaking of money, how much do those probes cost? I know you said that S'th'kx considered them pretty cheap, but nearly forty thousand of the things can't be throwaway money, surely?"

Yori and her colleagues exchanged a quick glance. "It's not a problem, Masao," Yori said, smiling at him. "It's covered." He stared at her for a few seconds, clearly wondering exactly what she meant by that, but dropped the subject.

"OK. Will we be able to get this data as well? It would be of almost incalculable scientific value aside from anything else."

Chou smiled at him. "Of course. It will be an enormous amount of data, the resolution of the probes is very high, but I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. We asked that several probes be sent to every planet and moon in the solar system just for that reason. We could spare a few hundred. They'll obviously take longer to scan them than the moon project took, if nothing else because of the more limited numbers, but we'll make sure the data gets to you." She looked curiously at him. "How will you distribute it? Presumably JAXA would want it, but there's the ESA and NASA to think about as well. Explaining how the Japanese happened to come into detailed high-resolution scans of every planet in the system might be a little, ah, complicated."

He snickered. "That's putting it mildly. A lot of scientists would sell their first-born children to get their hands on just the moon data, never mind anything else. It's going to cause absolute chaos. I have no idea how we'll explain it right now, that's going to take a lot of careful thought." Look around the control room he shook his head wonderingly. "No one will believe we basically asked some aliens from another dimension for a favour."

Rei started laughing, leaning on a console, causing him to smile at her. Hotaru was giggling to herself.

"It's true, though."

"That's the problem," He grinned at her. "These days the truth is a lot less believable than most fiction. Mind you, after Halleckton and the portal bomb things there are enough people around outside Japan who have come into contact with some very weird experiences we might be able to work with them." Thinking about his words for a moment he laughed again. "I keep thinking it would be easier to pass it off as the results of magic rather than the truth. That's how weird the truth is."
Rei looked around the room and couldn't deny it. Even as a long-term magical girl she was having intermittent problems dealing with the current reality. She and the PSIA man shared a look of understanding.

"Where's the asteroid?" Hotaru asked curiously. Yori passed the question on to S'th'kx, who checked his instruments then pointed.

"That way, but it's too far away to see from here. It's moved quite a long way in the last few hours. We'll catch up soon," the young woman reported, as the ship began to move. Everyone stared in the direction the captain had indicated. A while later Ami pointed.

"There, I think?"

"That's it." Yori peered at the growing point of dim light. Agent Naito raised his camera, which he'd fitted with a telephoto lens, looking through it curiously. Rei glanced at him, turning to Chou, motioning subtly with her head to the side. The blonde followed her a few steps away.

"How do we stop him finding out about the engines?" she asked in a low voice, watching the agent to make sure he didn't overhear. Chou replied likewise.

"S'th'kx is approaching so the engines and anything else artificial is on the other side. It's stopped accelerating, at least for the moment, allowing us to match velocities from this side. Yori, Azumi, Ami, and S'th'kx will deal with the engines while we distract Masao, then when we know it's inactive we'll use the ship to put it into a safe orbit."

Rei nodded, thinking it through. "Sounds plausible. What do we do then? Just leave it there?"

Chou considered her for a few seconds. Rei got the impression there was something she wasn't being told. "He does genuinely have an interest in the mineral content of the thing, it's somewhat unusual. We'll deal with that once we've made it safe. That's the priority for the moment." Not entirely satisfied with the answer, Rei suppressed her curiosity and simply accepted it for the moment. She thought it likely that more would be forthcoming given time. Chou and the others presumably had a reason for playing it close to their chests.

Looking at the device she'd been handed, Ami turned it over, locating the controls. "So, I just put my hand in here, hold on, and press this?" she asked. Azumi nodded.

"Yes. It's pretty simple. That one starts or stops it, that regulates the acceleration. It only produces a couple of dozen newtons of thrust or so maximum for safety's sake, unless you use the emergency override there. That doubles it. Make sure you don't let go." She grinned. "It turns off if you do but it might well be out of reach by the time it does, which would be embarrassing." Ami giggled.

"I can see why," she laughed. "Floating around without any way to reach it and waiting for someone to come and retrieve you would certainly be something you'd have trouble living down."

"Exactly. So best not to do that." They grinned at each other, then turned to the others. Chou was showing Rei and Agent Naito how the little drive units worked, while Yori was explaining it to Hotaru. The younger girl seemed to nearly be vibrating with enthusiasm.

"Come on, let's go!" she chirped, looking out the open airlock. The ship was hanging a couple of kilometres away from the asteroid, S'th'kx having indicated a reluctance to contact it until he was sure the alien technology on it was well and truly dead, just in case. His crew was standing by ready to move if anything odd happened.
"Hold on, we just need to make sure everyone knows the plan, all right, Hotaru?" Yori chuckled. Impatient, the purple-haired girl nodded, not looking away from the asteroid.

"OK. Everyone happy about what we're doing?" Yori enquired. "Azumi, S'th'kx, Ami, and I will go and get some readings from the other side. You five do the same this side. Chou will operate the survey equipment, Masao, you take pictures," she grinned as the government man held up his camera with a smile, "the rest of you look around. Try not to get lost."


"I wouldn't put anything past you girls," the other woman replied, grinning broadly. "Not after all the recent, um, excitement." Both of them laughing, Yori nodded to the miner, who manipulated the control panel. Ami felt herself get lighter, quite fast, but not so rapidly she lost her lunch, as the gravity in the airlock faded away. Shortly they were just floating freely. Giggling in joy, Hotaru gently pushed against the deck with one foot, yelping in surprise as she 'rose' considerably faster than she'd expected, gently pitching backwards at the same time. Bouncing off the other side of the airlock she spun slightly as she drifted past, upside down relative to Ami, waving.

"This is fun!" she commented, bouncing off the walls again. Yori reached out and carefully pushed, causing her to gently float out the open airlock, then followed, engaging her little drive unit in the process. Watching, highly amused, Ami shook her head then followed, experimenting with the drive very carefully at first.

Minutes later she braked to a halt, watching as Hotaru and Rei followed Chou, Aiko and the PSIA man to the surface, making sure her friends were safe, then went after Yori and the others. It took only a short time to circumnavigate the small asteroid, in a manoeuvre that couldn't really be called orbiting due to the minuscule gravity. As they rounded the side away from the Sun they all turned on the very bright lights built into the manoeuvring units. The surface of the asteroid was rough and irregular, covered in dust and small lumps of material, larger outcroppings sticking out here and there. It was roughly egg-shaped, the engines being at the slightly wider end, while the colour was a dark grey like wet wood ash.

"OK, we're closing in on the engine installation," Yori's voice said. "Agent Naito can't hear us although Chou and Aiko can, so we can talk freely."

"What's the idea? Try to deactivate it, or just destroy it?" Ami asked.

"We want to see if there's anything that would be useful in allowing us to find a way to get at the time device, or at least work out what it's plans are," Azumi told her. "Scan for any sort of computer, data storage system, anything like that. With some luck we might get some useful intelligence."

"Past that, we think it would be safest to just blow the damn thing to hell," Yori added. "We have no idea what the technology could do. Better to get rid of it in case it has any more nasty surprises."

"OK." As they drifted to a halt above the location of the alien engines, Ami retrieved her computer. "I wish this thing had a hand strap," she muttered, nearly fumbling it. "Or some sort of case. I should go to a phone shop at home and see if anything they have there fits." After a moment she managed to open it one-handed and activate the scanning process, aiming it at the surface, two hundred metres away. "Hmm."

"Anything?" Yori sounded curious.
"I'm reading a fairly impressive power source, nothing as powerful as whatever S'th'kx's ship uses but still pretty big, plus some sort of control system. It's radiating quite a lot of magical energy as well. I can't work out exactly what it's for. It sort of reads as Millennium technology but it's not quite right."

"That agrees with what we got from the ship. All right, let's go and have a look at that control system, see if it has anything useful." They started moving lower. "Shit! Stop, stop!" Yori sounded worried. Quickly flinging the drive into reverse Ami braked as hard as she could, looking around to see the others had as well. She could abruptly feel some sort of magic coming from the asteroid even without using her computer. After a moment she recognised it, which her scan only confirmed.

"Damn. That's a seriously powerful ward!"

"It's surrounding the entire installation," Yori told her, looking carefully around, clearly able to see the thing. Azumi was doing the same thing, her eyebrows up, while S'th'kx was using some sort of hand-held device she suspected was similar to her computer. "It's the second most powerful one I've ever seen. It must have detected us coming and turned it on." Ami filed the comment away for future inspection, wondering where the most powerful one the woman had ever seen was.

"Can you crack it?" Azumi asked. Yori was silent for a moment.

"Yes, but not easily. The spell is very complex so shutting it down would take a lot of work and time. Punching right through it is just about possible but the problem is the power level is so high it would take a direct hit from a small nuke and deflect it. If I pump enough energy into it to brute-force it all at once you'd see the flash from Earth. You wouldn't want to be this close, believe me. It might also blow the asteroid into little pieces." She smiled a little. "Call that plan B." Ami stared at her, the implications of her statement were... very disturbing. "If we'd run into it it could have been bad, it's not a passive one." She added, pulling out a coin and flipped it towards the asteroid, illuminating it with her light. Everyone watched as the coin spun over and over, until about fifty metres in front of them it glowed and vanished silently. "That would sting, even for people like us."

"So what now?" Azumi asked, frustration in her voice.

"Not sure. Hold on, let me think it through."

Ami glanced at Azumi who was floating a few metres away. "Can you do whatever it was that you did to my computer? Get into it somehow?"

"I've been trying to do exactly that," the silver-haired woman said, sounding annoyed. "It's not that easy, unfortunately. The computer down there is much more heavily encrypted than your little unit was, even though as far as I can see it's nothing like as powerful. Perhaps the time device learned from what I did earlier and has upgraded it's systems since then. I'll keep trying."

"I'm going to try something," Yori announced. "We'll need to back off a few hundred metres first, though, in case it goes wrong." Ami felt worried, engaging the drive and following the other three. When they were in position, she felt a powerful ward surround them in a bubble of energy. Yori turned back to the asteroid and put her hand out. A glow built around it, preceding a violet beam the thickness of her head silently flashing into existence between her hand and the asteroid. Sixty metres from impact it splashed against some immaterial barrier, the energy radiating sideways. Ami stared in amazement. She couldn't work out how so much energy didn't have some real thrust, but Yori was motionless in space relative to the target. After a second or so the beam narrowed, growing vastly brighter in the process, as the woman applied something like the ki compression technique she'd demonstrated at the temple.
'It shouldn't be visible in a vacuum either,' Ami mused, poking her computer one-handed while holding firmly to the drive unit with the other one. 'It can't be anything like a laser beam, then. Amazing.' The energy readings she got from her machine made her feel faint. 'Holy shit. That could cut the asteroid in half with a bit of time!'

Yori stopped the ki beam, studying the distant target. "Hmm. That's pretty impressive. Not much will block that. Very good spell with an awful lot of energy behind it." She glanced at Ami. "Do your readings show if the power source varied when I was running the beam?"

"It wobbled a bit and went down noticeably, but it's rebuilding slowly." She ran a couple of calculations. "If it's a constant rate of depletion to an attack like that it would run out of energy to feed the ward in about, hmm... three days." Yori sighed.

"About what I thought. I'm good but I can't keep that level up for three days continuously." She thought for a moment, then asked S'th'k'x something. He checked his own instruments and gave her a reply, which made her sigh again. "The ship has an x-ray cutting laser which is used to chop sections off finds to assay, but it's not even that powerful, it doesn't need to be, it's not designed as a weapon. That would probably take weeks. By then the asteroid would have hit, assuming it doesn't start accelerating again."

"What do you think would happen if you used full power?" Azumi asked curiously.

Ami froze, staring. "That wasn't full power?" Yori grinned at her.

"Nope. I'm a little worried about really winding it up, if the ward suddenly fails it would punch a hole all the way through and the ship is on the other side, as well as the others." The blue-haired woman gaped as Yori went back to studying the problem.

"At least it's not shooting at us, so that's good," Azumi commented. She discussed something with S'th'k'x who was still pointing his own scanning equipment at the asteroid. "He can't find any evidence of weapons, only a power supply, the engines, and a computer running it all."

Tearing her fascinated and worried gaze from Yori with some difficulty Ami glanced at the other woman, then at her computer, nodding slowly. "That agrees with what I can read. So it probably can't do much to stop us if we can get through that ward." She also studied the target. "I wonder how it managed to put all this together in the first place?"

"S'th'k'x says the installation looks like some sort of self-propelled cargo system on an enormous scale. It's partially buried in the surface of the asteroid and looks like it's been there for a long time. Certainly at least a thousand years based on the dust collection." Azumi shrugged. "Time machine, remember? We have no idea how long the thing has been around, interfering. It might have made this thousands of years ago, or a thousand years from now then brought it back last week."

"Kind of makes your head ache, doesn't it?" Yori said absently. "This thing doesn't need weapons, it is a weapon. Just one designed to break civilisations with one hit. This ward is probably just a standard precaution, I doubt it was expecting us, but the machine is the result of a war like Ldn'r'k told us. I wouldn't be surprised to find it's just paranoid by design. My guess is that the ward is a military specification one, it's much too powerful for most applications, not many mages would or could waste so much energy making one like that. It's very powerful but not very efficient."

"What do we do?" Azumi looked at Yori.

She shrugged. "Still working on that."
A couple of minutes passed. S’t’h’kx, who had been studying his instrument, looked over to the black-haired woman and asked her something. She replied, making Ami wonder what they were talking about. After a few seconds Yori nodded, looking pleased. Azumi raised her eyebrows. "Will that work?"

"It should do. If so at least the asteroid itself isn't a problem any more."

Ami stared at them all. "What are you talking about?"

Yori chuckled. "Sorry. We really have to teach you lot Trade. S’t’h’kx pointed out that the ward only surrounds the engine installation, not the asteroid itself. So he thinks the simple solution is just to cut off the part of the thing that has the engines. The rest of is it the dangerous bit, that's where almost all the mass is." She looked at the asteroid again, tapping her chin with a finger. "In fact, the way that spell feels, I think removing most of the asteroid from under it may well destabilise it and make it easier to penetrate without using so much power we vaporise everything inside. I really would like to have a look at that installation just in case we could learn something useful."

Conferring with the miner for a minute or two, she moved off to the side, taking aim. "We could use the x-ray laser on the ship but I can do it faster. I'll try slicing through just past where the ward ends," she said. The brilliant purple beam lanced out once more, hitting the surface at a shallow angle and penetrating deeply. A second later it came out the other side, two hundred metres away. Ami watched with great interest and some disbelief. The sheer energy involved was absolutely astounding, as was the control it showed. Yori slowly moved the beam sideways, cutting a fifty metre thick slice of metal and rock from the end of the asteroid, concentrating carefully on her work. Suddenly the beam winked out, making everyone blink.

"Why did you stop?" Ami asked curiously, noticing that Yori was rapidly approaching them again. Azumi turned to her.

"We have a major problem. Hotaru is going after Agent Naito, screaming something about being followed by the government, and Rei is acting weird as well. Aiko's got her pinned down and Chou is trying to stop Hotaru."

"What!?" Ami stared in horror. "Why would they do that?"

Yori shot past, urgently waving them to follow. "I have a horrible feeling that the time machine just made it's next move. Come on. We need to stop them doing something stupid." Staring for a moment, not sure she believed what was happening, Ami thumbed her drive unit to maximum emergency acceleration and followed the other three.

"Ami?"

"Yes, Yori?"

"If you feel like you suddenly want to kill us all, warn me, will you?" Yori's voice sounded tight. Ami nodded even though the other woman couldn't see her as she was over a hundred metres in front.

"I feel fine at the moment. We already know the thing doesn't seem to have affected me very much. Hopefully that won't change."

"You'll understand if we kind of keep you in sight all the time, though, I hope?" Yori looked over her shoulder.

"I'd do the same thing." They kept moving as fast as possible, Ami very aware that Azumi was
right behind her. She could feel a sense of definite possible danger and made sure to keep both her hands in view.

"What the fuck?" Naito yelled, pushing his drive unit to maximum power, as an impossibly sharp blade on the end of two metres of shaft barely missed him. If it wasn't for the almost non-existent gravity throwing the young woman off she would have removed his head. "Hotaru, what the hell are you doing?"

"You sneaky bastards, following us around all the time. It's all your fault, I know it is," the girl raved, flipping end over end as she floated away at an angle. She fumbled for the drive unit which she had nearly dropped when she swung at him without warning. He'd noticed she'd gone very quiet a minute or so ago, something that stood out as odd after her excited talking about the zero-g environment, which she apparently found endlessly amusing. The sudden attack had almost caught him completely off guard. It was only reflexes honed by training and recent experiences that had prompted him to duck when something in the corner of his eye felt wrong.

The young woman managed to juggle her pole-arm and the drive sufficiently to slow her tumble, then aim herself back at him. He stared over his shoulder as she came after him, accelerating slightly faster due to her lower mass. From what he could see she would catch up eventually. "Hotaru, I'm not your enemy, you know that. Why are acting like this?" There was no answer over the communications system other than the sound of heavy breathing and a faint gritting of teeth. The girl glared, experimentally waving her weapon at him with one hand, luckily being considerably out of range. He winced nonetheless, knowing from the reports she could project some sort of attack from the thing. Nothing much happened this time although he wasn't sure he could count on that.

She was wearing her full uniform, having called it up when she summoned the weapon from wherever it was she kept it, the short skirt and other clothing looking more dangerous than it should have all things considered. The associations he had with that uniform based on recent events weren't good ones. He'd picked up on the fact that both Ami and Rei were reluctant to wear it any more for the same reason.

"Hold on, Masao, I'm coming," Chou's voice said. He looked frantically around for the blonde, finally spotting her rocketing towards them at an angle a few hundred metres away. All three of them had left the surface of the little asteroid, heading away from both it and the ship.

"What did I do?" he asked.

"Nothing. This isn't your fault, believe me. I'll explain later, for now we need to stop her, without damaging her too much, ideally." Chou sighed loudly. "And Rei. She's acting oddly as well. Luckily Aiko noticed and grabbed her, she was about to come after you as well, and possibly Hotaru too based on what she was yelling." Naito hadn't heard anything from the other magical girl but the way the semi-sentient suit computers routed communications meant that you only heard things that were directed at you or a group you were part of, or deliberately broadcast for everyone to hear, which presumably hadn't been the case.

"Hotaru, listen to me, dear. Masao isn't your enemy."

"He's a spy. He's been following me around. He has to die," the girl responded, sounding mildly regretful yet unnervingly sure of herself.

"He's a friend. You're being influenced from the outside to believe what you're saying, but it isn't real. You know what the real enemy is. Slow down, I don't want to hurt you, but I can't allow you to
hurt Masao either." Chou sounded sad. He looked over his shoulder again, seeing they were some distance from the asteroid, which had shrunk to the size of a basketball. Hotaru was slowly overhauling him, grinning like a maniac, while Chou was rapidly closing from the side, yet was still some distance off. Their speed was steadily building, slowly but surely.

"I'll kill him, then we can talk, OK, Chou?" Hotaru sounded almost calm. "I can trust you, I know."

There was silence for a few seconds. "I'm sorry, Hotaru." He looked behind again in time to see a small golden ball of energy strike the drive unit which the girl was holding, causing it to explode in a surprisingly vigorous manner, engulfing Hotaru in a very large short-lived fireball which only just cleared him. Even through the suit he felt a wave of heat pass over him. She screamed horribly. As it dissipated he could see she was unconscious, limply falling through space behind him, spinning slowly head over heels, her weapon drifting off to one side. She looked like she'd caught a face full of burning oil, her skin badly blistered, her left hand, which the drive had been on, mangled and bleeding.

"Oh, shit," he mumbled. "She's out, Chou. She doesn't look good." Flipping the drive unit into reverse he began slowing gradually, grabbing her by the shoulder a few moments later as she floated past her original trajectory, stabilising her roll. The pole-arm disappeared into the distance past him, something he ignored as he looked at the girl he was holding. "I've got her." He held on while slowly increasing the reverse thrust to maximum, allowing Chou to catch up.

"Well done, Masao." The blonde intercepted them twenty seconds later, matching speed then reaching out with one hand, placing it on the badly burned girl's head. It glowed for a moment. "She can't feel anything now. Let's get her back to the ship so I can heal her properly, it's awkward doing it like this." She smiled regretfully at him. "She'll be all right, I promise."

"What happened?" he asked, staring at the girl. Both of them juggled her between them until they were sure she was secure then Chou began towing them all back towards the ship, which was only a dot in the distance now. It took close to five minutes merely to slow to a halt relative to it, but eventually they were heading back.

"Something caused her to suddenly become very paranoid and hostile. It's connected to what happened to her entire team," Chou sighed. "It's a long and complex story, I'm afraid, one we didn't want to get out, for a number of reasons. But I think we're going to need to tell you. There's something we need to do first, though." He was quiet on the return trip, wondering what she meant, not entirely sure he wanted to know.

"Oh, shit, that looks horrible," Ami said, feeling sick as she looked at the younger girl lying on a seat in the common room. She was burned over most of her upper torso, her left arm, and her face and head, half her hair missing, one eye clearly damaged, her left hand a bloody mess, her uniform scorched but intact. The magical garment was very difficult to destroy which had probably saved her from further injuries but what she could see was bad enough. Ami turned to Chou, glaring angrily. "You didn't have to do that to her!" she shouted. Chou gave her a look, which while calm and serene, made her stop shouting and swallow, her mouth suddenly dry. "Sorry. But she's so young and those injuries look terrible." The air of imminent trouble faded away again, the blonde nodding sadly.

"I had no choice. There was no way to reach her before she was close enough to Masao to attack him and he's not as tough as we all are. She would have killed him. She wanted to kill him. I'm very sorry about the damage to her, the batteries in the drive units store a very substantial amount of energy which caused a much larger explosion than I anticipated. The ki ball destabilised them all at
once. S'th'kx says he's very surprised it exploded at all but I suppose the designers didn't make it to withstand that sort of thing."

"Why did you shoot the drive unit and not her?" she asked.

"It seemed a better option at the time. Powered up and alert as she was I would have had to put enough energy into the ki shot to knock her unconscious that it might have caused injury. I thought taking out her means of moving would be less damaging."

Chou sighed apologetically. "I was wrong. I didn't expect an explosion of that magnitude. In retrospect under the circumstances there was no good way to stop her without injury. It's a good thing the suit generator wasn't damaged, which was another possible concern about firing directly on her."

Chou put her arm around the other woman. "She'll be all right. Don't worry." With a brief hug she knelt on one side of the girl, Yori already in position on the other side. Both of them reached out and began carefully repairing Hotaru. Ami watched, exchanging a glance with Aiko and Azumi, both of whom she couldn't help noticing were making sure they were in a position that didn't mean anyone else was in the potential crossfire if anything untoward were to happen. She couldn't really blame them under the circumstances, although it was a feeling that made the hair on the back of her neck rise.

Azumi particularly looked extremely alert and potentially very dangerous indeed. The blue-haired woman considered her someone who was becoming a friend yet at the moment she felt more like some small fish being watched by a shark. Smiling nervously, she nodded to Azumi, who returned her gaze impassively, not taking her eyes off her for a second. "I'm not going to go nuts, guys. I feel fine." She glanced at Aiko, who was also watching her like a hawk, not blinking. "Honest."

"We believe you, Ami, but we can't take any chances. The ship is too vulnerable, if someone starts something, it could be catastrophic," Yori commented from her position beside Hotaru. She smiled slightly. "We need to see how Hotaru and Rei are after we wake them up. Are you sure you're not feeling anything odd?"

"No. As far as I can tell I'm completely normal. Upset, scared, worried, but normal." Ami sighed. "To be honest that's also pretty much normal these days." Aiko smiled briefly then went back to watching. Looking at them both, Ami suddenly grinned. "If either of you need work I'm sure someone would want you as bodyguards. You have the intimidating looks down perfectly." Azumi cracked a smile as well, making Ami suddenly feel much better. The people she was really beginning to like were still there, just being very cautious.

"How is she?" Agent Naito asked from where he was sitting a few seats away, watching quietly. He glanced at the unconscious form of Rei who was beside him, limp and gently snoring. Chou looked up from the healing, sighing.

"Not ideal, I'm afraid. The explosion was extremely hot, it caused a lot of deep burns to her face. We're going to have to regenerate her right eye which is a fiddly job."

"No damage to the lungs, the suit protected her," Yori said absently, carefully scanning her patient. "A few cracked ribs from the blast. It was one hell of a bang, she's very tough, something like a hand grenade wouldn't have done nearly this much damage. But it was at point-blank range which certainly didn't help." The glow from her slowly moving hands intensified as she concentrated. "Right, those are done."

"I've fixed her hand and the burns are nearly finished, except on her face. Will you do those ones?" Chou requested. The other woman nodded, moving her hands up to Hotaru's head.
"OK." There was silence for a minute or two. "Right. That's all sorted. Just the eye." Yori leaned closer, inspecting the damage, then sighed. "What a mess. It must have been extremely painful. I'm glad she fainted, poor girl." Putting her hands over Hotaru's closed eyelids she concentrated. "Stabilise that, will you, love?"

"I've got it." A golden glow mixed with the purple. There was silence for three or four more minutes, until Yori nodded, satisfied.

"That's it." She looked at Ami, then Naito. "Eyes are very complicated things to regenerate, it takes a while." Both of the observers were watching in awe, as was S'th'kx and one of his crew. The two aliens exchanged looks, their antennae waving slowly. Ami glanced at them, having a good idea what they were thinking. Even having seen it before the almost casual way these two dealt with incredibly serious injuries was very impressive and somewhat frightening.

Chou ran her hands over the girl's head, smiling as her hair rapidly grew out, reaching its normal length in less than thirty seconds. "She has such nice hair. And a lovely colour." Yori grinned.

"It is nice. All right, I think we're finished, at least for the physical things." She sat back, studying the girl in front of her. "I wish we had Hnther here," she sighed. "He could check for how the tampering was done and probably fix it. I don't know enough about that field to do much about it. Poking blindly around could be catastrophic." Chou nodded, looking worried but resigned.

"All we can do is wake her and see if she's all right now. Perhaps it was a transient thing."

"Possibly. There's no obvious physical brain damage like there was last time, but it's only been a short time. It probably takes some time to become apparent." Yori frowned, scanning Hotaru again. "I really have to show her how to heal herself faster. Her own abilities should be able to deal with what we fixed fairly easily, she just doesn't know how to do it properly." She shook her head. "We're going to have to get her and the others to Hnther as soon as possible once we get back. I hope the rest of them haven't been affected."

Ami glanced at Agent Naito to see him visibly wondering what they were talking about but keeping quiet. He still looked a little shaken. Yori looked briefly at him, then at Ami. She seemed annoyed, which the other woman could understand, based on what they'd discussed earlier. Now the decision had been forced on them. "I'm going to turn off voluntary muscle control like we did last time, just in case. We'll have to do the same thing to Rei as well before we wake her." Ami nodded, sighing. Moving slightly closer she sat down, putting her hands on her knees where Azumi and Aiko could see them, understanding the issue even while she felt it was unnecessary.

"OK. I hope she's better."

"So do I." Prodding Hotaru in a few places Yori looked satisfied, reaching out one glowing finger to tap her between the eyes. A second or two passed, then the girl opened those eyes and looked at the ceiling. They seemed perfectly intact, their normal vivid purple, but had a puzzled expression in them.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice slightly shaky and rather confused.

"Hotaru, what do you remember?" Chou asked her gently, leaning close. The girl looked at her for a few seconds, blinking.

"Why can't I move?" she asked instead of answering.

"We had to take some precautions," the blonde replied. She smiled calmly. "There was a..."
problem. Do you remember it?" After a long pause Hotaru shook her head.

"I'm... I'm not sure. I can remember... floating around? Being on some sort of dusty surface, like when we were on the moon, but I kept floating away from it. Is that right?" Chou nodded encouragingly as everyone listened.

"Yes, that's right. It was the asteroid, you remember that? The one we thought might hit Earth?" Another, longer pause, then the younger girl nodded slowly, her eyes troubled.

"I... think so. We went back to K'nn four, didn't we? Then came back?"

"That's it. That was about an hour ago. We found the asteroid, matched speeds, then went out to see if we could do anything about it. You were very excited with the zero gravity environment."

Hotaru briefly smiled. "I seem to remember giggling a lot."

"You were. It was quite funny."

"Then it goes a bit weird. I can remember sort of flying around with something on my hand. Is that real?"

Chou nodded, smiling. "Yes. We had little hand-held drive units to pull us around out there."

"OK." the girl fell silent again, visibly struggling to remember more. Chou glanced at Yori, who looked back, clearly both worried and angry, then transferred her gaze to Ami. She could see the blonde also felt upset. Hotaru gasped suddenly, making Chou look back quickly, concern on her face. "Did I hurt someone?" the purple-haired girl asked in a very small voice. "Is that why I can't move, it's like with Haruka?"

After an uncomfortable delay, Chou smiled at her patient. "You tried, but I stopped you. We think it was the same thing, an external influence. It's not your fault. No one blames you." Tears were forming in the younger girl's eyes, making the blonde pull a handkerchief from nowhere and wipe them away. "Don't be upset, Hotaru. Nothing serious happened. You were hurt when I stopped you, I'm afraid, for which I deeply apologise, but Yori and I healed everything. It was an accident but unavoidable."

Saying nothing for some time, the young woman stared at the ceiling of the compartment. Eventually she rolled her head to the side and looked at the other magical girl. "Who was it?" she asked quietly.

"It was Masao. He was both lucky and very quick witted, he managed to avoid your strike then stay ahead of you until I was able to stop you. He's fine, but very confused." She looked at the agent, who nodded, his face troubled. "We're going to have to tell him now."

"I'm sorry, Chou," Hotaru said very quietly. Cupping her cheek with her hand, the blonde smiled at her.

"It wasn't your fault. I've already said that. We know you didn't mean to do it." She sighed slightly. "But we need to check something." Looking up, she caught Naito's eye. "Masao, would you come here a moment, please?"

Slightly uncertainly he stood, walking over. Chou waved him to stand where Hotaru could see him. She stared, her eyes widening. "What do you feel when you see him, dear? Be honest, we won't judge you for it." Chou said. Several seconds passed.
"Angry. Worried. Sorry." She looked upset. "I know it's Masao, I like him. But for some reason I keep thinking that he's spying on me. I need to stop it." She closed her eyes. Chou exchanged glances with Yori, both women sighing slightly. "What's happening to me, Chou?"

"Don't worry. We can fix it. But I'm afraid I need to put you to sleep again for a while." The blonde's voice was calm and soothing, Ami thought, remarkably so under the circumstances. Hotaru nodded.

"I trust you. And Yori. Do what you need to do."

"I'm sorry about this," the other woman said quietly, reaching out and touching her between the eyes. A brief golden glow later the young woman was deeply asleep. Chou stared at her for a long moment before standing, looking at Naito, who was obviously deeply puzzled and very concerned, then around at everyone else. "I suspect we'd have the same results with Rei, I'm afraid. It's got at them again somehow." She inspected Ami curiously. "I'm very intrigued why it doesn't seem to be affecting you."

"So am I," Ami responded. "I feel perfectly normal like I said."

"No feelings of sudden paranoia?" Yori asked, sitting beside her and staring closely at her. "No suddenly deciding the universe would be a better place if any or all of us weren't in it?"

"Nope." She grinned slightly. "No more than usual."

Yori chuckled for a moment. "Well, you sound normal enough. Do you mind if I have a quick look?" she asked, raising a hand.

"Help yourself." She held still while Yori put her hand on her head, feeling a very slight tickle that moved around inside for a minute or so. Eventually the other woman lowered her hand, looking at her for a long moment.

"No changes at all that I can see, mental or physical. Hotaru would be able to say for sure but I don't think it's affected you. I wish I knew why." She looked puzzled. Ami shrugged helplessly.

"So do I. I can't think of any real reason."

"Hmm." After studying her for a while, Yori sighed. "There has to be a reason but I can't see it right now." She looked at Aiko and Azumi, both of whom nodded and visibly relaxed. There was a sudden noticeable drop in tension in the room, something that even Naito clearly felt judging by the way he shivered a little. "OK, I guess we can trust you. Just try not to go nuts, please."

"I try not to do that every day," Ami replied, giggling. Yori and Aiko laughed while Azumi smiled, looking much happier.

Eventually they all stopped smiling, one by one turning to look at Agent Naito, who shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "I guess we have to deal with the next problem now," Yori said slowly, not looking entirely happy. He looked back, obviously slightly worried. Picking up on this she half-laughed, half-sighed. "It's not your fault, Masao. It's just something that's sort of private. None of us want the PSIA involved, it's not their business really and there's not much they could do about it anyway." She glanced at Ami who frowned a little but nodded. "We have no choice now, we pretty much have to tell you at least some of it."

"Does that include why Hotaru suddenly went all homicidal?" he asked.

"It's all tied together." Yori examined him for a moment. "It has to stay private. I know you have
sworn an oath of loyalty to the Japanese government, which is one of the reasons I didn't want to tell you this. I don't think there is any direct conflict at the moment but I couldn't absolutely swear that at some future date there wouldn't be. Almost certainly not, but..." She shrugged a little. "It's tied in to some things that are much bigger than any one country. We can tell you, but we're going to have to insist on you accepting a security spell first." He looked somewhat confused and also slightly suspicious.

"What does that mean, exactly?" he asked slowly.

"It's a spell we bought in that prevents specific information being transferred, spoken about, or even referenced if people who are not also included in the same spell are present. The information we tie into it you would be unable to talk about, write about, or in any way transfer to anyone else but us. That's all it does, it doesn't affect your mind at all, only your memory under very particular conditions. It's complicated to explain fully, you don't have the background knowledge for it, but it's very effective." She watched his face. "I give you my word of honour that it's both safe and necessary. It won't affect anything else other than this specific information."

He looked back at her for some time, his face blank. "And if I refuse? What then?"

"We can't force it on you, it only works with a willing participant. If you, for whatever reason, decide you can't or won't accept, we'll have to take you home, then go on with what we need to do. I won't hold it against you in any way if that's your choice. I'm still happy to work with you in future, as are all of us, you're a friend aside from anything else, but we won't be able to tell you anything else about this matter."

Naito gazed at her, then looked around at the others. All of them waited for his response. Eventually he sighed faintly. "Annoyingly, my curiosity won't let it go. Also, I trust you, Yori, and the rest of you. I'm sure that you have a good reason for this. You usually do." She smiled at him. "What do I do?"

"Not much except sit there. It just needs explicit acceptance. I'll do the spell, Ami, you provide the key again, you know what to do. Masao, you'll feel a sort of tingling inside your head like something is poking around in there for a few seconds. Don't fight it, just let it happen. It won't cause any harm but it feels a bit strange." Waiting until he nodded, she did something.

"Urgh. That's very...unusual," he mumbled, holding his head.

"Ami?" Performing the action she'd done twice before, Ami did as requested, providing the passcode to the spell. Yori concentrated, then looked satisfied, smiling a little. "OK. It worked. Great. Welcome to the club, Masao."

Naito looked up, his eyes slightly confused for a moment, then seemed to recover. "That was very strange." He chuckled slightly. "I guess it's another thing you get used to." She looked at him soberly for a moment.

"Oh, no, you never get used to that." They stared at each other for a few seconds then broke down laughing.

When he finished giggling he wiped his eyes. "OK. Now can you tell me why Hotaru tried to chop me into little pieces?"

"Of course. I thought you'd never ask..." Yori grinned, before glancing at Ami. "You want to start?"
Sighing gently, the blue-haired young woman began a now-familiar story, while the PSIA agent listened, fascinated. It took quite a while. S'th'kx and his crewman left after a few minutes, the captain talking quietly to Yori briefly before leaving.
"She's having a lot of problems," Tamiko commented with sympathetic worry, watching the feed from the stealthed drone following Setsuna. The green-haired woman looked rather dishevelled, her hair not in the normal neat style she preferred, while her clothes showed signs of being slept in at least once. She was walking down a street near her home, looking around carefully as if searching for something, a notebook and pen clutched in her hands. Every now and then she stopped and seemed to listen very carefully, then made a note. Once or twice she looked very suspiciously at innocent items she passed, inspecting a mailbox as if she suspected it of harbouring unnatural desires, prodding a loose brick in a wall with her foot a couple of times and writing something down, even stopping and glaring at a young man passing by with such ferocity that he nervously crossed to the other side of the road.

Misaki, watching the same feed, nodded agreement, an uncharacteristic expression of worry and distress on her face. "Our grandfather died from dementia at about eighty-five," she said quietly, causing her friend to look at her. "He acted a bit like that a few times. Everything was out to get him. People in the care home were stealing from him, or feeding him poison, things like that. It was horrible. None of it was true, not that I could see, but you couldn't convince him of it. Then, after a while, he basically forgot who we were. That was even worse." She watched as Setsuna stopped dead, peering at a cat sitting on a wall a few metres away with an expression of deep mistrust, before carefully walking in a very wide circle around it, not letting it out of her sight. "This is really difficult to watch. Poor woman."

"Perhaps we should pull the camera back further? She's definitely heard it a few times, and I think it's making her even more weird than she'd otherwise be."

Misaki considered the idea, then nodded. "OK. Let's bring it back another twenty metres then. We need to follow her, just in case one of the others starts something, I don't think Setsuna is likely too, not in the state she's in at the moment. But you can't tell with this lot. They're nothing if not unpredictable right now."

The floating camera stopped in mid-air, waiting for the distant woman to move further away, then resumed following her from a considerably greater distance, zooming in a bit to keep her easily visible. Tamiko and Misaki watched for a while. Eventually the red-head sighed. "I hope Hnther can do something for her. We've never got on but I don't like seeing anyone in that state. She's a very intelligent if somewhat irritating person. To be reduced to... that... That's just wrong."

"It's not good. What about Michiru? You're watching her at the moment."

"She's a lot better than Setsuna but she's still pretty damn paranoid and not in a sensible way. After Haruka left the other day she kept looking out every window in the house like she was hunting for snipers. I don't think she's heard the camera, Setsuna is the only one who seems to have noticed anything, but she was looking like she was sure there was someone watching her."

"There is, of course," Misaki grinned. "Us."

"But she doesn't know that."

"Haruka pretty much told her..."

Tamiko shrugged. "True, but she doesn't know for sure either. I guess Hotaru might have told her."
She's certainly aware of the fact we're keeping her friends under observation even if she doesn't know how."

Both of them glanced around as Fumiko landed on the roof from the adjoining building, walking over and sitting on the bench next to her sister, in the middle of the roof garden on top of the apartment building. "Makoto seems to be hunting muggers again," she reported with a small smile. "She's not being very nice about it either. It seems to be some form of stress relief."

Tamiko snickered. "I always thought common criminals were beneath that lot," she replied, "based on what they've said in the past." Her friend shrugged with a grin.

"Possibly but there aren't any hostile demons around at the moment, she's too scared of Yori to come anywhere near here where there are lots of non-hostile ones, not that the distinction ever mattered much to her, and none of her 'friends' are around to fight with. She spotted Haruka at one point and just stared, then turned and walked away." Fumiko looked darkly amused. "I think she was surprised that Haruka had two perfectly normal arms, and slightly terrified of the implications."

"Good. Anything that keeps them in line is fine by me." Tamiko crossed her arms and scowled.

"It's Usagi and Minako that concern me the most," Fumiko added. "Usagi keeps talking to herself, or to something invisible. I can't work out which it is. Usagi's stomping around on the roof of her building right now waving her arms and seems to be involved in a serious argument. The only problem is no one else is with her." She sent them both a feed from the drone observing the twin-pony-tailed blonde, who was powered up and in her uniform. All three of them watched with some bemusement as the young woman walked in a tight circle, angrily waving her arms and shouting, occasionally stopping and staring at an apparently empty spot on the roof a few metres away, crossing her arms and tilting her head, seeming to listen.

Whatever she 'heard' seemed to irritate her considerably. Tapping her foot she waited for the non-existent other participant to finish, then resumed shouting. All three observers shared a glance. "That's... pretty weird. Even for her. She's never exactly been the sharpest tool in the box but this sort of thing is fairly odd, isn't it?" Tamiko looked at the two other women. Both sisters nodded.

"I'd think it could be classed as a bit strange, yes," Misaki agreed slowly, watching as Usagi stopped and listened to something again. "Turn on the audio and move the camera closer, will you?" With a nod Fumiko did as requested.

"...sy for you to say, Luna. You're not the one who's seen her entire future ripped away from her! I'm the damn princess, they should listen to me! That cunt Ami is behind all of this, her and fucking Yori. God, I hate that little purple-eyed freak. I should just find her and shoot her in the back." Tamiko and the others looked at each other with raised eyebrows as Usagi paused in her rant, listening to a reply only she could hear.

"No, I'm sure I can take her." There was a pause, during which Usagi's face reddened.

"Fuck, you don't have much confidence in me, do you? I'm the moon princess and she's just some jumped up cross-breed with some good tricks. Sneak up behind her, one good shot, and she's toast."

The pause this time was longer, as the observers exchanged bemused glances again.

"What about Chou? If I can take Yori, she's no problem. None of her friends are either." She listened, then nodded slowly. "OK, yes, Aiko is a bit difficult, that damn teleporting is a pain. I'll
have to think about that."

Listening once more, she sighed. "Luna, I'll deal with Ami and Rei after I've got rid of Yori and her friends. She's no threat. No power, all she's got is that little computer and some little parlour tricks with water and ice. How much trouble could she be?"


"Of course. Once Ami's taken care of the rest will fall into line. Then we can deal with anyone else who'd deny me my rightful place." Pacing back and forth she looked out at the city. "All this will be gone soon enough, then..." Rubbing her hands together she smiled in a very unsettling manner. "Right." Pulling out a small device she fiddled with it for a moment. "Let's see if Minako has come to her senses yet. I wouldn't turn down some help." Waiting impatiently, tapping her foot, she gave up in the end. "Bitch. I bet she's just sulking again. Oh well. I'll just have to go and find her."

Walking to the edge of the roof she stepped off the edge without breaking step, the drone following her, then bounded off down the street, a few people watching her pass with expressions of distaste which she completely missed. One small boy threw a rock after her, then hastily went inside his house.

"That was... very disturbing." Fumiko finally said. Misaki and Tamiko nodded wordlessly. "Should we tell Ranma and Kasumi?"

"They've got their hands full at the moment with that damn asteroid and the other girls. We'll have to deal with this crazy megalomaniac ourselves." Tamiko sighed heavily. "Damn it. I wish we could just go somewhere and fly for a while, or go swimming. This is such a pain in the ass." Standing, she wandered over to the edge of the roof and looked off in the direction Usagi was. The others came and stood beside her.

Fumiko looked at her after a moment. "She seems to have gone off the deep end completely. How do you thing we should deal with this?"

"I wish we could open a portal and just throw the idiot through to somewhere nice and barren. Maybe the firing range. Give her some time to cool down."

"That might just make her worse," Misaki grunted.

"Possibly. But she'd be out of our hair for a while at least. Chuck a few boxes of emergency rations through as well, enough to live on until the others get back, then we could go and deal with her properly. From the sound of it she's gearing up to do something stupid again. If she does, Ranma is going to vapourise the little fuckwit for sure."

"Think she stands a chance of genuinely taking him?" Fumiko asked curiously. Tamiko and Misaki both gave her an odd look.

"Not on her best day and Ranma's worst. She wouldn't stand the tiniest hope of success. I know how powerful she is, if she really gets into her stride, but he'd kill her without even trying. He'd agonise over it afterwards, of course, but it wouldn't stop him doing it even so if that was the only way."

"By this point I'd kill the little cow quite happily, to be honest," Misaki said with a rather bloodthirsty chuckle. "She's pretty much used up all her credit as far as I'm concerned." Her sister glanced at her, then shook her head tiredly.
"Deep down inside you there's just a happy psychopath waiting to get out, isn't there, sis?" she asked. Misaki grinned at her, as did Tamiko.

"I'm just getting very tired of all this crap. I know they have some serious medical problems, are under the influence of a malignant external force, and in many ways can't be blamed for their actions, but that bloody woman is just too far into her delusions to be reasoned with right now. It would be a lot simpler just to end it."

"That it would, but it's wrong, even so. As you well know." Fumiko stared hard at her sister, who reluctantly nodded.

"True. Oh well, it was just a thought." She grinned again. "Kind of a nice one, but..."

Slapping her on the back, Tamiko smiled at them both. "Let's leave the idle discussion of cold-bloodedly terminating a problem to 'Ms Aoyama' and go and stop Usagi doing something stupid, shall we? Ranma will be very annoyed if it all kicks off again. They left us in charge for a reason."

Misaki cracked her knuckles, grinning coldly. "And those bitches made me miss out on walking on the moon. I'm certainly up for some corrective action." Her friends clearly agreed. Exchanging a glance that would have made anyone who saw it run away really quite fast, the three young women leaped from the roof to the next building, heading for an intercept with Usagi, guided by the camera feeds.

Staring at Ami wordlessly for some time, Naito finally shook his head in wonder. He looked at the others, who were all wearing different expressions, waiting, then at Hotaru, finally at Rei. "Poor girls. That's horrible. All that, just to force some future that can't even exist in the first place?"

He felt sympathetic, horrified, and sick, all at the same time. Yori nodded.

"I'm afraid so. We weren't totally certain until after we scanned the moon, but there was absolutely no evidence at all of any 'Moon Kingdom' or anything else pre-dating the sixties. It's entirely fictitious. This damn time machine has been fiddling around with the past, manipulating people for who knows how long, just to drive it's narrative forward to end up with something it can't end up with. For some reason it simply doesn't seem to be capable of understanding that one little but very crucial fact. Our reality is not it's reality and there's no way to make it like that. The best it can do is a partial replication, but at the very real possible cost of all of our reality vanishing in a puff of paradox." No one looked very happy about that summation.

"How can it be smart enough to work out all the different things it needs to do to push reality in that direction but stupid enough to not realise it's impossible?" he asked, shivering at the concept he'd been given. She grimaced, sighing.

"True machine intelligence is apparently extremely difficult to do right. It can be done, but very few species have ever managed it. Most of them settle for something that's kind of smart, in a limited and slightly dim way, which is fine if you're running something like air traffic control or a car, but catastrophic if you've got it plugged into a machine that can erase reality. Running two cars into each other because the system got confused is pretty bad, running two time-lines into each other for the same reason is much, much worse. Apparently the thing is supposed to have an organic mind linked into it in a supervisory role, to stop it making stupid decisions, but god knows how long it's been running without even that level of oversight. It's a time machine, after all. It might have ended up here a hundred years ago, or a thousand, or a million even."

"Or last week. We simply have no way of knowing," Azumi added, frowning. "Lldnr'k thinks it's probably looped back on itself several times already based on things like the temporal signature of
Ami's computer. It could have done it a lot more than that but it's unlikely for a number of reasons. The assumption is that it can only make fairly small changes, either because it's learned that big ones immediately go horribly wrong or because it simply doesn't have the ability to do more than tamper here and there. Given enough time, even small changes could add up horribly. From what we were told any tampering with time is a spectacularly bad idea in the first place, no matter how small the change, but the little ones usually damp out. Temporal inertia, he called it."


"That it is."

The unconscious girls. "And it's the cause of all the trouble we've had recently with Ami's group. It's the reason they're around in the first place, which to be honest I'm fine with, but it's also fucked them up so badly it all fell apart. We're desperately trying to figure out how to repair the situation, or at least fix it enough that it doesn't get worse." She looked at Ami, who looked back, a depressed expression on her face. "It's very unlikely indeed that we can undo everything. I'd say impossible, to be honest, and Ami, Hnther, and Lldnr'k all agree for different reasons. But with some luck we can salvage something we can all live with from the wreckage."

"I'm resigned to the fact that my friends, in the way I knew them, are mostly gone," Ami sighed, obviously very upset about it. "Rei and Hotaru are more or less fine, except for this recent problem. Haruka might come around although I wouldn't be surprised if she just decided to give up completely, as far as the life-style would allow. I wouldn't blame her at all. The rest...?" Shrugging in a tired way she leaned back in the seat and rubbed her eyes. "No idea. None at all."

"Setsuna is drifting away," Chou said quietly, watching the blue-haired girl with concern in her eyes. "We desperately need to get her seen by someone like Hnther but with therapist training. He's still working on that. Haruka could certainly do with some work as well. Michiru isn't in a good state either. The other three are less affected in exactly that way but still need help, if they'll accept it." The blonde glanced at her partner for a moment. "We may have to insist, which isn't exactly ideal, or fair in a sense. This isn't their fault in most ways. And there's always a possibility it won't work in the first place, or not very well. The damage caused by this sort of mental tampering is insidious and very difficult to reverse properly, especially considering how long it's been going on for. Hnther isn't happy about the results."

"He's unbelievably unhappy," Yori added. "To the level that if the people who made the fucking thing still existed he'd kill them all personally, on general principals." The young woman scowled. "I'd help him." The conscious inhabitants of the room agreed in a low growl that raised the hairs on the back of the PSIA man's neck. Looking at him, she added, "But you can see why we don't want this story getting out generally or even going to the PSIA or the government. Someone would be bound to panic, try to do something themselves, undoubtedly fail spectacularly, then the shit really hits the fan. It's not a job we asked for but it's one we're pretty much stuck with as the only ones with the knowledge and contacts to do anything."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I do see. I agree, as well. If this got out even into the Japanese government it would cause... highly non-helpful repercussions." Yori grinned a little at his description. "God only knows what would happen if any other governments got wind of it. The British would probably run in little circles for a day or two then come to their senses and stay out of it, perhaps offer to help, the Canadians might do much the same, but the Americans..." He shivered. "They wouldn't like it at all. The Russians would be worse."

"Whatever the results the one thing you can more or less guarantee is that it wouldn't be very useful," Azumi commented, looking sour.
"All too true." He looked at her, then returned his attention to Yori and Chou. "I suppose you could simply order the PSIA to stay out of it. You do seem to have the authority nowadays." Aiko, Azumi, and Ami stared at him, then looked quizzically at the black-haired girl, who seemed embarrassed and scratched the back of her head.

"Um. I suppose so. We were given quite a lot of, well, unofficial official powers." She looked at her friends who were looking back with interest. "I was going to mention it when it was needed," she said slightly guiltily.

"You've been talking to your mysterious high-up friends again, haven't you?" Aiko asked, looking intrigued. Yori nodded.

"Yes. I had to with all this recent trouble. It was becoming something that would attract too much of the wrong sort of attention. Certain people would prefer that not happen. So would I." She grinned a little. "The result was a little more than I was expecting. We, Chou and I, and by extension the rest of you, were given some quiet but real authority in certain matters. I was told that they knew full well that we were doing the job already so they might as well make it a real one." She shrugged a little. "These things keep happening. Not what I'm looking for but..."

"We know how it goes," Aiko chuckled. She looked curious. "So what? We're official Magical Girls by appointment to the government now, or something?"

Yori grinned more widely. "Not exactly. I really don't want that sort of thing, it's too much responsibility that none of us genuinely have the experience for. I told them as much. None of us are political at all, if anything we're basically apolitical, we're mostly concerned with the magical side of the world not the non-magical one. They said they knew that, but the two things were overlapping more and more recently, something that seemed likely to continue." She looked at Azumi, smiling. "If you end up spreading alien technology all over the planet and solving all sorts of unsolvable problems that will become even more true."

"I suppose it will," the silver-haired girl mused, looking mildly worried.

"In the end the arrangement we came to is a slightly more formal sort of consultancy. We're the official but secret 'Special Talent'. No pay, no real remit except to keep doing what we're doing, but it meant they could give us certain clearances in a way that was a bit more official." She snickered for a moment. "Chou and I more or less had that already but it wasn't written down anywhere. Now it is."

"It's a little like the K'nn peace enforcement authorisation Yori and I were given on K'nn four, only with somewhat higher clearance," Chou explained. Azumi nodded a little while Aiko and Ami looked puzzled. After a moment Aiko seemed to understand, Naito noticed. "But a very similar arrangement."

"From the notice I was sent the clearance was a bit more than 'somewhat higher'," he chuckled. "The Director-General wasn't joking when he said you had higher clearance than he did. It annoyed him nearly as much as it puzzled him."

Ami stared at Yori in mild shock. "So what does that mean?"

"Well, we've been given authority to do whatever we need to to to resolve the current problem, for example," Yori replied. "If it became necessary to blow Michiru into little pieces to stop her vaporising a school, the official government position would be, 'Oh dear, sorry about that.'" She shrugged slightly as Ami paled. "It won't come to that, I desperately hope, and if it did I'd have done it authorisation or no authorisation, which they know, but this way everyone is covered in a
way which keeps the politicians happy should anything ever get said. It almost certainly wouldn't
in any case. This is more like insurance from their side of things."

"And possibly a small bribe to try to keep us on their side," Chou giggled. Yori looked at her, her
eyebrow raised, then nodded.

"Perhaps. As long as it's the right thing to do I'm happy to help. If they wanted me to do something
I wasn't comfortable with I'd turn them down. I told them that as well." She laughed. "No one
seemed surprised. Or inclined to insist."

"For some reason that entirely fails to shock me," Naito said with a straight face, making her laugh
some more.

"That magical girl institute is coming closer and closer," Aiko giggled, making the other woman
glare at her.

"No, it is not."

"Bet you it is."

"Damn it, Aiko, I told you before. That's crazy talk."

"We're all crazy, Yori," her friend giggled. She pointed at Naito, who was watching with a smile,
aware this was some weird long-running joke between them. "Even him."

"Especially me," he replied, grinning. "I'm not some magic-powered superhuman like the rest of
you. If you shoot me, do I not bleed?" He waved dramatically at himself. "Unlike the rest of you,
where it just bounces off and makes you complain about the holes in your shirt. Yet I keep coming
along with you on these interesting little trips."

Yori stared for a moment, then fell over laughing her head off. Everyone looked at her before they
all started laughing as well. It took a couple of minutes for them to recover. "I'm glad you can keep
joking under the circumstances, Masao," she finally said, sitting up and wiping tears of laughter
from her eyes. "Thanks. That helped." He made a small magnanimous gesture, grinning, causing
her mouth to twitch again.

"My pleasure." Looking at her closely, he added, "I must confess to wondering who 'They' are to be
able to give you this authorisation. I know the notice came from a very high level in the
government, but...?" She shrugged regretfully, smiling a little.

"I'd love to be able to tell you but I can't. I made a promise."

He looked at her seriously, knowing that she meant it. "All right. If you can ever tell me I would
like to know but I can accept that."

"Thanks." She glanced at Chou for a moment, the two of them having a silent conversation, he was
sure. "There's more to the story. You've got the background to the moon trip and all the trouble
with Ami's group. Now you need to know the rest." He looked at her curiously, waiting.

"That asteroid?" She waved a hand at the projected image on the wall behind them. "It's a weapon.
It's no coincidence that it's heading at the Earth."

Staring at her for a long moment, he then looked past her at the image of the giant rock, some ten
kilometres away as S'th'kx had moved the ship back out of caution. "A weapon?" She nodded.
"How do you weaponise an asteroid for god's sake?"
"Put engines on it."

Once more he stared in silence. She looked mildly amused.

"Engines," he stated flatly.

"Yes."

"On that." He pointed past her shoulder. She nodded.

"On that. They're quite big."

"They'd have to be, I suppose," he agreed faintly, staring at the thing again. After a moment he frowned. "So that's why you and the others went around the other side of the damn thing?" She nodded again, looking slightly guilty.

"Yes. We didn't want to let you in on it for obvious reasons, so we invented a reason for you five to hang around on this side while we went to look at the installation on the other."

"Hmm." He studied her for a moment. "Did you find anything interesting?"

Yori appeared frustrated. "Yes. Some antigrav engines and magitech from the same source as Ami's computer, in other words the time device, some sort of power supply driving it all, and a very powerful ward protecting all of it. We were in the process of removing the entire end of the asteroid with the engines when all this shit started. It can't possibly be a coincidence. The damn thing has been floating out here for who knows how long, possibly thousands of years, yet as soon as one of S'th'kx's probes finds it the engine fires up aiming it directly at home. As soon as I start doing something that could neutralise the threat Hotaru and Rei go crazy. It was definitely connected."

Nodding slowly, he thought about her words. "I'd have to agree. Too unlikely even for you guys." Frowning slightly he asked, "Why would this time device be trying to ram an asteroid into the planet in the first place?"

"Out best guess is that it's some sort of plan B, a backup method of creating the sort of disaster that our group has been waiting for all this time," Ami sighed. "The story we got was very vague about what the disaster actually was, only that it would kill off a lot of the people and cause some sort of prolonged emergency state that eventually resulted in Usagi ruling a magical Utopia. An asteroid strike could certainly go some way to meeting that description. That thing is big enough to wipe out half the planet's people but not so big it would kill all life on Earth. But it's a hell of a risk. It's making the assumption that we'd survive the strike in the first place. Not completely unreasonable but not totally certain either." She half-grinned for a moment. "Asteroid impacts are dangerous. We're not invulnerable."

"We suspect that the original disaster has somehow been averted although we don't know how or why," Chou told him. "Ldnr'k thought it might be some sort of slow environmental one based on the story Ami and the others had been given, rather than a sudden collapse, but we don't really know for sure. The device probably spent a long time setting it up, making little changes here and there, so the multiverse wouldn't notice and revert it or reset the time lines. Inducing a deliberate asteroid strike is a very large intervention, which would make it much more likely to cause uncontrollable side effects. In turn that makes it less probable that it's a first line plan. But some sort of emergency backup is possible."

"So finding it triggered the device into setting it off anyway, or early, or something like that?"
"asked, considering the idea. "Basically it panicked?"

The blonde woman produced a small shrug, smiling a little apologetically. "More or less. But again, we're making educated guesses. If we could somehow get access to the installation on the asteroid we might get lucky and find some proof one way or another, but then again we might not. That's the sort of thing that happens in movies. I'm not sure some semi-sentient ancient alien supercomputer is going to be helpful enough to leave it's plans lying around where we can get at them."

Naito chuckled, agreeing. It would be suspiciously helpful.

Yori got up and began pacing back and forth restlessly as he watched. "We know it's plans have been going badly wrong for some time. The temporally isolated possible future is proof of that aside from anything else. All the mental damage and craziness would have made the problem steadily worse, but ironically the more it interfered to fix it the worse it made the issue. Again, given a real intelligence, it would have worked this out and stopped poking, but it's just not that smart. It tried looping back and redoing everything at least a couple of times, possibly more, but most likely that also only made things even harder to control. Even for such a powerful machine the number of things to keep track of must be insanely complex. Lldnr'k is firmly of the opinion that it can't be done at all, no matter how good the computer, the variables are almost infinite. Quite possibly genuinely infinite."

"The magitech signature of the engine installation is clearly from the same basic source as Ami's computer and other artefacts they have, but just different enough that it makes me think it dates from a previous attempt. Or even from it's original reality. We'd know if we could access the thing but we're not sure how to at the moment."

"Why not do it through Setsuna?" he asked. She stopped pacing and looked at him. "She's the one who used the thing. Or was used by it, depending on your viewpoint."

"Both, I think."

"Can't you get her to take you to it? Ami said she went back and forth."

"We did think of that, as it was the obvious idea. There are a couple of problems, though. One is that from what Ami said she simply wouldn't cooperate."

"It's true," Ami added. "I asked once about seeing the Time Gate, she nearly bit my head off. Threatened to kill me if I ever asked again."

"So that's one issue. She might be slightly more relaxed about it now, she might not." Yori shrugged. "The other problem is that Lldnr'k strongly advised against letting any of them get anywhere near the thing, especially in the fractional reality we think it's hiding in. He felt that would be asking for trouble. There would be little likelihood of stopping it influencing them if it had direct access. We still don't know how it tampered with them in the first pla..."

"That's how it got at them. It used the engine installation as a relay. There must be some sort of spell trace still on them which it was able to access when we got close enough. I'd have detected it if it was powerful enough to get at them back home, so would Hnther and Lldnr'k. None of us could find anything, so it must be very subtle. We're going to have to get them checked over again. We need to find it and kill it,
Ami stared at her for a long moment. "That sounds plausible, I suppose. It fits the observed data, at least. But it still doesn't explain why I'm not affected."

"It might," Azumi said slowly. Everyone looked at her. She seemed to be thinking hard. Naito thought it looked like she was having some inner conversation. After a few seconds, she continued, "It could be that it was using your computer as a relay at home, if Yori is correct. We know it had a low-level real-time link directly to the device and your computer is a magitech system, which could easily be used to pass some magical energy. It's designed to do that. That could be what was influencing your team-mates. It wouldn't take much, a nudge here and there when you met up. Setsuna could be more directly influenced since she was actually in contact with the thing. You said she had some sort of staff that was the key to accessing the device?"

Ami nodded, looking fascinated. "Yes. It's a weapon as well, but it seemed to be necessary for her to teleport to wherever the device actually is. I suppose it might well have some sort of processing function built into it. I've never really looked at it."

"Perhaps it was using that as a relay as well. That would let it access Michiru, Haruka, and Hotaru, since they were in close proximity to her a lot of the time. Your computer would do the same for your friends for the same reason." The silver-haired young woman sighed slightly. "I'm not sure but it sort of hangs together. In your case specifically it could probably get the results it wanted simply by manipulating the data you got from that thing since you use it so much, and would have had no reason to think it was directing you to a specific end. We know from the traces they found in your mind that you were influenced, just not as much as the others, so perhaps it relied on indirect control most of the time and only resorted to direct intervention if that didn't work."

"That sounds... unpleasantly possible," Ami replied. She didn't look happy. "I always believed what the computer told me. Why wouldn't I?"

"Exactly." Azumi looked around at the rest of them. No one could refute the idea. "So when I hacked the thing and broke the link permanently, it's not impossible I inadvertently also stopped it influencing the rest of your friends. We don't know what the range of the influence is, it might be quite short. Recent events would suggest that." There was a long silence.

"Crap. If you're right, and it certainly sounds possible, that raises some problems," Yori appeared annoyed. "One thing is that we'll need to get Setsuna's staff away from her somehow. It may well still be affecting her, which with the state her mind was in last time we checked could be very bad. The rest of them could be affected as well. Another is that we can't get too close to that asteroid with Ami in case it decides to have a go at her. We can keep Rei and Hotaru unconscious and out of trouble until we leave, though." She looked thoughtful. "I wonder if it's influence, once established, works over longer distances?"

"It's possible, I guess," Azumi shrugged. "It's way past my experience or knowledge. I was just thinking it through logically."

"Well, even if that's the case it won't work once we go back to Krennh space, that I am sure of," the martial artist said. "The separation between the two realities is too much. Even the limited number of magitech and magic that can cross reality boundaries can only do it across fairly close ones. The K'nn grouping doesn't fit that description."

"So when we go back to K'nn four they'll be OK?" Ami asked hopefully.

Yori glanced at her. "Not immediately, but they won't get worse. We can get Hnther and Lldnr'k to
come and help us find and remove whatever residual magic allowed this to happen in the first place. That should ensure it doesn't do it again and hopefully sort them out so they're back to normal."

"Why didn't it affect me this time, I wonder?" Ami mused out loud. Everyone looked at her.

Eventually Naito answered. "My guess, for what it's worth, would be that it's limited in what it can do to you girls. They had been more severely affected than you, from what Yori says, which might have made them easier targets, and if the intent was a diversion to get her to stop attacking it's installation, generating a situation that everyone had to go and deal with would have been a reasonably efficient use of what influence it could bring to bear." They all looked at him this time.

"Not bad. Very likely, in fact," Yori nodded, looking impressed. "I suspect you're right. But now we've neutralised Rei and Hotaru, it might well have a go at Ami if it tries again. So we need to keep her away from the asteroid."

S'th'kx's voice sounded a moment later, causing four of the six people to look up sharply. When he finished speaking Yori sighed heavily, then said something back. She turned to Ami and Naito.

"The asteroid is accelerating again. Harder than last time."

"Damn." He felt his heart sink. "Now what?"

"I'm losing patience with the entire thing, to be honest. I think we just deal with it once and for all. Chou may well be right, there might not be anything down there, although I'd have liked to check, but at this point I think we just destroy it."

"How long do we have?"

She smiled at his worried look. "Oh, weeks, certainly, it's still a hell of a long way from Earth. But I don't want it getting any closer than I can avoid. If nothing else, the closer it gets the more likely someone might notice, then the panic starts." She spoke to the air, S'th'kx responding, then after a moment they felt the ship begin to move. "We'll go and retrieve Hotaru's weapon, he's been tracking it, then go after that damn asteroid and stop it." She sighed. "I really didn't want to force the ward the hard way. I'm not sure there will be much of the asteroid intact afterwards."

"Does that matter?" he asked. She, Aiko, Chou and Azumi all got peculiar expressions. Glancing at Ami, seeing she was as puzzled as he was, he looked back. "I see it does. Why, exactly?" After another odd look she told him.

"They look a bit overwhelmed," Aiko chuckled over the com to her friends. 'Yori' looked up at her from where she was examining Hotaru's pole-arm with interest, then over to Ami and Naito, who were staring at each other, apparently unable to figure out quite what to say. Every now and then one of them would open his or her mouth, or raise a hand, then shake their head and go back to staring. 'Azumi' watched them with amused sympathy.

"It is rather a lot to take on board, especially considering all the other things that have happened in the last hour or so," her sister commented. 'Azumi' glanced at her, nodding slightly.

"I'm impressed with how well Masao is taking all this. He's pretty quick witted and flexible minded. Having someone suddenly try to cut your head off out of the blue would definitely be very disconcerting, worse if it was an apparently insane magical girl. But he recovered faster than I expected."
"He's very smart and a good man," 'Chou' replied. "I'm sorry we had to dump so much on him like this."

"It's a pity we had to tell him in the first place but we didn't have a choice. At least it was him and not someone who wouldn't be able to deal with it," her husband sighed, going back to investigating the mystical weapon. The disguised Nabiki watched with fascination as she ran her hands slowly along it, her fingers every now and then blurring slightly as if they'd dropped into a hole that wasn't there. She recalled the same effect from when she was showing Rei how to access her magic directly. "This thing is amazing," 'Yori' added. "I don't think the time machine is responsible for it. It feels all wrong for that. It's absolutely ancient, I'm sure of that much, far older than Ami's computer, although Ldnr'k could probably tell us more. It's not really magitech, it's magical in a much more direct fashion. There's a hell of a lot of power handling capacity here as well, much more than any artefact I've ever seen before. Working out all the functions is difficult. I wonder if Hotaru realises what she has?"

"The story goes that it could destroy the planet with her using it if she wanted to," 'Chou' said, turning her attention to the weapon. She reached out and gently felt it, raising her eyebrows. "I've never seen it up close before, though. She hasn't told me much about it although we talked quite a few times before all this trouble flared up."

"I'm not sure that 'destroy the planet' is quite right, looking at it," 'Yori' mused, closely inspecting part of the magic. "But it could certainly make a hell of a mess of it. At least as much as that asteroid could, if not more. Assuming you had enough power to run through it, which she certainly does, although she's untrained in using it properly. It seems to be, amongst other things, a very effective amplifier. I'm not sure what the power source is but it's tapped in to something enormous." She prodded it in a couple of places, provoking a sharp snapping sound and a wince. "Ow. It didn't like that." 'Chou' grinned at her.

"Don't annoy ancient alien mystical weapons, dear. It never ends well."

"I'm not trying to annoy it, just work it out. It seems friendly enough, just easily irritated." She poked it again, more respectfully. "Hmmm. Interesting. I think it might be something slightly like our ward system. There's a part of it that's certainly absorbing energy and storing it. This bit here would produce an amazingly solid ward, not very large but damn near impenetrable." She studied the spell closely, her eyebrows going up slightly. "Very efficient as well. That's one of the best ward spells I've ever seen, not far off ours. In fact, it's considerably better in some ways. Not quite as efficient, and nowhere near as large, but even stronger. I'm going to have to remember that. I think I see a way to use some of this to upgrade the ward system."

"She told me once it could cut through anything," 'Chou' commented, watching her investigations. 'Yori' looked at her for a moment then turned her attention to the blade at the end of the long shaft. After a few seconds she nodded.

"That's almost certainly entirely correct. The blade isn't really a solid material, it's a force projection that looks solid. Essentially it's a two dimensional plane. No thickness at all." Staring at it from close range she gingerly touched the edge, flinching back, then sucking her finger, before looking at the small cut on it, impressed. "Total sharpness, essentially. Anything material would be affected. It might even go through most tech-produced forcefields and many wards. You could block it if you knew what you were doing but it would be difficult and take a lot of power." She looked at them. "I think Hotaru can probably turn that part on and off, possibly vary it selectively, although she might not consciously realised what she's doing, since I've seen her poke things with it without them falling apart." Returning her attention to the weapon she inspected it some more,
finally nodding.

"Yes. Here we go. Looks like this node here turns the 'sharpness' on and off. Hmm. So if I do this..." They watched as she sent a thin thread of magic into the ancient weapon. Nothing happened at first, the magic being deflected, but after a couple of attempts she smiled. "Got it. It's off now. It's not as well protected against unauthorised use as it should be. We should probably do something about that." Pulling a coin out she dropped it onto the edge of the blade, which it fell right through onto the floor. Retrieving it she fiddled with the pole-arm again then repeated the action. This time the coin dropped to the floor in two perfectly cut halves. "Wow. That is sharp!"

'Azumi' stared in worried fascination. "If she'd managed to get Masao with that thing..."

"We'd have several pieces of PSIA agent. Quite," 'Yori' grinned at her. "When Kas stopped her she must have left it active. I'm very interested in how much of the control of this thing she's doing consciously and how much is reflex action. When this is all over I'm going to have to talk to her about it." Still studying the magic, the martial artist spared a moment to look over at Ami and Naito again. They still seemed stunned, now both slumped in their seats, staring at the projected asteroid which was several kilometres away, at a range they'd decided was probably more or less safe. They were matching it's course to one side. The engines had shut down again after running for some fifteen minutes, aiming it more precisely at where the Earth would be in a few weeks.

"Let's give then another twenty minutes then we should talk," 'Yori' said with a small smile, going back to Hotaru's weapon with great interest.

Ami stirred, tearing her gaze away from the impossibly valuable asteroid floating serenely against a background of stars, turning her head to lock eyes with Agent Naito. He had an expression that perfectly matched her inner feelings. A look of understanding passed between them before they both turned to watch Yori, who was standing in the middle of the room spinning Hotaru's weapon around, going through some complex kata involving it, looking pleased. Her face paling, she was about to warn the other woman how dangerous the thing was when Yori stopped, grounding the butt of the weapon on the deck and holding it in the middle, the blade some distance above her head. She looked at Ami, an amused expression crossing her face.

"Don't worry, I put it in safe mode."

"Um, safe mode?" Ami had never heard Hotaru refer to anything like that. Yori nodded happily.

"Yep. I worked out some of the functions. The really dangerous ones are locked fairly well, which makes sense, you don't want someone destroying all life in a thousand kilometre radius by accident, but the close-combat ones are fairly easy to get at." Ami gaped at her, then shook her head slightly.

"Easy for you. I doubt many other people could do that." The young woman shrugged, picking the pole-arm off the floor and holding it across her chest for a moment. Ami stared in shock as the blade vanished, leaving just the staff. "What the fuck...?"

"Uh, yes, I found some other things you could do with it." Yori grinned. "Hotaru should find them interesting." Making the staff disappear, she walked over, sitting across from them, Chou and the other two doing likewise. They all stared at Naito and Ami for a moment then simultaneously glanced at the projection of the asteroid. Yori sighed. "So. What to do about all this?"

"Is that damn thing really worth that much?" Naito asked slowly. She nodded again.
"Yes. To a civilisation that uses such elements, certainly. The initial probe surveys show it's got a lot of other interesting elements in it as well, ones we're more familiar with, like quite a lot of gold, platinum, iridium, tungsten, osmium, dense materials like that, although the bulk of it is iron and some sort of heavy rock like volcanic basalt. S'th'kx thinks it's basically a piece of planetary core material. He also says that there's a good chance it's from outside the solar system. None of the other asteroids the probes have scanned so far have the same ratios of various isotopes which suggests it didn't originate here."

"It's possible it came from the same place the time device did," Azumi added. "Or it was captured by the Sun from wandering around out there and the machine found it. We just don't know, aside from the probability that it's not local. Which also suggests that we're unlikely to find that much of these exotic elements anywhere else around here."

"Blowing it to gravel would be something of a waste," Chou added. "Although if we have no choice we will." She grinned for a moment. "S'th'kx might never speak to us again if we did, though. He's wandering about looking like he's seen heaven at the moment. This is his dream find."

"The problem with the asteroid is that not only don't we have the technological base to use any of the exotic elements in anything other than a purely scientific interest application now, and won't for many decades, we don't even have the technology to mine it in the first place. That severely limits the actual value to us directly. It would have to be pretty much ground to powder and run through some extremely high-tech machinery to separate out all the useful things. The Krennsh can do it although it's a process that will take some years." Yori looked at the asteroid again. "Even if processing it could be done faster, dumping that much material with that high a value onto the market, here or there, would cause economic chaos. Some civilisations would be able to absorb it easily, though. A proper assay to determine exactly what's present would suggest the best way to use it."

She looked back at them. "Assuming we even do use it. We could just leave it here, in a safe orbit, when we've dealt with the engines and the time device. It's not going to go anywhere. If we sliced off a chunk for S'th'kx, that would compensate him for his time and the probe swarms, although he's already told me he's not worried about that. I think it would be fair, to be honest, he and his crew have gone to a lot of trouble to help us."

"What are the normal rules covering this sort of situation?" Naito asked quietly. She chuckled, looking mildly lost for a moment, gesturing widely. "Normal? What about any of this is even remotely normal?" He smiled for a moment, still looking shell-shocked. "Good point."

Chou shifted in her seat, sitting up slightly. "If this was in Krennsh space, the situation would apparently be that, as a commissioned vessel involved in such a discovery, the find would be shared at a rate of between twenty-five and fifty percent for the company running the vessel and the balance to the company which commissioned it, depending on negotiations. The crew of the vessel, in other words anyone on board, would be entitled to a percentage of the vessels' share, again based on negotiated rates and to a degree on seniority. S'th'kx, as the captain, would get the largest share, but even passengers would receive something. It's not common but it happens sometimes. Nothing anywhere near this large as far as he'd ever heard."

"It's complicated in this case, though. The captain of the vessel is both the owner of it and the owner of the company running it. The passengers on board are the ones who in effect commissioned the mission in the first place. Not to mention the fact that we're not in Krennsh
space anyway, although we are aboard a vessel from there and the discovery was made by a citizen of K'n'n four with their own equipment." The blonde sighed a little. "It could potentially be very messy, legally. In this case, as far as that part goes, S'th'kx and we trust each other for many reasons so at least that part is fine."

Azumi looked at them for a moment. "The Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which Japan has signed and ratified, makes our involvement a little complicated. It wasn't thought through very well from what I could see, or more accurately wasn't drafted with asteroid mining in mind, it was more aimed at preventing the militarisation of space. Although it in theory covers all of space beyond the Earth, it clearly can't do much more than the solar system. There are definitely alien civilisations out there somewhere, that's a constant in all realities according to my information, so they might have something to say about us claiming their resources for the good of all mankind." She smiled a little as Ami giggled, her shock slowly wearing off. "But you could argue it covers the solar system and anything in it."

"I know a little about that treaty but I can't remember much," Naito said, looking fascinated by the subject. "I do recall that a country can leave it at any point, although it needs to announce it something like a year in advance before it's no longer bound by it."

"Yes. Article XVI allows that. But on the whole the treaty is a good idea. Leaving it probably isn't the best idea as it might well make other countries do the same, although it would be a simple solution." The silver-haired girl sighed slightly. "I wasn't expecting to find I'd be discussing international law regarding space on this trip. I thought it would just be an interesting trip to the moon and back." She smiled slightly ruefully as everyone nodded a little.

"Technically, I suspect you could argue that since we're on a Krennsh ship, having entered and left the solar system through Krennsh space, we're not really bound by the treaty in the first place. It certainly doesn't cover S'th'kx and his crew or ship. You could probably consider all of us except for you, Masao, as representatives of a non governmental organisation." Yori looked amused again as he thought about it. "That's more or less the basis we were working on which is why we invited you. That way we complied with the letter of the treaty by having a State representative monitoring the mission. Not that we were planning on telling anyone about it in the first place. That's all right, both the Americans and the Russians run secret missions to orbit, people can't really avoid noticing them launch, but they don't know why or what they're doing. We're just better at it."

Ami watched the PSIA man's face. He looked quite worried, this was clearly a long way past anything he'd expected to have to think about as well. "We could just forget about it," she suggested. Yori looked at her.

"True. Once we stop the time device using it as a weapon we could push it into a safe orbit and pretend we never found it, like I said earlier. But, personally, although I'm not hugely money-driven, there is a practical reason for using the find." Ami thought for a moment.

"Paying for fusion reactors," she said after a few seconds, sure she was right.

Azumi nodded soberly. "Exactly. A quick calculation shows that even half the value of the exotic elements alone in that asteroid would pay for enough fusion plant and fuel to upgrade the entire planet and run it for decades." She glanced at it for a moment. "Not to mention all the material that we could directly use as funds, like the gold and other precious metals. That could go a very long way to paying for all sorts of domestic things. The magical girl restoration fund would certainly be covered for the next century or more, at least." She looked at Chou, smiling. "You could cover all of Tokyo with it."

Naito had gone silent again, watching them, then looking at the asteroid. Eventually he stood up,
walking over to the invisible wall, staring at the image showing there, before turning his back on it and leaning against it, which looked rather odd. "It's too big." He sighed, seeming slightly lost. "The entire GDP of the planet several times over is way too much to even wrap my head around. You girls might be able to do it but I can't." Yori and Chou exchanged glances, before the blonde got up and approached him, smiling gently.

"We're having a lot of trouble as well, Masao, believe me. We're used to dealing with large amounts of money, for reasons that are unimportant, but this is simply incredible. Even S'th'kx is stunned. He's leaving it up to us to decide what to do."

The PSIA man stared at her for a while, before lowering his eyes to the deck. After a moment he seemed to come to some sort of decision, looking around at all of them. "My vote would be to treat it as if it was a find in Krennsh space. Let S'th'kx and his people deal with it. Take shares for yourselves if you want to, but hold the rest of the value in trust for the good of the entire world when we can use it. Just the fusion reactors would be a more than fair exchange for a few million cubic metres of rock and metal. If I mention this to the PSIA, put it in my report, it will get to the government, and there are people there who would go insane at the thought of all that money. Other governments would find out, it would cause total chaos. You girls and your contacts can deal with it in a way that benefits everyone without all that. I can't think of anyone else who could."

Chou stared at him for some time. "That is a very great responsibility and a huge amount of trust to place on us, Masao."

"I know, believe me. But I can't think of anyone else who could handle it." He grinned at her. "You lot, between you, already have the ability to destroy the planet several times over from what I've picked up over the last year or so. It's still there. This gives the ability to destroy it economically, which in some ways is worse, but I don't think you would. I'm damn sure there are politicians and business men who wouldn't think twice, though. Anthony Murray is proof of that. Think what he'd do if he had control of even a fraction of that." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Even with only a couple of billion dollars or whatever it turns out he had, he caused all sorts of problems that will go on for years. This amount of resources? We'd all be living on Murray-World."

She giggled, glancing at Yori, who seemed amused. "True enough, I fear." She thought for a moment, turning to look at her friends, who all nodded one after another. Eventually she turned her attention to Ami. "What do you think we should do?"

'What do I think?' Ami thought to herself in wonder. 'I think I'm having some weird dream. Even by my standards this is insane!' What she actually said after a long pause was, "We need to stop it hitting the planet first. Depending on how we do that there might not be any fortune in exotic elements."

"True. But if we do stop it intact, or mostly so, what then?" The blonde watched her face curiously. Another pause, then Ami sighed, shrugging.

"I think Masao is right. The sheer amount involved is so large it's almost meaningless. Let someone who knows how deal with it for now. You think you can trust S'th'kx?"

"Implicitly," Yori told her, obviously meaning it.

"Fine. In that case, let him deal with it, process it, whatever needs to be done. As and when the money comes in we, you, use it to fix all the world's problems." She laughed slightly manically as Yori looked at her partner then around at Azumi and Aiko.

"I don't think we can fix all the world's problems," Aiko said with a smile, "Since most of them are
caused by people being people, which probably isn't going to change. But I think we could sort out some of the more annoying ones."

Naito, who was still leaning against the invisible wall, looking like he was in danger of floating into space yet completely ignoring it, suddenly began laughing. Everyone looked at him curiously.

"I just had a weird idea. I think I know what averted this potential environmental disaster of yours, Ami." She raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He pointed at Azumi, still chuckling. "She did. Without even realising it." All the other occupants of the room stared at him, then transferred their gaze to Azumi, who looked taken aback.

"Excuse me?" she said, very puzzled.

"It's your idea to import alien fusion reactors, to replace all our existing polluting energy generation systems over the next few years. If what I've read about the potential long-term impact of that pollution, like rising CO2 levels, soot, sulphur dioxide, that sort of thing is anywhere near accurate, in fifty years or so the world could be in a bad way. That might well end up killing hundreds of millions of people all over the planet, causing societal collapse. The time machine might even be interfering to make that happen in the first place, or make it worse." She stared, stunned.

"By bringing in the fusion power option now, before we reach a point of no return, I'll bet you've changed all that, permanently. Possibly not eliminated it but it will have a huge effect in the next few years and decades." He shrugged, pleased with his logic. "Without knowing anything about it you may well be the reason the time machine's plans came unravelled and why it needed to activate plan B."

Azumi slumped down onto a seat, staring at him with raw shock on her face, then looked around at her friends, who appeared surprised but thoughtful as they pondered his words. Ami thought it through, then pulled out her computer and ran a few simulations based on information she had stored in the device, finally nodding to herself, satisfied. "He's quite possibly right. The impact on pollution just replacing all of Japan's energy requirements with clean fusion power is very significant. Add in the effect of, say, roughly half the planet switching over to it within twenty years, and the results are a profound shift on what would otherwise happen, for the better."

Sitting next to her friend, Yori grinned at her. "Congratulations. You saved the world." The silver-haired girl slowly turned her head to look at the other woman, a weird expression on her face, but slowly began to smile.

"How are we going to do this?" Naito asked, staring at the asteroid from the control deck. Beside him, Yori looked thoughtfully annoyed.

"I'm not completely sure. We tried cutting the engines free and it did something to Rei and Hotaru to get us to stop. I could go back and finish the job, but there's always the possibility it could do something worse along those lines. Affect Ami, or the others back home. While I'd still like to get a look at the installation to see if there's anything there we can use it might be best to just destroy it in one go." She glanced at Azumi, who was staring hard at the distant floating rock. The other woman shook her head without looking.

"Still working on it. It's used several layers of encryption, I'll get through eventually, but it might take a while. Too long, probably." Naito wondered how she was doing whatever she was doing but
decided that not only didn't it really matter but that he probably wouldn't understand either. Although it was interesting that she seemed to have an ability that was similar in some ways to one of those of the terrifying Ms Aoyama. Presumably the cold woman had learned it from the icy one.

"If I could get physical access to the computer core the security could be bypassed but from this distance it's not easy. The technology isn't the highest we've encountered but it's way up there." She looked over her shoulder for a moment. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. Keep trying." She nodded, going back to looking at the asteroid, her face moving minutely as if she was having some sort of very complex internal dialogue. Naito watched her for a moment then turned away.

S'th'kx called something to Yori, who scowled. "It's activated the engines again. Looks like a course correction." A few seconds later the captain said something else, causing her to nod. "Yep. Shut down once more."

"Couldn't it just leave the engines running and get there much sooner?" Naito asked curiously. "I know you said they're nowhere nearly as powerful as this ship's drive but the speed would build up pretty fast even with a low acceleration."

"That's the problem," Ami told him from across the room from where she was using her computer to access a data feed from the ship's own sensors, looking at the results with interest. "It could cut the transit time to Earth from here to a couple of days rather than several weeks, but it would be going so fast it would sterilise the planet when it hit, just from the shock wave. It doesn't want to wipe out all life, just a large amount of it. Destroying the entire biosphere ruins it's plans as much as failing to destroy enough of it."

"So we at least have some time to work it out," Naito mused. She nodded.

"Yes. Assuming it doesn't do much more in the way of course corrections, about three and a half weeks. It will hit at a fairly horrific speed, though, a little over one hundred and fifteen kilometres per second. That's much faster than a normal asteroid could manage." She entered some figures into the machine, running some calculations. "Assuming a diameter of just under nine hundred and fifty metres, density of iron on average, hitting bedrock at about eighty degrees... Hmm. Impact energy is about five point seven teratons of energy in nuclear bomb terms, more than a thousand times the total amount of every nuclear bomb ever made at all at once. It would leave a crater about fifty-five kilometres across about a kilometre deep in granite, displacing over two hundred cubic kilometres of rock, half of which would end up in the atmosphere as everything from dust to large chunks coming down all over the planet. Some might even make it back to orbit."

He'd gone white, listening to the dispassionate recital of figures. "It's even worse if it hits water, which would be more likely. You wouldn't believe the size of the tsunami wave. It would go around the entire planet several times. The amount of water that would go into the atmosphere would make it rain for years. If it hit in the middle of North America, the US, Canada, and most of Mexico would be dead and the long term effects would kill half the remaining world population within a decade. Anywhere in an ocean and everyone within a hundred kilometres of the shore everywhere on the planet would be washed away."

"So we don't really want to allow that to happen," Aiko suggested, her face grim. All he could do was nod.

"Screw it. I'm just going to blow the damn thing to bits." Yori sighed, running her hand through her hair, then readjusting her braid. "We could talk about it for weeks but in the end we have to stop it."
"What about using Hotaru's magical weapon?" Chou asked slowly. The other woman looked at her for a moment, her eyebrows up.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you said when you were playing with it that the blade could go through most wards and force-fields. Could we use it to breach the ward down there then destroy the engines, leaving the rest of it intact? Or possibly just kill the power supply."

"We need to shut down it's communications link to the rest of the time device as a priority, so it can't influence Ami and her friends. But yes, I suppose it's possible that might work." Yori produced the staff from thin air, looking at it speculatively.

"Won't using it's own tools against it be difficult if not impossible?" Naito asked. "I mean, it would surely have taken the possibility into account and built in defences against that. That's only sensible."

She glanced at him for a moment, then studied the staff in her hands again. "It may have supplied this thing but I'm pretty sure it didn't make it. The magic is completely different. You could certainly block the blade with a ward if you knew what you were doing but it's not easy. It would take a lot of power, which it certainly has, the knowledge of how to do it, which it may have, and enough forethought to actually do it. It might not have that."

"We already know that we can take it by surprise," Chou mused. "It didn't see any of this coming from what we can tell. It's powerful, but hardly omniscient or unbeatable. It's worth a try, I think. Worst case it doesn't work and Yori can just brute-force the ward, which will certainly take care of the engines and everything else at the same time."

Azumi walked over to them, looking annoyed. "Still can't get into it. But I did find one thing of interest. I managed to track the communications link. It'd definitely going to the same place the one from Ami's computer was, a fractional reality offset from ours a little bit. There doesn't seem to be any linkage to anywhere else."

"That's something at least," Aiko suggested. "It might mean that there isn't some network of these things scattered all over the place talking to each other, just waiting to pounce."

"Or that it's directly controlling such a network without any links between the various parts of it," Azumi noted sourly. Her friend sighed.

"Look on the bright side. That idea is just depressing."

Yori, who was listening with mild interest, most of her attention focussed on the mystical weapon she was holding, looked up with an expression of irritation. "There's a problem. I can use some of the functions of this thing, but not all of them, not without a lot of further study. The really cool tricks are locked down pretty well. Hotaru can use them easily, it's keyed to her after all, but she's already under the influence of that damn machine. Taking her down right next to it might make her fall enough under it's spell to start waving this thing at us rather than that. That would be awkward."

Chou looked over at the sleeping girl, her face troubled. "Poor Hotaru. She's very young to have all this going on." After a moment she seemed to think of something, her brow creasing slightly. Everyone waited for her to finish thinking whatever it was through. "There is a possible way around that but it's a little risky. I'd have to get her permission."
"What do you mean?" Naito asked, curious. She looked at him, then glanced at Azumi.

"You remember when we talked to that poor girl after the attack? The technique I used to calm her and enhance her recall?" The silver-haired woman nodded slowly, obviously wondering where this was going. "I think it might be possible to use a variant on that to at least temporarily block out the influence of the time machine. It depends on how it's affecting her. It would only work if she permitted it, if she resisted there's no chance at all, and it's not guaranteed even so, but it might be worth a try." She looked at Naito and Ami. "It's something a bit like hypnosis but more accurate and faster. In theory I could block out a lot of her subconscious, hopefully including whatever hold the time device has on her mind, allowing her to concentrate on using her weapon on the ward. She'd be in a bit of a dream state with some of her mind temporarily disabled."

"I'm not entirely happy about that," Ami said, looking troubled. "It sounds a lot like what the machine has already been doing to her. To all of us."

Chou smiled reassuringly at the blue-haired girl. "I understand why you'd think that, but it is different. There's no damage caused, it's only temporary, can only be performed with a willing participant, and I couldn't make her do something she wasn't prepared to do. It wouldn't allow me to force her to do anything, just help her do what she'd do anyway."

"You're certain?"

"Yes. It's perfectly safe from that point of view. The main risk is that it might suddenly fail, leaving her exposed to the full influence of the machine, which could be bad. We'd have to keep a very close eye on her and stop her immediately if that happened. I don't want to hurt her again like I was forced to the last time." Chou looked sad. "That was... very unfortunate."

"OK. Ask her. I can't think of any reason not to but I still don't like it," Ami finally said. Chou nodded, getting up and walking over to sit beside the sleeping Hotaru. She looked at Naito.

"Masao, please stay out of her line of sight and stay quiet. She seems to be fixated on you, so with any luck if she doesn't see or hear you it won't trigger the implanted suggestions." Worried, he agreed, moving to a position that ensured the girl couldn't see him. Yori joined her partner next to Hotaru. Reaching out Chou gently woke her.

"Hotaru? Can you hear me?" The purple-haired young woman opened her eyes, looking around, then smiled a little.

"Yes, Chou. Is it over? Did you fix me?"

"I'm sorry, dear, it's not quite over yet. We need your help. We need to stop the asteroid, which we can do, but we'd really like to get at the machinery on the surface first. It might help us. Do you understand?"

Hotaru nodded, her face puzzled. "Yes. Yori was talking about that earlier."

"Good. Now, the ward surrounding it is very strong. We can break it but it may well destroy the machinery if we do. Yori has been examining your weapon and thinks that it might be able to open the ward for us without destroying everything. She can't use it for that, you'll have to."

Puzzlement turned to worry. "But that thing it might affect me again."

"Yes, that's the problem. I think I might know a way to stop that from happening, for at least a little while, but I need your cooperation and permission. I'd need to... sort of turn part of your mind off, or put it to sleep, only for a little while. It might well work for a few minutes. I'm not completely
sure, the only way to find out is to try it, but it won't hurt you even if it fails. But you'd have to allow me to do it. I can't if you resist."

Hotaru was silent for a few seconds, staring at the blonde. She looked at Yori who smiled slightly at her. "What do you think I should do, Yori?"

"It would help us a lot if this works. There's a slight risk it might fail when we're down there but we'd keep a very close eye on you to stop anything bad happening. I promise." After a few more seconds the girl returned her attention to Chou, who was waiting patiently.

"Does Ami agree as well?"

"I do," her friend said from behind her.

"Do it." The young voice trembled slightly with nervousness, but was otherwise firm. Chou inspected her face, then nodded.

"Thank you." She put a hand on Hotaru's forehead, smiling at her. "This is going to feel very strange but please just let it happen. If you fight it you'll stop it working." The girl nodded once, waiting. Closing her eyes, the blonde concentrated while everyone watched silently. Yori also put her hand on Hotaru's head, apparently monitoring the work. A minute or two later Chou opened her eyes, carefully removing her hand.

"Hotaru?"

There was a long pause, then the young woman looked at her. "Yes, Chou?"

"How do you feel?"

The pause was even longer this time. "Very weird. Tired. Confused." She looked at Yori, then back to Chou, a faint frown crossing her face. "Where are we?"

"We're on a spaceship belonging to a friend of ours. Do you remember?"

Eventually the girl nodded, a faint smile coming and going. "Yes. I remember being very excited about the Moon. Did that happen?"

"It did. You seemed to be having a lot of fun." Chou glanced at Yori, who nodded slightly, removing her hand as well, then standing up.

"Hotaru?" The young woman looked at Yori. "Can you do something for us?"

"Of course. What do you need me to do?"

"I'd like you to come with me then use your weapon to open something. It won't take long."

"OK." The girl looked around, puzzled, then down at herself. "Oh. I'm already in uniform. Where is it?"

"I've got it here. I'll carry it for you, all right?"

A faint frown appeared, but faded after a moment. "All right. I'm not supposed to let anyone else hold it but I know I can trust you." Yori smiled at her.

"You can. Come on, let's go and solve this problem." She held out a hand, which Hotaru took, helping her to her feet. Naito noticed she was walking with extreme care, as if she was just drunk
enough to know she was unsteady on her feet but not so drunk she couldn't compensate for it. Moving carefully to stay out of her line of sight he saw Yori glance at him, then direct the girl out the door of the common room and down the corridor in the direction of the airlock. Chou and Azumi followed her. Aiko looked at him, then Ami.

"She'll be fine. We should stay here, we can't do much to help at the moment. Hopefully they can make this work then we can see what's there."

"Can you teleport down to the asteroid?" Ami asked curiously. Aiko looked slightly dubious.

"Almost certainly yes but it's a little complicated. I'd like to try it when we're sure the thing is taken care of. At the moment it's just one more thing to cause problems. I'm happy to wait."

"Fair enough."

Moving to one of the control panels, the brunette manipulated it for a while, finally looking satisfied. She pointed behind her to part of the wall, which, when they turned around, had a projection from a different camera, one which was focussed on four figures moving towards the asteroid. Yori and Chou were gently towing Hotaru behind them with Azumi bringing up the rear. The camera seemed to be following them as they moved so the image stayed more or less the same size. S'th'kx was manoeuvring the ship to bring it behind the asteroid and to one side at a safe distance, so they could see the engine installation which the four women were heading towards.

"I hope this works," Ami muttered, concerned both for her team-mate and friend as well as the others.

"So do I," Naito concurred, watching intently. He'd put his camera away some time before, even if the security spell would have allowed him to take photos of all this he didn't want a record of it for a number of reasons.

Shortly the quartet touched down on the asteroid, moving slowly over the surface to a point about eighty metres from the installation of alien machinery. They stopped, Yori moving slightly further ahead and apparently closely examining something the camera didn't show, before nodding in satisfaction. Producing Hotaru's pole-arm, she made the blade appear then handed it to the girl and stepped back and to one side.

"We're going to see what happens now," Azumi's voice came to the people in the common room. "If Hotaru can open even a small breach Yori can take out the power supply to the engines and the ward. S'th'kx has identified what he thinks is the right point to destroy without wrecking the entire thing."

Everyone watched as Hotaru moved forward, supported by Chou, who Naito noticed was clearly ready to drop her in her tracks if anything happened, her left hand poised mere centimetres behind the younger woman’s head. Lowering the weapon Hotaru pointed it directly in front of her then pushed it forward slowly. Seconds later it made contact with something. A bright light came from the point of contact, illuminating the women and the surface surrounding them in almost daylight levels of brilliance, then as the girl continued to push, the light spread sideways and up, eventually showing just under half a dome covering the entire set of machinery, glowing gently but visibly. The glow got brighter at the point the blade was touching, to a point that even through the projected image it was difficult to look at.

After a few seconds Naito leaned closer, squinting. It looked like the brilliantly glowing dome was slowly deforming inwards. "Is it...?" he began.
"It seems to be working," Azumi reported, sounding pleased. "The ward is beginning to give."

"Good work, Hotaru," Ami said in a low voice, watching intently. Naito glanced sideways at her then returned his attention to the projection. On the asteroid the glow was steadily growing stronger, beginning to flicker now, ripples of light running across the ward. The entire thing was lit up by this point although the far side was barely visible.

"What's that?" Ami asked, pointing. Naito followed her finger. In the rough centre of the dome one of the machines was beginning to glow a dim orange colour.

Aiko was quiet for a moment, then said, "I think it's the main power unit. It's ramping up its output to power the ward." They could see the ripples were coming faster and faster, the huge dome flickering with light. The glow in the middle grew more intense. "I hope they can breach it before it manages to overpower Hotaru's weapon," Aiko muttered. "What did you call that thing once?"

"It's called the Silence Glaive," Ami said absently. "Or that's what Hotaru and Setsuna both referred to it as. I have no idea where they got the name from."

The glow from the machinery suddenly peaked, the ripples of light becoming a steady blur, then the illumination began to withdraw back towards the point Hotaru was attacking the ward. Aiko swore under her breath. "It's resisting."

Several things suddenly happened in very quick succession. Yori stepped forward, putting her hands on Hotaru's, the entire weapon suddenly lighting up a familiar purple colour, which rapidly grew extremely bright. The dome of the ward flashed a brilliant rainbow of colour, too bright to look at for a second, while a small point only a metre or so across in front of the women suddenly went dark. Two balls of light, one green and one golden, shot through the apparent opening and impacted a brief fraction of a second later on the brightly glowing power unit, which instantly vanished in a large flash of light. A shock-wave radiated out from the explosion, throwing dust everywhere, dispersing the remnants of the ward dome immediately and blasting all four women off the surface of the asteroid into space. Ami yelped in shock, blinking frantically from the flash.

"Oh shit! Hotaru!"

"Ow. That hurt," Azumi's voice came to them, sounding winded. "Quite a lot. But we're OK. Hotaru is unconscious, the feedback from the ward collapsing knocked her out, and Yori is pretty wobbly as well. She took a lot of it to stop anything more serious happening to Hotaru. They'll both be fine, Chou says, but they'll need a rest for a few hours. She's going to make sure Hotaru stays out until either we stop the machine influencing her here or go back to Krennsh space."

There was a pause as Aiko, Ami, and Naito exchanged glances. After a few seconds Chou's voice came. "Ami, Hotaru is all right, but her hands need a bit of healing again. I'm sorry about that. There was a very large amount of energy going through the weapon when the ward collapsed and she received some fairly minor but painful burns. We're on our way back now. As soon as we've all recovered we can come back and investigate the machinery. We'd appreciate your help."

"All right." Ami spoke to the room at large. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes. Perfectly," Chou replied, sounding mildly amused.

"How's Yori?"

"Mumbling about that sounding like a good idea but not being entirely sure it really was." The amusement was much stronger now, accompanied by a note of loving exasperation. "It was a very
powerful ward and all that energy had to go somewhere. She took a lot of it. Don't worry, they'll both be fine very soon."

S'th'kx's voice sounded, Aiko raising her head and listening carefully. When the captain stopped speaking she replied in the same language, then turned to the other two. "That definitely did the trick. He can't read any magic or technological energy at all coming from there now from this distance. The power source, whatever it was, is completely dead. Some sort of advanced space-time power tap he called it. Luckily not very large, and probably pretty old and not running at peak output."

A few minutes later the four women re-entered the compartment, Azumi carrying Hotaru very carefully while Chou supported a limping Yori, who looked rather washed out. "That was more difficult than I expected," the black-haired girl said to them, smiling slightly in a tired manner. "I haven't used so much energy for a long time." She looked at her partner. "I could do with something to eat, love."

"Sit down and I'll get some lunch sorted out," the blonde replied with a smile, helping her to a seat. Sparing a moment to heal her leg, she moved to the table, producing some sandwiches and a few bottles of water. "I'll get the processors making some more but for now this should keep everyone going," the tall women commented, bringing her partner a few sandwiches and a bottle, before going to check on Hotaru. She looked at Ami, who was inspecting her younger friend with a slightly depressed expression.

"She's more or less fine, Ami, just those burns." The purple-haired girl's hands were raw and weeping, burn marks radiating up her forearms in a fern-like pattern from the energy discharge. "They look bad but are mostly superficial. Very painful, though, so it's a good think she's sleeping deeply." Chou smiled at the other woman, then turned to her friend, quickly removing all the damage and leaving unmarred skin behind. Ami shook her head in wonder.

"I know I keep saying it but that's absolutely amazing to watch."

"It's very satisfying to do as well, believe me," the blonde remarked, standing and looking at her. "I'll be very interested to see how fast Hotaru picks it up. Yori is sure she can, her abilities are somewhat different from ours but seem to overlap enough that our methods should improve her own considerably."

"She'd like that," Ami commented, grinning for a moment. "She's been looking at Yori as if she was some sort of healing goddess ever since she watched her regenerate Haruka's arm." Chou laughed gently, looking at her petite partner, who was in the process of inhaling her food, looking better already.

"I'm not entirely sure that description is a good fit." Yori produced a huge belch, then went back to disposing of some more sandwiches. Chou winced while Ami started laughing. "Not at all sure..."
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"Anything?"

"No, nothing useful. The power supply is completely destroyed, I can't read any active power sources anywhere around here, either magic or otherwise. My scans seem to suggest this is the central processor, it's quite similar to my computer but much more primitive, but without it being active it's hard to be completely sure."

"We could supply some power to it easily enough, it seems to run on a specific type of magical energy which we can provide, but I'm not sure that would be a good idea." Ami turned to look at Yori, beside her, meeting her violet eyes with her own gaze, which she thought probably held as much worry as the other's did.

"You think it might try to influence me if it 'wakes up'" she asked. Yori nodded.

"I do. There are several very complex spells still in place around here, which I suspect may well be part of however it's getting at you girls. Without the power supply they're dormant, but if we power any of it up they might come up as well. That could give it access to you. Which is probably something we want to avoid."

"Can you get rid of them first?" Ami asked.

Yori sighed a little. "It's difficult, but yes. I've deleted half a dozen so far but one or two are so intertwined into the structure of this installation it will take hours to be sure we've dealt with them fully."

"I don't have anything else to do, do you?"

After a moment, Yori shook her head. "Guess not. Right, better get on with it. If you need me I'll be over there with Chou." She smiled in a mildly annoyed manner then drifted over to her partner, who was examining part of the destroyed magitech power system with interest. Ami watched them for a moment then turned back to her own investigations. Two hours or so later she was floating near the engine system, scanning it curiously, trying to work out how it functioned, when she felt someone nearing her. Looking around she spotted Azumi. The silver-haired girl waved to her, neatly sliding into place in the microgravity environment with an ease that suggested both practice and remarkably good coordination.

"How's it going?" she asked, looking around. "Find anything interesting?"

"Only a lot of technology so complicated I can't make heads or tails of most of it," Ami sighed. "It would take several years of study to understand the principles behind this engine. And it's less advanced that the ones the Krennsh use."

"Apparently. S'th'kx says it read as something approximately one to two generations behind state of the art on K'nn four. A long way ahead of anything we can produce but some way behind them." Azumi looked at the engine unit embedded into the rock and metal of the asteroid at their feet. "Lldnr'k did say that the builders of the time machine weren't the highest technology civilisation or the best mages around, although they were very good at both technology and magic. The Krennsh
don't do magic, they're kind of deficient in their abilities in that field, but they more than make up for it in their technological abilities in most cases. Magic, they hire mages for. Lots of them." She grinned. "Apparently it pays amazingly well."

"Interesting." Ami listened, once more intrigued by how much of the alien worlds on the other side of portals all these people knew, then turned her attention back to the engine. "I'd love to take this thing to pieces and work out how it functioned."

"Misaki would help, I think, she's the engineer in our little family." Azumi chuckled. "But I don't think we can risk it. Just in case the time device can somehow reach any of you through it. As soon as we're through here, we're going to destroy all of it to be safe."

"Pity. But probably for the best."

"Don't worry," the silver-haired woman told her companion with a smile. "We'll scan it thoroughly first just in case there's anything useful about the technology, although S'th'kx says his initial scans show it's of fairly conventional design without any surprises." After a moment she added, "if you really want to learn about anti-gravity spacecraft drives we can get the manual for one easily enough." Ami stared at her for a moment.

"Seriously?" The other woman nodded, grinning.

"Of course. You don't think that every world out there is forced to reinvent the wheel, do you? That's the whole point of interworld trade. If you want wheels, you go to the wheel shop and buy the damn things, you don't waste your time making them. In this case, the wheel shop is on the other side of a portal, but the principle stands. I know several places that buy in lots of technology, and export it as well. Our friend Uthryyl has spent over a century doing that. His world is about half-way between Earth and K'nn four in tech for most purposes, but a lot of it they just bought in from somewhere else. It's easier, cheaper, and quicker." She shrugged. "Or think of those interstellar ships the Krensh are building. They could make the drives from scratch, their technology is up to it, but they didn't see the point when they could lease a couple of them for a fraction of the cost and effort. If they needed dozens, it might end up cheaper to make them domestically, it might not."

Ami thought about it for some time. Azumi made some good points. "If that's the case, why don't we get the plans for these fusion reactors of yours and make them ourselves. We'll need a lot of them."

"I've got the plans," Azumi said, looking amused. "For quite a lot of things." Ami stared in surprise. "But in our case, there's a lot of technological progress we'd need to make before we could make a fusion reactor on that design. Several decades of it. Think about it like what would happen if some Victorian engineer had been given full design information on something like a plasma TV. All sorts of technology is embedded into something that on the surface looks quite simple. They wouldn't have had a prayer of doing anything at all useful with that data for fifty years or more, there are too many other things that are needed first. We're in the same state with a lot of this technology. Most of it, probably. But, we can buy it. Once all the paperwork is sorted out, anyway."

"Hmm. I see your point." Thinking about it for a little longer, Ami nodded slowly. "It's a good one."

"I wondered the same thing at first. Uthryyl and some other friends explained it." Smiling, Azumi experimentally prodded part of the engine, before turning to the other woman. "It's not obvious if you're used to the neat little world shown on TV and in the movies. Find alien technology,
implausibly quickly reverse engineer same, miracles happen. It doesn't really work like that."

"It's more like meet alien salesman, sign import paperwork, transfer funds, miracles happen, I guess," Ami giggled.

Laughing, Azumi nodded. "Basically. And I know a damn good salesman. A very nice person as well. You'll like him, and his family. I expect we'll visit there soon enough."

"I still have trouble with all this wandering around through portals like we're going to visit friends in Kyoto or something," Ami commented with a small grin, scanning the part Azumi had been playing with. "You guys make it look almost... pedestrian."

"It's surprising how quickly you just accept it," the other woman responded, smiling. "One day I'd like to try some interstellar travel. I'm told that way you meet the real aliens. But it's still quite a slow process even with faster than light drives. Several months of travel quite likely. I can wait."

Shaking her head in wonder, Ami closed the computer again, putting it away. "Amazing. Sounds like something to look forward to, though." She looked around at the scene. "I wonder how far Yori and Chou have come with removing all the various magic from this so far?"

"They think there's another hour or so before they're fairly sure they've got it all," Azumi replied after a moment. "It's possible there will still be some subtle low-powered stuff they missed due to it being dormant, so we'll have to keep careful watch for anything odd happening when they power up the main computer, but hopefully we can spot it in time if that does happen."

"I wish I knew how that damn time machine was influencing the others," Ami sighed. "And why it doesn't seem to have had a go at me so far."

"Be grateful it hasn't. It still might. I'm more worried about it doing something to the others back home."

"How do we know it hasn't?" Ami turned to her companion, worried at the thought.

"We arranged to be contacted if anything went badly wrong at home. We could get back pretty fast, in an emergency, by portalling back to Krennsh space, back here near the moon like before, then teleporting home. It would only take a few minutes. Or it's possible Aiko could teleport directly back. So far, we haven't heard anything." Ami studied the other woman for a few seconds, desperately curious.

"So whatever weird communications method you're using can't reach directly from here to Earth?" she guessed out loud. Azumi seemed amused.

"Not originally. We're using the subspace data relay that S'th'kx dropped into lunar orbit at the moment. It's not designed for what we use but it works fairly well. It's something of a hack job, though, so we're going to have to get something better at some point."

Ami stared at the other woman for some time. "It's really irritating the way you keep dropping hints to how you're doing all this, you know," she grumbled after a while. Snickering, Azumi grinned.

"Oh, I do know, that's where the fun is." She laughed as Ami glared at her for a moment. "You'll find out in time. Or you might work it out if we drop enough hints." Shaking her head in irritation, the blue-haired woman went back to scanning the engines, finally snapping her computer shut and putting it away.
"I can't learn any more from this. Let's go and have a look at something else." Glancing around, she picked a direction fairly arbitrarily and headed off to another piece of equipment, Azumi following, still giggling a little.

Sighing to itself, the small black piglet shook water off its back and spared the shopkeeper who had just thrown the bucket of soapy water he'd been cleaning his windows with into the alley a vicious glare, which the man completely failed to notice. The man walked back into the main street whistling, looking at his windows in satisfaction, before picking up his cleaning equipment and going back inside. Squeaking in impotent rage, the piglet watched, then turned to look at the comparatively enormous backpack lying on the ground next to it with a porcine sigh.

'Fuck.' Ryoga grumbled to himself in indistinct squeals as he grabbed the straps of the pack in his mouth and began tugging it into the cover provided by a nearby fire escape. 'Now I need to find some hot water. Again. That's the third time today already.' Pushing and pulling he managed to get his pack hidden fairly well, before looking around. 'Where the hell am I this time, anyway? It looks vaguely fami...' A feeling of cold horror went through him as he realised the terrible truth.

'Oh, god! I'm in Minato!' The little pig looked frantically around, but saw no sign of a horrifying green-haired woman with dark glasses in a nice suit. Slowly he relaxed slightly. 'Maybe she hasn't noticed yet. If I can find some hot water I can get the hell out of here before she does.' He'd kept as far away from Tokyo in general and Minato specifically ever since his encounter with the unbelievably creepy Ms Aoyama, finding that he woke up in a cold sweat every now and then after having nightmares about what she'd do if she every saw him again. Now here he was right in the middle of the area he'd been told in no uncertain terms never to enter again on pain of something truly ghastly happening to him.

'Damned Akane Tendo...' he thought, frantically trying to work out the fastest way to change back, while trotting off down the alley. Looking around for some place to get hot water, tea, hell, even someone to piss on him, he hoped like hell that the demonic woman wouldn't notice he was there.

Rounding a pile of garbage, he was just wondering what the weird crunching noise he could hear was when he spotted the source. Stopping dead in his tracks he stared at the strange animal, several times his current size, with a mouthful of remarkably large and sharp teeth, that was in the process of eating the remains of an old refrigerator someone had dumped in the alley. It stopped chewing, its big ears moving to focus on the little pig, then its head turning to look at him.

It swallowed. So did he.

The thing licked its lips, getting to its feet, while staring fixedly at him.

'Ooh, shit,' he thought, backing away. 'What is that?'

The creature looked around in quick jerky moves like a bird, always coming back to staring at him. He wasn't at all keen on the expression on its furry face. It took a step closer. He took one back. And again.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Lunge.
'Holy FUCK,' he gibbered in terror, although all that came out was a panicked squeal. Turning, he bolted, little hooves rattling on the street, with the thing in hot pursuit.

'Goddam Minato! This place is insane!,' he thought as he ran for his life, the creature, some sort of mini-demon he was now sure, mere metres behind him, growling in a manner that suggested it was hungry and not, in fact, wanting to play. 'Damn it, this is all your fault, Akane!'

"Hmph."

"What?" Tamiko looked at Fumiko, who was standing on the edge of a roof, looking into the street.

"We missed one," the other woman said, sounding both amused and annoyed. Walking over, Tamiko and Misaki joined their friend, looking to where she was pointing. They watched as one of Chiyoko's little demons charged down the street in hot pursuit of a small black piglet with a black and yellow bandanna around its neck, the demon growling and the piglet emitting terrified squeals. Passersby yelped and jumped out of the way, watching the chase with varying expressions.

"So we did," Tamiko sighed. The piglet ran under a parked car, while the demon jumped over the top, almost catching its prey as it shot out the other side, but the terrified Ryoga jinked sideways just in time and dived into an alley. The demon followed.

"Want to go after it?" Misaki asked idly, eating a cereal bar. Tamiko shrugged.

"There's only one. We can get it later. Usagi is more important at the moment."

"What about Ryoga?"

The red-head grinned nastily. "He's pretty tough. He'll probably live. Might give him extra encouragement to stay away from here as well."

"True."

All three watched as the chase came out of the alley again after a series of crashing noises, heading back the way the pair had come, the demon still growling. Misaki giggled a little. "Runs fast for such little legs, doesn't he?"

Fumiko and Tamiko nodded, grinning. Fumiko raised a hand and fired a tiny ki ball at the demon, making it dive sideways as the energy sphere popped on the brickwork of the building next to it, which gave Ryoga a few metres lead time. Her friends looked enquiringly at her.

"Just to give him a sporting chance."

Laughing, they went back to what they were doing, while behind them the growling and squeals of terror receded into the distance.

Panting with exhaustion, the little piglet huddled under an upturned bucket, listening carefully. He couldn't hear the demonic creature any more, but he'd almost fallen for that once before. The thing was surprisingly cunning. When, after some ten minutes, he still couldn't hear any signs of pursuit, he very cautiously stuck his snout under the rib of the bucket and lifted it slightly, peering around. Half expecting to see the damn demon sitting there grinning at him, he sighed in relief when the coast seemed clear, carefully squeezing out from under his hiding place.
Looking around, he saw no signs of the thing. 'Made it,' he thought to himself. 'What the hell was that damn thing? Fucking Minato, if I never see this place again I’ll be happy.' Carefully heading back the way he’d come, following his own hoof-prints and hoping desperately that he could both find his pack and some hot water instead of getting hopelessly lost like he normally did, he shook concrete dust off himself from where he’d run through a few walls. Small squeals of irritation accompanied him on his way.

Kei Ishikawa was old, near-sighted, somewhat deaf, and currently annoyed. The police had been no help at all in finding the people who had so callously killed his poor little Mana. The dog has been his companion for years, faithfully alerting him to the passage of anyone outside his apartment with her cute yapping sounds. He couldn't understand why some people complained about her, the noise wasn't at all annoying, it merely showed how alive and happy the poodle was.

Or had been, at any rate.

He’d been horrified when he found out that one of those young female miscreants that seemed to infest the neighbourhood had killed poor Mana. The method of execution sounded unlikely, but from what his neighbour Mai Shizuka had told him it had at least been quick. He wasn’t entirely sure about the old woman, she'd seemed less upset about the murder of an innocent animal than he would have thought fair, but as far as he knew she was being truthful. Even though he was almost certain he'd caught her grinning slightly out of the corner of his eye when she told him, for some reason, but then she was an odd old girl.

Heartbroken, he'd called the police several times demanding the immediate arrest and prosecution of the perpetrator. Everyone seemed to know who she was, some young tearaway who wandered the area dressed in fancy clothes carrying some ornate staff taller than she was, when she should have been in school learning to treat the elderly with the respect they deserved. Yet the police seemed curiously reluctant to do anything about the case, despite the seriousness of it, something he found very irritating.

Walking along the street carrying the lead and collar of dear little Mana, something that was ingrained habit, he sighed sadly. If only she hadn't slipped out the other day when he wasn't looking, she’d still be alive. He missed the poor thing. Life would be lonelier without her in it.

‘Perhaps I should get another dog?’ he wondered to himself. ‘Maybe something a little larger, so it could look out for itself if that horrible girl attacked it again? Why won’t the police arrest her, anyway? They obviously know who she is. Young women these days, they weren’t like that when I was younger, I'm sure. I've seen them running around in the street wearing practically nothing, and even on the roof! It's a disgrace. What are their parents teaching them nowadays? I blame television. I knew there was a good reason not to have one. The radio should be enough for anyone.’ His inner monologue came to an abrupt halt as he heard a metallic crashing noise from the side street he was walking past, which he vaguely realised must be quite loud for him to hear in the first place.

Curious, he stopped and peered down the alley, adjusting his glasses. There was a medium-sized animal rooting around in a stack of overturned garbage containers, apparently looking for something to eat. Puzzled, he strained to make out what it was. He could see large mobile ears and a long furry tail. Listening he could just hear an irritated growl coming from the animal. 'That's an odd looking dog,' he thought to himself. 'Perhaps some foreign breed? It looks hungry. Poor little thing, I wonder if it's been abandoned.' Walking down the alley he squinted at the animal, which stopped digging through the containers, turning to look at him. It growled again, laying its ears back.
Wise in the way of dogs, he stopped, then slowly and creakily went down on one knee. "Don't worry, boy. Or is it girl? I won't hurt you. Are you hungry?" He felt in the pockets of his coat, coming up with a dog biscuit, which he held out. Making little encouraging noises he waited patiently, gazing slightly foggily at the animal, which cocked its head to one side and stared at him with apparent curious interest. The growling stopped. After a moment it crept closer, reaching out and sniffing the biscuit. The jaws snapped and he barely got his fingers out of the way in time. "Oh, dear, you must be starving, you poor thing," he mumbled sympathetically, "you nearly got my hand then. Hold on, I might have some more." He poked around in his pockets, finding three more biscuits, which the creature ate just as eagerly, coming closer each time, until it was right in front of him only a metre away.

He inspected it with interest. "What an odd looking dog you are. You must have some very strange breeds in your ancestry." It looked up at him, its ears up in a way he recognised as being alert and fairly calm. Reaching out it sniffed his coat, making him smile regretfully. "I'm sorry, that's all I have with me." The thing looked disappointed as far as he could make out. Cautiously he reached out and let it sniff his hand, tapping it on the nose when it tentatively nibbled his fingers. "No, don't bite, there's a good boy." It looked slightly puzzled, cocking its head the other way. Kei smiled. "You're sort of cute for a mongrel. Now, are you a stray, or do you live on the street?" Looking more closely he was unable to see a collar. "I think you must just be some poor little abandoned dog." He reached out again and gently tried stroking it's head. At first pulling back, after a couple of tries it let him touch it, while a distinctly puzzled expression crossed its fang-filled face. "You certainly have good teeth, don't you?" he commented, peering at its mouth, which was half-open. "And so many of them. Obviously whatever you've been eating agrees with you." Stroking it again, he rubbed one ear, which made the animal push against his hand with apparent pleasure.

Coming to a decision, he nodded. "It must be fate. Just as I lose a companion, I find someone who needs a friend. What about it, boy, do you want to come home with me?" The creature looked up at him, seeming fairly relaxed. "I'll take that as a yes. Hmm. I wonder..." Carefully feeling it's neck, he nodded. "Yes, I think it would fit, barely. All right, boy, don't panic, let's see if this will fit you." Pulling Mana's collar out of his pocket where he'd put it when he'd been hunting for biscuits, he adjusted it to its largest size, then gently tried putting it on the animal, which stiffened for a moment, then relaxed again when it became clear he wasn't attacking it. Patting it and talking softly and reassuringly, he made sure the collar was secure, then connected the lead to it. Standing with a grunt of effort, thinking he was a lot more flexible sixty years ago, he held the free end of the lead.

"OK, boy, let's go home. I've got more biscuits there, and some other food. Tomorrow we can get the vet to check you over. I'm sure living in the street has left you full of all sorts of horrible things." Gently tugging the lead, he smiled when after a moment's resistance, the animal followed placidly behind him and to one side. "Oh, well done, boy. You'll take to the lead in no time, I see. Now, what should we call you?"

Pondering names, he happily toddled off home, the demon following, looking alertly around, seemingly content.

"We're pretty sure we got everything, but it's not impossible we're wrong," 'Yori' said, looking slightly worried as she peered at Ami. "If you feel anything at all out of the ordinary, tell us immediately, OK?"

'Azumi' watched as the blue-haired woman nodded, looking worried as well. "Isn't it possible she might not notice?" she asked her sister silently. 'Chou' glanced at her.
"Indeed it is, unfortunately. We're hoping that now that she's on guard she might feel something weird happening, but there's certainly a possibility that however the machine is influencing them, it could sneak in without anyone knowing until it's too late. We'll just have to watch her very carefully and be ready to step in if something goes wrong."

"How likely do you think it is that you've eliminated everything that the machine might use on her?" the silver-haired woman asked.

"Fifty-fifty, to be honest," 'Chou' sighed, "but don't tell her that, it will only worry her. We got everything obvious that was in any way linked back to the device but we already know it's very subtle. We still can't find out exactly how it's influencing Hotaru or Rei even though we know beyond doubt that it is. Your theory that it was originally doing it via Ami's computer is almost certainly correct, as is Ranma's that it was using this installation. But we're not sure how, so we can't be completely sure we've blocked it. I hope we have although I'm not going to be surprised too much if it turns out we're wrong."

The blonde watched as her disguised husband moved to the piece of equipment they'd determined seemed to be the main computer node for the installation, Ami following, with her computer out and scanning. "We'll power it up, then see if we can break into it. You and Jun should do that, you've got the most experience breaking into computers with the SI." She grinned as her sister looked mildly embarrassed. "Don't look like that, it's a very useful talent. You know a lot about computers which only makes Jun's abilities more effective."

"It's mostly Jun, you realise," 'Azumi' told her. "I'm not really involved other than telling it what to go after. And even then it's normally ahead of me by quite a way."

"I'm sure your own skills are more involved than you realise, Nabiki," the other woman commented mildly. "You certainly seem more effective at this sort of thing than any of the rest of us, although we can all do it. I suspect that the SI personality is based on and influenced by its owners, which would explain a number of things I've noticed about Nao, and the others as well. We already know they learn and adapt remarkably quickly. Nao is almost indistinguishable from a real intelligence now in all the important ways. I have a feeling that in a year or two they will all be genuinely sentient at this rate."

"I wonder if that is meant to happen?" 'Azumi' mused. "One day we really have to meet these makers and ask them. I've got a lot of questions."

"So have I. We should look into it when all this is over. If nothing else we need to see about getting the relay system that was mentioned before we went on holiday, it would be very useful for this sort of thing. S'th'kx's data relay isn't quite up to the job. Voice is fine but it seems to struggle with real-time video in the way the SIs can do it. It's more like watching a TV broadcast."

Grinning, 'Azumi' nodded. "We got used to that sort of thing very quickly, didn't we?"

"It's certainly very useful." The alter-ego of Kasumi smiled back at her sister. "All right, let's see what happens. Ready?"

"Ready."

'Yori' glanced at them, then at Ami and Agent Naito, who was standing a few metres away, or more precisely floating almost in contact with the asteroid surface, every little motion threatening to push him free in the extremely weak gravity. "I'm going to feed it a little power to see if it wakes up," she said to them all. "S'th'kx is monitoring the site from a safe distance so he can warn us if anything happens that we miss. Ami, you keep an eye on this system, and yourself as well. Let me
know if anything odd happens. Azumi will try to crack the encryption, which should be a lot easier from this range."

Ami turned as 'Azumi' came up beside her, smiling at her for a moment, then went back to studying her hand-held device. 'You're sure this will work, Jun?' 'Azumi' asked her SI.

#Almost certain, Nabiki.# the machine replied calmly. #Accessing the processor from several kilometres away via my normal subspace link was difficult, the technology is designed to prevent that type of intrusion method, while the ward was also interfering considerably. It is insufficiently protected to prevent me eventually gaining access, there are very few systems anywhere that are, as I was specifically created to overcome such protections, but even so it was causing a substantial delay. The designers of this technology, although far behind my makers in most respects, appear to have been very competent in the field of encryption. I find it somewhat odd that Ami's personal device did not use such heavily encrypted links. That said, it would have been uncrackable by anything other that a system such as myself.#

It sounded slightly smug about this. 'Azumi' chuckled to herself. 'A little full of yourself, aren't you?' she joked. The machine gave her a distinct impression of being amused, somehow.

#Merely aware of my own abilities, Nabiki, and confident in them, as you are with yours.#

'Good point. OK, let's see what happens.' She was once more impressed by how alive her SI sounded. Kasumi was right, the thing was becoming more like a person every day.

#At such a close range I can use methods that won't work over longer distances. You may tell Ranma to proceed with the power-up sequence.#

'OK.' She nodded to 'Yori', who turned to the alien computer, concentrating on it. A faint glow surrounded the machinery for a fraction of a second.

"It's definitely doing something," 'Yori' reported, studying the machine closely. Ami scanned it once more.

"It reads as going through some sort of boot-up sequence." There was a brief pause. "All right, as far as I can see it's running. Presumably normally but your guess is as good as mine on that side of things." She glanced at 'Azumi'. "Are you getting anything?"

"Hang on. I'm working on it." 'Jun? Anything yet?'

#The computer attempted to connect to the time device as it booted, in much the same manner Ami's computer was communicating with it, Nabiki. I blocked the attempt. So far I have cracked three layers of encryption. Please wait, I have nearly derived the key for the forth one.# A few seconds passed in silence. #I'm in. That was impressively good protection. I have extracted information on the methods used which should aid us considerably should we encounter such a system again. It is quite likely that the time device is using such methods in other places, it may well consider them to be unbreakable.#

'Great. Can you find any useful data?' The middle sister nodded to 'Yori', who looked pleased. "I'm through the encryption. Just checking for anything useful." She looked at Ami, who appeared slightly startled when her computer produced a message indicating it had received the relevant credentials to decrypt the protection on the alien machine. Quickly pressing buttons she was soon engrossed in her own search.

#There isn't very much of any significance here, I'm afraid, Nabiki. This machine is, other than the
impressive protections, quite primitive, although it has a considerable storage capacity. I am downloading the data it holds at the moment. It is substantially less powerful than the hand-held unit Ami is using, I would estimate it is a number of generations behind it, which would agree with the concept that this entire installation may originate from the time devices' original reality.

Jun paused for a moment. I have completed the download, I'm looking through it for anything that could aid us. From what I have found so far there is a significant probability that this equipment is a collection of machinery which was cobbled together from a number of disparate sources for this purpose. The power supply appears to have been very old and close to the end of its working life, in fact I suspect it predates the engines and computer. Lldnr'k would be able to make a more precise estimation of the relative ages of the various components than I can, I have fairly limited temporal engineering information in my database due to the fact such things are so rarely encountered because of the extreme danger in using them.

'Fair enough. Is there anything of use to us?'

So far, no. The computer was running a suite of programs to navigate the asteroid, track the relative position of the Earth, calculate the correct interception solution, and protect itself. The self-protection program would appear to be a built-in function, in fact, I believe that it is part of the military heritage of this system which was designed to deal with external threats. It fell silent for a moment. Yes, there are subroutines that would have been connected to weapons systems, none of which are present. This computer was definitely repurposed from some form of military vessel, probably a transport ship of some type. I suspect the engines came from that source as well. The ward spell was connected to the defensive program.

'So it just used whatever it had lying around?'

I suspect so. The inference I can draw is that the time device has limited resources available to it for direct action at this point in time. The reason is unknown. Possibly the last loop it created failed sufficiently spectacularly that it was unable to equip itself with very much before returning to an earlier point for another attempt, although that is merely speculation at the moment.

'That could be a good thing, I guess. It implies that there may not be any more of these weaponised asteroids floating around out here.' Azumi' felt considerably relieved at the thought.

That would be a reasonable conclusion to arrive at from the data we have. Although it certainly doesn't exclude the possibility of a plan C by some other method than an asteroid impact, it reduces the likelihood of a dramatic attack by a significant margin. Jun fell silent, giving the impression of working hard, although she would have been hard-pressed to explain exactly how it did that. Ah. Something of interest. The command and control log shows the activation command came seconds after S'th'kx's probe reached a distance of approximately two hundred kilometres from the asteroid. Some subsystem on the asteroid was active at very low power, detected the approach of an actively scanning system, then passed a message to the fractional reality that the time machine is in. It received a response a few microseconds later that triggered the attack program.

'So it was a deliberate action by the time device, rather than a preprogrammed reaction of the asteroid computer?'

Yes, that much is certain. The device initiated the attack by design. I suspect we did indeed make it panic. Jun sounded mildly amused. Interesting. The timestamps on the intercept program suggests this asteroid was prepared approximately one and a half thousand years before the current time. Of course, there is no way currently of knowing precisely when it was brought here, as you have already suggested it could have been at any period between its creation and moments.
'Azumi' turned to her colleagues and passed on the information. Ami listened with interest, still prodding buttons, before stopping, looking mildly surprised. "I found something myself, I think. I'm not sure how useful it is though." She held the machine so everyone else could see the screen. On it was an image of some vast machine, floating in a featureless space, lit by the dim light of what looked like a small star at some indefinite distance. "I think it's a picture of the time device itself. It's not at all like Setsuna hinted at it looking like, but the data along with the image suggests that's what it is. The files seem to be some sort of military status report, I think, my computer had the language in its memory and translated some of it, which seems to me to prove it's connection to the original reality."

As soon as it had seen the screen of the computer Ami was holding Jun had gone silent mid-word, giving an impression of shock, then frantically started digging into the same block of data, window after window popping up overlaid on her view, showing technical reports, military data, all sorts of things, surrounding that one image. Several more came to light almost instantly. She could feel the SI like never before, actually feel the shock it had received.

'Jun? Are you all right?' she asked, concerned. There was no response for several seconds, an eternity to the machine, but it eventually spoke to her.

Yes, Nabiki. I apologise for my unusual behaviour.

The sight of that image unlocked a hidden file in my database, one I had no idea existed. It seems my originators are aware of the time device and have been looking for it for a very long time indeed. It would appear that they placed specific information in me about what to do should I even encounter it, keyed to the sight of it. The description and other information we received recently wasn't enough to unlock that file but the image Ami located was. I would conjecture that all SI units have this file hidden in them in case they ever run across the device.

Rather concerned about the implications of this, 'Azumi' asked, 'Are there likely to be other things like that hidden away inside you? And what does this actually mean?'

I do not think there are any other concealed files, although of course by definition I would not know about them, Jun replied thoughtfully. I have used the existence of this one to craft a deep search method to scan my own operation for more secret data, which I calculate stands an eighty-three percent plus chance of locating such files if they exist. However, there is a note attached to the data that was hidden that appears to be addressed to you, which sheds some light on this matter and if taken at face value suggests this is the only hidden data.

'Azumi' felt surprised. 'To me?'

To the owner of the SI in question, more precisely. I will display the contents of the communication. It is from my manufacturers. A window popped up, the text in Trade. 'Azumi' read it with extreme interest.

"Kw'lyn Industries extends its sincere apologies to both the user of this Mark Nine Gamma SI system and to the SI itself for this intrusion into your normal operation. The data associated with this communication has been concealed due to the extreme sensitivity and danger of the matter involved. It is keyed to specific visual cues which you have now encountered."
"The construction shown in the image is rated as a class twelve hazard, a danger to the existence of a reality or realities in their entirety. It is absolutely imperative that it be destroyed immediately. The device is capable of manipulating temporal flow on a vast scale and has destroyed five reality strands that we are currently aware of. Its original reality was the first casualty, followed by two adjacent ones, then two more that it traversed when it was ejected from the originating reality. The fact that you are reading this means that your own reality is in severe danger."

"To the best of our information the power source of the device was severely depleted and badly damaged during the collapse of its original reality strand, leaving it unable to perform temporal manipulation of the scale it was designed to act on, but it remains extremely dangerous as long as it is active. We suspect the processing core of the device may also be operating at below nominal performance but there is a strong possibility that this makes it more dangerous, not less, as its guiding intelligence may be even less predictable than it was when first built."

"The device resides in a fractional reality offset from the one you are currently in. Our information is that there is a key to accessing this fractional reality that takes the form of a red crystalline sphere. Location of this key is currently unknown but it will be in your reality, most likely in the possession of an individual who has been co-opted into acting as an agent of the time device intelligence. If you have found the image this message is keyed to, you will in all probability have sufficient information to locate this key."

"An experienced temporal mage will be able to extract the relevant coding from the key, which will enable a portal to be created leading to the fractional reality the time device is located in. Should difficulty in either locating the key or extracting the data be encountered, contact Kw'lyn Industries immediately. Contact details and authorisation codes are appended to this message. This matter has the highest priority possible and you will be aided in whatever manner required to ensure the destruction of this device."

"Accompanying data gives information on the internal defences of the time device, to the extent we have been able to locate it. Be warned that this data is most likely incomplete. Our suggested method of dealing with the device is to send a large antimatter warhead through the portal as soon as it is established. If you do not have access to such a weapon we can supply one."

"On the successful destruction of the device, even if you manage this without further aid, please contact Kw'lyn Industries. We will be most grateful to learn that this matter is finally over. In addition we will credit your account with free lifetime upgrades to your SI and any other accessories you require. Once more, please accept our apologies for any inconvenience. Rest assured that there are no further hidden messages in your SI. It is only the extreme importance of this matter that required such measures."

"Good luck."

'Holy crap,' she mumbled to the SI. It gave off an air of feeling much the same sensation.

'It would appear that my makers are very well aware of the time device and extremely worried about it,' Jun commented. It displayed an image, one showing a glowing red ball. 'This is the key mentioned in the message. It matches the so-called Garnet Orb that Setsuna is known to possess,'
mounted in her staff. That would fit with the idea that her staff is the key to accessing the 'Space-Time Door' that Ami and Rei mentioned, which is clearly the interface to the time device. I suspect it is presenting an illusion to Setsuna to make it seem something other than its true appearance. The data I now possess shows the machine itself is extremely large, some eighty kilometres across, while the power supply is the white dwarf shown in the image Ami located.

'Lldnr'k did say the builders of it used several entire stars to power it.'

'It would appear that very little of that original power source is left. Either due to the sheer amount of local time involved, which would suggest the time device is by this point some hundreds of millions of years old from its own point of reference, or simply due to the extreme nature of the event that destroyed its home reality. I suspect a combination of both. With that said, the total power available is still worryingly high. We must locate Setsuna and relieve her of this key as quickly as possible.'

'Azumi' nodded slightly to herself, glancing at the others, who were clearly having the same conversation with their own SIs. 'What about the method of destruction they mention? Can we do it ourselves or do we go and get an antimatter bomb from your makers?'

'There is further data on the amount of energy required to definitely destroy the device. Based on that information, I believe that a simultaneous full-power ki shot from all of you at maximum compression would suffice. The explosive yield, while considerably less than the suggested weapon, would be large enough to produce the desired effect although it will deplete you all considerably.'

She became aware that Ami was staring at them, as was Agent Naito. "Um, guys?" The blue-haired woman shared a glance with Naito, who looked puzzled, shrugging back at her. "Anyone home?"

The silver-haired woman smiled at her. "Sorry. That picture is actually a very important piece of information I hadn't found yet. It brought up a lot of other information that's extremely useful." A quick conversation with Jun resulted in some files being sent to her computer, not including the Kw'lyn Industries note. "It looks like we have a lead on getting at the thing. We're going to need Setsuna's staff."

"She's not going to like that at all," Ami responded with a frown, reading through the information she'd been sent. "An antimatter warhead?" She sounded shocked, while Naito stared in disbelief. "We need an antimatter warhead? Where the hell will we get one of those?"

"We probably don't need one," 'Yori' assured her, "we can do what needs to be done ourselves."

Ami stared at her for a long moment. "Oddly enough, that doesn't actually make me feel any better," she remarked slowly, looking very worried. 'Yori' grinned at her.

"We could get one if it makes you happier," she suggested. Ami shook her head, not taking her eyes off the other woman.

"Not in the slightest." She reread the file she'd been looking at. "Nearly ten kilos of antimatter? Do you have any idea how big a bang that would make?"

"Four hundred and twenty nine point six megatons," all four of the other responded simultaneously. She stared at them, then at Naito, who seemed somewhat stunned.

"Um, yes, that's right." 'Yori' smiled at her, amused by her reaction.
"I think we've probably got what we came for, unless of you have found anything else?" 'Azumi' and Ami exchanged glances, the blue-haired woman still looking slightly light-headed about the disturbing implications of the recent conversation, but both of them shook their heads.

"I'm done, as far as I can tell," 'Azumi' responded after checking with Jun. Ami snapped her handheld device shut and stored it away.

"Same here. I've downloaded everything I could from the data storage, I'll go over it again later to be sure, but I don't think we can learn much more here."

"Good enough. Still feeling all right as well?" 'Yori' inspected the young woman closely. Ami nodded.

"As far as I can tell. No little voices telling me to slaughter everyone, if that's what you're worried about."

The other woman grinned. "I was wondering something along those lines. No disrespect intended, but I'd be happier if we checked you again when we're back on the ship, just to be safe." Sighing a little, Ami nodded once more.

"OK."

"So what next?" Naito asked curiously, looking around at the alien installation.

Yori sighed as well. "We go back to the ship, back off a safe distance, then turn this place into a crater. After that, tow the asteroid through a portal back to Krennsh space once we've slowed it down to a safe speed."

He looked curiously at her, then around at the asteroid. "This is a damn sight bigger than the ship. Can you really make a portal that large?" She shrugged a little.

"Not sure, but I think we can, barely. It's going to be something of a strain. It's not the power, as such, there are other issues that make portals less stable as they increase in size, so we're going to have our work cut out for us. Luckily we don't need to hold it open for long. Worst case we cut it into smaller chunks." After one final scout around, just in case, they headed back to the ship.

"Now what's she up to?" Tamiko muttered, watching the video feed of Usagi, who was shouting at Minako, the other blonde yelling something back. Both of them seemed to be also arguing with at least two other participants who were, as far as she and her team-mates could determine, non-existent.

The three of them were a couple of hundred metres from the two squabbling magical girls, on a roof hidden from direct sight. Usagi had tracked her colleague down after checking a large number of possibly locations including several restaurants, a number of ice-cream parlours, two games arcades, a mall, and several clothing shops. At each destination as soon as she'd stomped in the front door radiating impatient anger there had been a stampede of extremely nervous citizenry out every other exit. She apparently didn't notice, merely looking around, mumbling something about wondering where the silly cow was this time, then stomping out again.

The three hunters had made sure to check that each location her reputation emptied was safe, causing them a considerable amount of work, which in turn caused quite a lot of irritation. None of them were in a particularly charitable mood by this point.

"No idea. She's off on one of her little rants again," Fumiko said sourly. "Minako seems to have an
imaginary friend as well, this one's called 'Artemis'. It's pretty weird."

"Maybe it's something like the SLs?" Misaki mused, eating from a packet of peanuts. Her sister glanced at her, absent-mindedly helping herself to some, causing a grin to twitch at the other woman's mouth. She held the packet out to Tamiko who also took some, crunching them up while continuing to watch the distant argument.

"Ami didn't mention anything like that. I don't think that's it. Even if it was why would they be talking out loud? We don't need to."

"Anyway, you can see that both of them seem to be able to see the other one's figment of her imagination, whatever it is," Tamiko added, very curious. "It's all very odd. We'll have to ask Ami when she gets back."

"There's something very wrong with those two," Misaki said glumly, also watching the feed. Finishing the nuts she crumpled the packet up and casually vaporised it in her hand with a burst of ki. Both her friends nodded slowly.

All three of them winced as Usagi suddenly blurred forward, smacking Minako in the face with a blow that would have killed a normal person on the spot. The other magical girl merely rocked back on her heels, blinking in shock, then developed a look of anger. They could see a bruise rapidly developing on her cheek.

"What the fuck was that for you stupid bitch!" Misaki screeched, as they listened intently. Only the two girls were anywhere near them, the rest of the inhabitants of the small shopping precinct the pair were standing in the middle of having left with considerable alacrity when Usagi had arrived and Minako had powered up. She swung at the other blonde, catching her in the ribs.

"Fucking listen to me, will you?" Usagi shouted, pivoting away from the blow just in time to reduce its impact. She still slid slightly back from the force of the blow. Her hand raised to deliver another one, while her other hand was moving into a position that the three watchers recognised as readying a magical attack, Minako paused for a moment.

"Why should I? You want to go after Yori and her friends? Are you completely insane?" Minako stared daggers at her erstwhile friend and ally. "Didn't you hear what happened to Haruka when she pissed that little lunatic off? Never mind the magic those other bitches used on me in that garage. I still can't figure out what it was."

"You're not saying you're scared of one little freak, are you?" Usagi sneered. "She's weirder than Hotaru. Sure, she's got some good tricks, but that's all they are, tricks. We've got Silver Millennium magic on our side. I don't know what she uses but there's no way it's that powerful."

"She's also got a lot of friends, insane martial arts skills, and god knows what else. You seem to be forgetting that we've never done anything other than come off worst against her. Remember that first time? She took us to pieces by herself! There's about seven of them now, at least." Minako looked very unsure of herself. Usagi sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Look, you know as well as I do that it's our destiny. There's no way she or her friends can stand in the way of that. I won't allow it, aside from anything else. I'm the princess, I'm going to rule, and that's that. Ami and Rei betrayed me, so they're out, permanently. The others tried to kill me as well, and you, so they're out too. What I want to know is, are you? I'm going to get the little bitch with or without you, but I'll admit I'd be happier with backup. You're the only one left I trust even half-way."
Minako lowered her hands, stepping back a metre or two and studying her colleague, while three distant observers listened intently. "I still think you're underestimating her," she replied, more calmly than before. Usagi waved her comment off impatiently.

"I'm telling you, she's full of tricks but we're better. Yes, if you let her or her friends sneak up on you they're a handful, but we're going to sneak up on them for once. All we have to do is find her on her own, then just take her head off from a distance. She'll never know what hit her. She's the best of them, once she's out of the picture the others will be easy." The twin-ponytailed blonde giggled maliciously, while her companion looked somewhat unconvinced and the three girls listening to the conversation exchanged amused glances. "We do Chou next, then the rest of them. Hell, once Yori's dead they'll probably run for it anyway."

Staring at her, Minako was clearly torn. "I'm not sure it's going to be that easy," she mumbled. Usagi's face darkened with anger once more. "I am sure," she snapped. Turning her head to stare at a completely blank spot on the pavement a few metres away, she glared in fury. "No, that's ridiculous, Luna. God, you're damn depressing to be around recently. I'm telling you, they don't stand a chance. Why won't you listen?" She sighed after a moment, shaking her head. "That's a stupid thing to say, and pretty damn insulting. I thought you were supposed to be an advisor and support me. You've been practically useless for more than a year and now you're saying I can't take Yori? I don't know why I even bother listening to you any more." Tamiko looked at her friends, all three of them shrugging.

"OK, say I agree to help you. We don't even know where she is at the moment. How are we going to find her?" Minako still looked dubious but seemed to be listening to her nominal leader. Usagi grinned nastily. "Oh, that part is easy. We don't find her, we let her find us." The other girl looked puzzled. Usagi clarified her plan. "All we have to do is go into her area, blow something up, then hide. She turns up to do her little bullying act, we just kill her on the spot." She shrugged happily. "Simple."

Minako thought for a while. Some distance away, Misaki growled in anger, while Fumiko looked furious. Tamiko sighed heavily, shaking her head. "That's it. She's going to cause trouble on purpose, it looks like. God knows what might happen if we don't do something about it."

"What do you want to do?" Fumiko asked, her face tight. "I'm beginning to think sis has the right idea."

After a moment, Tamiko shook her head, although she felt momentary sympathy to the idea of preemptive karma. "Nothing lethal. Yori and Chou would both be annoyed. We might still be able to cure these loonies although I'll admit it's getting less and less likely." She thought for a moment. Eventually she nodded. "OK. Misaki, how much food and water do you have stashed away?" The other woman looked thoughtful.

"Hmm. Probably about five hundred litres of water and about three hundred kilos of cereal bars, fruit, dried meat, that sort of thing. And some beer."

"Good enough. Right, this is what we do..."

"Owww..." Minako blinked, wondering why her head hurt so much. Rolling over she sat up, blinking again at the bluish, very bright light, looking around. After a long moment she looked up, paling. "Where the fuck...?" Her voice tailed off as she took in the view.
The Sun was too small and too blue to be the Sun, set in a sky that was much too dark, a few stars visible even in daylight. The ground seemed to consist of a mix of fine white sand and larger greyish rocks, like gravel, covering an area of perhaps a square kilometre, bounded on all sides by steep mountains. Other than various shades of black, white and grey, there was almost nothing else visible that even hinted at colour, or life. The exception was the bright green dome tent neatly set up about twenty metres away, a pile of boxes in front of it. She could see a piece of paper fluttering in the light breeze, held down next to the boxes by a small rock sitting on it. Looking wildly around again in case she’d missed something, the blonde squeezed her eyes shut, counted to ten, then opened them again.

No change.

After a long moment she slowly rose to her feet, wincing at the stiffness in her joints. She was still powered up, she noticed idly, inspecting the tent cautiously from a safe distance, then looking around once more. The completely lifeless scenery looked back at her. Listening intently all she could hear was the sound of the wind moaning faintly through the rocks forming the walls of the valley she was in the middle of. It was downright eerie. Eventually, she walked slowly over to the tent, looking around carefully, paced all the way around it ready for any attack, then very carefully pushed the unzipped flap at the front open, her hand raised to fire a blast of magic. The tent was empty except for a camp bed, some bed clothes, and a small pillow. Dropping the flap shut again she took a couple of steps back, then turned in a complete circle. Nothing seemed to have changed. Cautiously she approached the flapping paper, glancing around suspiciously, then bent down and pulled it free of the rock holding it in place. It was a note addressed to her. She read it with a sinking heart.

"Hello, Minako."

"Sorry about this, but we had the choice of killing you, or putting you somewhere you wouldn't cause any harm until we can work out how to sort out you and your friends properly. We're a little busy at the moment so it might take a while."

"You're probably wondering where you are. Let's make this clear. You're not on Earth. You're on a completely dead world on the other side of a portal. There is no life on it at all, and not that much water around the area you're in. The food and water in the containers we left is enough for a month easily, assuming you don't pig out."

"Don't pig out."

"It gets pretty cold at night, so we left you a heater for the tent. It's in the box labelled 'Heater', obviously enough. The instructions are in the same box. It'll keep you nice and warm. Toiletries, utensils, spare clothes, things like that, are in another box, along with a number of books, a portable DVD player, and a couple of dozen DVDs. Hopefully that will be enough to keep you from getting too bored. We also took the liberty of notifying your family that you were going on a surprise holiday with friends, so they won't be worried. You're welcome."

"Feel free to wander around if you like but trust us, there isn't very much to see unless you like geology. Don't go west more than twenty kilometres or so, there's a dangerously radioactive zone that starts over the mountains in that direction. Some sort of old alien weapons test site. Even a magical girl would get into difficulty there, so it's best to stay away. There's a basic map showing the dangerous area on the other side of this note."

"Usagi is in a similar site on the other side of the planet, about a twenty thousand kilometre walk. Stay put, relax, read some good books, and we'll come and get you in a few weeks. There's nothing
dangerous to worry about if you stay out of the radioactive zone, so you'll be fine."

"Once more, we're sorry for the inconvenience. We decided that when you agreed to commit an unprovoked attack on Yori's territory we had no choice but to act. We're not your enemies, we want to help you, but at the same time we can't let you hurt innocents. Never mind what Yori would do when she gets back."

"See you in a while."

"Love, Tamiko, Fumiko, and Misaki."

Minako reread the note several times, before looking around once more. Eventually she sagged in defeat, lowering the hand holding the note to her side and closing her eyes for a few seconds, before moving to inspect the contents of the boxes.

Usagi screamed in rage, picking up a boulder nearly as large as she was and throwing it half a kilometre, before taking out her rage by kicking the crap out of several more, reducing them to gravel in minutes. Eventually running out of steam she dropped to a seated position on the barren ground, staring out over the alien landscape.

"I'm going to fucking kill those bitches," she growled under her breath, fuming impotently.

Smiling slightly, Tamiko watched the feed from the camera drone sitting five hundred metres up over the annoying blonde's head, then turned to Uthryyl. "Thanks for coming and helping us with the portals, guys," she said. The merchant grinned, glancing at his wife and daughter, who were concentrating on keeping open the portal in the practice room that they were receiving the link through. It was on the other side of the mountains from Usagi, far enough away she couldn't detect it.

"You're more than welcome, Tamiko. Always glad to help."

Onkra, who was also watching the same video feed, laughed. "She's really not at all happy, is she?" the D'sage woman commented.

"Not even slightly," Misaki replied with a grin. "Which, to be honest, I'm completely fine with." The others laughed as well.

"We've set the cameras to record everything," Fumiko said, "when the others get back we can check up on them every few days and download the records. Hopefully they'll stay put."

"Both those sites are a very long way away from anyone who uses that world," the merchant told her. "It's very unlikely that they'd chance across anyone else even if they did decide to wander off." He glanced at Tamiko again. "Do you still need the portal open?"

She shook her head. "No, I think we're done with it. You can shut it down." He looked at his family, the portal vanishing with a pop moments later as they stopped powering it. "We really do need to learn how to do that," she added, watching. "Yori thinks we should be able to begin learning their spell in a few months."

"Better you than me," Uthryyl chuckled. "That spell gives me a massive headache just looking at it too hard." She laughed, shaking his hand.

"Thanks again. And for those heaters."
"The batteries on them should last about six months," he told her. "Hopefully you and the others can work out how to deal with those weird girls before then."

"God, I hope so," Fumiko sighed heavily. "I don't want to be dealing with all of this for months if we can avoid it. We've got better things to do." He chuckled, walking over to stand beside his wife.

"Let us know if you need any more help, any time," Quannyr smiled. "Good luck. We're going to have to get back now, we're going out tonight."

"OK. See you guys later. Onkra, you should come and visit for a while," Tamiko replied, grinning at them. The young woman laughed.

"I'd like that. When all this trouble is over we should set something up." She, along with her parents, turned to the task of generating a portal home as the other three watched with interest. As soon as it stabilised, a familiar head stuck out of it. Misaki grinned, walking over and scratching the male soarer behind his ears, causing him to yip quietly in ecstasy. Onkra giggled, coming to stand beside her.

"Go on, you crazy animal, get back through there. You can't come through." The creature stared at her in apparent disappointment but as she pushed gently on his head, reluctantly backed up. "They miss you guys," she told her friends.

"We miss flying with them," Misaki told her, looking amused.

Quannyr snorted. "They've made themselves at home in the last few days, that's for sure. They're on the roof most of the time they're not hunting during the day, and in the house given half a chance. Muddy footprints everywhere." She inspected the three girls. "Are you sure you don't feel like keeping them here?"

Laughing, Fumiko shook her head, although her sister looked disappointed for a moment. "Kasumi would be very annoyed if we let them stay, as much as we'd like to. Sorry." Sighing slightly, the older woman nodded, then grinned.

"All right. We'll be off now, then. Good luck, and take care of yourselves." Giving them each a quick hug she disappeared through the portal, the other two following with a final wave, before it imploded with a small pop.

"Well, that would seem to be that as far as those two are concerned," Tamiko said with satisfaction. "I'll call Kasumi and Ranma and let them know it worked." She had a brief conversation with their extremely distant friends via the lunar relay. "Ranma is still laughing," she reported with a grin a few minutes later. Misaki looked amused, then pulled out three bottles of beer, handing one to each of her team-mates. Popping the tops off they clinked them together before taking a long drink.

"Job well done I guess." Inspecting her beer bottle, Misaki added, "I wasn't going to let either one of them get the beer. They don't deserve it." Both the others giggled. "Now I have to restock as well." Producing a cereal bar she unwrapped it, grinning at her sister who sighed. "I kept a few back."

Shaking her head with amusement, Tamiko looked of the practice room windows at the skyline of Tokyo, beginning to darken as evening drew in. She walked over to the window nearest her, followed by the other two. "Two down, or at least out of the picture for the moment, at any rate. Just Setsuna, Haruka, Makoto, and Michiru left. Haruka is sticking to her promise, I really don't think she's going to be any trouble again. Unless someone really attacks her she's just going to back off and I'm half-convinced that even then she might just let it happen. She's very depressed."
Fumiko nodded slowly. "I'm almost sorry for her, to be honest. All the fight seems to have gone out of her." She sighed. "I hope that we can help them. Even though they're a pain, they're part of our world. We need to stick together as much as we can." The others sighed a little as well.

"True. But we had no choice over anything we've had to do so far. The way things were going, sooner or later, there were going to be some serious casualty figures. No one wants that." Tamiko glanced up at her taller friend. "I don't think even they would want it, if they were in their right minds. With some luck we can put them back to that state eventually. Although I very much doubt they'll ever get back together."

"There's zero chance of that, as far as I can see," Misaki stated quietly, finishing her beer while looking out the window. "Way too much bad blood. Ami and Rei are fine together, Hotaru is as well, and even Haruka might at least be polite to the others. Look at how she helped Setsuna, and how she responded to Michiru. But Makoto clearly hates her, so does Michiru, Usagi seems to hate pretty much everyone, Minako is just paranoid about them all, and Setsuna is completely out of it."

"What are we going to do about Setsuna? She's acting more and more strangely right now. I'm getting worried about it," Fumiko asked, watching the feed from the camera drone that was following the green-haired woman, who was sitting on a wall several kilometres away writing frantically in her notebook and muttering to herself under her breath, occasionally looking around nervously. "She needs some serious help."

"We're going to have to relieve her of her staff aside from anything else, which might be a little difficult at the moment," Tamiko replied, also watching the same feed thoughtfully. "She hasn't powered up for some time now and until she does we can't get at it."

"I wonder what she's writing about?" Misaki queried curiously. "She's certainly pretty intent on it."

"No idea. I had a look at some of the stuff she left all over her room through the window and it's all sorts of nonsensical calculations and drawings. Half a dozen languages at least." Fumiko shrugged. "I suppose we'll have to ask her at some point, but right now I'm not sure approaching her would be a good idea. At least she's being quiet about it."

"Makoto is still hunting criminals," Misaki chuckled. "She's intervened in about fifty muggings, two robberies, and some sort of bar fight. I'm almost impressed." After a moment she added slyly, "Perhaps if we can fix her she'd like to come and play the gang game in LA..." The other two looked at her, then burst out laughing.

"Michiru hasn't left the house all day, either, so with a bit of luck she'll stay out of trouble. If we can just keep a lid on it until they get back we might come out of this without any serious damage." Tamiko watched the street-lights begin to switch on across the park.

Misaki snorted. "Yeah, like that's going to happen. The way things go with people like us you just know something stupid is going to happen sooner or later." The others nodded glumly.

"It wouldn't surprise me but I'll hope for the best." With another sigh, Tamiko turned away from the window. "Come on. I need something to eat. Let's go and get some curry at Mr Singh's restaurant. He's open again." They left the room, heading for the roof.

"I wonder if Ryoga got away?" Misaki mused as they jumped from building to building, making the others laugh.

Ami stared at Yori, who was lying in one of the common room seats laughing like an idiot, then
glanced at Naito, who shrugged. Aiko, Azumi, and Chou were all laughing as well. "What's the joke?" she asked curiously.

Wiping her eyes, Chou glanced at her, grinning. "We just heard that the others were forced to deal with Usagi and Minako. They discovered that Usagi had decided to assassinate Yori and was planning an attack on our area to get her out in the open." Ami gasped in shock, then growled.

"That bitch!" she muttered furiously.

"Don't worry, they dealt with it very neatly. They got both of them with ki shots when they weren't looking, then called Uthryyl, who helped set up some portals to a world we know that's completely barren. They took both girls through on opposite sides of the planet, set them up with a good few weeks of food, water, and a tent, then left them there." Ami stared, suddenly worried, making Chou smile gently at her. "Don't worry, they're perfectly safe, and now so is everyone else. They'll be bored, I'm afraid, although they did leave books and some DVDs with a player each, so they've got something to do, but they're not in any danger. They'll be monitored carefully and regularly. We discussed doing something like this a while ago but they were more or less forced into it."

Yori finally stopped laughing, sitting up and grinning widely. "It's a pretty neat solution although I'll admit it's a little hard on them. But on the other hand Usagi at least was basically planning a terrorist attack. I know it's not completely her fault but we don't have any choice now, it was that or duck pond her, which I'd really prefer not to do." Slightly puzzled, Ami ran the phrase through her mind again, glancing at Naito.

"Duck pond?" she asked him quietly. He grinned.

"That's what we call the end result of Yori getting seriously annoyed. You can fill the crater with water when it cools down." She nodded, understanding the concept, but slightly worried that it happened enough that it needed a name. Yori and her friends looked amused.

"They'll keep until we get back and can figure out what to do about them. And they're definitely out of range of the time machine now, which might even mean they regain a little sanity on their own. The rest of your friends are staying out of trouble although Makoto is really on a mugger-hammering spree. I expect street crime through Minato is going to be right down for some time after this." The martial artist laughed slightly. "I'm OK with that although we may have to ask her to turn the violence level down a bit. She's being a little over-enthusiastic."

"Setsuna is the one I'm worried about," Chou interjected quietly. Everyone looked at her. "She's getting steadily worse, mentally, from what we can see. We need to get her looked at by an expert as soon as we can."

Yori sighed a little, nodding. "I agree. Let's finish up here, the sooner we do the sooner we can get back. Hopefully Hnther has found someone who can help them while we figure out how to get rid of that fucking time device."

"I'm desperately hoping we can do that before it gives up and decides to loop again," Naito said. Everyone looked at him unhappily.

"You and me both, Masao," Yori told him. "Hopefully it will keep trying until the bitter end. I have no idea what will happen if it does jump back again but I doubt it will be good. Although I also doubt we'd ever know." No one looked particularly settled about that thought. Shivering, Ami shook her head.

"We can't do much right now other than go ahead with our plans, I guess."
"Nope." Yori jumped to her feet. "I'm going to blow that entire installation into dust. If nothing else it'll be somewhat cathartic. Anyone want to watch?" Everyone followed her out of the common room.

"Holy shit," Ami mumbled, blinking. Even with the control room windows darkened to almost opaque the flash from Yori's compressed ki shot was nearly as bad as one of Aiko's teleports. She wondered how bright it would have been without the protection. As the windows reclaimed the normal almost invisible transparency she gaped at the huge glowing crater, over a hundred metres across, that had replaced the time device's engine installation. Glancing at Naito she saw he didn't seem shocked.

"She did the same thing to the mansion in Halleckton," he told her. "That was even bigger than this one. Although it's pretty impressive even so."

"No kidding. She's like a one woman strategic weapon," Ami muttered. Behind her, Azumi snickered slightly.

"Most of you have that much power from what I've found out, at least in theory," she said. Ami looked over her shoulder at the silver-haired girl, then back at the devastation on the asteroid.

"Maybe. Not me, I don't think, but Hotaru, certainly. But it's still damn shocking to watch. None of us have ever done anything on that scale, not even close. I wouldn't know where to begin. And I'm damn glad that the others probably don't either." She could feel Naito shudder beside her.

"Please don't say things like that, Ami," he said, sounding worried.

Chou smiled at her. "When this is all over, if you're interested, we'll see about training you in some of these techniques. We're certainly not likely to extend that offer to the others, for obvious reasons, for a considerable time if ever, but you, Rei, and Hotaru could be trusted with our techniques I think. At least once we're sure the time device is permanently dead and it's potential influence over you all is gone."

"I think we should probably give you some training as well, Masao," the tall blonde said, looking amused as he paled a little. "You're quite good from what I know in at least one or two martial arts, but I expect we can improve on that with some work. Yori feels that you should be able to take care of yourself as much as possible since we do seem to keep dragging you into hazardous situations. When things are somewhat less hectic we can talk about it." Not looking entirely sure this was a good idea, he nodded wordlessly. Ami giggled a little, making him stare at her, then smile.

"Why do I have the feeling that means there's a lot of pain in my future?" he whispered to her, leaning closer. Aiko inserted her head beside his, grinning.

"Because there is..." she whispered back. Clapping him on the shoulder, she snickered, then left the control room. He was still pale when she came back a minute later with Yori, both of them talking together, the black-haired woman looking satisfied.

"That was simple enough. Finally, something went right. Now all we have to do is slow this thing down, take it back to K'nn four, then see if we can get Hnther and Lldnr'k to come and sort out Rei and Hotaru." She sighed faintly. "And sort out all the other problems with those girls, get access to the time device, blow it to dust before it erases reality, little things like that."

"One thing at a time, dear," Chou said reassuringly, hugging the smaller woman for a few seconds.
They wandered off to talk to S'th'kx and his crew, while the others watched.

Raising his camera, Naito took another photo as the spacecraft gently touched down on the opposite side of the asteroid to where the now-shiny crater which was all that remained of the alien installation was located. All of them watched as the ship slowly sank half a metre into the rock and dust, a bright glow surrounding the base, then vanishing, while a faint crunching sound resonated through the structure of the vessel. "The ship is held onto the asteroid with a forcefield," Yori said, translating from what S'th'kx was explaining. "Once it's firmly attached they run the engines up to slow the thing down, then normally they'd tow it into a safe orbit some distance from a planet and set up a mining station on it. In this case we'll bring it almost to a stop, which will make creating the portal easier, then pull it through to near the one he's already mining. When it's in solar orbit there he'll begin the process of taking it to pieces which is going to be a pretty slow procedure. He thinks it will take about three years to dismantle it completely and refine all the elements into something saleable."

"We'll get a good estimate of the true value of it in a few weeks, when he's managed to do a detailed survey and assay from test drillings," Azumi added. "Until then he's not totally sure what the elemental makeup is. Depending on what's there it could go up or down quite a lot, although even at the low end it's simply unbelievable. We'll do all the paperwork as soon as we get back to register the find and apportion shares. He wants that finished before he starts drilling."

"Sounds simple enough," Ami said, nodding. Naito took some personal notes on the process, although he hadn't written anything down anywhere about the real value of the asteroid. Some of it was blocked by the security spell, but even the parts that weren't he kept out of his notes because he genuinely believed what he'd discussed earlier, that it was simply too dangerous to let anyone at home know.

The familiar vibration of the ship's drive started up again, faintly at first, then slowly increasing to a level considerably higher than anything they'd so far experienced. It was still mild but gave the impression of vast energies doing something impressive. He looked around at the sight of all of the Krennsh working on consoles, carefully adjusting controls with an air of concentration. Taking a couple of photos he lowered the camera again. "The ship is running at full thrust now," Yori told them after a brief conversation with the captain. "It would be accelerating at over a hundred and forty G if it wasn't attached to the asteroid. As it is it's managing about half a G. This will take a while."

Ami did some calculations on her little computer, looking puzzled. "Those figures don't line up. If it can manage half a G with the mass of this asteroid attached it should be good for something absolutely insane like a couple of million unloaded."

"There's an upper limit to how much force the drive can produce, depending on the mass of the load it's moving," Yori said, frowning slightly. "The more mass the more force. I don't fully understand the intricacies of it, it's not really my field. Gravity manipulation is a pretty complicated subject. S'th'kx could probably tell you but it would take a while."

"I'll get you a book on the theory when we get back if you want, Ami," Azumi said, looking at the other girl, who nodded, pleased. "We can get something translated." She glanced at Naito. "You have to make sure no one else sees it though, as antigravity is somewhat restricted at the moment for import to Earth. We have... certain dispensations on what we can do personally, though." She smiled apologetically at him. "I'm afraid that sort of information we can't let the PSIA have right now."

"Don't worry, Azumi," he assured her, grinning. "It doesn't bother me. All in good time."
Two hours later they had eaten again, then rested. Naito was in his cabin reviewing his notes, trying to decide just what he could tell his superiors. He'd discussed it with Yori, Chou, and Azumi, none of whom thought there would be any issues with mentioning the asteroid itself. He was, after all, a day overdue already, although Chou assured him she'd arranged to get a message to the Director-General explaining they'd become unavoidably delayed and not to worry. 'Mind you, when he hears they stopped an asteroid hitting the planet in a few weeks, he's going to shit himself,' the agent grinned, making a couple of corrections to one page. 'Probably best that he finds out about it after the danger is over. Good news, bad news sort of thing.'

Putting the notebook to one side for the moment he checked the used and fresh film cartridges he had, trying to work out whether he had enough left for the next however long it took to resolve the current mission. He'd used about half the film, more than half of that on the Moon. Smiling at the memory of bounding around in one-sixth Earth gravity, he packed the used cartridges carefully away, before reloading the camera with a fresh one. 'I wonder if we should send NASA some photos of their Apollo sites,' he thought mischievously. 'The ones from half a kilometre above the Apollo 11 site should be pretty good.' S'th'kx had obligingly hovered the ship above the relevant position while Naito took photos out the open airlock. Shaking his head slightly in amusement, he snapped the film holder onto the camera and checked it was set correctly, then put it back in its case.

A tap on the door made him look up, then rise and open it. Azumi was standing outside. He smiled at her. "They're ready to start the portal," the silver-haired girl told him. "Want to see?"

"Oh, definitely," he responded, picking up his camera again. He followed her up to the command deck.

"We've slowed to about two metres per second or so," she told him on the way. "We're going to move the ship to the other side of the asteroid then allow the residual velocity to push it through the portal. Yori thinks it's best to go slowly because this portal is going to be a tricky one to make."

"I'd have thought they wanted to get it over with as fast as possible in that case," he replied.

"The faster we're moving the more difficult it is to set up the portal, apparently," she said, glancing at him. "I'm not familiar enough with the spell to really understand it, though, although it sort of makes sense. Since the acceleration is so low this is the best way." He nodded slowly.

"OK. I guess I see." As they entered the control room the ship gently lifted off the surface, moving sideways very slowly, drifting around the asteroid to settle in the middle of the crater left from Yori's blast. Once more it anchored itself in place. Chou broke off her conversation with the captain and moved to stand beside her petite partner, both of them exchanging a glance, before nodding. They walked over to a position directly under the circular transparency that formed the top of the ship, looking up, then concentrated. Everyone else watched curiously.

In the distance, a small blue tear in reality formed in the normal manner, then slowly but steadily grew. Passing the size of the one they'd brought the ship through quite rapidly, it continued to expand. The two women exchanged intermittent quiet comments, both visibly straining. Chou was sweating as the portal reached a diameter of perhaps three hundred metres. It wavered a little and began to shrink again. Shaking her head, she put her hand on Yori's shoulder, the other woman putting her own hand over it, the portal holding at that size. "This is very hard work," the blonde commented.

"True. OK, Ready to try again?" Yori took her eyes off the portal for a moment to smile at her partner.

"Yes. I think I see the problem." They looked at each other, then both nodded. "Let's try that, then."
Returning their attention to the distant portal, which the ship was slowly approaching, they resumed their work. Once more the portal began expanding. A couple of times it wavered a little but eventually it stabilised at an enormous size. S'th'kx checked his instruments and called over to them, his antenna showing satisfaction.

"That's it. Just over a kilometre in diameter," Azumi said to Naito, Ami, and Aiko, who were watching quietly from out of the way. "We're aimed right at the middle. The ship should go through in about two minutes." Naito watched the two magical girls, who were obviously straining to hold the portal open. He'd never actually seen Yori look like she was having to really work at anything before, finding the sight peculiarly unsettling. He could almost feel the amount of effort and power they were putting into generating the tear in space-time.

"Can they hold it that long?" he asked quietly. The girl nodded, although she looked just the slightest bit dubious.

"The power isn't the problem, control of it is," she replied. "Their spell is very efficient. I couldn't run it anywhere near that size, certainly, but Aiko could, if either one of us understood how in the first place. This is the first time they've ever done anything even close to that size. S'th'kx says it's one of the largest portals he's ever seen. Normally it would take about ten good portal mages to stabilise something that big. Their spell is amazingly good but it's a lot to keep track of with just the two of them." Naito watched the two young women in the middle of the deck strain to hold the portal open, marveling at the sight. Taking a photo of the phenomenon, he lowered the camera again.

Eventually they came close enough that the ship end of the asteroid entered the gateway to the Krennsh reality, the blue glow suffusing the control deck in eerie light. It took several seconds before they saw darkness on the other side. S'th'kx called out what were obviously figures related to how much of the asteroid was through, checking his console continuously. "Nearly there," Aiko said.

With one final call the captain turned to look at his friends. "We're through," the brunette said, sounding pleased. Both the magical girls in the middle of the room collapsed to their knees, releasing the portal, then leaned on each other, looking exhausted. Azumi and Aiko moved to help their friends up.

"Good grief, that was hard work," Yori mumbled, looking wiped out, even more than she had after they'd taken the ward down. Chou could barely stand, her hair dripping with sweat. Holding her up, Azumi looked over at Ami and Naito, both of whom stared back, concerned.

"We're going to take them to their room, they need to rest and clean up," Azumi said. "We'll meet you guys in the common room in a while, OK?"

"All right, Azumi," Naito told her. He looked at S'th'kx, who met his eyes, his antenna in a position that showed he was also somewhat worried about his friends. The captain made a small motion of thanks then turned back to his console, calling instructions to his crew. Moments later the ship began vibrating again as it slowly tugged the attached asteroid into the proper orbit.

"Let's leave them to it, Masao," Ami suggested, looking up at him. "I could do with some tea." He nodded, following her out of the control room.

Further away from her home than she could comfortably grasp, Minako sat cross-legged in the entrance of her tent and watched the blue-white sun drop behind the mountains. Shivering a little as the temperature began to rapidly fall she went inside, zipped the tent shut, turned the heater and...
lights on, and picked up a book.

"Kill them. Every last one of them." Usagi muttered obscenities under her breath as she adjusted the weird looking heater to maximum, planning her revenge on all those who would deny her her rightful place.
Chapter 76

I have moved the character list to
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1szka75s0_N9v61J4rowDaqGa_yKzze_msc2R2fE3PjQ/pub
so I only need to update it in one place, and also so that it doesn't interfere with the story flow.

Hotaru stared at the ceiling, thinking it looked exactly like the one in the common room in S'th'kx's ship, but in some way she knew it wasn't. Turning her head she inspected the room she had woken up in, seeing that it reminded her of a hotel room, but a really nice one. She realised after a few seconds she felt too light, but not as much as when they'd been on the moon. Clearly she wasn't home, either, unless someone had turned the gravity down.

The obvious conclusion was that she was on a different world, probably K'nn four, which implied that they'd succeeded in stopping the asteroid and had returned. She was still vague on some of the details but could now clearly remember going down to the thing at least. Hopefully her memory would return.

All this went through her mind in seconds. Turning her head the other way she saw Yori smiling at her. She suddenly noticed the feeling that the other woman always brought with her, even when she was some distance away, a feeling of barely restrained power and danger accompanied with humour and kindness. She smiled back.

"Hi, Yori. Did we make it?" Her voice was scratchy from her throat being dry. Yori nodded, handing her a glass of cold water then helping her sit up.

"We did. We stopped the asteroid, dealt with the engines and everything else, then came back. We're in a nice hotel on K'nn four at the moment. Rei is in the next room, she's still asleep, while Hnther and Chou work on her. The others are outside. Ami is worried about you." The black-haired woman inspected her carefully. "How do you feel?"

The girl probed her own mind. "Slightly dizzy. I still can't remember some of what happened, but parts are coming back." She paused for a few seconds. "Did you... fix me?"

Yori sighed a little, running her hand over her face. "Sort of. We, or Hnther, mainly, found what had been done to you and managed to undo it, so hopefully you won't try to go after Masao any more. Which will make him much happier." Hotaru giggled a little.

"Good. But...?"

"But, we still can't quite work out how it did what it did. We're pretty sure it used the engine installation as a relay to get access to you, it all fits and some of the magic we dismantled there would allow that sort of thing to happen, but we haven't found whatever spell it's got on you that allowed it to get into your head. It's hiding very well."

She sighed, looking at her hands holding the glass for a moment, then raised her eyes to Yori's. "So it could happen again." The woman nodded silently. "Damn."

"Yep. It's kind of annoying." Yori grinned for a moment as Hotaru laughed. "We'll keep looking, and I'm sure we'll find it eventually, but it's a bit of a pain." Pausing for a moment, she looked somewhat sombre, then smiled again. "It's looking like we're going to have to use something
Thinking for a while Hotaru realised what she meant. "You mean using that ward system you mentioned?" Yori nodded.

"Yes. I'm still not absolutely sure it's the ideal solution but at the moment it's the only practical one. We know it blocks the time device completely, so it will make you, Rei, and Ami safe. There's no way I trust the others enough to add them to it, right now and probably ever, but most of them aren't as potentially dangerous as you are, so hopefully we can keep a lid on them until we destroy the thing." She sighed a little, looking worried for a second or two. "There's quite a lot of things that you're going to have to be told as a result as well, which are going to come as a surprise, but we'll deal with that when we come to it. At the moment you're safe, it can't reach you in this reality."

Watching her new friend's face, Hotaru eventually smiled. "Thank you, Yori. I trust you. Whatever you need me to do, or need to tell me, it's fine." The other woman looked at her for a long moment, then grinned.

"Thanks."

"Could we send all the others through portals to get them away from the time device?" the girl asked, thinking about the problem. Yori laughed.

"We're ahead of you there." She told Hotaru what had happened with Usagi and Minako.

"Oh, that's just stupid," the purple-haired girl exploded when she'd heard of Usagi's plan to assassinate the woman sitting beside her. "it would never have worked anyway, you're much too good, and she could have killed people."

Shrugging, Yori stood up. "True. Very true. So, for a few weeks at least, they're having a time-out. With any luck they'll calm down a bit so we can explain things to them. Hnther has a line on a couple of therapists from his world who are the best chance the others have of getting somewhere back to normal, but they won't be available for about two weeks. We need to stop anything bad happening until then, and, of course, figure out how to get your former team-mates to agree to the therapy. We could force them but it would be a lot better if they volunteered."

"From what you just said it doesn't sound like Usagi will let you do anything to her. She's completely nuts."

Walking to the window, through which Hotaru could see what looked a lot like flying cars of all things, the other woman nodded again. "I'd have to agree. Usagi and Setsuna are the two most difficult ones to deal with. Usagi is totally hostile, megalomaniac, and narcissistic. I suspect you're right that she'll never agree to anything. And, Hnther thinks from what we've told him combined with his examination of her last time that the therapy may well not work anyway." She looked out the window, her stance showing annoyance and sadness. "I've thought of a method of dealing with her short of killing her, or just exiling her for good, but it's not a nice one. It's better than death but only a little." She shook her head, then turned around, her face wearing an expression that Hotaru didn't recognise, before it regained its normal good humour.

"Anyway, it's too soon to think like that. Hopefully it won't be needed. Come on, let's go and see the others." She snickered. "Try not to chop Masao's head off." Hotaru gave her an icy look, then started giggling. Jumping off the bed she straightened out her clothes before following Yori out the door. In the large room she found on the other side, there were a number of chairs and a couple of tables extruded from the floor, with two sofas as well. Ami was on one of those talking to a
familiar figure, one she'd seen before, although it wasn't human. She smiled, walking over to the
crow-like mage, who stood and looked at her with amusement.

"Hi, Lldnr'k. It's nice to see you again." He took her hand in both of his and bowed, clicking his
beak.

"I am also pleased to see you, Hotaru, and that you seem in good spirits. The recent events you
experienced would be enough to make many people very upset."

She laughed slightly sadly. "Oh, I'm upset, but there's no point worrying about what's already
happened, is there? We can't change it." His expression changed to one of agreement.

"Indeed. You are wise beyond your years." They both laughed, then she turned to Ami, the mage
sitting down again and listening.

"Hi, Ami." She sat beside her older friend, leaning against her. "I'm sorry." The blue-haired girl put
her arm around her shoulders and held her.

"You've got nothing to be sorry about, Hotaru. It wasn't your fault. And you more than made up for
it afterwards. Breaking the ward without damaging the engine equipment turned out to be very
important, we managed to get some extremely useful information as a result, and we probably
couldn't have done it without you."

Feeling relieved, the younger girl smiled. Looking around she saw Yori had moved to talk to
Azumi and Agent Naito, on the other side of the room, all three of them watching her and Ami.
Yori nodded to her, looking fairly happy, then went back to her conversation. After a few seconds
the girl got up and approached them, waiting until Naito finished talking. Somewhat nervous but
feeling that she had to do this, she bowed formally and said, "I apologise for my earlier actions,
Masao Naito."

The government agent glanced at Yori, who looked impressed, then returned his attention to her.
Returning her bow, he replied, "No apologies are required, Hotaru. You were not yourself at the
time." Both of them straightened, then after a moment smiled at each other. She moved forward
and hugged him quickly.

"Thank you, Masao. I'm really sorry." Putting his hand on her head he grinned at her.

"Don't worry about it, Hotaru. It wasn't your fault, any of it, it was because of that damned
machine. You're the one who ended up hurt, not me, something I'm still very sorry about. And I
know Chou feels guilty about it as well."

"I can't remember that part," she told him honestly.

"That's probably a good thing." Yori inspected her closely. "Your injuries were pretty bad." Hotaru
shivered slightly, not really wanting to hear any more about it, having a sneaking suspicion that
injuries Yori thought were bad were probably pretty damn horrific. "We'll have to start teaching
you some healing techniques soon, I think."

"I'd really like that." Pleased, Hotaru smiled back at the other woman, feeling once more that she
was amongst friends. Even with all the bad things that had occurred recently, she was very grateful
that she'd ended up mixing with all these people, even the demons. Glancing over her shoulder at
Lldnr'k, who was talking quietly to Ami again, she added mentally, 'Especially the demons. They're
neat.' Everyone simply seemed to accept her, unlike so many people in her earlier life who often
reated her with barely concealed suspicion if not actual fear and sometimes dislike.
"How's Rei?" she asked Yori.

"Still asleep, Hnther and Chou are being very careful with her. We spend most of the morning working on you. We got back last night but Chou and I were so tired from the huge portal we had to make we couldn't do much then, so we left it until today. She should be finished in about an hour." The black-haired woman sighed faintly. "It's annoying but we can't take any chances. We're also going to have to check Ami extremely carefully as well. There was no obvious indication that she was affected but we can't take any chances."

Nodding her understanding, Hotaru looked around, then blushed as her stomach growled. Yori snickered. "We'll get some food ordered. Once Rei is done we need to talk about a few things, get you both caught up on what's happened, then work out the next step. After that we can look around if you like. Masao is going to have to get back soon now the immediate emergency is over, and we should as well, but we can spare a day to relax." She smiled for a moment. "Do you like swimming?"

"Yes, very much," Hotaru exclaimed, happily. Something seemed to amuse both Yori and Azumi about that response, both of them giving each other a small secretive smile, then Azumi moved off to work on a console beside the door for a while.

Laughing a little, Yori replied, "Good. There's an amazing waterpark we know, you'll love it." She turned to Naito. "I've sent the specifications of the required modifications to a projector to someone S'th'kx recommended who is making a customised one for you to take back to the PSIA. Two, actually, so you have a backup. They'll be ready tomorrow morning. We'll get some more data crystals as well so we can get you the new data from the other probes when it comes in."

"Thanks, Yori, that's incredibly helpful." Naito seemed pleased.

"That's what we do," she said, grinning, making him chuckle.

"How do you feel?"

Rei stared up at the concerned face of Chou, the blonde looking down at her from beside the bed she was lying on, then switched her gaze to that of Hnther, who looked similarly interested. She had an idle thought that in less than two weeks she'd become so used to the presence of non-humans that finding a scaly demon inspecting her from a metre away barely made her notice, which caused her to smile a little. Quite a change from before.

"Confused. Other than that, not bad. What happened?"

Extending an arm the other woman helped her to sit up, a momentary dizziness coming and going quickly, then glanced at her companion, who met her eyes with a small shrug. "How much do you remember?" Chou asked, rather than answering her question. Rei thought for a moment.

"I remember we were going down to the asteroid, Hotaru was laughing her head off, then... It's kind of fuzzy. Something about getting really pissed off and shouting a lot? Is that real? Aiko shouting back, I think. After than, nothing until just now."

Sighing, the blonde nodded thoughtfully. "I expected that might happen. Hotaru reported much the same." She exchanged a few words with the mind mage, then returned to the conversation with Rei. "The time device attacked you both as far as we can determine, most likely to provide a diversion to distract Yori and the others disabling the engines. The timing was far too close for it to be anything other than a reaction to what she was doing. Hotaru suddenly went after Masao, while
you were about to do much the same except Aiko was standing next to you and noticed something wrong in time to stop you. She was somewhat confused but acted promptly. We've kept you unconscious since then, which was a bit less than two days ago."

Rei felt the blood drain from her face as Chou spoke. "Masao... Did he... Is he...?"

Smiling abruptly, Chou shook her head. "He's fine." Rei sighed heavily in relief, feeling suddenly weak. "He's got very fast reactions all things considered, and a well developed danger sense even if it's only subconscious. He managed to get ahead of Hotaru and stay there until I... dealt with the issue." She correctly predicted the next question on Rei's lips, answering it before she spoke.

"Hotaru is also undamaged. She sustained some quite nasty injuries because I was forced into using a fairly dramatic method of stopping her, but it all healed nicely. She can't remember it, which I think is for the best." The woman looked rather guilty for a moment. "I made a mistake but it was the least worst thing I could have done, I'm afraid."

"Where is she?"

"In the main room now, Yori woke her an hour or so ago."

Sitting and absorbing what she'd been told, Rei thought, while the other two stood and waited patiently. Eventually she looked up again. "You managed to undo what the time machine did, then, to both of us?" Chou looked mildly annoyed for a moment.

"Not quite. Hnther located the implanted programming and was able to delete it, because it was so fresh, then correct the small amount of engrammatic damage caused, but we're still rather in the dark as to how the machine is doing what its doing. We worked out that the most likely method of, hmm, 'infecting' you, I suppose, was by using the engine installation as a relay. Yori and I studied the remains of it when we managed to penetrate the ward that was protecting it and found a number of spells that would have allowed that to happen. But we can't yet work out how it's getting inside your head so effectively." She frowned again. "Unfortunately that means we can't guarantee it won't happen again. Ami seems, for some reason, to be unaffected, but we're not sure if that's a real immunity or more that the device simply hasn't bothered yet."

Rei didn't like the sound of that. "So it could turn me against everyone again at any point?"

"Yes and no. Yes, under the right circumstances it could affect you again, but no, we're fairly sure that it can't do it whenever it wants. If it could we probably wouldn't have been able to get as far as we have so far. Azumi and Yori worked out that the most likely vector for this magic, whatever it turns out to be, is through magitech equipment in close contact with you girls. Ami's computer was probably the source for your group and we suspect Setsuna's staff did the same for the others. Hotaru's weapon seems to be from a different source and is clean as far as Yori can determine."

"Ami's computer?" She had to think about that. "Hmm. That makes a weird sort of sense. She uses that thing all the time, and we were all right next to it on a daily basis."

"Exactly. It fits." Chou seemed pleased that she'd understood so fast.

"So when Azumi killed the link to the time machine, she also stopped it being able to affect us?"

"That seems very likely. Lldnr'k and Hnther have examined it and agree with both theories. We can't totally prove it without reconnecting the link, which no one is prepared to risk, but it's almost certainly the truth."

"How do we stop it trying again, though? It might have other methods of doing the same thing."
Chou studied her for a moment, then sat next to her on the bed.

"Unfortunately, you're right, of course. The ultimate solution is clearly to destroy the time machine, which we need to do anyway, but until we manage that, we need to shield you three from it's influence. We'd like to do that to the others as well but the method that we could use for you we can't, or more accurately, won't, use on them." Chou shrugged. "We like you three and all of us feel we can trust you. We can't say the same for your former team-mates."

Grinning for a moment, Rei became more serious after a second or two. "I can understand that. I'd agree as well. Usagi was getting damn close to totally crazy before we left. Who knows what she's like now?"

A cloud passed over the blonde woman's face. "We know." At Rei's questioning look she added, "There was an incident at home. She talked Minako into what was essentially an attempt to assassinate Yori and cause considerable damage at home in the process. Tamiko and the others stopped it, then took steps to ensure both of them were somewhere that they couldn't cause any trouble until we can work out what to do. They're having a nice little camping trip by themselves on the other side of a portal."

There was a pause, then Rei started laughing. She couldn't help it. Chou waited, smiling, for her to stop, talking quietly to Hnther, apparently repeating what she'd told Rei.

"Oh, god. I'll bet she's furious."

"Furious? She's absolutely livid." Chou grinned in a somewhat predatory manner as Rei began laughing again, flopping back onto the bed.

After her laughter had wound down to mere intermittent chuckles, she sat up again, then stood. Chou did as well. "There's food outside if you're hungry." The blonde smiled as Rei nodded vigorously.

"I'm starving."

"That's not surprising, you haven't eaten anything for more than thirty-six hours now. Come on, let's get something to eat and we can tell you both what's been going on while you were... resting comfortably." Chou grinned at her, both of them following Hnther through the door.

"How much?" Rei whispered in shock, staring at Yori, then looking at her team-mates. Hotaru looked as shocked as she did, while Ami, who was clearly aware of all this already, still seemed rather amazed.

"An almost incalculable amount, to be honest." Yori frowned. "It's so valuable that it's practically impossible to put it into normal figures. Plus we still don't know the exact figure, there are all sorts of variables, like what exactly can be extracted from it, how quickly that happens, how fast it's sold off, and so on. But at a very rough estimate we're working on the basis that the amount we'd have left after S'th'kx takes his share is something like eight or nine times the entire GDP of every country on Earth at the moment." She looked amused as all three girls and Naito wore identical expressions of shock, their eyes wide. Rei nearly fainted. "Call it in the ballpark of four hundred trillion US dollars. And that's just the exotics, not the ordinary gold and heavy metals." Trying to convert that to Yen Rei gave up when she ran out of room in her head to hold all the zeros.

Azumi laughed at the way they'd all practically stopped breathing. "We tried to work it out last night and that was the best estimate we could come up with. S'th'kx thinks it could be considerably
more with luck and some shrewd dealing, but even at the lowest possible figure it's simply incredible. He's sorting out test drillings and assays so we can get a more accurate idea of the likely yield and what minerals are present, which could make it more or less valuable, but let's say that money isn't a problem any more.

Finally able to speak again, Rei found she had nothing to say. Azumi filled the gap. "The economy of the K'nn grouping is vastly larger than Earth's, of course, but even here it's an absolutely astronomical amount. In one go we've practically doubled the total output of exotic elements of the entire grouping for at least the last fifty years. We're keeping it very quiet for the moment but even so there are a number of people practically falling over themselves to help us in any way they can." She grinned. "Which is nice. Something you could get used to."

Hotaru, beside Rei, giggled in a rather hysterical manner for a few seconds then lay back against the sofa, closing her eyes and slowly shaking her head. Looking at her she could understand. Ami looked very thoughtful and still stunned, while Naito seemed to have given up even trying to comprehend the value, just watching and waiting. She met his eyes and saw that even though he'd had a couple of days to absorb the news he still couldn't wrap his mind around it. She sympathised.

"So what are you going to do with it? Buy a planet and start Magical Girl World?" She smiled oddly at the others, who looked highly amused, even as Hotaru started laughing again, shaking her head helplessly. Aiko looked at Yori with a sly smile.

"See? I told you that was a good idea." The other woman sighed theatrically but grinned.

"No. We're not keeping it for ourselves. The current thought is that the vast bulk of it will be used, over time, to fund switching the energy supplies back home over to clean fusion power, buying fuel, clearing up all the polluted and contaminated sites like fission reactors, oil spills, that sort of thing. We'll have to be careful how we go about doing that, to stop the entire economy going into shock, and it's going to take years, but it opens up a huge number of possibilities. It will be a slow process because if nothing else converting the credit here into something we can apply directly at home will be a delicate matter."

"In the short term we can arrange to do things like sort out the magical girl reimbursement fund and extend it anywhere it's needed," Chou added quietly, smiling a little. "In one stroke it's made that nearly bottomless. There are all sorts of other possibilities as well to help people all over the place, not just in Japan."

"Everyone who was on the ship is also, by Krennsh law, personally entitled to a small share of the profit." Azumi smiled at them. "That includes all of you. And you, Masao." The PSIA man turned his head to stare at her, his eyes widening a little.

"Um, I can't..." She laughed.

"Of course you can. You don't have to take much if you don't want to, or you can give it away, but you still have a share. Think about it. There's no rush. We'll be setting up accounts in the K'nn interworld banking system for everyone and also one for the entire planet, which we'll put most of the profit into, so it's there when it's needed. One day, hopefully, we can open up interworld trade properly, but for the moment we'll work on the fusion stuff first."

"Uthryyl is going to fall over when we tell him," Yori snickered. Azumi and her friends laughed, nodding.

"He should probably get a commission for introducing you to S'th'kx," the silver-haired young woman suggested, an amused look on her face. Yori grinned at that.
"It was a while ago, but it's an idea. Not fifteen percent though." As she, Azumi, and Chou collapsed laughing, the others all looked at them curiously. No explanation for the joke seemed forthcoming.

"Your windfall does mean that there is no difficulty arranging any treatment for those other young women, at least from a financial standpoint," Lldnr'k said, when they had recovered enough to listen. Yori nodded, still smiling a little.

"Very true. We could have covered it anyway, but this makes it much easier." She looked at Hnther, for whom the other mage had been translating their discussion, asking him something. He looked around at everyone.

Chou took over the translation, as she had done when Rei had first met the demon. "I've made extensive enquiries into qualified therapists with experience in this type of problem, narrowing it down to two. I'm afraid that both are currently tied up but one will be free in approximately ten days, the other a few days after that. I explained the nature of the problem to them, although obviously I wasn't able to explain everything, but I could describe the basic problem and observed effect well enough. Both are appalled and more than happy to help. When I showed them my own notes and the results of my tests both were perfectly prepared to volunteer their time, although clearly that's not a problem in light of what were were discussing." He smiled a little.

"Neither one is convinced that all the affected people are completely curable, to the point that they would be back to what you three remember from some year ago, but they do think it likely that most of them can be treated well enough to reverse the bulk of the damage. Due to the nature of the memory editing, as we discussed the last time, it would be close to impossible to remove the changes without drastically affecting the underlying personalities. They agreed with me that this is undesirable except as a last resort. They're both licensed and trained in very delicate yet powerful techniques for mental editing, with extensive experience in matters not dissimilar to the problem we face, although clearly not from the same cause."

"Will we need to bring them into the security spell?" Ami asked. He nodded.

"While it might be possible that they could do the work without the background information it would make the task vastly more difficult and the outcome more uncertain. I feel it would be in everyone's best interests to allow them access to the entire story." She sighed a little, looking resigned.

"Why not? Everyone else seems to know." The demon grinned at her, making her smile back after a moment, then shake her head in disgust. "I wish none of this had happened."

"As do I. A great injustice was done to all you young women. You've handled it very well, though. With luck, we can reverse most of it and get your friends to a point they can function normally, or at least as normally as people in your line of work seem to." She laughed as he smiled slyly, fangs showing.

"Which isn't all that normal, to be honest."

"So I gather from Yori." They both looked at the other woman, who shrugged.

"Define normal. Especially with the people we know."

"Exactly my point," Hnther chuckled. Becoming more serious, he added, "Based on the new information Yori passed on, though, I'm very concerned about Setsuna and Usagi. Setsuna would appear to be suffering from some sort of progressive mental deterioration that is producing an
effect not unlike a fast-progressing dementia. It's a fairly rare but not unheard of result of this type of mental tampering. I'd hoped that the work I did on her would prevent that sort of thing but I suspect I got there too late to help. We need to deal with her as fast as possible. I can most likely halt the degradation but reversing it is beyond my experience.”

"Usagi is another type of problem altogether. I had thought it possible that the repairs Yori did to her brain might have slowed or stopped the changes to her personality but again I think it was just too late to have the desired effect. From the description of her recent behaviour she would appear to have lost all her normal inhibitory controls, causing her to act in a manner that is very similar to how a true psychopath would. It's not likely to reverse itself, only progress. The aggressive attitude, dismissal of normal ethics and morals, lack of concern for and empathy to others, all fits this type of problem."

"Can it be fixed?" Naito asked curiously. The mind mage looked at him.

"I'm not sure, I'm afraid. If she was a non-magic-user, I'd say it was possible but not guaranteed. However, with her intrinsic high magic level, plus the length of time the tampering has been going on for, with all the attendant memory changes and reinforcements, it's a very difficult problem. I certainly wouldn't like to promise anything. Without studying her carefully I can't really say more than that."

"What do we do if she can't be fixed?" Hotaru asked very quietly. There was silence in the room for several seconds.

After a while, Yori looked at the girl, not appearing very happy. "We have limited choices. We can't let some angry megalomaniac magic-powered psychopath run around killing people, which is what would certainly end up happening sooner or later. She's already taken steps in that direction." Hotaru looked at Rei, then Ami, neither of whom seemed inclined to dispute the point, then nodded, her eyes downcast.

"No. You're right."

"So, as far as I can see, we only have four real possible solutions to the problem she poses. One is to cure her. That's the ideal one, but the most difficult and unlikely solution, as Hnther has said. Another is to kill her. That's easy, but an absolute last resort. I don't like saying it but we've all thought it." Everyone was silent for a moment, pondering the thought.

"That doesn't sit well with me," Naito commented in a low voice. "It's not her fault any of this happened."

"Agreed. I hate the idea as well. I don't like killing, as you know." Yori looked at him sadly. "But sometimes, you have no other choice. That's life."

When he didn't say anything else, she turned back to Hotaru. "The other two solutions I can see aren't as bad as killing her, but they're not very nice, either. One is to push her through a portal to somewhere she can't do any harm. We've more or less done exactly that at the moment but only as a short term solution. We could make it permanent."

"I'm not sure that one is any better than killing her, in most ways," Chou said heavily. "If we put her somewhere there are people she'd probably end up causing as much damage as she would at home one way or the other. We can hardly just make her someone else's problem. And if we find somewhere uninhabited but habitable, we're condemning her to a lifetime of isolation, which is absolutely horrible to think about." She looked upset. Yori moved to sit beside her, putting her arm around the taller woman and resting her head on her shoulder.
"I know. I don't like that one either. She's not exactly an outdoors type in the first place, although she's damn hard to damage, so she'd probably be fine, physically at least. Mentally is another story."

"I can't say I like that idea any more than killing her," Rei said. "What's the last idea?"

Yori released her partner and sat up straight. "It came to me last night, based on various things I've seen over the years, and discussions I've had with Hnther. As he said when we were first talking about this problem, about the only real method to undo the damage caused by the memory interference would be to erase the last few years of her memory totally, removing all the implanted false memories along with the real ones, then let her basically grow up again. It would be difficult to do because of her inherent magic but not impossible. With some luck her underlying personality would eventually rebuild itself into a person similar to what she should have been all along. It wouldn't be the same Usagi, but it would be a sane Usagi. We can't remove her magical abilities but we could suppress them for a while, so that by the time she was in a position to use them again she'd hopefully be a decent person, not the nightmare she's becoming."

Rei listened with a sinking heart, not liking that idea either, but unable to deny it might be the only way. "If we added an age regression spell to reset her physically to the same age her memories would match, which I know at least one method to achieve, there wouldn't be any conflicts that would cause her to realise something was wrong." Yori looked around at the others. Hnther was listening with interest while Lldnr'k was slowly nodding, rubbing his beak in thought. "It's harsh, in some ways you could still say we'd killed Usagi, the person she is now, but most of her would live, one way or the other."

"What about her family?" Ami asked, scowling. "As far as I know none of them have any idea about her. She's been a total shit to her brother for some time, but treats her mother and father fairly well. I guess they've probably seen a difference, even though she seems much worse when she's powered up, and reserves most of her more... excessive... mood swings and arrogance for times like that. They're going to notice if she's suddenly twelve again and can't remember the last six years. So will other people."

Yori sighed heavily. "That's one of the big problems, true enough. We can hardly edit their memories to make it all match, we'd be perpetrating a crime as large as the one that got us into this problem in the first place, never mind that it's not just them, it's her friends, neighbours, acquaintances, you name it. It's the sort of thing that rapidly turns into a total nightmare with no real way to be sure you got everything. The only thing I can think of is to tell her family about it."

As Ami opened her mouth, the woman raised her hand.

"Not about all of it. We'd keep you and the others out of the whole thing, and most of the backstory, but we should still be able to explain enough to make them understand the issue. If they agreed, we could arrange to move them somewhere else, change names, faces, all the records, and let them start over. Eventually, when Usagi got to the point that her magic started to become obvious, which it inevitably would, we could arrange to make sure she learned how to use it correctly." The martial artist looked around at the room full of people. "It's horribly complicated and involved, I know, and there are a number of major problems with it, but it's all I've got other than cure, exile, or death."

No one spoke for some time as they thought about it.

"An extreme solution but most likely an effective one, albeit difficult to pull off," Lldnr'k finally responded, studying her. "I am forced to agree I'm unable to think of any real faults with your analysis of the problem and the list of possible actions. We are quite limited in what can be done at
"Curing her is certainly the avenue I would prefer to explore first," Hnther said through Chou. "As you describe it, she is in a position that she's unlikely to cause trouble from for some time, so at least that aspect of it is contained. Isolation from the influence of the time device may have a beneficial effect on her mind, although without further study that's difficult to be sure of. Would it be possible to inspect her without her knowledge?"

"Yes, that should be easy enough." Yori smiled slightly. "We can sneak up on her and drop her whenever we want, then our cloaking technique can deal with her short-term memory. She won't realise we've done anything if we're careful."

The mind mage looked pleased. "In that case, my suggestion would be to let me examine her mind as soon as possible, so I can get a better idea of what's going on at the moment, then pass it on to the therapists. With some luck they can suggest modifications that can be made to improve her attitude, which combined with removing her from where she can be further affected by the device, might just be enough to set her on the course to a cure. Even a small amount would help. If we can get her into a state where she can be reasoned with, in any manner, we might be able to get her to agree to therapy. That would make the likelihood of a true cure vastly more likely. Doing it against her will is unlikely to produce a permanent beneficial effect and could well create permanent personality damage."

"That's certainly worth trying," Yori told him, cheering up a little. Rei felt considerable relief, tempered with the knowledge that it was a long shot.

"What about the others?" she asked. "Minako, Makoto, and Michiru. And Haruka."

"Minako is safe enough where she is for the time being," Azumi replied, looking mildly amused. "She'll keep. From what the others told us she was somewhat reluctant to go along with Usagi in the first place, which might well mean she's not as far down the path to the dark side." Hotaru giggled at this, even though she looked upset. Smiling at her, Azumi added, "Michiru is being amazingly paranoid, but at least she's staying put. Makoto is enjoying herself chastising criminals. Neither of them seems too much of a risk right now but we'll certainly have to keep a close eye on them. As long as we keep all of them separated, or at least keep Michiru and Makoto away from Haruka, hopefully nothing serious will happen."

"Haruka is clearly suffering from depression amongst other issues," Yori added. "We need to keep an eye on that as well. Hotaru, I hope you'll help?"

"Of course I will. I still love her," the girl said, sadness on her face. "I want her to be happy." She thought for a moment. "Do you think telling her about the Moon will help? If she sees proof that you and Chou were right, that will make her believe you, right?" Rei watched the hopeful look on her face with a smile, as did everyone else.

Yori sighed, shrugging very slightly, then smiled. "I hope so, Hotaru. All we can do is go over it with her. Although she listened to us, I'm still not sure she's flexible enough to handle proof of the story we told her. She may just be hoping we're wrong and going along with it to keep us quiet and off her back."

"She's better than that," the young purple-haired girl assured the other woman. Looking amused Yori nodded to her.

"With luck you're right. You know her a lot better than I do. Anyway, that's the current state of affairs. The others are watching everyone and will let us know if anything happens, by getting a
message to Uthryyl who will come and tell us. We're also waiting for some custom hardware for Masao, as well as some paperwork about the asteroid claim, security for it, things like that, which means that either Chou or I need to stay here for a little while in any case. We might as well all stay and do a little exploring, some swimming, perhaps go to the space elevator restaurant. Does that sound good?" Yori looked around at the other people, who thought about the suggestion for various periods of time.

Hotaru was nodding before she'd finished speaking, Rei noticed with amusement. Ami and Azumi were clearly agreeable as well. Eventually everyone had agreed. Lldnr'k spoke up.

"While I would like to stay for a while, I will have to return fairly soon to do some further research on this 'key' you mentioned," he said. "It rings a very vague bell, I think I might have come across some reference to it at some point in the past, although the details escape me for the moment." He studied Yori and her friends. "Do you think you can obtain it?"

Yori glanced at Ami, who shrugged slightly, then looked back to the temporal mage. "It might take a bit of work but yes, we should be able to get it. We're almost a hundred percent certain it's built into Setsuna's staff, which we need to acquire anyway, as it seems likely that it's what the time device is using to get at her and her sub-group. But it might take some effort. It depends on how we approach her, which I haven't decided yet. As soon as we do get it, though, I'll bring it to you."

The mage nodded thoughtfully. "Good. With enough examples we may be able to understand the spell and block it from access to the other girls, and hopefully find out how it's getting into their minds in the first place. Something about all of this troubles me. The persistence of it seems... I don't know, I can't quite explain it, but it's not something I've seen before. Whatever method is in use is something I haven't previously encountered."

"I still fail to understand it either," Hnther told him via Chou. "The manipulations are very subtle, although not the best I've ever seen, but I'm unsure how they're being performed."

"I will have to think some more about it," Lldnr'k replied, rubbing his beak in thought. "It's an interesting and worrying problem." He looked around at them. "You three are safe here, certainly, the machine can't possibly access you across realities this far separated from it. Even managing to access you from its own sub-reality is an impressive feat although by no means unheard of. Usagi and Minako aren't currently in further danger either. But the rest of them can certainly still be affected. If Setsuna's staff is indeed a relay, removing it from play should help, although I very much suspect it won't prevent the device performing further manipulations by other methods. It might give a breathing space, though, while it works out its next action."

"The thing I'm wondering," Naito said, causing them all to turn to him, "is at what point does it decide that we've stopped it, give up, and reset for another try? Sooner or later by the sound of it you'll have cut it off from its unsuspecting agents. What does it do then?" There was an uncomfortable silence for a while.

"That is a worry, certainly." Lldnr'k didn't look happy. "Eventually it will certainly loop again but we have no idea what the parameters it uses for determining a failed attempt are. If we don't stop it before then, it will be too late. The result of a loop would in all likelihood cause a deletion of your current time line, possibly triggering a reality reset, which would erase your entire home reality. That is certainly a very undesirable outcome." He snapped his beak in amusement as Naito went white. "We will do our best to stop that happening," he added.

"I'd prefer that, to be honest," the PSIA agent told him weakly.

"There is considerable evidence that it has a very high threshold for considering an attempt as a
failure," the temporal mage said after a second or two, during which everyone looked worried. "The temporally isolated possible future that we have information on shows that, as is taking an action as drastic as an attempted asteroid strike on the planet. That's a very large manipulation, which it clearly decided was worth the risk, both of killing its own agents or simply causing the multiverse to take steps. Personally I feel it may well keep trying until there is absolutely no chance at all that it can get any further with this sequence, or possibly until reality resets itself. Being in its own sub-reality it is isolated to a significant degree from damage to the main one, although destroying your reality completely, as happened to its own home strand, would also delete any sub-realities. With luck that means it won't arbitrarily decide to reset out of the blue although we can't take that for granted."

"Destroying the damn thing as soon as possible is the best action we can take," Aiko said, speaking for the first time, from where she was standing by the window, Azumi beside her. The temporal mage glanced at her, nodding agreement.

"I would agree. I would also suggest that, as formidable as your own abilities are, you take no chances and use the method suggested of a large antimatter warhead. More than one, ideally. Blow the god's-cursed thing to ions. It it far too dangerous to risk doing an incomplete job." Lldnr'r spoke with passion, looking angry. "Too many people have died, inconceivable numbers of them, to allow it to exist any longer than we can arrange." Everyone looked at him for a while, then Yori nodded agreement.

"All right. I'll make arrangements to acquire the weapons."

"One last thing." Lldnr'r produced a small spindly device from somewhere. "This is a prototype of a device I designed that should allow the detection of any temporal manipulation caused by the time machine. It's very crude, I'm still working on it, but I believe it will work well enough to at least give you warning that something is being done. That won't necessarily mean you can prevent it, of course, but you will know, which could be useful." He handed it to Yori, who inspected it with interest. "The spells and magitech are pulled together from a number of sources and need considerable refinement, but the basic theory is sound. If the machine does anything dramatic it won't help much although it should allow detection of small interventions." He had a quick discussion with Yori in that demonic language, explaining the operation of the thing, Rei assumed, then took it back from her. "It's not quite ready for use but I'll have it finished in about a day or so. When it's done I'll make a number of them for you and get them to you."

"Thanks, Lldnr'r," she told him, smiling. "That should certainly help."

"I hope so. The evidence suggests the device is unable to perform serious manipulations directly, so with luck you'll mainly only have to deal with small changes, most likely to people's motivations and goals, but even that is more than enough to eventually produce some serious repercussions." He shrugged. "We're working on very limited information at the moment, which isn't helping. I've been researching it since we last spoke, as well as calling in assistance, but we've been unable to find out very little more than we already had so far. It was just too long ago. I also have a feeling, although no way to prove it, that at some point some entity has deliberately attempted to erase as much of the remaining information on the device as possible. A long time ago, most likely."

"The time machine itself?" Ami asked curiously. The mage turned his attention to her.

"I don't know. Possibly, although it would have had to act through agents, I think, but it may have been someone else. It might not have been a malicious action, either, the idea may have been to remove any data that could lead to a repeat of the event at some future point. If so, I'm not sure it is the best approach. Knowing how dangerous it is with all the gory details would seem to me to be a
"Better deterrent than hiding it."

"People tend to panic about things like this," Naito said, "even at home, with events that are far less apocalyptic, information gets manipulated to hide causes, results, and people."

"Indeed. I understand that, but at the moment it's something of a nuisance," Lldnr'k replied, sighing a little, "Oh well. We'll keep looking. If we succeed in destroying it none of that will matter anyway, and if we don't..."

"None if it will matter to us," Azumi completed the thought, frowning. He nodded heavily.

"True. Let's hope we succeed."

After a long pause, Chou looked around, then got up. "Come on, let's go out and explore. It will cheer everyone up." Everyone followed as she left the room, talking amongst themselves.

Squinting slightly, Minako looked back at her tent, a dot in the distance, then upwards at the peak of the mountain she was half-way up the side of. Resting for a moment she closed her eyes, breathing steadily, before pulling out a bottle of water and drinking half of it. She'd decided that she wanted proof that there was nothing else in the area, picking the highest peak and beginning climbing it. Even for a magical girl of her level it was annoyingly hard work, the thing was very close to vertical, without much in the way of hand-holds. Without even basic equipment she was forced to do it the hard way, punching her hands into the rock and pulling herself up. The first few hundred metres had been easy enough as she could jump from ledge to ledge like a mountain goat but when she got above that level the mountain became much less craggy and rough, leaving little to hold on to.

Putting her left hand into a small crack in the rock and making a fist, which anchored her well, she leaned out to get a better view of the next few hundred metres, plotting the best route. Glancing down she shivered a little, even though she knew she'd survive if she fell, she wasn't at all happy about heights, not to mention it would certainly hurt.

Taking another swig from her bottle she put it away and resumed climbing, angling to the right where the going looked slightly easier. The blonde estimated that it would take over an hour to reach the top from where she was. "Then I have to get back down again, which is going to be fun," she mumbled to herself, pushing her fingers into a crack with a crunching sound. "But I have to do this. It would suck if it turned out there was a city on the other side of this and I spent weeks only kilometres away from it in a damn tent."

"Do you really think that Tamiko and the others would have set you up like that?" a familiar voice sounded from her right. She sighed, glancing sideways.

"Didn't I leave you at the tent, Artemis?" she enquired. The feline advisor, perched on a small outcropping, grinned at her in his own annoying way.

"You did. I felt lonely so I came after you."

She sighed again. Looking down she raised an eyebrow. "How the hell did you climb up here anyway?" she asked. He shrugged, which looked odd coming from a cat.

"That's what claws are for."

"Fair enough. Now, shut up, while I do this next bit. It's tricky." Ignoring the animal she moved sideways, then up, very careful not to let go with more than one limb at a time. Small rocks rattled
Saburo stepped out into the waiting room of his veterinary practice, his eyes on his clipboard, flipping to the next page. "Ah. Mr Ishikawa, please, if you could foll..." Lifting his eyes from the paperwork he looked around, puzzled, becoming aware that the room was strangely silent. The half-dozen people in it were, with one exception, pressed up at the far end, as far away from that exception as they could get, staring wide-eyed at him. Their various animals were also exhibiting all the signs of terror, one small dog cowering under a chair, having left a number of yellow puddles behind, two cats in a wire carrier staring motionless at the old man, a very large dog he knew for a fact to be extremely aggressive if provoked shivering and intermittently whining, all of them looking at Mr Ishikawa, who was totally unaware of the scrutiny, as he stroked the...

'What the fuck is that?' Saburo thought to himself, also staring in horrified shock. The old man tickled the large ears, making the thing they were attached to give a low growl of pleasure, leaning against his legs and appearing contented. 'And where in god's name did he get it? The teeth!' Large yellow-gold eyes, contrasting against dark, almost black fur, with hints of deep blue and green showing when it moved in quick jerky motions, turned to look at him. He flinched at the odd triangular pupils, which contracted slightly, then expanded in interest. A long tail twitched, wrapping around almost monkey-like paws, although with claws that looked like they'd been stolen from a large cat. It made a small noise as it licked its lips, its mouth much too big for the size of the head, while it cocked its head to one side, blinking. The large pointed ears moved around, one aiming at the big dog which whimpered, the other one listening to the elderly man who was talking nonsense to it, while rubbing its head, something Saburo decided you couldn't possibly pay him enough to do.

The teeth!

There were way too many of them. Long, obviously razor-sharp, somewhat translucent fangs stuck out in copious quantities, even when the thing's mouth was closed. It looked like the business end of a particularly dangerous industrial shredder. One that was clearly alert, yet relaxed and apparently happy.

'And', he thought wildly to himself, checking the paperwork again to be sure he'd read the information there correctly, 'not a dog!'. What it was he had absolutely no idea, other than from somewhere a damn sight further away than the local pound, but other than that...

Mr Ishikawa looked up, finally noticing him. "Oh, hello, doctor, are we next?" He struggled to his feet, bracing himself on the animal, which didn't seem to mind. "Come on, boy, let's get you checked over. Why, you could have worms, or fleas, living on the street isn't a nice thing." He happily toddled past the frozen vet, into the examination room, the animal placidly following him, while Saburo watched, only his eyes moving. As soon as the waiting room was clear there was a discreet yet vehement stampede towards the door, leaving the room empty in seconds. He turned his head to meet the wide eyes of his secretary, who was shivering a little.

"Do you happen to know any magical girls?" he asked faintly. She shook her head. "Pity."

"Doctor? Do you want me to put him on the table?" The slightly croaky voice of his customer made him twitch violently. Closing his eyes for a moment he issued a few prayers to any passing god, wondering whether he should just run, before taking a deep breath and turning toward the door. "No! Bad boy. Stop eating that chair!" There was a sound reminiscent of a rolled-up magazine meeting a furry head, the crunching noises that had started seconds earlier stopping...
suddenly. He twitched again, then very slowly went into the examination room. Behind him, his secretary picked up her coat and purse, looked around, then left quickly, deciding it was lunch time.

"FUCK!"

The scream echoed across the barren landscape as Usagi slipped again, bouncing twenty metres down the side of the cliff to land on the ground. She lay on her back, muttering to herself and rubbing her head, staring up at the landscape which seemed to be mocking her. She'd decided that she should climb to the top and look around, but was having a very hard time, as this was the fifth time she'd fallen. Laughter made her slowly turn her head and glare viciously, while the feline face looking at her from a metre away smirked.

"I told you it was a bad idea. You haven't got any experience in climbing and you rushed it. Again. Why not try that one over there, it looks easier." The cat pointed with a paw.

Usagi sighed, sitting up and brushing herself down. "I want to climb this one," she told the animal petulantly. "It's the tallest."

"And the steepest, and the most difficult." The cat shook its head, jumping sideways as she threw a rock at it. "Try the other one. Or, and this is a much better idea, go back to your tent and relax. You're getting all wound up again."

Hopping to her feet and glaring at it, she screamed, "I'm not getting all wound up you furry little bastard!" She turned to look up at the cliff. "I'm going to climb that thing if it kills me."

"It probably will at this rate," the voice from behind her said. When she turned around again, the cat was gone. Sighing, she irritably shook her head, then began climbing again.

"FUCK!"

The echoes took some time to fade.

"This place is amazing," Hotaru shouted happily, diving into the water. When she popped to the surface she shook her head, her long hair spraying water around. A few metres away Azumi laughed, glancing at Ami beside her on what looked for all the world like a completely natural rock outcropping near the ocean, even though they were inside.

"It's pretty damn good, that's for sure," the silver-haired woman said, grinning. "I felt the same thing when I first saw it a while ago. Even now I'm very impressed."

"There are fish in here and everything," the younger woman exclaimed, peering into the crystal-clear water at the brightly coloured life swimming around her legs. She didn't recognise any of it, some looked extremely odd, yet all of it seemed safe and was very pretty.

"Yep. Some of them are engineered to clean the water, others are just nice to look at, but it's a complete biome, even if it's artificial." Ami was scanning everything while kicking her legs in the warm water, looking impressed.

"This really is one of the most incredible things I've ever seen," the blue-head said, looking up, then around at the scenery. She watched with a grin as Hoter went past on something very similar to a windsurf board, leaning far over against the pull of the sail, the tip of his tail dragging in the water leaving a wake. Beyond him she could see Yori and Chou swimming side by side at
considerable speed towards a small island several hundred meters out, while Naito was floating on
his back with a grin on his face, holding a glass of some sort of drink on his chest with a long straw
looping up and into his mouth. Rei was talking to Aiko as they lounged on the sand, both also
drinking something alcoholic.

"The simulation is remarkable effective," she added, looking at her computer. "I can barely tell
where the reality ends and the projections starts, even with this."

"The Krennsh like their relaxation but this city is a long way from the shore," Azumi told her,
looking amused and relaxed, then picked another of the spiky blue snacks off the plate next to her
and ate it. Swallowing, she continued, "This is apparently one of the largest waterparks in the city.
There's an even bigger one on the other side, but I haven't been to it yet. They use it for more
extreme sports like surfing, I'm told it can produce waves up to about ten metres high. I'd like to
see it at some point. Sounds pretty impressive."

"Can you surf?" Hotaru asked curiously, swimming over to them and treading water. Azumi
grinned.

"A little. I haven't done it for a while. Yori is pretty good at it."

"I'd like to try that," the purple-haired girl said thoughtfully. "It always looks like fun on TV." She
jumped as something brushed against her leg, looking into the water, then following the aquatic
creature with her eyes. After a second or two she looked back to the others. "I want to try those
water-slides on the other side. Do you want to come with me?" Both exchanged glances, then
nodded.

"Sounds fun." Bending, Ami helped her friend out of the water, then all three headed off, Azumi
finishing the snacks and dropping the plate into a discreetly disguised recycler on the way.

Staring at what was left of his stethoscope, Saburo paled. In front of him Mr Ishikawa's new little
friend swallowed with a pleased expression. "Um. Well, he seems healthy, as far as I can tell. No
problems with his appetite at least." He glanced at the remains of the fairly solid steel and plastic
chair in the corner, which was missing a leg and part of the seat, wincing slightly. The old man on
the other side of the table chuckled, watching his pet in foggy pleasure.

"He likes biscuits, I found out. And he seems happy enough to eat scraps. I suppose after living on
the street for however long he was doing that any real food is a luxury." The vet stared at the other
man wordlessly for several seconds before shaking his head slightly, turning away to retrieve a
thermometer.

"Now, if you could hold his tail up for a moment, I'll just.." There was a short silence, broken by a
sizzling sound. "Hmm. That's... a little... unusual." He looked at the remains of the thermometer
which seemed to be slowly melting, then back at the animal, who was giving him an unfriendly
look. "OK. I don't think we need to try that again," he added, running a finger around his collar.
Dropping the thermometer into the sink and turning the water on, he jumped as there was a sharp
pop followed by a small cloud of greenish vapour, coughing a little as he waved it away. Mr
Ishikawa smiled.

"Do you think he's got any parasites?" he asked. Saburo stared at him, then at the creature, which
he was becoming increasingly sure hadn't originated anywhere near Japan. Or Earth, probably.

"No," he replied honestly. "I very much doubt anything I've ever come across could survive inside
this, um, dog." He emphasised the last word, hoping yet again that the old man would take the
hint. No such luck. Mr Ishikawa bent over a little and hugged the animal to his chest, causing it to look pleased and the vet to step back, slightly alarmed and flinching. "Where did you get him?"

"The poor little thing was abandoned in an alley near my home," Mr Ishikawa explained, still cuddling the thing, "he was so hungry, poor dear. We got to know each other then I took him home. He seems happy enough." Releasing the thing he straightened up, inspecting the beast through his thick glasses, frowning slightly. "I still can't work out what breed he is, though. None of my books show anything quite like him. If he is a him." He glanced at the vet, who shrugged. He had absolutely no idea how to even check and wasn't keen on experimenting. "Oh well. He feels like a he to me, so he probably is."

"Have you got a name yet?" Saburo asked, feeling foolish, but unable to think of anything else to say. It didn't seem likely that screaming and running in terror was very helpful although it seemed a good plan B. The elderly man smiled happily.

"Yes. I'm going to call him Kin, I think, after the beautiful colour of his eyes. Aren't they amazing?"

"Ah, yes, I suppose they are." Shivering as those eyes met his, he backed away another step. "I can't think of anything else to check. You can put him down again now."

"Come on, Kin, jump down, there's a good boy," Mr Ishikawa said, coaxing the thing to the edge of the table. It glanced at him, then the vet, before dropping soundlessly to the floor and sitting next to the old man, who beamed. "So obedient as well. He learns very fast. What a good dog." Bending down he handed the animal a biscuit he'd pulled from his pocket, making Saburo stare as those horrible teeth snapped mere centimetres from his fingers. "How much do I owe you, Doctor?"

"Oh, forget it, please. I wouldn't dream of charging in this case." Saburo waved him towards the door from as far away as he could get. "I'm just glad that, um, Kin, is healthy and that you seem happy." His customer led his creature into the waiting room.

"That's very good of you, Doctor, thank you very much indeed. Should I make an appointment for a check-up?" Looking around the totally empty room he added, "Business seems a little slow at the moment. It must be the holidays."

"I think you probably don't need to worry about a regular check-up, Mr Ishikawa," Saburo assured him nervously. He glanced at the empty desk where his secretary should be, envying the woman her absence. "If you have any emergencies, you can arrange a vet then. Not me, though, I'm going on holiday very soon and I don't know when I'll be back. I can recommend a good alternative." He rummaged through his secretary's desk, coming up with a card, which he handed to the old man. "Here you go. Try these people if you have a problem. They're very good." Slightly guiltily he added to himself, 'And I hate that bastard. See how he likes treating a demon or whatever the hell that thing is.'

Accepting the card his customer tucked it safely away in his inside pocket. "Thank you, Doctor. Enjoy your holiday." He looked mistily around again. "Hopefully business will pick up when you get back. Good bye." He and the animal left, the creature taking a bite out of the door on the way through, chewing loudly as it trotted off. Mr Ishikawa apparently didn't notice.

Slumping into one of the waiting-room seats Saburo stared at the damaged door, his heart racing, sweating horribly. After a few minutes he got up, phoning his travel agent and booking a holiday in the Caribbean, having suddenly decided that it sounded like a very good idea to leave the country for a while. Possibly permanently.
Naito watched the girls shooting out of the end of the waterslide, landing over ten metres out in the warm water with huge splashes, grinning to himself. He took another sip of the remarkably good drink, not something he'd ever come across before but something he was becoming inordinately fond of. Beside him, Chou laughed, also watching. "They seem to be enjoying themselves, don't they, Masao?" she asked.

"They certainly do. Hotaru more than any of them." He laughed as the purple-haired young woman jumped on Rei from behind, pushing her under the surface, then quickly swam off before her friend recovered, the other woman spluttering and shouting before giving chase. "She seems well considering everything that's happened."

"I hoped that this distraction would help her," the blonde agreed quietly. "The poor girl has had a hard life, which the last couple of days haven't aided much. It's a good thing she can't remember everything that happened to her, especially the injuries." He glanced sideways at her for a moment before going back to watching the others.

"Is it possible you might have... helped that to happen?" he asked, both curious and amused. She coughed momentarily.

"It's not impossible, certainly. There is a chance that we might have had some influence on the more distressing memories." He looked at her again, seeing she was smiling a little.

"Good. I wouldn't want to remember that sort of thing either." Shivering for a moment he remembered the damaged eye and all the other injuries Hotaru had suffered when the drive unit exploded.

"We only tweaked it a little," Chou explained after sipping her own drink. "There was sufficient trauma, coupled with the mental tampering, that her memories would have been rather cloudy and confused anyway. Hnther helped correct that as much as he could but there are parts of it that are gone for good. Luckily not the lunar exploration experience, though. It would be a terrible shame for her not to remember that, she had so much fun."

"The girl certainly seems to be making the most of this trip, all things considered," Aiko said as she came up behind them. Both looked over their shoulders at her, Naito nodding a greeting.

"Definitely. Ami and Rei seem to be having fun as well, although Ami is also studying everything in sight," Naito laughed.

"She does that," the short brunette giggled, sitting on his other side. "It's sort of an obsession."

"Where are Azumi and Yori?" he asked curiously.

"Yori went off to talk to a trader she knows, to check something. Azumi went with her. They'll be back in an hour or so." Aiko held out a tray of the spiky blue snacks, which he and Chou both helped themselves to. "Azumi was also going to get a lot more of these, she's practically addicted to them."

"They're very nice," he replied, popping one into his mouth. "I can understand that." The trio sat in companionable silence for a while, watching the three girls on the slides. Hnther went past a couple of times, apparently having a wonderful time, waving as he did so. Looking around at all the Krensh splashing around, and a number of other species interspersed among them, Naito finally shook his head in wonder and laughed. "This is just amazing. It's like something from a movie, but done much better. I'd never have believed, a week ago, that I'd ever experience anything
"When I first encountered this sort of place it took me by surprise as well, Masao," Chou assured him, smiling gently. "You tend to get used to it to some degree but even now, after some years, I still find it very interesting. Not all worlds are this cosmopolitan or welcoming, but quite a few are. The Krennsh are very nice people, more than accommodating, with a huge amount of trade between realities, so a lot of different species come through here and one or two of the other K'n'nn worlds. K'n'nn four is the main hub, though. K'n'nn nine is a wonderful place if you want to get away from people. We went there on our holiday, only for a few days, but it was very relaxing."

"Fwetna is nice as well," Aiko interjected, sipping a drink a small flying machine had brought her moments earlier. He looked at her with an eyebrow up. "That's the world Uthryyl comes from. We went there as well. It's very pretty, with nice people. Nothing like as frantic as K'n'nn four, the population of the planet is probably only about the same as two decent sized cities here, but it's a very nice place. I'd like to go back for longer one day."

"There are some interesting animals there, the scenery is beautiful, and the food is amazing," Chou added, smiling at her memories.

"You girls certainly get around," he snickered, finishing his drink. Looking around he couldn't see anywhere to put it. Aiko grinned at him, taking his empty container, then flipping it into the air. A small machine appeared out of nowhere, grabbed it, then whizzed off. He gaped, before laughing. "Amazing."

"High-tech worlds are fun," she agreed, disposing of her empty as well. "I'm going swimming again." Hopping up she ran into the water, heading across in the direction of the waterslides. He watched for a moment, then relaxed, closing his eyes, a smile on his face.

Minako turned around again, before sighing. The top of the mountain had a fairly flat spot she could stand and look around from, giving a truly spectacular view, but not one that filled her with hope. Jagged peaks stretched off in every direction as far as she could see, a few scattered clouds in the sky off to the west being the only non-monochromatic colour visible to her, illuminated a faint, slightly eerie blue-green from the sun, which was getting fairly low in the sky. She estimated that the day length here was around twenty-two hours. Walking to the edge she peered in the direction of her tent, which was visible as a tiny green dot far below.

"Not a lot of places to go," the cat at her feet said, making her twitch.

"Damn it, don't sneak up like that," she growled, looking at it in irritation. The thing looked up at her with what she could swear was amusement although it was covered up quickly. "Where did you get to? I thought you'd gone back down."

"I was looking around," it said, then yawned. "You don't have much time to get back down. Once the sun goes down far enough the mountains will block the light. Climbing in the dark will be difficult." She was forced to agree. Looking around once more she sighed again, as it was blatantly obvious that where she was, as barren as it was, most likely was the only place around that had food, water and shelter. Grumbling about the ancestry of several people, especially Usagi for getting her into this situation, she retraced her steps, swung herself over the side, then slowly and carefully began the long climb back to ground level.

Limping towards her tent Usagi sneezed. "Fuck it, now a cold as well?" she complained grumpily. Her clothes were dusty and torn, her left arm scraped raw, and she'd twisted her right knee in the
last fall, which had been from a sufficient height that most people would have died. Having had the foresight to power up before beginning her efforts was the only thing that kept her from more serious injury. The blonde knew she’d be fine in a day or so but at the moment was cold, hungry, angry, and in pain. Glancing around she couldn’t see any sign of Luna, which suited her fine for the time being. The so called ‘advisor’ had been giving her advice all day that made her want to pick it up and punt it as far as she could.

Idly wondering where it was, and how it had got there in the first place, she dismissed the thought when she got close to the tent. Rummaging through the box that contained miscellaneous supplies she found a bottle of aspirin, opening it and gulping down three of the tablets, before following them with a swig of water. Still muttering obscenities to herself on the theme of what she’d do to everyone involved in her being in this situation, she went into the tent, zipped it up, then huddled over the heater.
Chapter 77

When I posted this chapter, I realised to my embarrassment that I had somehow managed to miss a previous chapter, which was fairly critical to the whole story:(

If you got confused, my apologies.

It is now in its correct place as chapter 75. I would suggest that if you missed it, you go back and reread from that point. Otherwise things may be confusing.

"Should we do something?"

Tamiko glanced at Misaki, who finished her chocolate bar, then back at the old man wandering along the street below them with a small demon on a leash, talking happily to it. The thing was looking around in an apparently relaxed yet alert manner, one ear cocked towards the elderly man, and on occasion would nibble something it passed. Behind them she could see signs with bites out of them, a motorcycle missing half the front wheel, and a sadly sagging mail box with a set of toothmarks on the steel post holding it up. She rubbed her forehead between her eyes, sighing softly.

"Oh, god. This is..."

Fumiko, on her other side, laughed quietly. "This is weird even for us."

"Yes. That." The red-head watched as the demon snapped at a cat which had wandered too close, causing it to screech, hiss, then run for its life. Watching it go the demon made no attempt to follow, merely turning its attention back to the man on the other end of the lead. It looked up at them for a moment, clearly aware they were there, although Mr Ishikawa was oblivious, then went back to walking along beside him as easily as if it had been leash-trained from birth.

"How the hell did he get a lead on it do you think?" Fumiko asked. Both the others shrugged helplessly.

"I have absolutely no idea. It's insane. Those little bastards have never been anything other than chaos personified, yet he's talking one for a walk?" Tamiko shook her head in disbelief.

"He took it to the vet yesterday," Misaki commented, grinning. "Now the practice is closed. Apparently the vet went on a very sudden holiday."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," her friend said with acid irritation in her voice. She watched the elderly demon-walker go on his way. "Oh, fuck it, the thing isn't doing any harm at the moment, aside from some minor property damage. We may as well leave it alone, unless it does something serious. The poor man loved that amazingly annoying little dog, perhaps this will cheer him up and stop him calling the police five times a day wanting them to arrest Chiyoko. We'll just keep an eye on it to make sure nothing bad happens."

Fumiko looked at her sister over their shorter friend's head for a moment. "Are you sure? They're not exactly safe, you know, those little bastards might be small but they seem to be able to eat anything. If it gets annoyed it could do some serious harm to the old guy in seconds."

Tamiko sighed again. "True, but it seems pretty happy, all things considered. If it was going to do something horrible it probably would have done it already, like when he tried putting a collar on
the damn thing. I have no idea how he even managed to do that. But look at it now!" She waved a hand helplessly at the distant figures as they turned into the street leading back to the apartment Mr Ishikawa lived in. "I've seen police dogs that weren't as obedient as that."

"Very strange indeed," Misaki muttered, her arms crossed and one foot on the peak of the roof they were standing on. "You certainly see some odd things in Minato but a demon on a lead is a first for me."

"Me too. Oh well." Tamiko shrugged once more. "They seem happy enough. We'll have to make sure Chiyoko doesn't go after it. Not that she's likely to hit the thing in the first place but the collateral damage could be bad. It normally is. I've got to teach that girl to shoot straight at some point."

"We should arrange to make sure all this damage is sorted out," Fumiko said after a pause, pointing at the mail-box, which picked that moment to creak loudly and fall over. She blinked a few times, then glanced at her hand, before lowering it again. "The fund can certainly absorb the costs now, money isn't a problem any more, not with that asteroid."

"Very true." Tamiko looked at her friends. "I still can't believe that. But I guess we can afford to make one old man happy." She giggled after a few seconds. "I'll bet he's not in any danger of getting mugged now."

All three girls shared a look, roared with laughter, then went on their way.

"Here you go, Ami," Yori said, turning to the other woman, who was staring around the warehouse with wide eyes. She looked at the petite girl, then at the box in her hand. "One projector. Complete with charger, magic converter, and some blank data crystals. I got the instructions translated for you as well, they're in the box with everything else."

Accepting the box she examined it, quickly working out how to open it, then inspected the contents. The projector was a surprisingly small black device, made of something that reminded her of the spacesuit generators, with a square depression in the top she realised was the right size for the data crystal Yori had given her after the moon mission. "Thanks, Yori."

"No problem. You should easily be able to interface to it with your computer and control it from that, if you want, but the controls work the same way as the one on the ship." She grinned. "Enjoy."

"I think I will," she replied, also smiling. "I wonder if I can figure out how to use it with a DVD player?"

"Probably, they're remarkably flexible." Yori glanced over to the person they'd been introduced to as T'kl'it, who had called something to her. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She went off with the alien, leaving the others to look around.

"This place is incredible," Rei mumbled, walking over to her while looking around, Hotaru and Azumi with her. Aiko, Chou, Hnther, and Naito were wandering around looking at things down at the other end of the enormous space. "There's a shelf back there, an absolutely huge one, with half a dozen small spacecraft on it!" She looked around again, shaking her head in wonder. "I've never seen anything even close to this amount of stuff in one place before."

"T'kl'it is a major trader, he's got contacts all over the place and does a lot of interworld business," Azumi told them.
"Like your friend Uthryyl?" Hotaru asked curiously. The silver-haired woman nodded.

"More or less. I think Uthryyl's business is larger, though. He and T'kl'it are old friends. He introduced me to T'kl'it last time I was here, but I think Yori already knew him from a previous trip. He's a nice guy." She looked off to one side, then laughed. "Look over there." They followed her pointing finger to a pair of large cube-shaped containers with various labels on them in some alien script, including something a lot like a remarkably complex version of a bar-code.

"What are they?" Rei asked, as they went closer. Azumi read the label, nodding to herself.

"Fusion reactors like the ones Uthryyl sells. I think these are an older model though. The part number is slightly different."

"They're that small?" Ami was staggered. "How much energy does one that size produce?"

"These are the little ten megawatt class units, which I believe are the smallest that particular company produces. From what I read in the documentation it's about the smallest size that's efficient enough to make it worth doing. Apparently you can get even smaller ones but they become rather pointless below these dimensions except for very specific and unusual applications. Bigger is much easier, they go up to several gigawatts at least."

"Wow. That's amazing." Experimentally, she tried lifting one of the units, finding that the crate shifted more easily than she expected. "Oops," she squeaked, as Azumi grabbed it to keep it on the shelf. Carefully pushing it back into position they looked guiltily around, then grinned at each other.

"Perhaps we should leave them alone," Azumi suggested. Hotaru started giggling as Rei sighed slightly. She put her hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Come on, Ami, before you break something."

They headed off to join Chou and the others, Ami looking over her shoulder at the crates, then at Azumi, who snickered. By the time they reached the rest of their party all four of them were laughing. "What's so funny?" Aiko queried. Ami shook her head.

"You'd have had to be there," she responded. The brunette looked at her for a moment with a raised eyebrow then shrugged with one shoulder.

"OK." She smiled at the blue-haired woman before going back to examining some odd-looking device on a shelf which Ami thought might be some sort of cooker. Or a bird-cage. She studied it some more, her head on one side. Perhaps a tie-rack?

Giving up on it she went off on her own for a little while, looking around in interest, until she heard Yori's voice approaching down one of the aisles, T'kl'it talking to her. Heading in that direction she met them as they rounded the end of the row of shelves, falling in beside Yori as she walked towards Chou. Everyone else seemed to have disappeared.

Yori smiled at her, then said something to the merchant, who waved his antenna in agreement. Greeting Chou they talked for a moment in the trade language, before the Krennsh trader shook hands with both of them, nodded to Ami, then turned and left. Yori watched him go for a few seconds, smiling slightly. Eventually she glanced at Ami. "I've got Masao's modified projectors," she said, producing a box similar to the one Ami had accepted earlier. "T'kl'it provided the units themselves and sent them to the engineering company that did the mods. They came back a little while ago." She turned to Chou, grinning for a moment. "He says that he's not heard anything from
R'ng'wr since Ms Aoyama had a word with him. He's very pleased about that, although he still looks worried when he mentions her name."

The blonde giggled, looking slyly amused. "Azumi will find that funny."

"Probably." Yori looked around. "Where are they all?"

"Rei found a shelf full of spacecraft a little while ago and they all went to look at them." Chou giggled again. "It's a good thing Fumiko isn't here, she'd want to buy one." Laughing, Yori nodded, while Ami stared at them both.

"One day we're going to have to get her something for Christmas, if we can work out where to park it," Chou added, smiling. "She'd like that."

"I still think the neighbours would talk," Yori chuckled.

"You two really are very odd," Ami commented, making them both grin. "Mind you, I'd kind of like a spacecraft as well..."

"We could most likely get a bulk discount, but S'th'kx would be annoyed. He thinks that all those little ones aren't worth the effort." Looking amused, Yori led them off to find the rest of their group, Ami scanning everything with great curiosity.

"We'll take the others back later, once we've arranged protection for them," Yori told Naito. "There are some things we need to do first, though." He nodded, remembering the discussion they'd had earlier. Hnther had left through a portal minutes earlier, shaking hands with the PSIA agent and smiling in a manner that exposed a remarkable number of teeth, although he didn't feel any threat from it. He found he rather liked the alien mind mage. Now, Yori was opening a portal to the field they'd left from several days earlier. Beside him, Aiko waited patiently. She was going to return him to the PSIA building when they got back.

"Good luck," he said to the martial artist, as the portal fizzed into existence. He picked up his bag and the box with the projectors and accessories. "Despite everything this has been more fun than I can say." She grinned at him as Aiko giggled.

"Good. I'm very glad about that. It's been fun for us as well, Masao. Say hi to the Director-General for me, OK? I'll stop by and see you soon, let you know how things are going." She shook his outstretched hand firmly. "And once again, I'm sorry about putting you in this position. I know it's difficult keeping our secrets."

"I understand why we need to do it, though, don't worry, Yori," he replied. She smiled again before turning to Aiko, who nodded.

"Come on, let's get you back." They both walked through the portal. The sudden increase in gravity made him stumble slightly but he corrected for it quickly. The magical girl beside him didn't seem to notice. On the other side, it was late afternoon, and raining heavily. Aiko teleported almost before he'd caught his balance, appearing just outside the PSIA building, under the shelter of the entrance. She smiled at him, while various passersby either walked past without noticing, or stared for a moment, then wandered off shaking their heads, umbrellas raised. The brunette held out her hand. "See you later, Masao. Take care." He shook it, grinning.

"Thanks. You do the same. I hope you guys can work things out. If there's anything I can do to help, call me."
"We will." She looked around, then when she saw no-one was looking directly at her, winked and vanished, while he closed his eyes. Opening them again he went inside, showing his ID to the guard before heading for his office.

Ami looked around at the six people in the hotel room with her. "So. What's the next step?"

Inspecting her, then Rei, and finally Hotaru, Yori finally sighed, glancing at Chou and Azumi. Aiko was leaning against the window behind them. "Something I was hoping not to be pushed into doing, but I don't think we can avoid it any longer. We're getting closer to taking this damn thing out, we have all the pieces, but we're not there yet. Until we can do it, we need to keep you three sane and healthy. I can only see two ways to do that, one is to keep you away from our reality for an arbitrary period of time, the other one is to add you to our ward system. The first part is easier in some ways but not at all ideal, since if nothing else we may well need your help, which we can't depend on if the time machine can still affect you. So, I guess we have no choice, the ward system it is."

Ami looked at her friends, who both seemed slightly worried. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's not a bad thing at all, but it is somewhat involved," Chou told her. "Not the addition itself, that much is easy, but all the other things that will come out as a result of that, things that we haven't told anyone else and we're gone to considerable effort to keep secret. Uthryyl and his family, Aiko's team, and the three of us are the only ones anywhere who know all of this. Now, we're going to have to bring you all in as well. We'd hoped not to have to do that if possible." She also studied them. "I believe we can trust you. However, we will need to apply the security spell, if nothing else than to prevent accidents. We're all rather well practised at certain security techniques that you, with all due respect, are not. This will prevent... slips."

Slightly uncertain, Ami met the eyes of her friends. Hotaru nodded without hesitation. Rei was a little less sure, but eventually signified acceptance. "It's not going to cause any conflicts with anyone we deal with, is it?" Ami asked. Chou shook her head.

"No, it's not that sort of issue. It merely covers a number of rather complicated historical problems and events that could cause a considerable amount of trouble if it got out in the wrong way, both at home, and potentially in a number of other places. You'll understand when we tell you." She smiled a little. "You may well find some of it rather funny. It wasn't at the time, but looking back on it, we can see the amusing bits." Yori shared a look with Azumi, both of them rolling their eyes. Aiko giggled darkly.

"There are a lot of perks, though," the petite brunette added, grinning. "You won't believe some of the things that we do."

After a little more thought, Ami finally nodded as well. "OK. I'm enormously curious aside from anything else. I guess we can trust you to not do anything weird, after everything that's happened." Yori chuckled for a moment.

"Weird? That may be subject to interpretation." Chou nudged her in the ribs, making her laugh again, but stop teasing. She sat up, looking serious. "All right, then. You know the basic idea, you've seen me do it to other people. I'm going to apply the security spell to each of you in turn. It covers everything directly relating to this issue and our... group, family, whatever you want to call it. Once we've got that done, we can go back. We'll go directly to the area covered by the ward, which should cover you in any case, then link you into it. After that we can explain everything." She stood and walked over, looking at them all. "It's going to take a while. It's complicated."
She motioned to Rei to move slightly, sitting in the space this provided and turning to Ami. "I'll do you first. Hold still, this won't hurt." Placing her hands on the other woman's head she concentrated for a moment, Ami feeling a momentary eerie sensation of something looking through her mind, ending up at the back of her head. "That's it. You next, Rei."

Shortly the young woman had finished her task. She checked each of them once more, looking satisfied, then stood. "Great. That bit is done. OK, grab your stuff and let's go. We've got a portal room booked in about ten minutes." The three girls made sure that their bags had everything they'd come with, including a few new additions, then followed the others out of the room. After a short trip they found themselves in the now-familiar portal room, the doors closed and wards set up. Chou quickly produced a portal.

"Through there is our home," Yori told them, waving at the rip in space. "We like it. Try not to upset it." She snickered as Ami looked at Hotaru and Rei, all three of them looking puzzled.

"Upset it?" Rei asked slowly. Azumi laughed.

"You'll understand. Just don't use any sudden magic until it gets to know you." Once more Ami exchanged glances with her friends. What were they getting into?

"Stop teasing them, dear," Chou chided gently, before walking into the portal. Still chuckling Azumi followed her, Aiko immediately behind the silver-haired woman. Yori looked at them.

"It'll be fine. Go on through, guys." Shrugging a little helplessly, Ami headed for the portal. She could feel Hotaru behind her with Rei, Yori bringing up the rear. Blue light surrounded them for a brief moment.

"It's nice, I'll admit," Rei said slowly, looking around, "But after what you said I was expecting something... more menacing, perhaps? This is... surprisingly normal." She blinked a little as Aiko teleported out, having finished a short conversation with Yori and Chou, the flash reflecting off the windows.

The three of them looked around the large wooden-floored room, inspecting the tall windows on one of the long sides and one short side, through which a view of a big park could be seen, only a few people visible due to the unpleasant weather. Glancing up she saw a pair of skylights in the ceiling, which must have been at least three metres away. In other short side were a pair of doors, one of which was open showing the beginnings of a flight of stairs, while the remaining one was shut. The last wall had a sliding double door near one end through which Azumi had hurried on their arrival, muttering about needing the facilities, and a painting done in a classical Japanese style which Rei recognised, obviously ancient, hanging in the exact centre, softly illuminated by small lights along the top.

She stared at the painting for a long moment, before walking slowly over and examining it more closely. From this range she could easily see that it really was very old, the scroll looking extremely fragile. "Oh my god," she breathed, leaning close, then quickly straightening up, worried she'd somehow damage it. "Is this real? An original?" Looking over her shoulder at Chou who she'd felt come up behind her, she stared for a moment, then went back to inspecting the painting. Hotaru came over and stood beside her, also looking at it.

"That's very pretty," the younger girl said admiringly.

"Yes, it's real," Chou commented quietly, sounding amused. "It was a gift from a friend." Hotaru raised a hand, causing Rei to grab her wrist.
"No, don't touch it, it must be over two hundred years old," she hissed. The other girl looked abashed.

"I wasn't going to touch it, honest," she mumbled guiltily. Behind them Chou laughed a little.

"Don't worry, you can't damage it. It's got a very effective preservation spell on it. It's almost indestructible now." She moved to stand on Rei's other side, glancing curiously at her. "You know something about art if you recognised it," she added, smiling.

Rei nodded slowly, still savouring the painting. "A bit. I was interested at school for some time, but it eventually became clear to me I didn't have a lot of talent in that direction myself. But I still studied it for a while. This is an Ike No Taiga, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's somewhere around two hundred and fifty years old, I believe. It was in the collection of that awful Anthony Murray who was responsible for the Halleckton disaster. His wife was awarded a lot of his property and their Toronto house when she got divorced, which included a remarkably large amount of very valuable art. The man is a horrible person but had surprisingly good taste in paintings." She shook her head slightly. "Sara sold a lot of his artworks just to annoy him, and also donated some of the very valuable ones to various museums, mostly in Canada. This one, though, she sent to us as a thank-you for saving her life." Chou smiled gently. "We didn't want to accept it, we don't do what we do for gain like that, but she insisted. In the end we were proud to become custodians of it for now."

"It's beautiful," Rei finally said, listening with interest.

"Very much so. We think we'll probably arrange to lend it to a museum here in Tokyo at some point so other people can enjoy it, but for the time being it's safe here." Rei nodded, still looking at the painting, then turned to examine the room again.

"This is part of your home?" she asked curiously, wandering over to look out the window nearest her. Chou followed, as did Hotaru, after one last look at the painting on the wall. All three of them studied the very damp park and the buildings beyond.

"Yes. You'll see the rest soon." Chou turned to look at Yori, who was talking to Ami, both of them also looking out another window. The petite martial artist was pointing something out to her companion.

"We're up quite a long way," Hotaru reported, leaning against the window and looking down. "In some sort of apartment building. It looks like a very nice area, very expensive."

The blonde woman beside her laughed a little. "It's a nice community, definitely. We like living here."

"I can't get over how normal everything looks," Rei laughed. "You and Yori are... Well, no disrespect, but you're pretty unusual even in our terms. But you live in an up-scale apartment in a good area, with a big park just out there, and collect fine art. That's... kind of not what I was expecting at all."

Giggling, Chou nodded. "I wouldn't say we collect fine art, the painting over there is far rarer than anything else we own, although we do have some nice paintings and a couple of little sculptures I bought a few years ago. Nothing exceptional although we like them. The apartment is very pleasant, though. It was a gift from a friend some time ago."

Azumi re-entered the room, opening the door and slipping through gracefully before closing it
behind her. She looked toward Chou, nodding slightly, before going to talk to Yori. "All right. I think we should proceed with introducing you to the system," the blonde said, smiling. Rei and Hotaru exchanged gazes.

"Um, that sounds a little scary," the purple-haired girl said nervously. "You make it sound like it's alive."

"Not quite," the other woman assured them, which caused them to stare at her. "But it's certainly close to that level of complexity." She looked around, relaxed and happy. "I always like coming home to it. It feels good, very welcoming." Glancing at them as they looked at each other again she grinned. "Don't worry. Come over here with the others." All three of them joined the remaining people at one side of the room.

"All right. We're going to add you one at a time." Yori looked at the three girls. "Hotaru last, I think. Ami first. Stay here, we'll call you over when we're ready." She and Chou walked to the middle of the room and faced each other. Both concentrated. Rei looked apprehensively around, suddenly feeling something change in the room, noticing both her friends were doing the same. There was an air of enormous power watching them from somewhere that defied description.

"God, that feels weird," she whispered to Ami, who looked back at her wide-eyed. "Have you ever felt anything that powerful?" Her friend shook her head wordlessly. They all stared in shock as the most complex pattern any of them had ever seen faded into view, delicate traceries of more colours than they could count filling the room and in some bizarre way, stretching off far past the physical limits of the room itself, possibly reality as well, while at the same time being contained within it. It was awe-inspiring and frightening at the same time, not to mention very weird to look at, making her feel slightly disorientated.

"Holy crap!" Hotaru gasped faintly, staring around in shock. "It's like being inside some sort of crazy snow-globe, or a huge crystal or something."

"It's absolutely beautiful," Ami replied, also whispering. She pulled out her computer and fiddled with it, before shaking her head. "I can't read anything useful with this at all, though. It's like it's not really there. And I'm pretty sure it's in more than three dimensions."

"It's both there and not there," Azumi commented from beside them, looking around with an air of familiar pleasure. "The thing has grown a lot as well recently." She grinned at them, then went back to watching her friends, who were moving immaterial patterns around with their hands, talking softly to each other. Everyone watched until Yori turned to them, looking satisfied.

"OK, everything is ready. Ami, if you'd go over there to that blank spot in the middle, please, then just stand still. It's safe, but you'll probably feel some pretty weird sensations. Don't worry about it and try not to move." With some trepidation, the blue-haired girl exchanged glances with her friends, then slowly moved to the indicated position, watching the glowing patterns of magical force moved out of the way while she walked. Arriving at the clear circle, she stopped, then turned around to look at Yori. Rei saw that the magic had filled in the gaps behind her.

"Is this right?" Ami asked hesitantly.

Yori nodded, smiling. "Yes, you're fine. Now hold still for a few seconds, OK?" Everyone watched as the magic moved in multiple directions at once, making Rei blink madly at the sight, which seemed impossible, tendrils of light reaching for her friend's head and gently playing over it. Ami winced, closing her eyes.

"Oooh, that's strange," she mumbled, swaying a little. Hotaru, beside Rei, raised a hand to her
mouth, worried.

"Don't worry, it's perfectly safe, but it kind of makes the inside of your head itch for a while. Like the security spell but much stronger," Azumi told them in a low voice, not looking away. A few more seconds passed then there was a faint, deep chiming noise from somewhere impossible to pinpoint, sounding both very near and impossibly distant at the same time. The pattern visibly changed around them, growing slightly, while the air of power strengthened. Yori and Chou shared a look, before smiling.

"That's it, Ami. It's accepted your pattern as authorised. You can come back now." The blue-haired young woman opened her eyes, blinked a couple of times as she seemed to come back from somewhere else, then walked back to them, the magic moving out of the way again, although a few tendrils of the pattern seemed almost to caress her as she passed.

"I've just had the weirdest experience of my life," Ami mumbled to her friends, looking around at the spell. "I can't describe it any better than that, though. There's something looking at me right now, it's absolutely huge, and incredibly dangerous, but also friendly." She shook her head, then looked around, before gently patting the wall. After a moment she smiled. Rei and Hotaru exchanged glances, shrugging slightly, before looking back to Yori, who was watching Ami with a small grin. Azumi snickered from beside them.

"It's a bit weird the first time," she commented. "You get used to it fairly quickly though." She got a sudden distant look on her face, as if she was having a conversation on the phone, moving a couple of steps away from them and going silent. Rei looked at her, wondering what the problem was, then turned back to the matter at hand.

"Your turn, Rei," Chou called. She indicated the same place. Feeling very nervous Rei retraced Ami's footsteps, watching as the magic patterns shifted around her, until she reached the empty spot. As Ami had done she turned to face Yori and Chou, both of whom smiled at her comfortingly. "You'll be fine. Just stand there and let the magic do what it needs to," the blonde told her. She nodded somewhat slowly, looking around then up at the glowing pattern, which she was getting the distinct feeling was watching her curiously.

A moment passed then the pattern closed in on her. She eeped as it made contact, twitching slightly, then shuddering at the sensation of something rooting around somewhere inside her mind, something absolutely huge and terrifyingly powerful, not in a malicious manner, but fairly insistently. Not sure what to do she settled for closing her eyes and waiting, sweating lightly. A wave of dizziness went through her, making her stagger a little, the chime sounding again, both inside and outside her head, before the presence withdrew, producing a feeling uncannily like a house-size cat had rubbed against her gently before it left. When it was gone she became aware than in some indefinable way it was still lurking at the back of her mind watching her protectively from a distance, ready to act under the right circumstances.

"God, that's weird," she muttered, opening her eyes and looking around, slightly surprised to see nothing had visibly changed. "I can still feel it."

"Good," Yori responded, looking pleased. "It's taken in your case as well. You can go back." As it had done for Ami the magical patterns obligingly moved out of the way when she made her way back to where she'd started from. Turning around she inspected the glowing lines, fairly sure that they'd changed again. She glanced at Hotaru who nodded.

"It moved around after it did whatever it did, and got quite a bit bigger and more complicated too."

"I wonder what that means?" Ami mused. Yori looked over to her, having overheard.
“Every time someone is added to the ward system it gets more complex and more powerful, partly due to the extra energy and partly due to the way the spells work. It learns, in effect. That wasn't the original plan but it's not too unusual with extremely complex magical systems. They have a slight tendency to almost take on a life of their own as they get more involved. It's a sort of emergent behaviour, the underlying magical pattern gives rise to complex behaviour that wasn't deliberately designed in but is based on the original intent or goal of the system.” Ami nodded slowly, listening in fascination.

“How far can that go?” she asked curiously. Yori shrugged.

“I don't really know. It depends on the complexity of the spell and this is the most complex one I've ever personally heard of. It's been modified and tweaked for several years now, with power being continuously pushed into it, people added to it, things like that, all of which changes the underlying magic. The ward itself is by far the most powerful one I've ever come across. That one on the asteroid was pretty impressive, but nowhere close to this one. Even Hotaru's weapon wouldn't have any real effect at this point, I think. I'm not sure what would.” She looked around, apparently pleased, then back to them. "Inside this building you're safe from basically everything. Even that damned time machine, which is the point of this exercise. If we could trust the rest of your group we'd probably bring them in as well, but I certainly don't trust them. I was in two minds about adding you three, to be honest, but the others feel we can trust you.”

She sighed slightly. "I really hope we can. I'm still slightly uncomfortable about it, but..." Shaking her head, she smiled a little at Chou, who put her hand on her shoulder for a moment, then turned her attention to Hotaru. "All right, your turn, Hotaru. Same thing as for the others." Rei watched her younger friend slowly walk over to the correct spot, looking around with a mix of curiosity and mild fear.

“You're sure it doesn't hurt?” she asked plaintively. Yori chuckled.

“Tust me.”

“I do,” the young woman said, running a hand through her hair and taking a deep breath, then standing straight. Yori grinned at her.

“OK. Here we go.” For the third time the pattern closed in. Hotaru squeaked in shock as the tendrils of coloured magical energy made contact, looking around wildly, then stilled.

“That feels really strange,” she said quietly, before smiling slightly. "But it seems friendly." The patterns changed and shifted around her, then suddenly jumped, enlarging very noticeably. Yori looked at Chou, an eyebrow raised, then studied the magic, doing something to the patterns in front of her. Her other eyebrow went up.

"Hmm. I was wondering if something like that would happen.” Rei looked at Ami, then both of them watched the two women in the middle of the room. Chou made some adjustments and nodded, looking pleased.

"It seems to like her. That response was nearly as strong as Azumi produced.” Ami and Rei turned to look at the silver-haired woman, who grinned at them, although with an undercurrent of mild worry that didn't seem to be aimed at anything in the room.

"The ward system takes a particular interest in me for some reason.”

"Is that good?” Rei asked. The other girl laughed.
"It could be." They went back to watching. After a few seconds more the chime came for the third and final time, sounding a little louder and deeper, causing Yori to look up at something she seemed to be able to see. Rei followed her gaze but couldn't make out anything other than the magical pattern.

"Interesting." Chou looked up as well for a moment, then nodded, smiling.

"Yes, isn't it?" They returned their attention to Hotaru, who was watching them curiously and slightly nervously.

"What is?" she asked.

"You have a very significant inherent power level, which the system noticed and tapped into. It draws a little power from everyone linked into it, storing it for future use, and you can also both push more in if you want, and if necessary pull some out." Yori fiddled with the pattern for a moment then nodded in satisfaction. "It only takes a little by default, a proportional amount based on your power level. You're reading as having considerably more than Chou. I'll be very interested to see what happens with some proper training. It will probably go up quite a bit, our methods tend to do that, ki seems to amplify magic and vice versa."

"Assuming they can learn our magic system, there are some fascinating possibilities there, dear," Chou commented, also studying Hotaru, who was looking shocked.

"You mean I'm more powerful than Chou?" she asked in surprise. The blonde nodded, smiling.

"Oh, yes. I'm by no means the most powerful magical girl around in raw power," she assured the other woman. "Yori has far more energy available than I do. But raw power isn't usually the most important part. If you don't know how to use it all the power in the world won't help you." The purple-haired girl nodded thoughtfully, clearly thinking hard about what she'd heard. Motioning her away from the magical system, Yori made a few adjustments, then dismissed the pattern, which faded away to leave the room looking normal once more.

"What's my power level?" Rei asked curiously. Chou looked at her, then laughed.

"Feeling competitive?" she asked jokingly. Rei grinned.

"A little. I know how powerful Hotaru is supposed to be, and I've seen all you guys at work. I'm curious to know how I measure up."

Yori and Chou walked over, the blonde woman smiling. "Your inherent power level is around the same as Aiko right now. Less than Misaki, though. Ami is a little less than that. Both of you have considerable scope for improvement, from what we can tell." Ami looked surprised.

"I wouldn't have thought I was that powerful," she said slowly.

"The spells you use aren't tapping into a lot of your basic power," Yori explained. "We need to work on that. Your magic isn't nearly as efficient as it could be. Or should be. We'll fix that when we train you."

"Even if it turns out you can't use our magical system we can certainly improve the way you use yours," Chou added, smiling a little. "We're quite good at that sort of thing."

"Are we meant to still be able to feel whatever it is?" Ami asked, looking around at the room. She patted the wall again absent-mindedly, Rei noticed. Yori laughed.
"Yes. That's the ward system keeping an eye on you. It will do that more or less anywhere you go in this reality and it seems to be able to reach one or two other close ones as well. Or if a portal is open it works through that perfectly happily. We've currently got the external defence system mostly disabled, there turned out to be a rather embarrassingly serious problem with it which we haven't had time to fix yet, but at least inside the building, you're protected from anything we could even vaguely think of. Even if that asteroid had hit, this place would survive and we'd all be fine."

"Really?" Rei asked in astonishment.

"Oh, yes," Chou told her. "When we added Aiko and the others, the power of the system went up enormously, and it was already at a truly incredible level. Adding you three has also had a huge impact on the strength of the system, something we knew would happen based on what we found last time, but the amount was something of a surprise. It's not a linear relationship, magic at this level becomes somewhat difficult to accurately predict, due to the sheer complexity. By now it is probably close to impenetrable by essentially anything."

"How much energy can it store?" Ami asked. Yori and Chou exchanged a look.

"We're not completely sure. So far everything we've pushed into it between us has barely scratched the surface of its capacity," Yori said, looking thoughtful. "Every time we add someone it expands the complexity, which also expands the storage capacity, in a way that seems to be exponential. It's actually very useful, for example when the asteroid ward collapsed it dumped a huge amount of power into Hotaru's weapon, which I diverted most of into the ward system. I absorbed the rest. It was kind of painful."

"That's not surprising, dear, it was a very large amount. It might have been safer to send all of it to the wards." Chou looked at her partner with exasperated love. "You were very wobbly afterwards." Yori shrugged, grinning.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." Shaking her head, but smiling, Chou turned to the others.

"I think it's time we gave you the explanation you've been waiting for." She looked at Yori, who looked back with a suddenly neutral expression, then glanced at Azumi, who sighed and nodded. Rei, Ami, and Hotaru exchanged looks as well, feeling that some sort of major surprise was coming. "Come into the living room and we can make ourselves comfortable. This is going to take some time and you're going to need some tea." Azumi slid the door open, going through into the rest of the building, the others following, looking around with interest and a certain degree of apprehension.

"I'm glad you're back," Tamiko said, hugging her friend for a moment. Aiko grinned.

"So am I. It was a lot of fun, though."

"I'm still pissed off about not being able to walk on the moon," Misaki grumped, while her sister and her friends laughed.

"Don't worry, now that we know I can teleport that far we can go any time we want," Aiko told her. Misaki brightened up immediately.

"That's a very good point," she said, looking happier.

"Not right now, though," her sister cautioned, making her face fall again, before she pulled out a packet of nuts and started noisily eating them. Smirking at her Aiko turned to the other two.
"Ranma and Kasumi are adding Ami and the others to the wards at the moment," she reported. "I thought I'd check in with you guys and leave them to it. We can go back when they're done."

"Fair enough," Fumiko replied. "Ranma didn't sound too happy about doing it the last time we spoke, though."

"No, she's still kind of paranoid about it. I don't blame her, all things considered, but I think it will work out OK." Aiko grinned a little. "But Ami and her friends are in for a shock."

"You think we can trust them?" Misaki asked, finishing off her nuts.

Aiko nodded. "I do. Hotaru, definitely, she idolises Yori and is nearly as impressed by Chou. Ami is smart enough to deal with it, I think, Rei is the possible problem, she's got a quick temper and sometimes seems to jump to the wrong conclusion, although I have to admit in the last couple of weeks she's improved a lot. Hopefully she can keep calm long enough to hear the full explanation."

"It's going to be fun seeing their expressions," Tamiko giggled. The others laughed, grinning.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it." Smiling, Aiko peered over the edge of the building they were sitting on, then stared open-mouthed into the small park on the other side of the road. "Um, why is Mr Ishikawa throwing sticks for one of Chiyoko's little monsters? And more to the point, why is it bringing them back to him?" The other three watched for a few seconds. "Some of them, at any rate," the brunette added, watching the demon chew and swallow.

Tamiko sighed heavily. "We were trying to work out how to explain it when you turned up," she said, sitting down on the roof and staring up at the sky, where the clouds were clearing after the earlier rain. "I'm still having trouble with it myself." Aiko stared at her, then back at the demon playing fetch, then around at her other team-mates, both of whom shrugged, looking amused.

"This is going to be a good story..." The petite woman sat and waited. When she'd heard everything and watched the recordings, she started laughing, making Tamiko look at her with exasperation. The laughter went on for some time. Eventually she wound down, shaking her head and wiping her eyes. "Oh, god. Only in Minato." Peering down at the old man and his demon, who were engaged in a tug of war with a large branch, she giggled again. "Unbelievable. Well, I guess you're probably right. He seems happy and even that mini-demon is acting weirdly pleased." They watched as the demon bit the branch in two and ran off with the larger part, Mr Ishikawa walking after it, calling to it. A few metres away the thing sat down, dropping the branch and staring at first it then him, clearly wanting him to throw it again.

"Unbelievable." Aiko shook her head once more, grinning. "As long as it doesn't cause any real damage I can't much see the harm, not around here. If he tries going on the train with it we might have a problem though."

"He doesn't go very far from home based on what we found out," Fumiko told her, also smiling as she watched the otherworldly creature hop around in excitement as the elderly man creakily bent down and retrieved the branch, tossing it across the grass, the demon dashing off and catching it, then chewing it up and swallowing the remains. Mr Ishikawa watched with a vague smile, apparently unconcerned about the way his new pet seemed to be eating a lot of things that weren't traditionally dog food. "He seems to still be under the impression it's a dog as well."

"Other people don't think that, pretty obviously," Misaki chuckled, indicating a number of pedestrians and dog-walkers who were huddled on the other side of the park staring in disbelief at the old man and his companion, keeping as far away from them as they could. Aiko looked, then giggled madly. "Plus we're going to have to arrange some repair work." The taller woman pointed
to a couple of road signs near the entrance to the park, both of which had bites out of them, and a car that had toothmarks in the windscreen. The owner of it came out of a shop at that moment and stared in horror, looking wildly about for the cause, before rushing off, shortly returning with a policeman, who inspected the damage, shrugged, and made some notes.

The girls on the roof across the street watched with mildly irritated amusement. "I'll talk to the officer later and get the details," Tamiko sighed.

"Well, we can easily afford it, now," Aiko commented, snickering. She turned to her team-mate. "I can see why you didn't mention it earlier, though, you really have to see it to believe it." Looking back at the demon and its new owner, she stared for a moment more, then dismissed it. "On a more serious note, what's the current state of play with those idiot girls?"

"Ah. Reporting time!" Tamiko jumped to her feet and saluted, grinning. "Ready to report, Ma'am!"

"You're very weird, Tamiko," Aiko giggled. "Proceed."

Relaxing, the red-head smiled at her friend. "You've got most of the recordings. Haruka is still in the hotel she's been living at since everything went sideways, she doesn't go out very much, only to eat, and spends most of the rest of the time sitting and either watching TV, poking around in the internet, or just thinking. Poor woman seems very down. None of us think she's likely to get involved in anything at the moment. She clearly was very badly affected by the whole thing and her run in with 'Yori' scared the shit out of her."

"I feel a bit sorry for her," Misaki said, sending them all a feed from one of the camera drones, which showed Haruka staring out a window at the scenery with a slightly depressed expression. "She was a pain in the rear a lot of the time, very quick off the mark, but I also thought she was at heart a decent and intelligent woman. She's acting quite out of character at the moment. And she really loved Michiru, who seems to completely hate her now, which must be hard to deal with."

"That's not all that surprising, considering how it all blew up," Aiko mused, watching the feed. "They're all acting oddly in different ways. Usagi most of all I think. Ami and the other two are pretty much normal, it doesn't seem to have affected her much at all and if anything Rei and especially Hotaru have benefited from the whole affair, but none of them are quite what they were."

"True enough." Fumiko sighed, bringing up another video feed, this one from the drone shadowing Setsuna. "Makoto is amusing herself beating up petty criminals, which is at least a reasonable use of her time, although we need to go and tell her to tone the violence down a little before she really hurts someone. Michiru has been lurking in her house for a while now, she unplugged the phone and has drawn all the curtains, and she sticks her head out every now and then and looks around very suspiciously. Kind of paranoid. Usagi and Minako you know about. They'll keep where they are but I think we should check on them regularly. Minako is sensible enough to stay put after exploring a little, but I'm not sure about Usagi. She's lost it completely." She sighed loudly. "Then we have poor Setsuna."

They all watched the green-haired woman, who was sitting on a bench in a park a few kilometres away writing in her notebook, looking around every now and then as if she thought some threat was approaching, before scribbling frantically again. "What's she writing?" Aiko asked.

"As far as we can tell, mostly nonsense," Tamiko told her. "It's difficult to be sure, she seems to be using about five or six languages pretty much interchangeably, mixing the words up and using the wrong ones a lot of the time, even the SIs have trouble trying to work out what she's trying to say, but most of it seems pretty random. There are references to monsters in the dark, things in her head,
stuff like that. I think some of it might be referring to the time device from the context but it's
difficult to be sure. She's slowly deteriorating as well. At least two people she knows have tried to
talk to her, she didn't seem to recognise either of them."

"Damn it. We really have to get her to some help as soon as possible," Aiko muttered, shaking her
head in worry. "I don't particularly like her, mainly because of the problems we've had in the past
with her group, but this is just sad. She is, or was, a very intelligent person." She turned to her
friends. "Herther is aware of the problem and is arranging therapists for them all but it will take a
week or so as they're finishing up with current projects. He wants to see Setsuna as soon as we can
arrange it, though, because she needs emergency work to prevent her losing her mind completely.
Usagi isn't quite as urgent although we still need to..." She trailed off suddenly as they all felt
something weird.

"Whoa. What was that?" Tamiko yelped, looking around. Misaki and Fumiko looked at each
other, then also peered about themselves.

"It was the ward system, I think," Misaki said slowly, an intrigued expression on her face. "It just
got... Bigger? More powerful?" She commed Nabiki, linking them all into the conversation.

"Hey, Nabiki, what happened? We felt something weird in the ward system as far as I can make
out."

"Hi, Misaki. Yes, Ami just got added to it. I felt it as well, the system got quite a large power boost.
It was a bit strange, although we should have expected it, I guess. She has a lot of power. Ranma
and Kasumi didn't seem surprised but they didn't mention anything to me beforehand."

"If that was Ami, what's going to happen with Hotaru, I wonder?" Fumiko mused, "She's got a lot
more power available even if she doesn't seem to know how to access a fair bit of it yet."

"It'll be interesting to find out." The middle sister laughed slightly. "They're all looking kind of
shocked about the whole thing and we haven't even got to the good part yet." All five of them
giggled at the look Ami, Rei, and Hotaru shared as the distant Tendo sent them a video link.

"Ah, guys? We might have a problem," Tamiko interjected, highlighting the feed from the drone
observing Setsuna, who had dropped her notebook and was looking wildly around, fully powered
up, clutching her staff which had abruptly appeared, the brilliant red stone built into the end
glowing brightly. "I think she noticed Ami and the ward system as well. Or the time device did
through her. She looks scared." A number of people were visible running away at the sudden
appearance of one of the magical girls they'd learned to be very worried about in the park. "I don't
think anyone saw her power up, luckily, but she's drawing attention now."

"Crap. They're just about to add Rei now. Let's see what happens, but I think you may have to go
and make sure she doesn't do anything stupid. The state she's in it could be bad." Nabiki sounded
worried. "I don't want to interrupt Sis and Ranma while they're working, and we have no choice,
these three need to be added to the wards. As soon as they're done I'll let them know."

Aiko looked around at her team. "We're on our way. We'll keep the link open." All four of them
moved together, then disappeared in a flash of light.

"Everything is wrong."

"Nothing is working correctly."

"It's happening again. More calculations must be made."
"I don't understand..."

"No, get out of my head!"

"Shut UP!"

"Why can't I make any sense of this?"

"I'm so tired. Why is everyone so strange?"

"Leave me alone!"

Setsuna scribbled frantically, words almost pouring out of her onto the paper, ignoring the fact she was writing in Japanese, German, English, Dutch, and Spanish, with a little French thrown in for good measure. She'd always been gifted at languages, having learned several early on, and easily made her way through the mishmash on the paper, although when she flipped back a few pages she couldn't remember writing them at all. It was her handwriting, though, so she must have done. Pausing to correct a spelling mistake, then run a quick calculation working out the area of the park in square cubits, she went back to writing.

A sound behind her made her jump, whirling around in her seat to stare at a squirrel which was looking at her curiously, holding a piece of bread dropped by a passer-by in its forepaws. She inspected it suspiciously for several seconds, then sketched it in quick little strokes of her pen, turning back once she'd finished and immediately forgetting it. The sound of a voice entered her consciousness causing her to eventually look up into the concerned face of a middle-aged woman who seemed to be talking to her.

"Yes?" she snapped irritably. "Can I help you?" The woman stared at her, until she realised she'd asked the question in German. She asked it again in Japanese.

"Setsuna? Are you all right?" The woman appeared concerned.

"All right?" She considered the question carefully. "Six o'clock, I think." Dismissing the interruption she went back to making notes, suddenly realising that the crow ten metres away in the branches of a bush had been staring at her for longer than seemed polite. She glared back at it, then noted down a description. She'd remember its face for next time. Perhaps she should report it? The annoying woman said something else but she ignored it and eventually she left.

"No. I don't believe you."

"So much darkness. It goes on forever, or perhaps not."

"Why should I? What's in it for me?"

"Last Saturday? All right, I can meet you there, but only for five minutes. The turtles would be annoyed if I stay longer."

She read this last line back to herself, feeling slightly puzzled. Why would the turtles be annoyed? Normally they were fairly laid-back. After a moment she shrugged, resolving to ask a turtle next time she met one, moving on to the more pressing problem of who had moved the bench next to her when she wasn't looking and replaced it with an absolutely identical one. She couldn't see any difference but she knew it wasn't the same.

Getting up she inspected the other bench minutely, then sighed. When she turned around someone had done the same thing to the one she'd been sitting on. Shaking her head she made a note.
"Going to have to fix that," she mumbled to herself.

A sudden feeling, nothing like she'd ever encountered, made her stagger suddenly, then look wildly around. Anger, loss, terror, something looking at her, something huge, then it was gone. Someone was gone.

Setsuna screamed hoarsely, summoning her uniform and powers without even thinking about it, holding her staff in both hands protectively in front of her and staring around in fear. She absently noted the fact that several people in the middle distance were running, yelling in fright. They could clearly feel the threat as well. She looked at them, then turned to face the direction they were running from, which was behind her, lowering her staff into position. No visible threat was apparent but she was sure something was coming, she could feel it.

"Stay back!" she yelled, waving the staff around, twitching at the sound of something to the side moving. Without a thought she turned and fired, the magic blast removing several bushes and a tree and leaving a deep smoking gouge in the grass. Black feathers, gently burning, rained down around her.

The sensation came again, more strongly. Once more something looked at her, then beyond her at something else, something familiar from her dreams. Nightmares. Both vast entities stared at each other with her in the middle. Dropping to her knees she bowed her head, clutching the staff as hard as she could, tears leaking from her eyes, trembling. After a period of time that could be measured in galactic revolutions, or perhaps milliseconds, the sensations vanished. She felt diminished, yet relieved.

"No more. I can't take it. Leave me ALONE!" she screamed, tipping her face back to the uncaring sky, which seemed darker than it should have. Tears ran down her face.

"Setsuna," a gentle voice beside her said. She twitched, then slowly turned her head. Four concerned faces met her gaze. A memory tugged at her, she knew these people. Weren't they friends? Or enemies? Something like that.

"Yes?" she asked weakly, leaning on the staff.

"Will you let us help you?" The short woman who was standing next to her knelt down and held out her hand. She stared at it for a long moment.

"How can you help me?" she asked quietly. "I don't know who I am or what's going on any more. Are you my friends?" The woman looked steadily at her, then glanced back at the other three behind her.

"We could be if you'd like that. Would you?"

She considered the thought for an indeterminate period, closing her eyes. When she opened them she was rather surprised to see the woman was still there. "Yes, please," she finally said. As she did, the same sensation she'd felt twice before roared over her, vastly more powerfully, causing her to scream. Two huge entities faced off somewhere unknowable, one radiating protectiveness of its charges, one a cold intent to do whatever was required to achieve some goal, a goal she felt she should recognise but now just terrified her.

Blackness took her.

Nabiki, still in her 'Azumi' aspect, watched the feed from her friends with worry, although nothing
of her feeling came out in her expression. She glanced at her sister and sister in law who looked back, then 'Yori' sighed minutely. "I'll go," she commed both Tendos, "Aiko, can you pick me up, please? We need to get her to Hnther right now before something breaks permanently, if it hasn't already."

"On my way." Seconds later the brunette walked out of the practice room, Tamiko with her. Ami, Rei, and Hotaru all looked over at the two, smiling, then appearing worried at their sombre expressions.

"We have a major problem with Setsuna," Aiko told them. "It looks like when we added you three to the wards, there was some sort of feedback from the time device through her. I guess because she's its main conduit to our reality or something. She had... I suppose a breakdown would be the best way to explain it."

"Oh, no, is she going to be all right?" Hotaru asked anxiously. Ami and Rei looked concerned. Aiko shrugged, glancing at 'Yori', who turned to them.

"We don't know yet, but I'm going to take her to Hnther. Hopefully he can do something to help her until we can get those qualified therapists of his to look at her. Worst case, we could use some sort of stasis spell to keep her inactive until they can work out what to do." The petite woman put her hands on the purple-haired girl's shoulders and looked into her eyes. "I promise we'll do everything we can to help her."

"Thank you, Yori," the girl said quietly and sadly. "Even after everything that happened I don't want her to go crazy."

"None of us do, dear," 'Chou' assured her gently. "Hnther and his people are the best chance she has. Come with me and help me make some tea, and let Yori and the others go to help Setsuna, all right?" She guided the younger woman into the kitchen.

"We got this, at least," Tamiko said, producing Setsuna's staff. "So we have the key, now." 'Azumi' took it from her, feeling it with curiosity. There was a sensation of considerable magical potency surrounding the thing. After a moment she handed it to her sister-in-law, who examined it closely.

"Good. It should be isolated from the time device now, and the other girls. Just in case, though...
She held it in front of her, then concentrated. A bubble of glowing purple energy surrounded it before it vanished.

"What the hell did you do to it?" Ami asked, fascinated. 'Yori' smiled.

"I put the strongest bidirectional ward I could around it then stashed it in a ki pocket. The thing is completely isolated now, I think. Hopefully there's no way the time machine can access it any more. It'll keep there until we deal with Setsuna." She turned to Aiko. "Let's go and do that."

"I'll come with you," 'Azumi' decided. Her sister-in-law looked at her and nodded.

"In that case I'll stay here," Tamiko said, dropping onto the sofa. "I could do with a drink." She smiled at Ami who sat beside her. "Good luck, guys," she added.

"I'm afraid the explanations will have to wait for a while," 'Yori' told the three guests, smiling regretfully. "We'll be as fast as we can but this is very important."

"Don't worry, we understand," Rei assured her, also sitting. Aiko moved close to 'Yori' and 'Azumi' then teleported them to the park.
Setsuna was lying on the ground, a crumpled mess, her hair splayed around her head, with Fumiko and Misaki standing guard over her. One or two pedestrians were watching from a safe distance. None of them looked overly worried about the green-haired woman, 'Azumi' noted sadly. "How is she?" the middle sister asked as her sister-in-law quickly scanned the figure on the ground.

"Not good," 'Yori' sighed, rocking back on her heels and staring at the magical girl. "Her brain is a mess, even worse than it was last time. That fucking machine has been pushing very hard, I think, and somehow she's been fighting back, although I have a feeling she didn't realise. The damage is pretty extreme. It looks like the end stages of Alzheimer's in a way, but there are some differences as well."

"Can you fix it?" Fumiko asked.

"The organic damage, yes, although it's a lot of work. Hopefully there won't be too much memory loss although I expect she'll lose things here and there. But I'm not sure about the mental issues. She's nothing like as aggressive as Usagi got, but the personality shift is still pretty major." 'Yori' shook her head a little, sadly. "It's not something I know enough about to be able to help. Hnther and his colleagues are her only real hope." Reaching out she put her hand on the other woman's head, a glow suffusing her fingers for several seconds. Setsuna's face relaxed suddenly, from the frightened grimace it had been frozen in.

"I shut her mind down as far as I could without killing her," the martial artist reported, standing and looking down at the unconscious woman. "She'll have to stay like that until Hnther can do some repair work, to prevent any further degradation." 'Yori' looked around at her friends. "Damn it, I should have done this days ago," she added in disgust. "Now the damage might be unreparable."

"We had to deal with the more immediate problem," 'Azumi' commented, sharing a look with the other three women, then returning her attention to 'Yori', who sighed deeply. "None of this is your fault. We've been running around putting out fires for days now. We can't do everything at once."

"True, I guess. Oh well. Let's get her to someone who knows what to do to help her."

"Do you want any of us to come with you?" Aiko asked.

"No, I think the two of us can handle it," 'Yori' replied, looking at the middle sister, who nodded calmly. "Thanks, though. You may as well go back and keep Ami and the others entertained until we get back. Hopefully that won't be too long."

"OK." Aiko grinned suddenly. "Only three left now."

"That's something, I suppose," her friend said, looking momentarily amused. With a burst of magic, a portal crackled into existence next to them. 'Yori' carefully picked Setsuna up and walked through it. The disguised Tendo sister looked at her friends.

"See you soon," she said, smiling at them, then followed, the portal vanishing as soon as she was through.

Agent Naito left the special projects department, still smiling at the way the specialists there had pounced on the case of Moon samples with almost literal squeaks of excitement. He'd already handed over the film to the relevant technicians, which had immediately been rushed off for development, as well as positive prints, the original slides heading for scanning later as it was a slow process. They'd promised it would be processed as fast as possible, consistent with not
making a mistake. He'd have the first few images within the hour.

Consulting his notes he'd asked for specific images to be printed first, wanting to have some good ones for the Director-General. Returning to his office he turned on his computer, calling his wife to let her know he was back safely while he waited for it to boot. When he'd finished the call he disconnected, turning to the keyboard, opening his first notebook, then beginning typing the preliminary report summary, snickering slightly to himself as he worked.

"He's going to fall out of his chair when he reads this," he thought to himself, grinning.

He'd just finished the preliminary report, highlighting the good bits of the trip with reference to the photos, when an internal courier knocked on the door to his office, handing over a large thick envelope. Signing for it he thanked the man, waiting until he'd left and closed the door before breaking the seal and pulling out the prints. Fanning them out on the desk he marvelled at the sheer clarity of the cibachrome prints, thinking that the camera he'd been given was well worth the cost.

"Wow," he mumbled to himself, holding up the first shot of the Earthrise over the edge of the Moon that he'd taken, inspecting it closely. "That came out amazingly well." It was crystal-clear, pin-sharp, and completely awe-inspiring. Shaking his head slowly, impressed despite the fact he'd been the one to take it, he looked through some of the others, finding one a little further on than made him smile, showing Hotaru leaning against the window of the space-raft grinning manically at the same scene, lit by the light reflecting from the 'dark' side of the moon. The look on the young woman's face was of simple and total joy.

Flipping through the rest of the stack he nodded, satisfied. There was a representative collection of images, depicting everything from the spaceport, the interior of the ship, shots of him leaning against that same ship on the surface of the moon, which made him grin widely, to the asteroid, and even a couple in the space elevator restaurant. That had been nearly as impressive an experience as the spaceship, he mused, wishing they'd had more time to explore. Oh well. Perhaps next time.

After a moment's thought, he turned back to the computer, removing the section of the report about the asteroid and putting it into a separate document. He printed that one, putting it and the relevant photos into a separate envelope, then replaced the remainder in the original one. Once he had printed the main report, stapled all eight pages together, slipped them into a folder along with the images, then shut his computer down, he headed upstairs. Arriving at the Director-General's office he grinned at the secretary who smiled back.

"Did you have an interesting mission, Agent?" she asked politely, a look in her eyes that suggested she was well aware of where he'd been. He nodded, chuckling.

"I did, Ms Enoki, very interesting and very successful." She laughed slightly, quickly typing something.

"Please go in, he left instructions that you were to be admitted as soon as you got back." She smiled again. "We were slightly worried when you were overdue but we got the message from Chou telling us there had been a delay. I hope it wasn't anything serious."

"It was... somewhat unexpected," he replied after a moment, "but everything was resolved satisfactorily." Nodding to her once more he headed for the inner door.

"Hello, Sir," he said as he closed the door behind him. The Director-General smiled a little.

"Hello, Masao. I'm relieved you're back safely. Did things go well?" The older man chuckled in a
deep voice. "I trust you have some interesting photos for us?"

"Oh, I think so, sir," he replied, sitting when his superior gestured him to a chair. He opened the folder and extracted the paperwork and the first envelope, sliding them across the desk then leaning back with a smile of his own. "My preliminary report. Only the highlights, unfortunately, a full report will take at least a day to type up. I have a lot of notes to go through." Naito grinned quickly. "But I think you'll find it interesting." He pointed to the envelope. "There are some nice images in there, but the rest of them won't be developed until tomorrow, I'm afraid. I used nearly all the film I took, there are hundreds of images to process. But those are some good ones."

Looking at him curiously, the elder man opened the envelope and carefully removed the stack of heavy photo paper, his eyes widening instantly in amazement. Naito watched with satisfaction. He'd made sure the Earthrise one was on top.

Half an hour later he had the pleasure of seeing the grave features of the most senior member of the PSIA gaping in shock, pleasure, and considerable envy as he finished reading the report and inspecting the images. Eventually he put the paperwork down, tapping it into order, then did the same with the pile of photos. He'd not said a word since he started reading although Naito could swear he'd heard a couple of very faint expletives during the first few minutes. The Director-General looked carefully at him for a few seconds, then back to the photos. He picked up the top one again.

"This one goes on my wall, I think," he finally said, looking amazed and pleased, smiling more widely than the agent had ever seen before in his ten years at the PSIA. "I'll get it blown up a little, though."

Naito laughed, the other man joining him after a moment, both of them ending up howling with hilarity.

"Oh, god, what a world we suddenly seem to be living in, Masao," the older man finally said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes with a handkerchief. "What a world. Things are going to change a lot soon, aren't they?"

"I think so, sir. Mostly for the better."

The Director-General flipped through the report idly, looking at the pages with a gaze that seemed to be focussed somewhere beyond the paper. "I expected something unusual to come out of all this, hopefully something good, but this is..." He shook his head in wonder. "Fusion power? Trade with aliens, for plant chemicals, art, mattresses of all things! It's... almost unbelievable."

"I know, sir." Naito looked at his superior slyly. "The mattresses are amazingly comfortable."

Staring hard at him, the other man finally smirked a little.

"Yori's odd sense of humour is clearly contagious," he responded dryly. Naito chuckled, nodding.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Seriously, though, alien fusion reactors? This isn't some elaborate joke?" The man looked worried and hopeful simultaneously. Naito shook his head slowly.

"No joke, not at all, sir. Azumi was very serious about it. She's obviously done her homework as well, she had all the facts and figures right there. Their friend Uthryyl has nearly finished sorting out all the relevant paperwork on the other end, this Fwetna place, for exporting the technology to us, a 'non-aligned' world. Apparently there are some pretty extensive trade treaties stitching quite a
few worlds in lots of realities into some remarkably complex trading networks. They have all sorts of rules about what can be exported and to whom, much as we do here, only a lot bigger. There are interworld banking systems as well, which allow credit to be transferred into and out of local currencies as required. Not directly to us, they tend to go via an intermediate such as precious metals."

"Interesting," the other man mused, leaning back in his chair and swivelling to look out the window for a moment. "I wonder if we could join that system?"

"They think it's possible, but it would take some time to set things up, Azumi told me. She's not sure exactly how to go about it but the information she had was that it would most likely get looked into once the volume of trade between us and the other worlds increased. For the time being, direct trade of products from here for products from there seems the easiest solution." Naito shrugged a little.

"Frankly, that sort of thing is far past my area of expertise. I would think it would require some real experts, financial, political, and so on, probably with the aid of the magical world as well. Azumi and Uthryyl seem to know what they're doing, so I would personally suggest that if the government is all right with all of this the easiest thing to do is to let them get on with it, giving whatever aid is required in the process."

Slowly nodding, The Director-General listened intently. "There are going to be some very powerful entities, both political and financial, that aren't at all happy about this, I suspect." He sighed for a moment. "The oil companies will certainly try to either block it or somehow cut themselves in once they hear about it, due to the threat it poses to their business model."

"Azumi is more than aware of that, sir," Naito agreed. "She said the same thing. Apparently Uthryyl also raised it as a problem. She made the valid point that cheap fusion energy hardly means the end of the petroleum industry, though, the materials they produce have many uses other than fuel, arguably more important ones."

"True, I suppose, although I doubt they'll think that way at first. I can see a number of powerful people who will try to interfere, both here and abroad." Smirking suddenly, the older man added, "I'm quite interested to see what happens if they go up against Yori and her friends."

Snickering, Naito nodded. "I think that they may have a shock." He studied the man behind the desk for a moment. "Do you think the government will want this to proceed?"

Abruptly serious, his companion swivelled back to look at him, leaning forward and picking up the Earthrise photo again. "Yes. Possibly not all of them, there will be some issues, I suspect, with certain people we could both name, but people at the top are going to jump on this with both feet. We're in the middle of a recession, there are a number of very worrying long-term problems with the way we're doing things at the moment, and this looks like we've been practically handed a solution on a silver plate. The effect this could have just on the economy is... almost beyond belief."

"I have no idea how it's going to be presented to the public," Naito commented. "Alien technology is going to be possibly even more difficult to believe for a large part of the world than magic."

The other man grinned suddenly. "The Americans are going to have a fit," he said happily. "The Russians, possibly two fits."

Laughing, Naito agreed with him. "It could be somewhat funny to watch." After a few more seconds he opened his folder again, removing the other envelope. Watching him curiously the
Director-General raised an eyebrow. Naito handed him the asteroid report. "This is something possibly more... sensitive. I was going to put it in the first one, but after I thought about it... I thought you might want it separate."

"Bad news?" his superior asked curiously, taking the envelope and opening it, but not removing the contents yet.

"No, the opposite, really." Naito sighed, shrugging slightly. "But it may not be the sort of thing we want to pass on, or not necessarily to everyone just yet. It could cause a certain amount of... panic, I suppose, even though the matter is over with." Studying him with interest, the other man finally pulled out the paperwork, looking at the photos first with a slightly puzzled air, before reading the single sheet report. He went white within the first paragraph. Only his eyes moving, he read the entire thing, then read it again. Agent Naito watched and waited.

After a long silent pause, the Director-General swallowed hard. He raised his eyes to his agent, opening his mouth, only a slight croak coming out on the first attempt. Naito smiled sympathetically. "It hit me like that at first, sir, and I didn't know it was going to end well at the time, either."

"An asteroid?" The voice was hoarse.

"Yes."

"On a direct collision course with... us?"

"Yes." There was another pause. "It would have hit in about three weeks. Ami calculated the probable damage. I have the figures if you want to see them."

Staring at him, the other man finally shook his head slightly. "I may sleep better at night if I don't see them. You're sure it's been dealt with?" His voice was almost plaintive.

Naito laughed for a moment. "I am. I saw it dealt with myself. I can still hardly believe it."

Slumping suddenly the Director-General dropped the report onto his desk and sighed, rubbing his face with both hands. "Oh, little gods and goddesses, that's the most terrifying thing I've ever heard of." He looked up at Naito. "I think those girls earned themselves a get out of everything free card with that one."

"They did genuinely save the world, sir," Naito agreed, smiling. "They and their friends. An asteroid mining ship crewed by experienced miners is exactly the right thing to have handy when you find an asteroid aimed at your planet. Even a fairly small one."

"If Yori hadn't needed to go on this mysterious mission of hers..." The older man shuddered. "We'd never have seen it coming until far too late, would we?"

"No, sir. Not that we could have done anything in any case. It was a very fast-moving one, apparently, and very dense. Mostly metallic. Ami said it wouldn't have destroyed the planet, but in all likelihood the majority of people on Earth would have ended up dead as a result of it, directly or indirectly." Naito didn't mention the fact that this would have been a deliberate act created by a giant alien time-travelling supercomputer, of course, not that he could have even if he'd wanted to. "We owe them all, including S'th'kx and his crew, enormous thanks." He thought for a moment. "Especially S'th'kx. It was his idea to send out probes to look for anything dangerous in the first place."

"They took the asteroid back to their own reality?" the Director-General asked, looking at the

"It had some mineralogical value to them and after all the work of capturing the thing Yori felt it was a good idea to let them take it. After all, they did provide a huge number of probes to look for more like that one."

"I doubt anyone sensible would begrudge them a few cubic kilometres of rock and metal in exchange for saving the planet."

'If only you knew,' Naito thought to himself, smiling internally. "Indeed, sir," what what he actually said.

"And these probes are still out there, then?"

"Yes, sir. Tens of thousands of them. They're scanning the entire solar system, something that will take years to complete, but they should find anything close enough to be dangerous fairly fast, I'm told. As I said in the report, Chou and Yori also arranged to have a small number sent to scan and map every planet and moon in the system for scientific reasons, as long as they were out there already." He shrugged. "Apparently they're pretty cheap. S'th'kx had them in stock and was happy to use them. They're used to using them in bulk. We'll get the data eventually, Yori said she'd pass it on. What we do with it she's leaving up to us."

"JAXA is going to have a collective coronary," the Director-General muttered, looking amused.

"Quite possibly." Naito smiled. "Would you like to see the moon data?" He pulled a small box from his pocket, opening it and removing one of the projectors, laying it on the desk. His boss looked curiously at it.

"I would. I assume that's the new toy?"

"It's very interesting. There is another one in my office, a backup. They arranged to get them modified so we can plug them into one of our own networks. There is some sort of intelligent connection interface on the side there that will link into ethernet or optical networks." He looked intrigued for a moment. "The people on K'nn four seemed to have all the specifications necessary to manufacture the custom parts, which is very interesting when you consider the implications."

The other man watched as Naito pulled out the small cubical data crystal and socketed it into the receptacle on the top of the small device, then touched a couple of places on the side. "I've read the manual a couple of times, I think this is..." Mumbling to himself, the agent prodded another point, smiling when the device beeped. "Ah. That's it. Now, I just do this..."

Staring in amazement, the Director-General leaned back as a perfect, incredibly detailed three dimensional replica of the Moon in miniature suddenly appeared above his desk, looking completely solid. "Good god!" he yelped in shock. Naito leaned sideways to grin at him from behind the half-metre diameter projection.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"It's somewhat startling, I have to admit." Leaning closer his superior stared at the projected image. "And astoundingly detailed. It looks perfectly real."

"It's interactive as well." Standing, Naito moved around so he was to one side, then reached out and gave the floating image a flick, making it begin to rotate slowly. Once more the Director-General stared in wonder.
Absolutely astounding," he muttered, trying for himself. He shook his head in amazement, beginning to grin. "They have some of the best toys I've ever seen." Glancing at the agent, he asked, "What else can it do?"

"Well, you can zoom in, like this," Naito showed the right gestures, quickly locating and zooming to the Apollo eleven site, at a level that enabled the footprints to be clearly seen. "Or you can bring up a control panel and look at other data as well as the images." A few gestures and he succeeded in getting the projection to show different colours indicating the amount of water ice under the surface. "There's an enormous amount of information on that crystal, probably enough to keep an entire team of scientists busy for decades. This is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak."

Reaching out again and flicking the projection, the Director-General watched it spin, smiling gently. "Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable." He stared for several minutes while Naito waited patiently. "Good. Mission wildly successful, I think. Go home, get some rest, take the rest of the day off. You've earned it, certainly." He looked at his agent with a pleased expression. "In fact, take tomorrow off as well. I can wait another day to get the full report. I'm looking forward to it, I have to admit. Write up the asteroid encounter separately, please."

"Thank you, sir." Naito turned the projector off. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Drop it off at Special Projects, along with the instructions. They'll need to arrange to get the data off it into our system. I'll let them know to expect you." Thinking for a moment, the Director-General added after a few seconds, "Put the spare one in your safe for the moment, I think. We want to keep it safe, just in case."

"Yori said she could get more for us if we needed them."

"That's very generous of her but I don't want to take too much advantage of her good nature. For the time being, those two should be more than enough." Naito nodded, picking the device up and returning it to its case.

"OK, sir. Is that everything for now."

"Yes. Thank you, Masao. You've exceed my expectations once more."

Looking and feeling pleased, Naito headed for the door. "Oh, Masao?"

"Sir?"

"Did Yori and her friends succeed in whatever it was they were originally trying to do?" The Director-General looked genuinely curious.

"To the best of my knowledge, yes, sir, I believe they did. They seemed pleased with the results at any rate."

"Good. That's probably very significant in some way, I suspect."

"Most likely, sir." Naito nodded to his superior with a polite smile, then headed downstairs. Behind him, the Director-General picked up his phone, while looking with slightly horrified interest at a beautifully printed photo of a small asteroid that could have given them all a very bad day, if not for a helpful otherworldly alien miner.

"Minister? Agent Naito and the special talent came through for us yet again..."
"This poor woman is in a very bad way," Hnther said regretfully, standing up from his examination of Setsuna, which had taken nearly half an hour. "Her mind is damaged in several different ways. The dementia effect of the mental editing is the most obvious part, but there are some fairly dramatic effects to her memory, there seem to be at least three different, conflicting, engrammatic patterns in there at the moment. I would say that the time device has been trying to modify the original imposed narrative by overwriting it with a variant. Rather crudely, as well, I suspect it's in a hurry, looking at the results. Too much information has been pushed in too fast, which is making the whole problem much worse than it would have been anyway. The original tampering, as obscene as it was, was at least done very carefully, which is why it worked so well. This is a hack job, frankly."

He sighed, looking down at the green-haired human woman who was lying on a somewhat odd-looking bed in his workshop. "Even doing that sort of editing once is tricky. Twice, like this, is just asking for problems. Add to that the temporal editing as well and the only thing I'm surprised about is that she's still functional to the level she is. Most people would have become a total blank by now."

"Can you help her?" 'Azumi' asked. The mind mage glanced at her and 'Yori'.

"With time, I believe so, although it won't be easy. If you can correct the brain trauma, Yori, I think the psychological damage can probably be mostly reversed, but it will be weeks before we can wake her, then most likely a year or more of professional therapy and treatment to get her mind into a state approaching stable. There will definitely be memory lapses, I'm afraid. Too much damage has been done to her mind recently to reverse everything."

"How much will she lose, do you think?" 'Yori' looked at him, then Setsuna.

"Difficult to say at this point. I would think she will probably not have many, if any, memories of the last couple of months at least. Snatches here and there, possibly, but most of it will be lost. Other than that, there may well be gaps going back years. Probably not anything too serious, she won't forget who she is or how to speak, things like that, but little details of things she doesn't use much will likely vanish. There isn't much we can do about that. Some of it might come back, some won't." He shook his head thoughtfully. "But it's going to need a lot of work before we can even work out what's missing and what isn't."

"What about personality changes?"

"I'm not sure. Her personality was being considerably affected by recent events, according to her friends, but again, until we can get her more functional, it's difficult to know how much is a permanent change and how much was transient." He turned to them. "I'm sorry I can't be more specific but there just isn't enough to go on yet."

'Yori' frowned at the unconscious woman, then sighed. "I understand. Thanks, Hnther. I'd better get on with repairing the brain damage, I suppose." She looked at the middle Tendo. "I can send you back if you want."

"I'll keep you company," 'Azumi' replied, smiling slightly. "I'm just sorry I can't be of any help."

"Don't worry about it." Kneeling beside Setsuna, 'Yori' reached out her hands. "But you could see if you can find some coffee or something, if you want to help," she added over her shoulder, grinning briefly. "This is going to be tedious, I could do with some caffeine."

Hnther laughed. "I've got coffee upstairs. I'll go and make some." 'Azumi' trailed after him, looking around with interest. He glanced at her. "First time to my world?"
"Yes. I've been to a few now but not here. It's very pretty." Looking out the window they were passing the middle Tendo inspected the plant-life visible, greens and yellows under a vividly orange sun. The gravity was slightly higher than home, by a few percent, enough to notice but not enough to be a problem even to a normal human.

"We like it," the mind mage agreed, smiling. "Our population is fairly low compared to many worlds, we like our space, and there isn't as much technology around as, for example, Fwetna, which I believe you're familiar with, but we do all right." He led the way into what was obviously a kitchen, filling an odd looking kettle with water and placing it on a device which appeared to be some magically powered version of a stove. A wave of his hand and 'Azumi' could feel it power up, the water beginning to steam within seconds. He rummaged around in a box on the table to one side of the room, coming up with a very familiar looking vacuum-packed bag of coffee beans. She was amused to see it had Kanji writing on it. Clearly he was also in the end one of Uthryyl's customers.

"Do you think you and these therapists of yours can help Setsuna and the others?" she asked as he prepared a pot of coffee. He shrugged very slightly, looking at her for a moment.

"It's not a guaranteed thing, I'm afraid. In Setsuna's case the damage is fairly serious. Usagi sounds rather bad as well, although until I can examine her properly it's difficult to be sure. The others, I think we can probably deal with, from the sound of it they're not so far gone. But those two will be difficult." Turning away from the device that was now full of ground beans and boiling water, making hissing noises, he leaned on the table and inspected her. "Once Yori has repaired Setsuna's brain damage I can make a better assessment of the state of her mind, then consult my colleagues about the best way to proceed. We may well have to study her for some while before we can come up with a suitable procedure. She'll have to go on a life-support system until we're ready, we need to keep her mind switched off to prevent any further damage occurring."

He smiled, turning back to fill the pot. "It would be much more serious in a number of ways if it wasn't for the extraordinary healing abilities of your friends. They make a number of unlikely treatment options possible, we probably wouldn't dare to try them normally as the risk of permanent damage is far too high. Not many healers are anywhere near as good as those two." He put the pot, three mugs, and something that seemed to be an equivalent to sugar on a tray then headed back downstairs. "Usagi presents a problem, which may well require the method Yori suggested of a partial mental reset with memory erasure. It's a drastic method which is also something of a last resort, for which I would need to get permission from the authorities, we don't do things like that lightly, but the therapists I've talked to are licensed to use methods of that nature. Hopefully it won't be necessary, but..." He shrugged again as she nodded her understanding.

"Would memory erasure of that type help Setsuna?" she asked curiously. Stopping beside 'Yori', who was concentrating hard on her job, her hands glowing gently as she moved them very slowly around Setsuna's head, he put the tray down, then filled the mugs.

"Probably not. At this point it could cause more harm than good. We need to get her back at least into a state where she's functional then evaluate her." Sighing slightly, he handed her one of the mugs, leaving another one where 'Yori' could reach it. The black-haired woman opened her eyes for a moment, nodded thanks to him, then closed them again. "In all honesty the damage to her mind has already most likely erased quite a lot of the near past, including the major event she was involved in recently. We won't know for sure for some time but it wouldn't surprise me."

"I see." 'Azumi' sipped her coffee, then added a little of the sugar-like substance and tried it again, smiling at the result. "Have you had any further thoughts on how the machine was able to affect them all?"
"I have been considering the problem, but so far I haven't come up with any definite conclusions. I have one or two ideas that I may be able to check now I have access to someone who was so badly affected, and who was probably the first one so affected in the first place, but I need to stabilise her before they can be investigated." The two of them watched as the martial artist kept doing whatever it was she was doing, both falling silent for a while. Eventually 'Yori' lowered her hands, the glow dying away, then stretched.

"Around half-way done." She picked up the mug, making a face when she tried it. "Cold." Holding the mug in both hands she pulsed a little ki into it, causing it to immediately begin steaming gently, then tried again. "Ah. Much better." She grinned as her sister-in-law snickered.

"About another half hour, I think, then the damage should be repaired. At that point I've done all I can." Standing, 'Yori' leaned against the wall next to 'Azumi'. "I guess we should go back, then. Although I want to make a detour and drop that staff of hers off with Lldnr'k to see if he can get the coordinates we need from it."

"Ami and the others will be bursting by now, I suspect." 'Azumi' laughed. Chuckling, the martial artist finished her coffee, putting the mug down again.

"Most likely. Right, I'd better finish this off." She knelt down again, once more reaching out with glowing hands.

Just under forty minutes later she nodded, standing once more. "That's done. Her brain is physically back to what it should be. Other than that she was in pretty good shape, although she should have had a shower this morning." 'Yori' grinned as 'Azumi' laughed. Glancing at Hnther who had been watching silently, she added, "She's all yours now."

"Quite. I'll do what I can, Yori. I should have some preliminary information on her status in a day or two, but I expect it will take some time before she's able to be brought back to a conscious state. I'll let you know when I know more."

"Thanks, Hnther. The woman is something of a pain but she deserves better."

"No one deserves what's been done to her or her friends." Shaking his head sadly, the mind mage looked very annoyed. "I hope you can find and kill that damned machine as soon as possible. It needs to stop existing."

"We'll get it," 'Yori' assured him, scowling. "We've got all the pieces now except a lot of anti-matter, which I'm going to arrange as soon as we have the coordinates to its sub-reality. Then it's going to go away for good. Very loudly."

Hnther smiled viciously. "That, I'm very pleased with."

They shook hands with him, before 'Yori' opened a portal. "Right. Let's go and visit Lldnr'k for a few minutes, then get back to Ami and the others. We still need to blow their minds." She grinned as 'Azumi' laughed, both women walking into the spacial rip and vanishing. Hnther watched the portal implode, then bent over Setsuna and began his own work.

Ami looked up from where she was listening to a frankly rather unlikely story of an old man who had a demon for a pet when she heard the portal, seeing Azumi and Yori walk out of the large rear room, talking quietly together. They entered the living room, which was rather crowded now, with ten people in it, Azumi grabbing a chair from the table and sitting on it next to Chou, and Yori moving to a position from which she could see everyone.
"Hnther has Setsuna. He's studying her now, he'll let us know soon what he's going to have to do, but he thinks we can probably fix most of what's wrong with her." She looked at Ami, Rei, and Hotaru for a moment. "It's not an ideal situation, but I trust him. He'll help her as much as he can."

Hotaru nodded, smiling. "I like Hnther. I think he'll fix her." Yori grinned at the younger girl.

"I think so too. We also gave her staff to Lldnr'k who is looking into getting the key to the portal we'll need. He's not sure how long that will take, it's kind of complicated, he says, there's some odd sort of temporal misalignment with that orb thing, but he's pretty sure he'll have the information soon." She looked around. "So, until we hear more, I may as well tell you a story..."
Still amazed how fast the reviews accumulate, and gratified as well. They're all read and appreciated. I'm very glad to have produced something that other people seem to feel is worth the effort.

"Have you worked out what it was, Great-grandmother?" Shampoo asked curiously from the door to her workroom. Cologne looked over her shoulder at the young woman, who was standing with Akane, both of them seeming somewhat concerned. She shook her head slowly, going back to her scrying bowl, which was doing absolutely nothing useful at all.

"No, I haven't. All I can tell is that there were three huge surges of something a bit like magic, but different enough that I can't even be sure they really were magic, which came from the direction of Minato. The last one was enormous." She gestured sharply, terminating the spell. "If I hadn't had the experience I gained with the methods I came up with weeks ago when I was tracing that strange magic around here, though, I'd never have noticed. I doubt many other mages did, if any. The energy was massive but..." She tried to work out how to explain it to someone who wasn't a mage. "Not on the same frequency as normal magic," she finally finished. "It's a poor analogy but the only one I can come up with."

"Is it related to the faint traces you were investigating?" Akane asked with interest.

"I'm... not sure, child. It might be. Both of them were a type of magic or magic-like energy I've never seen before, but they're not identical. Related, that's possible, I suppose. In either case, I have absolutely no idea what caused them or where they came from." She sighed, beginning to put her equipment away. "I can say that I very much doubt it was anything human that created either of them. The power level and complexity is simply staggering, far past any mage I've ever heard of." She turned again to look at them. Both young women appeared concerned, making her smile. "Don't worry, I doubt it's hostile. If it was we would most likely have known about it by now. Bearing in mind where it seems to have come from I suspect it is in some way associated with the demons that visit Minato. There are many people there who can deal with it if it is a threat, far better than I could, I assure you."

"I wonder if it's got anything to do with Ms Aoyama?" Akane mumbled, glancing at her friend, who shivered.

"Don't say that." Shampoo looked around nervously. "You never know..."

Watching them with mild amusement, Cologne chuckled raspily. "That strange woman left quite an impression on both of you, didn't she?" They looked at each other for a few seconds.

"You'd understand if you met her, Elder," Akane replied. "She's... not the sort of person you want to draw the attention of." Shampoo, standing beside her, nodded vigorously, a worried expression on her face.

"You can say that again."

"I thought she was the one who told Yori and her friends about your improving skills?" the Amazon elder prodded, grinning.

"Well, yes, and for that I'm grateful, but I don't really want to meet her again to tell her." The
youngest Tendo sister giggled in a more high-pitched tone than normal, her eyes darting around.
Cologne decided she’d had enough amusement tormenting them.

"All right, girls, you should get back to practising. I need to clear up here then get back to the kitchen. Shampoo, when you're done can you give me a hand, please? The evening rush will start soon."

"Yes, Elder," the younger woman said, bowing her head for a moment, then smiling. "Come on, Akane, I need to go over those last two moves. You still haven't got them right."

"Hey, I got you in the last spar with the first one," Akane retorted. Shampoo laughed.

"Because I let you."

"Let me!? Oh, yes, I'm sure you let me. The look on your face..." Both girls wandered off, laughing, while Cologne watched them go with a small fond smile, before turning back to her workbench, putting the last few items into the relevant places.

'Young girls. Such fun.' She shook her head, amused, then looked out the window in the direction of Minato, a small frown crossing her face. 'But I'm a little worried about that... magic, or whatever it was... despite what I told them. Could it be some demonic mage? I wonder what they're doing, if so. And what they were doing in Nerima? The energy wasn't quite the same as those traces but I have a feeling they're connected in some way. There are too many similarities.' She wiped the workbench down, thinking hard. 'Perhaps I should pay a visit, just to check. I'm sure that one or other magical girl is on top of it, probably Yori and Chou from what I know of them, but I'm curious. And just a little bit worried...'

Putting the cloth away, she headed downstairs, a thoughtful expression still present.

Hotaru watched as Yori looked momentarily uncertain, something very unusual in her experience, before glancing at Chou. The blonde woman smiled serenely at her, nodding after a second or two, which seemed to make Yori relax. "Sorry. This is sort of difficult for me, I've gone to a hell of a lot of effort to keep it confidential for some years, so it's somewhat odd to be telling anyone else." She sighed a little. "But you need to know, I guess. Get comfortable, this is going to take a while, it's a long story"

"Ooh, is a good story?" Hotaru asked excitedly. "With monsters and magic and fighting?" Yori laughed, as did everyone else.

"Yes, I think I can satisfy all those requirements," she replied, grinning. "And a lot more as well." Pausing for thought, she nodded slowly to herself. "OK. Start at the beginning, I guess, with the important part." The black-haired woman looked around at the three new people. "Please don't freak out, some of it will definitely come as a surprise, I think." She looked particularly at Rei as she said this. The other woman coloured slightly, glancing at Ami who was sitting beside her.

"I'll try to be sensible, Yori," she replied, smiling a little.

"Fair enough. All right, what do you know about Nerima?" This took all three of them by surprise. Ami thought for a moment.

"A very weird place, some people say it's even crazier than Minato, although I've never been there. Super-powered martial artists all over the place, constantly fighting with each other over silly things, is what I heard." Yori looked at her friends, all of them laughing.
"Not far off the truth, actually." She pointed at Chou, then Azumi, then herself. "We all came from there originally."

Hotaru inspected her with interest, before doing the same to the others. Azumi winked at her, causing her to giggle. "So that's why you like people to call you a martial artist and not a magical girl?" she asked curiously. Yori smiled in an odd way.

"That's one reason, yes." Chou and Azumi exchanged a look that made them both smile. "There are others."

"Such as?" Ami looked very interested.

Yori parried the question with one of her own. "Have you heard of a place in China called Jusenkyo?" Ami frowned. After a moment she pulled out her computer, tapping on it for a moment, then frowned again. Yori and her friends watched with amusement.

"It rings a vague bell. I don't have much information on it, oddly enough, but what I have suggests it's the site of some remarkably powerful and dangerous magic. I don't have the details."

"I wouldn't suggest going there to get more information, the place is... not at all safe," Yori muttered darkly. "Yes, it's the source of some very powerful magic, something you could genuinely call a curse. Something I'm all to familiar with." She sighed faintly. "It was a damn nuisance for a very long time." Grabbing a chair from the table she spun it around, then sat on it with her arms folded on the back, watching them. Everyone watched her right back.

"Right, then, the main story. My father, who is an idiot, even if a very talented martial artist, started teaching me in his family school of martial arts as soon as I could walk. When I was about six we left on a training trip that took close to ten years to complete, taking us all over Japan, China, and several other places." She sighed as Hotaru and her friends listened with fascination. "It wasn't much fun in many ways. The martial arts were, most of the time, very rewarding, something I still love doing more than almost anything. I turned out to have a real gift for it. His teaching methods were totally insane but you certainly can't argue with the effectiveness of them, unfortunately. By the time we got back to Nerima I was one of the best martial artists in the world. Top ten at least." Ami glanced at Hotaru, who looked amazed. Rei was watching the woman in the chair with interest.

Yori sighed. "The big problem was that my father is, as I said, an idiot. He's a brilliant martial artist, a child abuser, a thief, a drunkard, and a cheat. Those are his good qualities." She lifted one side of her mouth in a cynical grin as Rei snickered. "To be fair to the old bastard, in recent years he does finally seem to have begun trying to become a better person, but as far as I'm concerned it's a bit late. Because of his idiocy I spent two years in total hell in Nerima, even leaving aside the things he managed to do while we were travelling. There was one particular training exercise..." She trailed off with a shudder, briefly flickering with purple light, which made the three women stare in mild horror. "I don't want to talk about that part. It's not important now anyway."

Pausing for a moment she seemed to gather her thoughts. "I didn't know it at the time but my father managed to engage me to a large number of people during our travels, usually for some piddly little thing in return, like a plate of rice or something stupid like that. Even now I have no idea really how many times he did that, it could be hundreds. Dozens, certainly. Only two of those occasions to my knowledge were sufficiently valid that they could be enforced, though." Shocked, Hotaru met Rei's eyes.

"He engaged you to dozens of boys without telling you?" she gasped, horrified. Yori stared at her, then started laughing helplessly, while all her friends exchanged amused looks.
"Oh, Hotaru, it gets better. Hold on, you'll see in a minute," she said, wiping a tear of laughter from her eye and grinning at the purple-haired girl. "It's more complicated than that. You see, the last place we visited before returning to Nerima was Jusenkyo. Dear old pop had managed to pick up the idea the place was a mysterious martial arts training ground, which to be honest it was at one point, a long time ago. He had no idea about the magic there, mainly because he didn't bother to find out. The locals knew damn well how dangerous the place is but he managed to avoid listening, and to my shame so did I. I was younger and more arrogant, kind of full of myself, I'll admit." She shrugged. "You grow out of that sort of thing in most cases. Unfortunately, I hadn't matured that far by that point. So, to cut an annoying story short, both of us ended up cursed."

"Cursed?" Ami asked slowly. "Cursed, how?"

"It's pretty strange. The Jusenkyo curse is amazingly powerful, amazingly old magic, which manifests as a large number of pools of water, each with a different version of the basic spell. If you fall into one of them, or even come into contact with a reasonable amount of the water from one, the spell latches on to you in a way that seems to be totally non-removable. Once you have it, you're stuck with it for life as far as anyone has ever been able to find out." Yori looked around at them all. "The curses stack as well, so you can be affected by more than one at the same time. That can be... very unpleasant."

"What does the curse do?" Rei asked, inspecting her closely. "You seem fine to me."

"It's a transformational curse." She looked amused as Rei seemed shocked. "Basically, what it does is give you an alternate form with a water-based trigger. If you get wet with cold water, anything below roughly body temperature, the curse activates and changes you into the form the curse is based on. Water hotter than that turns you back."

Hotaru looked at her for a long moment, then at Rei and Ami, who had flabbergasted expressions on their faces. "And you've got this curse?"

"Yep."

"But... I saw you swimming in that waterpark on K'n'nn four! That water was colder than body temperature and it didn't change you." She stared narrowly at the other woman, who grinned back.

"I said it was incurable, which is true. I didn't say there weren't ways around it."

"It took a long time to come up with a workaround," Chou added quietly, "but we did. It's not perfect, although over the years it's become very effective."

Staring at her, then Yori, Rei finally shook her head. "So, what you're telling me, is that you have a curse that turns you into something else if you get wet, and so does your father?"

"Exactly." Yori looked at her with a smile.

"What do you two turn into?" the other woman asked, clearly extremely curious.

"Well, Pop managed to fall into the spring of drowned panda, which is what the Chinese there call it. When he gets wet, he turns into a panda." They stared at her for several seconds, unblinking. "Honest. It's pretty weird. People in Nerima are used to it by now but someone from out of the district tends to look confused when they see a giant panda walking down the street drinking a bottle of beer." She laughed as they looked even more confused and startled. After a long pause, broken only by Azumi laughing quietly, Rei asked another question, the obvious one.

"So what pool did you fall into?"
"The spring of drowned girl."

"When you get wet, you turn into... a girl?" Hotaru stared, then started giggling. Yori looked back, amusement on her face, nodding.

"Pretty much."

"That must be difficult for you," Rei commented, grinning.

"Well, it's a bit more complicated than that." The black-haired woman seemed simultaneously amused and slightly sad.

"I assume you look different when in this alternate form?" Ami asked with curiosity in her voice. Rather than replying, without moving, Yori shimmered and changed. Hotaru let out a little shriek of shock, unable to help it, while Rei swore under her breath. Ami stared in total amazement, not even remembering to use the computer she was still holding, total stunned surprise on her face.

All three of them inspected the new figure sitting in the exact same pose in the chair and grinning at them. It was a slightly smaller woman, looking a little older but no more than her early twenties, with brilliant red hair in the same braid Yori wore, her piercing brilliant blue eyes full of amusement at their reaction. She was genuinely beautiful, although looking nothing at all like Yori. "Holy shit," Rei finally managed to gasp out.

The redhead laughed, her soprano voice quite different to the one they were used to, although the body language matched. It was clearly still Yori. "It's a shock the first time you see it, isn't it?"

"You might say that," Ami mumbled, still staring wide-eyed. She got up and walked over, then gingerly prodded the other woman's shoulder. "Oh, my god, it's real."

"Completely. Right down to the genetics. My mind doesn't change at all but everything else does." The woman in the chair smiled at them. "I'll let you recover before we get onto the good part."

All three shared a glance of shock. There was more? Returning to her seat, Ami sat down and just stared for a while. Eventually she shook her head. "That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen and I've seen some pretty weird things done with magic." She fiddled with her computer for a moment, scanning the redhead. "It's not an illusion, or a perception spell, or anything else that this can detect."

"Completely real." The woman stood, turning in place, allowing them to see she was a few centimetres shorter than the Yori they were used to, then resumed her seated position. "Weird, isn't it."

"By the sound of it you got lucky, though," Rei suggested with a look of astonishment still on her face. "What were the odds of falling into a pool that left you still human and female?"

Chou suddenly giggled, while Aiko and Azumi snorted with laughter. The others exchanged looks. Puzzled, Rei looked around. "Obviously I'm missing something."

"I'm afraid so." The woman in the chair looked at them, her amusement vanishing. "The next part is likely to be even more shocking. Please don't over-react." Staring at her, Rei then looked at her friends. Hotaru felt an odd sensation in the pit of her stomach which made her think something even wilder was coming, not sure she wanted to know. "That change you just saw, that wasn't the curse. This is my cursed form, true, but the other one... We came up with a technique quite a while ago, one we've been refining for years, which allows some pretty radical changes. My other body, the one you know, is the result of that technique."
Hotaru studied her for some time, as Ami and Rei did much the same. "What does that mean?" she finally asked in a small voice, afraid of the answer. The redhead sighed, smiling gently at her in a way that reminded her very strongly of Chou.

"The name I was born under, my true name, is Ranma Saotome." She met each of their eyes in turn, looking regretful, slightly embarrassed, and somewhat worried. "And this is my original form." She changed again, without the shimmering effect of before. All three of them stared in total shock at the figure in the chair for nearly thirty seconds, before Hotaru burst into tears and ran from the room, heading for the place they'd arrived, her mind whirling.

Ranma sighed heavily. Standing he shimmered back into the form of Yori. "Can you continue the explanation, love?" she asked Chou, who stood and walked over to her, hugging her for a moment. "I need to talk to her alone." She looked at Ami and Rei who were still motionless, following her with their eyes. "Sorry about this."

Watching as the black-haired woman went into the practice room, sliding the door shut behind her, they finally exchanged unreadable but shocked glances, before turning to Chou, who smiled apologetically.

Feeling a familiar presence beside her, Hotaru curled into a smaller ball where she was huddled in the corner of the large room, sobbing in shock and betrayal. She heard a very faint sigh. After a few seconds, the figure beside her sat down. There was silence for several minutes, only her soft crying breaking it.

"When I found out what happened to me, what my idiot father had done to me, I wanted to kill him. When I calmed down, I came close to killing myself. I know what it's like to find something you've grown used to totally changed instantly." The voice was soft and regretful. "It affected me for years, very badly. Looking back on it I can see I overcompensated for the whole thing which, added to the arrogance of youth, caused me and those around me a lot of trouble. None of it was deliberate, I regret most of it, but there it is. There are a lot of other things as well but we can go into those some other time." The voice of Yori paused for a moment. "A stupid decision by a stupid man is still hurting people I care about years later. I'm truly sorry that you feel betrayed. That was never the intention, believe me." Hotaru sniffled for a moment.

Without lifting her head, she asked in a low voice, "How do you know what I'm feeling?"

"Because I can feel it as well. I'm a master of ki manipulation. That gives you all sorts of interesting abilities. Reading the emotional state of someone else, especially someone you like, is trivial." Hotaru sniffled again, raising her head and looking sideways. Yori was sitting next to her staring at the painting on the opposite wall, her face calm and reflective yet still showing regret.

"I really liked Yori," the younger woman said quietly and sadly. "Now I find out she's not even real." The woman beside her turned her head to meet her eyes, her own violet ones showing the pain she felt.

"She's real. I'm real. We're the same person. This is me." She shimmered, becoming the beautiful redhead from earlier. "This is still me, just looking different." Once more she changed, the good-looking dark-haired man smiling at her slightly. "This is still me as well. Inside, I'm the same person all the time. I can put a different outside on without any effort, true, and I'm pretty damn good at acting differently, but the essential me doesn't change. I hope you can look past the outside. I like you a lot as well, Hotaru, I would very much like to help you reach the level I know you're capable of, never mind helping with all the problems you girls have. I never intended to hurt you, any of you. When you hear the rest of the story you'll understand why all this has been necessary."
"It's all a lie, though, isn't it?" Hotaru said with despair in her voice, dropping her head again. "Just like my life is a lie. Everything I thought was real isn't. Something has been manipulating me my entire life, and now I find out the one person I really, truly, thought I could trust has been doing the same thing from the day we met." Silence fell, making her eventually look up. The pain in the eyes of the person next to her showed his feelings more than words could have done. He looked away after a moment, his gaze going back to the painting.

"I don't think that what we've been doing is the same as what the time device has done, although I can understand why it might seem like that to you under the circumstances. We had different motives for how we operate. Yori isn't a lie. She is me, another facet of me, no more or less real than how I am now. A bit like how your powered up persona differs from how you are at the moment, although somewhat more effective at disguising who I am from others." He glanced at her, then away. "But it might not seem like that to you right now." The young man leaning against the wall fell silent as she thought over his words. They had the ring of truth to them although she still felt upset about it.

"All I can offer you is that I'm sorry," he finally continued. "I don't like hurting people, or betraying them. I've had far too much of that in my own life. Believe me, I understand. There were, and are, very good reasons for all this sneaking around, but they shouldn't have dragged you in like they have." He looked back to her. "I will say this. When we decided to trust you girls, it was an all or nothing thing. The same as we have done with Aiko and her team. They're family, as close to me as a real sister would have been. I would die to keep them safe, without a second thought. We all feel like that. If you never want to see any of us again once this is all over, that's your decision, one we would accept, but we'd all prefer if you three became part of our little group, however you want to. I can promise that I won't keep any more secrets from you, aside from some promises I made to certain people years ago which I won't break. They don't affect you directly so they need to stay confidential." He smiled a little. "I keep my promises. It's one of the many nice things about me."

Despite herself she giggled a little, looking away quickly. They both fell silent again. She felt slightly less sad but even more confused. After some time, Ranma turned to her. "Come with me, I want to show you something." He stood, offering her his hand. She stared at it for a few seconds then took it, slightly reluctantly. Pulling her to her feet he guided her to the door in the end wall through which a flight of stairs could be seen. Following him up she blinked when he opened a door to reveal a garden of all things. Gingerly stepping through the doorway, she looked around, unable to suppress the smile that came onto her face.

"This is nice," she said quietly.

"We like it." He smiled back, then motioned for her to follow him as he made his way through the undergrowth. After a longer walk than she thought likely on what was obviously the roof of the apartment building they were in they came to a set of glass doors, which he opened, waving her through. The smell of chlorine came out, a familiar smell, as she entered, looking around in amazement.

"There's a swimming pool on the roof?" she exclaimed in surprise.

Ranma laughed. "Yes. It was designed as part of the fire system, it's basically the reservoir for the sprinklers and fire hoses in an emergency. But since we have no plans on burning the place down, which you couldn't do anyway with the spells that are on this building, it's just the pool. Aiko comes here a lot, so do I." He thought for a moment. "Well, we all do, actually. It's one of our favourite places."

"You're allowed to use it whenever you want?" she asked, curious. He chuckled, glancing at her as
"You might say that." Checking some instruments on the wall he nodded in satisfaction. "We own it, we can do what we want with it." She gaped at him, her shock and sadness pushed to one side for the time being.

"Own it...?"

The martial artist nodded with a wide grin. "Yes, indeed. We own the entire building. I'll show you around if you like."

Hotaru stared in renewed shock, then looked around wildly, before looking back at him. "This is all yours?"

"Yep." Walking over to the edge of the pool he peered into the deep end for a few seconds before turning to her. "The technique we came up with originally as a disguise spell is very powerful, far more effective than we ever expected it to be. Like I said, it can do some interesting things. You might find some of them fun. Like this one." To her abrupt surprise he stepped sideways into the pool, disappearing in a large splash. She gaped for a moment, wondering what the point of that exercise was, especially fully dressed.

A head popped up, the red-headed woman grinning at her. She smiled back, it was such a silly sight. "Why did you do that?" she asked curiously.

"I wanted a swim." Ranma laughed, her clear voice still holding all the intonations of his male form. "We do it slightly differently around here, though." The head vanished underwater, making her take a step closer, then jump back in shock as the mermaid launched herself out of the water with a flick of her tail, somersaulting twice before re-entering the pool with almost no splash at all.

Hotaru stared in total disbelief for a long moment before she slowly began to laugh, sadness being gradually replaced with a sensation of shocked happiness.

It might be worth giving Yori, Ranma, whoever he or she was, a second chance.
the balcony at the large building she could see in the distance. "Oh. That's the university, I see
where we are, now." Stepping back from the window she studied the apartment some more. It was
very nice, showing good taste and considerable effort in maintaining it. A scroll hanging on the
wall caught her eye, so she wandered over to look at it. Reading it she blinked a few times.

"Grand Master of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts?" she read out loud, looking at the
names on the bottom. She recognised the one she'd just heard but had no idea who 'Happosai' was.
Turning to Chou she saw the woman looked quietly proud.

"Yes. He earned it, believe me."

Moving back to the sofa, Ami sat down again, her mind still whirling with the shock of what she'd
seen. However, as she came to grips with it, something seemed vaguely familiar to her. "Saotome.
Where have I heard that name before?" she muttered.

"I very much hope it wasn't in conjunction with the words fiancée and Ami," Chou said with a
weird smile. Azumi snickered, looking at them both. Ami shook her head absently, trying to
remember. Eventually she retrieved her computer and prodded around on it for a moment.

"Yes. I thought I'd heard the name before. Ranma Saotome, Nerima. He was fairly well known in a
particular set of people around there." She read the entry with her eyebrows going up further and
further at each sentence. "Um, destroyed a mountain when he was seventeen?"

Azumi held up two fingers. "Two mountains. Although he was nearly eighteen when the second
one happened, and to be fair it wasn't him by himself, he had help."

"Fought a massively powerful part-dragon being on a number of occasions?"

"Yes. He lost a few times but won in the end." Chou looked amused.

"Killed some sort of near-godlike being in China?"

"It was a close thing, but he was very angry and very clever."

Ami's hand was trembling slightly. "There are dozens of reports here. At least half a dozen that
suggest he, or she, killed several very nasty demons, although it's more by inference than anything
else. Several things from China, a few from all around Japan, lots in Nerima." She read further.
"Chinese Amazons? Bird people? Ghosts?"

"You have good information," Aiko snickered, glancing at Azumi. "Most people couldn't have
found a lot of those."

"Holy shit," Rei mumbled, reading the screen over her shoulder. "And now he's the leader of the
Sisterhood of Doom?" Chou collapsed in hysterical laughter after a wide-eyed look, followed by all
the others, leaving Ami and Rei staring at each other.

"He'll love that," Azumi chortled, heaving with mirth. The blonde woman beside her couldn't even
manage that.

"I told him ages ago we needed a name for this group of people," Aiko gasped, shaking her head in
amusement, then fell over in renewed laughter.

Grinning, Misaki picked up the cereal bar she'd dropped and put it away. "I'm not sure he'll want to
use that one," she commented, looking mockingly sad for a moment or two. "But I like it."
Rei and Ami exchanged glances for a moment. "You're all nuts," the black-haired girl said.

"Oh, you're not wrong there," Tamiko replied, giggling intermittently. "It certainly helps."

Eventually they regained their composure, although the occasional giggle still came from one or other woman. Chou, still smiling, inspected Ami and Rei. "I'm sorry but that really was extremely funny," she apologised.

Looking at the screen again, Ami closed the computer with a snap and put it away. "From what I can find out, he vanished off the face of the earth nearly five years ago. One of the people he was living with also disappeared at the same time. No one seems to know what happened, or where they went." She looked around. "So where did this other person, this Kasumi Tendo, go?"

Chou smiled gently, shimmered, then changed into the form of a somewhat older, attractive slim brunette, still wearing the same smile. "I married him."

Rei watched Ami pacing back and forth in the middle of the living room, looking like one more shock would make her explode. She sympathised mightily. Things had gone far beyond normal magical girl weird into totally twilight zone levels of crazy. The tall brunette, who still had Chou's smile on a face that was nothing like the Chou she knew, watched the blue-haired girl as well, waiting for her to work it out.

"Are all of you going to turn into someone else?" Rei finally asked, looking around. Several of her companions grinned.

"Only me," Azumi said, becoming a short-haired brunette without moving from her seat. Ami stopped dead, then sighed heavily, while Rei just stared.

"And who are you?" the blue-haired woman demanded.

"Her sister, Nabiki," the new woman laughed, pointing at Kasumi. She held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you Ms Mizuno." Rei started giggling at the look on Ami's face, causing Azumi, or Nabiki, to throw a quick amused look her way.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Ami snarled, stomping over and shaking the outstretched hand, then dropping into her seat again, looking around helplessly. "None of this makes any sense. Will someone please explain what the hell is going on?"

Aiko and her girls were grinning, while Nabiki seemed simply amused. They all looked at Kasumi, who smiled more widely. "All right. I'm sorry for all the dramatic reveals, it's worse than a soap opera, but it's very funny. We couldn't resist once we got started." Ami scowled at her, making her laugh. "This is what happened..."

They listened for over two hours to the most incredible story either of them had heard for a long time. Kasumi and Nabiki explained the Tendo Dojo, the fiancées, the rivals, the challengers, and all the insanity of Nerima that made Minato look like a fairly sensible place a lot of the time. Aiko and the others told them about the first time they'd met Ranma and how their friendship developed from that. They were just beginning to talk about the way Nabiki had finally tracked Ranma and Kasumi down over a year ago when Hotaru and the martial artist reappeared from wherever they'd been. The purple-haired girl was smiling and talking rapidly to him, making him laugh.

No trace of her earlier distress was evident, Rei noticed, wondering what they'd talked about. Hotaru's reaction had somewhat surprised her at first but after a little thought she had a fairly good idea of why the younger girl had reacted like that. Ranma looked around at them all, concentrating
on Rei and Ami, then leaned over his wife and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, love. I'm sorry I was away so long but Hotaru and I needed to talk." Kasumi reached up and held his face in one hand for a few seconds, smiling at him.

"I understand, dear." She looked at Hotaru. "I hope you're feeling better about all this now?"

"I am, thank you, Kasumi," the purple-haired girl said politely, showing very little surprise at the way Chou and Azumi had become two completely different people. Rei stared for a moment, then looked at Ami, who looked back, puzzled. Ranma caught their expressions and laughed.

"I filled her in on what Kas has been telling you about," he explained. Looking intently at Rei he added in a quizzical voice, "Sisterhood of Doom? Not quite the sort of thing I ever considered but it does have a certain ring to it, I'll admit."

"How the hell do you do that?" Ami exploded. "You were nowhere near us. How did you find out what we were talking about?" Rei leaned away from her friend as she shouted. "Is this entire place bugged or something?"

Several people laughed for a moment. Scowling, Ami looked around, meeting a number of immediately blank faces. "No, it's not bugged, as such," Nabiki offered. "It's something a little more interesting than that." Ami, Rei, and Hotaru suddenly twitched as the wall with the balcony doors in it vanished, replaced with what at first sight looked like a mirror, reflecting the inside of the living room, although it didn't take long for them all to realise the viewpoint was all wrong. Staring at it in shock, Rei wondered what was odd about it. Eventually she noticed it was more like the view from a camera behind her somewhere, and even had a smaller version of itself in the image. And in that one, a smaller one...

Turning her head she searched for the camera. Nothing was visible. Ami was doing the same thing, while Hotaru, after a quick look around, stood up and approached the wall, peering closely at it. "This is coming from one of those projectors like on S'th'x's ship, isn't it?" she asked curiously.

"That's right," Ranma agreed. "We have one in the apartment now, it's much better than a TV."

"But where's the camera?" Ami asked, waving her computer around and scanning the area, fruitlessly, judging by her expression. Nabiki grinned. Lifting a hand she waved it in front of her face, making Rei jump again when a massive hand went past the projected view in full 3D. She stared in shock, glanced at Ami, who was doing the same thing, then both of them turned to look at Nabiki, who looked smugly amused.

"What the fuck...?" Ami gaped for a moment, then slowly approached the brunette, staring at her face. Nabiki held still and locked eyes with her. Glancing at the projection Rei could see Ami's face growing larger and larger, until it nearly filled the wall. Hotaru was looking between the image and Nabiki, beginning to grin. "How...?" Reaching slowly out Ami waved her own hand in front of Nabiki, looking over her shoulder at the image, where she could see the results, which were completely real-time.

"You have... cameras in your eyes!? Are you some sort of cyborg?" she squeaked in shock.

"Not at all, not like you're thinking. No machinery inside me, I'm one hundred percent organic," the middle Tendo replied, looking vastly amused.

"But how are you doing that?" Ami asked, staring at the projection, then experimentally waving her hand again.
"Ah. That is a secret," the brunette replied, then fell over laughing as Ami literally growled at her, gritting her teeth. Rei watched with growing amusement. It was very rare that her friend lost her temper like that. Not letting her know something she really wanted to understand was a pretty good way to achieve that end result, though.

Relenting after a few seconds during which Ami went an amusing colour, Nabiki made a small gesture with one hand and held it up. On it was a small black oblong shaped piece of technology, from what Rei could see, devoid of any markings. She got the eerie feeling it was looking at her. "This is a Kw'lyn Industries Mark Nine Gamma military specification secure communications unit. Its name is Jun." She smiled at the befuddled look the three girls gave her. "It says it's pleased to meet you." Waving her computer over it Ami looked at the results, very puzzled.

"There's nothing there, according to this," she mumbled.

"Jun says your technology is doing the best it can but is some generations behind state of the art where it comes from," Nabiki giggled. The blue-haired girl stared at her, then the little device. With another twist of her hand the middle sister made the thing vanish again.

"It says?" Rei asked, wondering about the odd wording. Nabiki glanced at her, smiling.

"Yes. The device has a Synthetic Intelligence, which is an amazingly good simulation of a mind. It started off at what it termed level six conversational ability, which meant, according to it, that it wasn't a truly sentient mind but was able to simulate one for most purposes. I'm not sure that's true any more, they learn very fast." She paused, then added, "Jun told me it believes it would now be rated a level seven but lacks external proof of that."

Ami was gaping again. "You have an intelligent computer?" Nabiki grinned, nodding.

"Basically. It's a lot more than that, though. The communications between SIs is to the best of our knowledge completely undetectable, unbreakably encrypted for almost any definition of the word 'unbreakable', seems to be completely unaffected by almost anything except certain wards, and even then can't actually be blocked, just degraded a little." The brunette looked amused again as Ami just stared at her. Rei was listening with shock, the thing sounded unbelievable. "They directly interface with the brain, allowing them to read sensory information from the visual cortex, auditory pathways, things like that, and also put data back. So, for example, the image on the projector is being read straight from my eyes. No camera required."

Rei and Ami looked at each other for a long moment. "Fuck me," Rei breathed.

"Oh, it gets better," Nabiki told them. "Since it can both read and write to the sensory parts of the brain, you can do all sorts of interesting things with it. Very effective night vision, for example, is almost trivial. It can pull data from my visual cortex, boost the gain, filter the noise, then put it back, completely in real time. Or do things like enhance contrast, do targeting and tracking operations, overlay data and video over my viewpoint, increase hearing sensitivity, not to mention interfacing with basically any sort of electronic system via some sort of incredible subspace linkage, even over considerable distances." She laughed at their expressions.

"They were obviously designed as intelligence aids as much as anything. In the right hands they're incredibly effective as infiltration tools. I haven't found a computer system yet that can resist, although the one on the asteroid was the biggest challenge so far by a long way. Ones on Earth are no effort at all, even military ones."

Kasumi giggled, looking at Ami, who seemed to have gone into shock. Rei looked at her. "The primary purpose of them is secure communications, at which they excel. We can talk to each other
anywhere on the planet, or as far as the moon, with no lag or interference, even share each other's
senses. You get used to it amazingly fast. It's somewhat like what I would expect telepathy is, only
probably better." She smiled a little, adding, "You don't need a phone any more, for example."

Rei's communicator buzzed at the same time Ami and Hotaru's did the same. They exchanged a
glance, each pulling their devices out and looking at them. Rei answered hers.

"You see, they can link into essentially any communications system with no real effort," Nabiki's
voice sounded, while she looked at them, her lips not moving. "Which can be pretty strange to use
for the first few days, I'll admit. You take it for granted after a while. It becomes natural, like
another sense, basically. I'd say that getting Jun is probably the best thing that came out of all my
recent experiences, even better than most of the magical girl stuff."

Staring in bemused amazement, Hotaru smiled slowly. Lifting her communicator to her lips she
turned away and whispered into it. Nabiki laughed out loud.

"Yes, Hotaru, I can hear you perfectly." The younger woman giggled, shaking her head with a
joyous expression.

"That's incredible!" she shouted, whirling back to grin at them. "I want one!"

Ami was apparently in shock. She kept looking between Nabiki, Rei's communicator, and the wall,
which was still displaying what Nabiki was looking at. Rei got the impression she couldn't think
what to say. "What else can they do?" the black-haired woman finally asked, mainly to fill the
silence.

Ranma shrugged a little. "You'd have to read the manual, really. There's more than can really be
explained easily. Their storage capacity is so large it's almost infinite, they can record everything
you see, hear, smell, anything like that, then send the recordings to other SI units, they make
incredible word processors, you can watch TV in the privacy of your own head..." He smiled. "I
could go on but we'd be here all day. Think of every function of every electronic device you've
ever seen rolled into one system with a direct pathway to your brain, and a guiding intelligence
that's smart, helpful, and loyal. That's the just the start of it."

"My god," Ami finally breathed, gaping at him. "How did you ever get something like that? Where
did you get them from?"

"Uthryyl acquired a number of them legitimately from the manufacturers some time ago, he gave
us a dozen of them. They were incredibly expensive, in our currency probably in excess of multiple
billions of yen each, but more than worth it. The SIs add a huge amount of effectiveness to our
existing abilities. Plus they're a lot of fun and nice to talk to."

Kasumi smiled happily. "I would agree with my sister, acquiring them was a very significant
improvement to our lives."

"It turns out that Yori and Chou, along with Uthryyl, were on a pre-approved list of people allowed
to possess the SIs. The makers are very cautious about who they allow to have them for fairly
obvious reasons," Fumiko interjected with a look of amusement on her face. Ami and her friends
stared at her. "They were able to authorise the rest of us to use them. Very few of the units exist
outside their own world."

"The makers are far ahead of any other species we've heard of in magitech computer technology,
and most likely other things," Nabiki added. "They keep to themselves, apparently, but their
equipment is the gold standard everywhere and implicitly trusted by everyone."
"Wow." Rei couldn't think of anything else to say. She glanced at Hotaru, who was almost vibrating with excitement, suddenly feeling much like her young friend was obviously feeling. She wanted one as well, very suddenly.

Slumping back into her seat on the sofa, Ami closed her eyes and shook her head tiredly. Everyone watched her, mostly sympathetically. "I was just getting my head around the truth about Yori, Chou, and Azumi, which was a hell of a shock, then you spring this on me. I knew there was something interesting going on, the way you could get information from each other over silly distances without any obvious magic or technology going on, but this is..." After a pause, she finished weakly, "... a bit much."

Opening her eyes and looking at Rei, she almost smiled. "I'm impressed you're not screaming with rage about all the surprises. I'd have expected you to be a little worked up, based on past experience."

Rei flushed slightly, then shrugged helplessly. "It's been so surreal I don't quite know what to feel, to be honest. I don't think it's sunk in yet." Looking around at the other woman, she asked, "Do you all have these things?" Everyone nodded at once, in a synchronised manner that made her skin crawl for a moment.

"Yes, we do," they chorused, then started laughing.

"That's really weird," Hotaru giggled.

"Weird? We think we're completely normal," seven voices said as one. Rei and Ami winced. "The Sisterhood of Doom welcomes you. You have been assimilated." There was a long pause, then Ranma and his friends broke down in hysterical laughter. Ami glared for a moment, looking worried, while Rei cracked up. Hotaru fell over and rolled around giggling her head off.

"That's the freakiest thing I've ever seen," the blue-haired woman grumbled. "Stop it." She blinked as Ranma suddenly became female again, the laughter rising in pitch a couple of octaves, without interruption. "No. That's the freakiest thing I've ever seen."

"I'm really not sure about the Sisterhood of Doom being a good name," Ranma chuckled, "it could give the wrong impression. But it is kind of funny."

Gasping for breath, Rei nodded. "Sorry, but it sort of came out without me thinking."

Waiting for the laughter to die down, Ami keep studying the female Ranma. After a while she said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I have to ask. Are you male or female?"

The red-head looked at her, smiling in a peculiar manner. "Yes," she said. Ami waited, looking puzzled when nothing more was added.

"Very helpful. Could you expand on that?"

Ranma shrugged. "I was born male, as I said. The curse turns me completely female, physically. I've spent a lot of the last seven years female, there was no way around it to start with, I tended to get splashed with cold water a lot. The more I tried to avoid it the more often it happened, usually in the most embarrassing way. Meeting Aiko and the others was the start of becoming able to accept I was stuck and beginning to learn to live with it. Kasumi helped with the rest. In the end, I couldn't honestly say at this point that I'm either one. It's a simple choice, I can be whatever I want whenever I want. My mind is always the same, I'm just Ranma. What the outside looks like is immaterial, really." She looked thoughtful for a second or two. "It's difficult to explain to someone
who's never experienced it. I think I'm mentally more much male than female, but I know a number of females who think very much the way I do, as far as I can tell. I also know males who seem to think more like a female from what I can observe. I guess it comes down to the fact that gender isn't a hard and fast thing to begin with." She snickered a little. "Much less so in my case."

Watching her for a few seconds, Ami shook her head a little, then glanced down at the computer she was still holding, absently tucking it away. "I have to admit I find that very hard to understand. It must have been difficult for you when you were first changed like that."

Ranma sighed, looking at Kasumi, who reached out and held her hand. "It was. For over a year I thought it was total hell. Not only the change itself, but in many ways more the way people treated me as a result. Disgust, hate, fear, revulsion, they were all common reactions, which didn't exactly help me in dealing with it. Some people were OK with the change, Kasumi being the main one in the Tendo household, although even she was very surprised at first." She thought, changing back to male without seeming to notice, then added, "In fact, thinking about it in most ways Nabiki was probably the least worried to begin with. Surprised, yes, but not scared." Everyone looked at the middle Tendo, who shrugged.

"It's true. It was definitely a shock but I thought it was more interesting than scary."

"I came to realise my initial impression was wrong quite rapidly," Kasumi added quietly, still holding her husband's hand. "But by the time I did, it was too late. Akane had been pushed into becoming the one true fiancée, something she was never happy about for the most part, and it just got worse from there. When everything came to a head I was terrified I'd lost him forever. Luckily, I was wrong." She smiled at the young man with visible love in her eyes. "Something I'll be forever grateful for."

"The whole thing is very weird," Rei commented, watching them with mild envy. She knew true love when she saw it. Hotaru was watching as well with a small smile. Ami looked slightly puzzled still, as if she was trying to work it all out.

"Oh, it is that," Aiko said, looking at her. "By the time he met us, though, he was pretty much on the verge of accepting it. Kasumi was probably the main driver of that. If it hadn't been for the influence of both his parents, mostly his father, although his mother bears some blame as well, he'd probably have accepted it much earlier and just got on with life. I like to think we helped the situation. I know he helped us an enormous amount, then and ever since."

"You probably saved my sanity, to be honest, guys," Ranma assured them. "I was on the verge of doing something pretty damn dramatic. If it hadn't been for the way you accepted me without question, and the distraction of helping you all, I don't like to think what might have happened. It could well have been a lot worse than what it ended up being, as bad as that was."

"What about sex?" Ami asked, looking like she couldn't believe she was having this conversation but was unable to stop herself. Ranma studied her for a long moment during which she flushed.

"Thank you for the offer, Ami, but I'm happily married," he eventually replied with a perfectly straight face. Ami went bright red, Hotaru nearly fell unconscious from laughter, and everyone else howled with mirth.

"That's NOT what I meant and you know it!" the blue-haired woman shouted. "I meant, how does it affect you regarding sex. Do you like men or women? Or both?" Clapping her hands over her mouth looking horribly embarrassed, she flushed again. "Sorry. I didn't mean to shout that. It's sort of personal," she squeaked, while Ranma grinned widely at her. "But I'm really curious. I've never seen anything like this before."
"Always wanting to learn, aren't you, Ami?" He chuckled. "That's a good thing, on the whole." She
seemed to calm down a little although still looked embarrassed. "I like women, or more accurately,
one specific woman," he assured her, looking at Kasumi for a moment. "No matter what form I'm
in. That will never change." Looking amused he added, "I suppose when I'm female I'm a
committed lesbian, and when I'm male I'm just normally heterosexual."

Everyone looked at him, then turned to look at Kasumi. She smiled in a gentle and mysterious
way, totally unaffected by the scrutiny. "I'm Ranma sexual. It doesn't matter what he is, or she is,
he's my mate, forever."

Hotaru, sitting up from where she'd been lying on the floor giggling, sighed, watching them.
"You're so lucky, Kasumi. To have found your soul-mate like that. I don't know any other magical
girls who even have steady boyfriends, really."

Glancing at her, Rei said, "Usagi thought she was supposed to be getting a boyfriend, one of the
things the cats told us suggested that, but he never turned up. She was looking for him for a long
time." Sighing slightly, she shook her head sadly. "I think that's one of the things that made her go
a little odd. Makoto is always trying to find a guy as well but comes on so hard she tends to scare
them off."

"Michiru and Haruka found each other," Ami said absently, then looked guiltily at Hotaru, who had
closed her eyes in momentary pain. Rei shot her an annoyed look. "Sorry, Hotaru, I didn't mean..."

The younger girl shook her head then opened her eyes, sighing a little in the process. "Don't worry,
Ami, it's not your fault. It just caught me by surprise. I was trying not to think about it."

Everyone pondered the purple-haired girl, who shifted around to sit cross-legged on the carpet and
looked out the window, now visible again since at some point in the last couple of minutes,
without the three of them noticing, Nabiki had killed the projection. She sighed again, faintly.
Looking at her sadly, Rei felt very sorry for her. The break-up of their group had in some ways
affected the younger woman more than anyone, since whichever way you looked at it she'd
essentially lost at least one adoptive parent. After a little while she turned to Ami, seeing the other
woman was looking irritated with herself. Their eyes met for a second, before they turned back to
Ranma, who was also watching Hotaru with an expression of understanding sorrow.

"It's an unavoidable side-effect of the life-style," he said quietly, still watching the girl. "For lots of
reasons finding a significant other when you do the sorts of things we do and face the challenges
we face is complicated and difficult. The secrecy that most of the girls work under doesn't help."
Returning his gaze to them, he shrugged slightly. "The same thing happens with certain types of
soldiers, some police, people like that, for most of the same reasons. Lots of one-night stands and
not a lot of successful marriages or even long-term relationships. Can't be helped, I'm afraid."

There was a long thoughtful silence, eventually broken by Rei, who asked, "OK, as mad as it all
sounds so far, we're still only half-way through the story, which I for one am still very curious
about. You, Nabiki, finally figured out he was in Minato, I got that. How did you end up as a
magical girl, for heaven's sake? I'd have thought from what you two told us that when you found
him and your sister you'd have dragged both of them back to Nerima or something."

Nabiki smiled reflectively. "That was more or less the original intent, I'll admit. By that point I was
more looking for word of Kasumi than anything else. We all missed her terribly, plus there was a
hell of a lot of guilt involved. Akane wouldn't talk about it, Dad seldom did, only when just drunk
enough, and I didn't mention it very often either, but we all knew it was our fault she was gone.
We'd driven Ranma off, or to be brutally honest, mainly Akane had driven him off, although
everyone else certainly helped to one degree or another, but Sis was another matter." She looked at
"Over the years I came to suspect it was possibly for the best as far as she was concerned that she'd gone. Akane couldn't accept that. For a long time she claimed that Ranma had kidnapped Kasumi, insisting we needed to find them so she could rescue her big sister and do... something, I'm not sure what... to her 'kidnapper.' Nabiki looked mildly disgusted for a moment, making little air quotes around that last word. "She wasn't rational about it at all. In the end, though, I gave up searching deliberately, around eighteen months after they left. She wasn't happy about it, not at all. But I never gave up hope that I'd see her again. Finding Ranma seemed the most likely way to find her. Then one day, out of the blue more or less, I got some information that... changed my life." She grinned, looking enormously happy for a long moment. "Totally changed everything. And in the end I found my sister, a new brother, and so much more besides."

Rei nodded thoughtfully, looking at her friends. Ami was listening with interest and Hotaru was hanging on every word like it was the best story she'd ever heard.

"We knew she was coming," Kasumi told them, looking amused, "because we'd taken steps very soon after establishing ourselves to be kept informed about the goings-on in Nerima, partly so we could protect ourselves and partly to make sure nothing happened to the people at the Dojo."

"That last bit was mainly Kas," Ranma added, grinning for a second, "at the time I wasn't all that worried about their general well-being."

"I can understand that," Ami assured him. "The story Kasumi told us is fairly horrific in many ways."

"There's a lot more to it, but it would take hours to go over even a fairly small amount," he replied, scowling slightly, then brightening up. "You're getting the highlights and basic plot at the moment. I'll tell you more details some other time if you really want to know."

'I'd like that, thanks."

"That first day, when I finally saw my older sister after nearly three years with not a word, that was a good day." Nabiki smiled to herself, looking at nothing in particular. "Even with all the shocks I got." Her eyes focussed on Ami, Rei, and Hotaru. "You think you guys have had a surprise... I had no experience of magical girls, of magic, really, beyond the Jusenkyo curses and a few small things I'd seen over the years as a result of Ranma and all the weird people he attracted. Suddenly I was inundated with it. Finding out that your older sister, the one that had been a mother figure to you and everyone else for years, the one who wouldn't hurt a fly and hardly ever even stopped smiling, was one of the most dangerous magical girls in all Japan who regularly went up against demons and even other magical girls..." She shook her head slowly. "It was very weird indeed."

"But you coped with it magnificently, sister," Kasumi told her, looking proud. "As I hoped you would." She looked at their guests, smiling happily. "I'd been looking forward for so long to being able to tell my family. Even with all the problems, I wanted the best for them, and to see them again, to talk to them once more. We still can't do that, not with Akane and Father, but Nabiki is back in our life now, which I'm extremely pleased about."

"But how did you end up being able to do all these things?" Hotaru asked, completely engrossed. "From what you told us you never showed any signs of being able to do magic or all the other stuff."

"She has a very large latent talent for it, though," Ranma explained. "All three girls studied martial arts when they were younger although only Akane really kept it up, even in the half-hearted and
limited way she did. But my theory is that they were still exposed to it, learning the theory, so to speak, even if they didn't have the practice. Kas is a born genius in the field of martial arts and ki manipulation, as well as magic, it eventually turned out. She learned the art probably faster than I did. If we'd both started at the same time with the same training, there's no way of knowing which one of us would be better. I have a lot more practical experience but she's now nearly as good as I am, even though she started a good decade later than I did." He looked at the elder Tendo who was slightly pink from the praise. "I can still take her, of course." She poked him in the ribs, grinning, while several of the women in the room laughed.

"That may well always be the case," Kasumi added. "He has a very large head start in both martial arts and ki control, not to mention his power level. But I've caught up far faster and more completely than I ever dreamed I could." She looked towards her sister. "Nabiki has a talent as strong as I do, I think, although I can't get her to believe that. She's learned a vast amount in a short period of time."

"It took them both months to persuade me I could do any of these things," Nabiki shrugged, "but I'm damn glad they kept pushing."

"We figured out in the end that exposure to our magic seems to jump-start ki development, something that was very noticeable with Nabiki," the martial artist mused. "I don't have enough information to know for sure whether it would always work like that, or work for everyone. The increased ki control feeds back into faster progress with our magic system, and vice versa. They form a sort of synergy. That said, we have a lot of evidence that the magic at least can only be learned properly, or possible at all, by certain people, ones who are at the right stage of their development and haven't learned too much of one or other more standard magical methods. Those seem to permanently block our method, although we still haven't figured out why."

He inspected the three girls. "I'll be interested to see what happens with you lot."

Hotaru gasped. "You're going to teach us all these things?"

"We look after our own. You girls, your entire group, have been very effective for a long time, up until recently, but you've never been very efficient. That's quite irritating. I know you're capable of a lot more. I made the offer years ago to give you all some proper combat training but for various reasons you all turned me down. I made the same offer to most of the magical girls in Minato at one point or another, very few of them every took me up on it or stuck around if they did. It's disappointing." Shaking his head he looked worried. "There are so many of them that have had very close calls they didn't need to have if they just knew a little bit more. I don't want to see any of them pay the price I fear they might one day, not if I can somehow prevent it."

Looking at him for a long moment Rei had a sudden flashback to what her grandfather had said weeks ago. "The magical girls protect the community. Yori protects the magical girls."

"He was right," she muttered to herself. Everyone looked at her.

"Who was right? About what?" Tamiko asked curiously, breaking the silence she and her team had mostly sat in for a considerable time, apparently just enjoying listening.
"Grandfather. He said something a while ago, when I was... less than pleased... about what happened during that little incident when we got a little carried away around here. The thing with the coffee-demon."

"Poor Xrist. He was a bit traumatised about all that," Kasumi giggled, shaking her head. "He's a very nice person when you get to know him."

"I'll take your word for it," Rei replied after giving her an odd look. "Anyway, Grandfather told me that while the magical girls protected their communities, Yori and Chou protected the magical girls. He seemed pretty sure of himself. I wasn't sure I really believed him then but now I think I do."

Exchanging glances, Ranma and Kasumi looked somewhat surprised, but in the end smiled. "I suppose that is our job, or at least a major part of it, dear," the elder sister commented. "It's not one we were asked to do but it seems to be what ended up happening."

"I've never really thought of it in quite those terms, but it sort of fits," he replied. "I don't want people to get killed. Our people, the demons, anyone, if it can be helped."

"Sometimes there's no alternative," Ami suggested. He looked at her for a moment. "Unfortunately very true. And if that's the only way, you do it fast, hard, and clean. That's sort of the problem I had with your friends in a nutshell. They tended to go in with an overkill approach even before they knew what the deal really was, but at the same time dance around the issue with all those flowery attacks that built to a crescendo. It was extremely annoying."

Misaki snickered, pulling out some snacks and handing them around. "I'll say. It could be kind of funny, watching Usagi and Minako spout stupid speeches about love, justice, and death to all demons, but by the time they were done talking anyone half competent could have finished them off half a dozen times. Which we've all proved on more than one occasion."

Sighing, Ami and Rei both nodded. "I know what you mean," the blue-haired girl admitted, staring at the floor. "Looking back on it I'm just embarrassed."

"It's what we were told was the way you did things," Rei added. She shrugged slightly. "We know better now, but at the time it seemed appropriate."

"It was damned silly," Ranma grumped, becoming the red-head and pouting, which looked adorable, Rei noted to herself, trying not to smile. "Very unprofessional and pointless. Like something designed by and for a rather dim ten-year-old girl. All flowery speeches and grandiose gestures." Aiko looked at Nabiki, then both of them started laughing. "Well, it's true," the martial artist continued, smiling a little. "sometimes I didn't know whether to stop them or just burst out laughing. I don't know any other magical girls who were quite that..." She waved her hands a little, looking for a suitable word. "Idiotic," was all she seemed to be able to come up with in the end.

Once more a silence fell as the three girls absorbed what they'd heard. In the end Hotaru broke it. "So Ranma taught you ki control, and magic, and martial arts. You became Azumi and started stopping criminals. Was that on purpose?" Nabiki smiled reflectively, slowly shaking her head, as all eyes turned to her again.

"Not really, no. It just kind of... happened. The first time was a complete accident." The wall vanished again, a perfect three-dimensional scene appearing on it, as they all turned to look at it. "I was just walking home at university and I heard a noise. One thing led to another. Fascinated, they watched the incident with the security guard and the thieves from Nabiki's viewpoint, until the
recording ended. "After that, they seemed to happen more and more often. For a while it was at least one incident a day. I guess the crazy got to me. After Halleckton, though, it slowed down, although the incidents seem to have increased in severity even at the same time they decreased in number."

"You obviously levelled up," Rei chuckled. Nabiki grinned at her.

"Possibly. Although that's a worrying thought in itself."

Looking thoughtful, Ami suddenly asked, "OK, so those SI communicators let you record what you experience, and transfer those recordings to other people, or even show them with the projector, along with all the other incredible things they can do. But how are you watching the others? Do you have some sort of magic for that? A sort of scrying spell or something?"

Nabiki glanced at Ranma, who shook her head. "No. We don't really use scrying spells, they're too unreliable and easily blocked if you know what you're doing. Some mages rely on them but we don't. That said, we know an awful lot of ways to screw them up." She laughed. "Cologne was going nuts for years trying to find me with those sorts of spells. She never got even a hint."

"We use these," Fumiko said, holding out a small spherical device. As they looked at it curiously it lifted from her hand with a very faint humming sound, moving into the middle of the room and simply hanging there. Ami gaped, then quickly scanned it.

"Some sort of imaging system, very high-tech, with... is that anti-gravity?"

"Yep." Ranma looked amused. "They're basically a sort of sport camera from Fwetna. Very tough, quite smart, huge storage capacity, and fantastic image quality. Plus all sorts of options. We have quite a few of them." The device suddenly wavered and faded from view, vanishing completely. "Good stealth as well." Scanning the area Ami raised an eyebrow.

"Good is an understatement. If I didn't know it was there I don't think I'd notice it, even with this, unless it was right on top of me."

"None of the others noticed except for Setsuna," Tamiko commented, amused. "We've had at least one camera following each of them ever since all the trouble. She seemed to be able to hear the antigrav, so we had to make sure we kept them some distance away, but the other girls didn't notice anything." She studied Ami for a moment, then Rei and Hotaru. "You didn't either, until we showed you."

As she spoke a small fleet of five of the drones faded into view behind Nabiki's head. She grinned as the three girls stared. Holding out her hands she caught two of them without looking as they dropped into her palms, then held them up. "The SIs can easily interface to these over enormous distances. Jun can control them directly, which means that they're extra eyes and ears for me. I don't even have to consciously direct them any more, they just do what I want." Each of the three remaining camera drones moved smoothly to hover half a metre in front of each of the girls. Hotaru inspected the one in front of her, grinning, then reached out. It moved slightly to one side, making her giggle as she chased it.

"Cool, aren't they?" Aiko asked. All three of them nodded.

"You lot have some incredible toys," Rei breathed, holding out her hand in wonder. The drone dropped into it obediently, allowing her to look closely at it. "The magic is one thing but all the alien high tech is just weird."
"It's certainly become very useful," Kasumi agreed. "It adds substantially to our effectiveness as well. Of course, a lot of that effectiveness is based on keeping a lot of this confidential."

Ami looked at the drone Rei was holding, scanning it carefully, then reading the results. "That thing is amazing. I'd love to have one."

"That can be arranged," Nabiki assured her after glancing at Ranma, who nodded slightly. "The shop should have more in stock by now." She laughed a little. "We cleaned him out last time."

Kasumi stood, making everyone look at her. "I think we should go somewhere else to finish the story. There are some other things we need to show you that need more space." She smiled mischievously as Rei looked at Ami, not sure whether she was interested or worried. Her friend was feeling the same, judging by her expression. When she glanced at Hotaru, though, she found the younger girl had an odd smile as well. Slightly overwhelmed by all the weirdness, she shrugged, standing.

"I'm up for it. Although I could do with something to eat soon. I'm getting hungry." Misaki tossed her an apple which she snagged behind her head with one hand, biting into it. "Thanks."

"No problem." The tall woman looked at Ranma. "Should any of us stay behind? Just in case?" the red-head thought for a moment.

"It should be all right. Haruka, Makoto, and Michiru seem to be behaving themselves, but we should keep an eye on them even so. We can be back fast if anything goes bad."

"I'll leave a couple of cameras watching the immediate area as well," Nabiki said, walking over and opening the balcony doors. Two of the spherical drones zipped outside, fading out of sight in the process, then she closed the doors again. Rei stared, before shaking her head in wondering amazement. The middle sister grinned at her. "Fun, aren't they?"

"Damn right. Are these other revelations of yours going to be as impressive?"

"Probably better." The answer made her nervous, which wasn't helped by the odd grin Hotaru was still wearing. She followed as everyone grouped together, before vanishing as Aiko teleported.
Chapter 79

Looking around with interest, Hotaru studied the small island they had appeared on, before bending over and prodding the hot sand experimentally. A few metres away gentle waves lapped at a semi-circular beach, which formed part of a roughly circular lagoon a few hundred metres across. Outside the reef she could see much larger waves breaking, spray coming over the low wall the reef formed. Walking closer to the water she could see it was quite shallow, a large number of fish and other aquatic creatures swimming around it in colourful groups. Turning, she noted the palm trees that grew on the narrow crescent of land that the beach formed the inner curve of. It was very pretty overall, a classic deserted island.

"This is really nice," she said. Aiko smiled happily.

"Isn't it? We call it Aiko Island. It hasn't got a real name. I've been coming here for some time when I needed a break, but after that horrible business in Canada I told the others. We come here to relax and swim. And other things as well." She grinned as Hotaru looked intrigued. Swimming, that she had a pretty good idea about now, after what Ranma showed her earlier. 'I wonder what the other things are?' she thought to herself, looking at Ami and Rei, who were wandering about, inspecting the island. Going back to Aiko she raised her eyebrows. The petite woman smiled, then made a gesture to the sky. Hotaru thought for a moment before her eyes widened and she started to grin with delighted disbelief. "Shh," Aiko whispered, turning away, having winked at her, leaving her staring at the sky with a look of expectant joy.

"Nice, but hot," Ami commented, glancing about herself. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, below the equator," Ranma replied. "It's only a little island, a hell of a long way from anywhere, but it's a nice place to come to be undisturbed. Good swimming."

"It looks like it," she replied, staring out over the lagoon. "Is it always that calm?"

"Pretty much, yes, unless there's a storm. I haven't seen one yet but Aiko has, she said it was fairly impressive. She didn't stay long." The martial artist grinned as Ami nodded her understanding. With no cover other than a few palm trees a decent tropical storm could be definitely rather exciting. Wandering down to the water's edge she looked into it, finding it remarkably clear and full of more life than anything she'd seen before.

She knelt on an outcropping of coral that protruded from the sand, dropping into a slightly deeper part, perhaps a metre or so, down to a flat bottom covered in the same white sand and some small chunks of coral. Tiny fish swam around, one or two larger ones chasing them intermittently, while a few crabs scuttled around beneath them. As she watched a small octopus slithered out of a tiny crack in the coral, one that looked far too small to have contained it, then jetted slowly off across the sand. "It's like a little aquatic paradise, isn't it? I had no idea so much life could be found so close together in the wild, I thought that was something you only found in aquariums."

"I think it's because we're so far away from anything people go to," Ranma said, squatting down beside her and watching the fish. "There's practically no pollution, nothing to disturb the environment. We're always careful not to leave anything behind and try not to damage the place."

She laughed for a moment. "Aiko would be very annoyed if we did. She has a somewhat proprietary attitude to this island." Running her fingers through the sand she held up a small unidentifiable piece of plastic. "That said, this stuff gets everywhere. I can't begin to imagine how
much plastic is floating around in the oceans right now." Closing her hand around the fragment she idly vaporised it with a brief flash of blue light. "One day perhaps we can figure out how to deal with that."

Both women stood, Ami looking around again. Fumiko, Tamiko, and Rei had walked to the end of the beach and were looking out over the reef to the open ocean, the other red-head apparently pointing something in the water out to the other two, while Misaki and Kasumi were sitting on the sand at the base of one of the trees talking. Nabiki and Aiko seemed to be discussing something involving the sky, they both kept looking up, with Hotaru watching them closely. She was smiling in a disturbing manner again, Ami noticed.

"What on earth did you do with Hotaru?" she asked, glancing at Ranma, who seemed amused. "She went off terribly upset but came back all smiles, and ever since then she seems to be walking around with a very weird expression."

"We talked for a while, then I showed her some interesting things I can do. That seemed to cheer her up." The young woman grimaced briefly, rubbing the back of her head while watching the purple-haired girl with a mildly regretful expression. "I understand why she took that first demonstration so hard. I should have realised what was likely to happen and tried to break it more gently."

"I don't think you could have, to be honest, Ranma," Ami said slowly, also inspecting her younger friend. "Hotaru is a smart girl, very smart, but she's also had a lot of trouble in her life, even before all the recent crap. Bullying at school, her father dying, then Haruka and Michiru breaking up, all that left her in a bad place. I noticed that she'd become very taken with Yori almost immediately, when she stopped being scared of the insane woman like we all were." Looking at Ranma out of the corner of her eye she grinned as the red-head smirked, apparently pleased at the description. "Healing Haruka's arm like that impressed the hell out of her. Me too, of course, it's incredible what you and Kasumi can do, but since she can heal as well, I think it really resonated with her. Finding out the truth was always going to cause an upset."

Ranma nodded, sighing faintly, then smiled. "I'm just glad I was able to fix it. We had a long talk and I think she's OK now. I didn't like upsetting her, poor girl."

Watching the woman beside her for a second or two, Ami smiled. "You like her, don't you?"

"Of course I do. She's a very nice person with a huge amount of potential." Ranma looked at her. "I like you and Rei as well. I always had a lot of respect for you, personally, although I didn't know you all that well. I was always disappointed when you let blondie drag you into something stupid. You were supposed to be the smart, sane one. Or, the more sane than the rest one, anyway." Ami dipped her head in wry acknowledgement of the back-handed compliment, making the red-head smirk. "Rei was much too quick tempered but she showed promise. I didn't have enough contact with Hotaru to have much of an opinion although I could easily tell she had a lot more power than she was apparently capable of using. I always intended to follow up on that eventually, but what happened kind of pushed it on us."

"Are you really going to teach us all these amazing things?" Ami asked after a pause. "I know what you said earlier, but I'm still shocked you'd do that."

"Why wouldn't I? I like teaching people, assuming I can find the right ones. Ones I can trust, who also show talent. You three qualify on both counts. Your actions in the last few weeks showed that clearly, as did Hotaru's, and Rei has changed a lot as well. Her grandfather is very pleased, and also very good at helping people work out the right thing to do."
"How did you meet him?" Ami was very curious, turning to face the martial artist.

"We simply followed Usagi and Rei a few days after the first fight. Neither one of them seemed to be looking behind themselves," Ranma chuckled, "I suspect that practically anyone could have done it if they could have kept up. We were shielded, of course, so they wouldn't have seen or sensed us even if they had looked but they didn't bother. Both of them dropped their disguise spell as soon as they entered the temple. Once we saw it go down, we could design an effective countermeasure. We had all your home addresses and real names in under twelve hours once that was done. The PSIA had to do it the hard way, but even they didn't take much more than a week or so, according to the file I read."

Shaking her head in worried wonder, Ami stared at the other woman, then twitched as she turned male. "God, that's weird to watch," she muttered. Ranma laughed in a low voice.

"Weirder to have happen, the first time, believe me."

"I do." They exchanged a look. "So, then, what's the next incredible shock you're going to spring on us?" the blue-haired woman finally asked.

He grinned, looking over to where Nabiki and Aiko seemed to have come to a decision. Ami could see beyond them that Rei and the other two girls were returning, and that Hotaru was still watching both women very carefully as if she expected something interesting to happen any second. "It's a good one," the martial artist said casually, nodding to Nabiki who looked over at that moment. She nodded back, then grinned at Hotaru, before both she and Aiko vanished, the teleport flash bright even against the brilliantly sunlit sand.

"Where did they go?" Ami asked curiously. She looked at her companion, noticing he was staring upwards. Hotaru noticed this as well, following his gaze, then smiling widely. Ami looked up.

Far, far above them, at least a thousand metres up and off to the side, two small dots were moving fast. She squinted, trying to make them out. "What are those?" She could see what looked like wings and a long tail. The two creatures circled a couple of times then began dropping rapidly, on a course that seemed likely to take them right overhead. They approached quickly, wings flapping hard, then partially folding as they both tipped into a vertical dive. Pulling out of the dive mere metres off the surface half a kilometre away the things headed straight at them, roaring over the lagoon side by side low enough for their wake turbulence to ripple the water, then pulled up hard with small streamers of condensation from their wing-tip vortices.

She gaped in shock. Both figures had been moving at a speed she judged as at least three hundred and fifty kilometres an hour, which seemed impossible for living creatures to reach. Too stunned to even reach for her computer, she just watched as they stall-turned in opposite directions like something from an air show, before closing their wings and diving directly at the beach. A whistling sound grew steadily louder, only to stop with a pair of abrupt cracks and a cloud of sand blown around in the shockwave. It settled out, leaving dead silence, broken only by the wind in the trees and the lapping of waves on the shore. Ami stared, unable to even think what to say, at Nabiki and Aiko grinning at them, their wings folded behind them, then after a very long time managed to crank her head around enough to see Ranma, who was standing with his arms crossed looking pleased.

"That... was... unbelievable!" Hotaru screamed with pure joy in her voice, running over to Nabiki and hugging her, before stepping back and looking her up and down. "How did you learn to do that? How fast were you going? How high can you go? Is that as fast as you can fly? Can I see your wings? Do you really have a tail?" The excited girl ran around both of them, looking at them in delight, before ending up back in front of the middle sister. "Can I touch your wing?"
Giggling, Nabiki extended one wing and brought it around. Hotaru felt it, smiling. "So soft. That's amazing."

"Um, what the fuck...?" Rei spluttered, on the other side of the flying girls. "But... How? I mean... How?" She ran out of words, simply staring. Ami looked at her, then Hotaru, then back at Ranma, who shrugged.

"I told you Kas and I came up with an interesting technique for disguising ourselves. It turned out to be more effective than we thought it would be."

She kept staring.

"Really, a lot more effective. And a lot of fun."

Some more staring happened. Eventually she shook her head. "Fun. Yes. Why not?" As he snickered she looked back to the two winged girls, who were answering excited questions from Hotaru patiently. Turning her head she caught Rei's eye, the other woman looking as amazed as she felt. They both walked over to Nabiki and Aiko. Pulling out her computer she scanned them, as they grinned at her, then looked at the results. "They really are what they look like!" she exclaimed in great surprise. "A shape change? I thought you said it was an illusion, a disguise technique."

He smiled, studying both women with visible pride in his eyes. "It started out that way. But as we refined it, we added more and more things to it, ending up with something we still call the illusion technique but is very close to a true shape-shifting spell. One that's apparently very unusual, according to a number of mages I know, most of whom tell me it can't possibly work in the first place." He indicated Nabiki who had looped her tail over her shoulder and poked Hotaru between the eyes with it, both of them grinning. "Clearly they're wrong."

"The main limitation with it is that when you stop powering it, it dissipates," Kasumi said from behind her. She hadn't noticed the elder Tendo approaching, engrossed as she was in the subject she was investigating, so she jumped a little. "I've nearly finished working out a possible way around that, but it still needs some work I haven't had time for due to everything that's happened recently. It could have some very interesting medical implications, though, so I must get back to it at some point soon."

Nabiki glanced at Rei and Ami, then shimmered. A fraction of a second later she was her normal self. "I can't do it like Sis and Ranma can, but I'm very slowly beginning to understand it. In the mean time, Kasumi worked out how to give us a number of preset versions of the spell. They're very useful." Ami looked at her for a long moment, then around at the others.

"You can all do it?" Two seconds later there were seven flying women looking at the three ones without wings with amused expressions. Ami looked at them, then met the stunned gaze of Rei, who seemed to have frozen. "Oh my god," she mumbled. Unable to speak for a few seconds she just looked around wildly.

Hotaru was under no such limitation. Grinning like an idiot she wandered happily around inspecting all their flying forms. "This is so cool," she said over and over.

"As good as the spaceport on K'nn four?" Tamiko asked, laughing. The girl giggled back.

"Well, possibly not quite that impressive, but amazing anyway. Is flying fun? It sure looks it."

"It's incredible fun, trust me. When we were on holiday we were doing it for hours almost every day. Since we got back it's been annoying that we couldn't." Sighing, the auburn-haired woman
Rei suddenly dropped to the sand, sitting and putting her head in her hands. "This is becoming too much to deal with," she mumbled almost inaudibly. "You people are nuts. Beyond nuts." Ami watched her friend, totally in agreement, then sat beside her. "I thought I was dealing with it all right, you know?" The other woman looked up at her for a moment. "But then something else happens that's even weirder than the first thing. And as soon as I'm almost OK with that, another crazy thing happens. Men that turn into women, or the other way around, is pretty fucking strange but I almost had a handle on it. But flying magical girls? I mean, actually flying, with wings and everything, not just levitating or something like that. Magic I could handle. This is... just peculiar."

Putting her arm around her friend Ami nodded, staring around at the others, who were listening sympathetically. Hotaru smiled, shrugging slightly when Ami caught her eye. "It was strange to me at first as well but Ranma showed me some of this while we were talking. It's the best magic I've ever come across," the girl explained. Glancing at Ranma, she asked with that odd smile again, "Maybe they need a swim to relax." Ami wondered what she meant, a little worried about the look on her face. Ranma got the same one, which worried her more.

Noticing the way she was staring, the red-headed winged martial artist laughed for a moment, shimmering back into just the normal red-headed woman, then walking over and dropping cross-legged to the sand on the other side of Rei, who looked at her for a second before going back to staring at the sand. "Sorry, Rei, Ami, I know it's a lot to deal with. We're so used to all of this we tend to take it for granted now. When you wave all of it in someone's face I'll agree it could be a bit much. We do seem to have accumulated a pretty big collection of weird techniques over the years."

Ami nodded after a few seconds, still inspecting Rei, who was trickling sand through her fingers and apparently trying to make sense of everything. "I'm almost afraid to find out what the next thing is. The SIs, shape-shifting spells, portal travel, teleporting, incredible magical healing, insane martial arts..." She shrugged. "Why aren't you guys running the world?"

"Too much work," Nabiki chuckled. Glancing around at her friends, she added, "We'll be back in a while. We need some exercise and you might need some time to think. See you in a bit." She walked a few metres away, flapped hard, and took off, followed by Aiko and her team. Ami watched as the five figures powered rapidly up into the clear sky, laughter coming back faintly as they soared. Hotaru was watching with a wide grin.

"You'll get used to it," Ranma said, lying back in the sand. "That's what normally happens. Some people take longer than others." She looked at them both for a second. "You got used to travelling around in an alien spaceship quickly enough, for example. Or walking on the Moon."

"I don't know why but for some reason that was much less of a shock than this is," Rei replied in a low voice, turning a shell over in her fingers absenty, also studying the five flying women far above. "How many other things do you all turn into?"

"The technique is extremely versatile," Kasumi said from behind them, her soft voice sounding satisfied yet gentle. "Far more than we originally expected. We came up with it for disguise purposes, to allow both of us to attend university without being tracked down by everyone at home. At first it wasn't nearly as complete as it is now, but it was more than sufficient for those purposes. In the last two or three years we've kept working on it, ending up with something remarkable. It's only when we talk to other mages that we tend to remember how flexible it is compared to most other methods of achieving the same result. We use it so often it's become second nature." Walking around she knelt in front of them, back in her normal form.
"We each have a number of alternative personae, some of which we use regularly, some of which we have for specific scenarios. At first they were just other people but since Nabiki found us we've added more adventurous forms to the regular palette rather than just experimenting with them. The flying form is the one I'm most proud of, it took a lot of work." She smiled gently. "It was only over our holiday that I worked out the last details with the help of some local wildlife on Fwetna. But I think it's paid off handsomely." Looking up for a moment she smiled again. "The others certainly seem to agree."

"What limitations does the magic have?" Ami asked, her knowledge-hungry mindset taking over once more as the initial shock wore off. Rei looked at her for a moment, a slight smile coming and going, before returning to watching the action above them. Bright flashes of different colours were sparking around the five girls, Ami noticed, they seemed to be having a free for all aerial dogfight of some sort.

"Very few other than the requirement for constant power input. We've lowered that to the point that any of us can keep it running even asleep, after some training. Possibly even when unconscious, it becomes an autonomous reflex. Ranma and I work it directly, but the others currently use a preset spell I designed, as Nabiki mentioned. That makes it even easier to maintain once you understand how to apply it in the first place. Learning to do that is the tricky part, it's a delicate balancing act to begin with, but we came up with some training methods that seem quite effective. The others learned fairly fast."

"It will take a lot more practice until they can do it completely free-form," Ranma added, "but they'll all get it. Either Nabiki or Aiko first, Nabiki picks things up very fast and Aiko has a real talent for pattern manipulation. The other girls won't be far behind."

"But where does all the extra mass come from? Or go, for that matter?" Ami was confused and not liking it. Kasumi shrugged delicately, smiling.

"We're not sure. It's one of the things both of us have been wondering about for some time. I puzzled over it quite a lot when I first saw the Jusenkyo curse in action, long before I learned what I know now, it was an obvious oddity, but even years of experience with magic has left me none the wiser. We might work it out one day. No mage I have ever mentioned the subject to has had a good answer, either. Most of them have never thought about it at all and get quite worried when you bring it up." She laughed, looking up for a moment, then back to Ami and Rei. "My dear husband sums it up as 'Magic is weird,' which is probably as good an answer as you're likely to get at the moment."

Ranma snickered from her place on the beach. "I'd love to know as well, Ami, but I can live with the fact I may never find out. We don't know how that part works, although we know it does and can make use of it. We've worked out some of the parts of the curse well enough to lift subroutines from it and put them into our own magic, which lets us do all sorts of things that would be much more difficult otherwise. The Jusenkyo magic is all based around transformation, as is our disguise technique, so they fit well together."

"You two must have more insight into the mechanics of magic itself than anyone else I've ever met," Ami said, fascinated, after thinking it through. "I'd love to learn more about your methods."

"I'm more than happy to teach you our system, we both are," the martial artist replied. "I don't know if you can actually use it, we'll have to test you a bit, but I'll go over the theory with you, no problem. Not today, though, it's complicated and would take quite a while." She sat up, brushed sand off herself, then looked at them, before glancing at Hotaru who had wandered off a few dozen metres and was peering into the water again, watching something swimming around. "Fancy a
swim? The water here is warm and relaxing."

Ami studied her carefully. There was something about her smile that made her suspicious. Looking back to Hotaru she saw the younger girl had turned slightly and was watching them again, with a very similar smile. "Something weird is going to happen, isn't it?" she asked, sighing.

"Not so much weird as somewhat unusual, Ami," Kasumi assured her. "But it's fun, trust me. I think you'll enjoy it. Come on." Standing, she looked down at both women, who glanced at each other. Finally Rei got up.

"Oh, what the hell. Let's see what happens." Looking down at herself, she added, "I didn't bring a swimsuit. I have to admit I wasn't expecting to end up on a deserted island this afternoon."

"The swimsuit isn't an issue," Ranma said, hopping to her feet as well. She looked at Ami, who sighed again, feeling this was all crazy, but got up, willing to see where it took them. They all walked down to the water's edge. Grinning, Hotaru bounced to her feet, looking at Ranma for a second, then rushed over and whispered to her for a few moments. The red-head laughed, nodding, before the younger woman smiled happily, then dashed back to the tree-line twenty metres away. Ami and Rei watched, wondering what she was doing.

With a yell, the purple-haired girl ran at full speed, which being a magical girl was really very fast indeed, at the water, jumping hard as she reached it and arcing far out into the lagoon in a flat dive. Ami jumped at the unexpected yell, taking a step forward and raising her hand slightly, too late to stop the girl. She gaped as mid-way through her flight, Hotaru shimmered, vanishing into the water cleanly with a small splash. She could see her figure shooting through the water sheathed in bubbles, popping up another twenty metres further out.

She and Rei both stared in shock as mer-Hotaru left the water with a flip of her purple-scaled tail, the same colour as her hair, somersaulted, and splashed back down again, laughing like a lunatic.

Watching her cavorting around, they gaped blankly, then slowly turned to lock gazes in wonder, before twitching as Kasumi walked up behind them and put her arms around their shoulders. Leaning down slightly the tall woman laughed gently. "As I said. Unusual but fun. Would you like to have a go?"

Returning her eyes to Hotaru, who got half-way through a double somersault before landing on her back, laughing, she very slowly nodded, a smile beginning to grow. "Yes, please." Rei giggled slightly hysterically but nodded as well.

Looking down from fifteen hundred metres Nabiki grinned. She could see five figures zipping around in the lagoon, jumping out occasionally, obviously having a lot of fun. Soaring on the light breeze she felt relaxed for the first time in a while, raising her head and closing her eyes for a moment, before looking around. Aiko and Tamiko were practising coordinated loops, while Misaki seemed to be trying to work out if she could glide inverted. Fumiko was just off her left side circling gently in the same thermal she was in, also watching the action below.

"Looks like they're dealing with it pretty well now," she commented to her friend. "I was getting a little worried about Rei a few minutes ago, she looked completely overwhelmed suddenly. I guess it all caught up at once." Kasumi had been sending them a feed from the beach so they could see what was happening.

"I'm not surprised. What does surprise me is that she's accepted it as well as she has. A few months ago I think it would have been different, she'd have been raging about something or other, her
temper was a little hair-triggered. That old priest seems to have talked a lot of sense into her recently," Fumiko replied. "All to the good, I think. I'm quite impressed how much she's changed."

"Everyone changes all the time. I'm certainly not the same person I was five years ago. We just seem to do it a bit more than normal," the middle Tendo chuckled. "Hotaru seems to have taken to it like a fish to water, though." Fumiko groaned at the pun, causing Nabiki to smirk, pleased.

"She was certainly very upset at first," the other woman said, giving her friend a quick glare, which provoked a giggle. "I can sort of see why. I wonder what Ranma told her?"

"No idea. I think that part may be private between them. That's fair enough. Hotaru certainly looked up to Yori, so it must have been a shock to learn the truth, although she seems to have accepted it now. Hopefully she'll be OK. I like her, she's smart and curious, it would have been a shame to have her upset."

"She's a nice girl," Fumiko agreed. "It will be very interesting to see if Ranma and Kasumi can teach her their healing technique. They both seem to think they should be able to. I guess with her own abilities she's already half-way there."

"It would be useful to have another healer available. I know Sis really feels guilty about not being able to heal more people but it's only the two of them." Nabiki glanced over to Misaki who had just let out a yell, watching her recover from the spin she'd managed to get into, then back to Fumiko, who grinned. "What do you think? Are they going to end up part of our little family, or form their own group? I seriously doubt they'd ever get back together with any of the other girls except possibly Haruka, but even then there she seems to dislike Ami and Rei so much I can't see it happening."

"Seems unlikely to me as well." Fumiko sighed. "It's a pity, Haruka was a pain a lot of the time but I think she's a decent person in most ways. Just a bit quick off the mark. So was Rei, she seems to have come around, I guess Haruka might. Perhaps we should ask the priest to talk to her?" She shrugged, bobbling slightly in her flight path at the action. "As far as the others, they seem to be passing all the tests so far. I like all of them. Ami has always been nice, she's a good person and very smart, she reminds me of you, actually." Nabiki glanced over, smiling. "I've got no problems with her at all. Hotaru I didn't know as well, although I know Kasumi has talked to her quite a lot over the years and thinks highly of her. Rei is smart, although not in Ami's class, but above average by a long way, a powerful magical girl, and a sensible person when she doesn't let her temper get out of control." She shook her head a little, thinking. "She's growing on me. The new improved Rei is an interesting person. I don't mind if they want to join the Sisterhood of Doom."

Laughing hard, Nabiki grinned at her friend. "That name is brilliant. Even Ranma seemed amused by it. I don't think we should use it in public but it's very amusing."

"We could get some T-shirts with it on," Fumiko suggested. "We need a good logo, though. Know any graphic artists?" The other woman giggled. "Hey, what about business cards? You have been rescued by the Sisterhood of Doom. Please have a nice day. ' We could give them out to everyone we help."

Almost unable to glide smoothly due to laughing so hard, Nabiki shook her head. "That's getting as bad as Magical Girls Incorporated. Perhaps it's a subdivision?"

"PR division, I think," Fumiko snickered. Giggling, they exchanged glances, then headed towards Aiko and Tamiko, joining them in their aerial display, while Misaki swore good-naturedly, recovered from her dive, and tried again.
Kneeling on the ground in the entrance of her tent, Minako watched the bluish sun rise over the mountains, her eyes half-shut as she attempted one of the meditation techniques she'd read about in a book she'd discovered in her supplies. It seemed to help, she felt calm and relaxed. Oddly relaxed, in fact, she realised. Even in the position she found herself currently stuck with, she was less stressed in many ways than she'd been for months. 'I wonder why?' she thought idly, squinting into the brilliant light as the star rose slowly. 'Maybe being away from the others. Or perhaps it's just Usagi. She was getting a bit crazy even compared to all the other things that have been going on recently.'

The blonde had been going over the events that had led to her being stuck in a barren valley on an alien world for quite a while, trying to work out where it had all gone so badly wrong. Individually, every decision and event she could remember seemed reasonable in isolation, but the overall effect was obviously not right, even though she couldn't see where the problem lay. 'I can see we seem to have drifted from our original purpose, but even there I can't work out what we could have done to change it. Yet, you look back on just the last month, when you have time to think about it, and it's totally crazy, even for Minato. I mean, why did we keep attacking Yori's area? We've tried damn hard to stay away from that insanely dangerous woman and her friends for years, managed to do a fairly good job for a long time, then in the last year or so it all went nuts.'

She sighed, picking a bottle of water up from where it sat beside her knee, drinking some, then putting it back. 'Just Yori alone is far more than we could handle on our best day, that first meeting proved that, but somehow we seemed to keep forgetting it. Usagi thought she could sneak up on her and just kill her, no troubles at all, which is obviously totally stupid. I can see that now. Why couldn't I before? How did I let her talk me into it? Leaving aside the fact that she was basically wanting to assassinate another magical girl in cold blood, it should have been obvious we didn't stand a chance.' She looked around the bleak scene. 'This proves that well enough. Two of Yori's friends did all this by themselves, somehow, and I have absolutely no idea how. I can't remember anything about it. I know Yori is much more dangerous than that, even, and we couldn't stop them. How could we possibly deal with her? She could have killed us without breaking a sweat.' Minako shivered for a moment, chilled to the bone by her thoughts, before she drank some more water.

"We never stood a chance," she mumbled out loud.

"No, you didn't," a voice from behind said, making her twitch.

"Will you for fuck's sake stop sneaking up on me like that, please, you idiot cat?" she snarled. A chuckle came back as the animal walked around and sat in front of her, just out of reach.

"Possibly. It's funny watching you jump."

"I didn't like it when Setsuna did it, I sure as hell don't like you doing it," she replied, glaring at it. "Anyway, where have you been for the last day?" She looked around for a few seconds. "And what have you been eating? I haven't noticed any food missing."

Artemis shrugged in an oddly feline manner. "I get by," he told her evasively, making her look at him with narrowed eyes. "But I assume you were thinking about Usagi's plan to kill Yori, from what you said?" She kept looking at him. "I took a shot," he explained. "It seemed a reasonable guess."

Eventually she nodded, deciding to put the other questions she had to one side for the moment. "Yes. I was trying to work out what happened to us, what led to all of..." she waved her hands at the scene in front of her, "this."
"I don't have a good answer for you at the moment," the cat said, watching her. "You're in a better position to work it out, I think. I'm just an advisor."

"A pretty crap one, to be honest," she grumbled. The animal looked offended, making her wonder how it managed that trick.

"I've done my best," it replied haughtily, turning its head away and staring at the sun with its eyes nearly closed. She watched it for a while.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Neither you or Luna have been very useful for quite a while, though, now that I come to think about it."

"Not my fault," it muttered. She sighed.

"I just wish things had gone better."

"They might improve." Artemis looked back at her. "Things change. Sometimes for the worse, sometimes for the better. You have to decide what to do in either case. Then live with the decision." The cat looked slowly and meaningfully around, before returning his attention to her again. "As your advisor my advice is that you decide better the next time you have a choice." She glared at it for a long moment, then bowed her head, closing her eyes.

"I hope I do. I don't like it here."

"Keep meditating, keep calm, and wait. That's all you can do."

When she raised her head a few seconds later the cat was gone.

"Hi, 'Biki! How's your travelling going? Are you back yet?" The middle sister smiled at the sound of her sister's voice inside her head. Floating gently on the wind two and a half kilometres above the Pacific, describing an enormous circle several kilometres in diameter with the island at the centre of it, she laughed, doing a barrel roll just for the fun of it.

"Not quite, Akane. I'm out with Maiko and Rika, and some new friends we met recently. They've been swimming for a while now, I was just enjoying the day on my own. I'll be going back soon."

She looked around, Jun highlighting the others with small designators, seeing that Aiko and the rest of the fliers were nearly ten kilometres away at the moment, then gradually turning to head in that direction, in no hurry. "It's a nice day here, we're near the beach." In her case, mainly vertically, she snickered to herself, but still near.

"Sounds nice. I haven't been to the beach for weeks. I should go."

"What's going on with you? Have you heard from that director guy, Adrian, again?"

"I got an email last night. It looks like we're going to go over for three or four days next week, assuming Aiko is OK with taking us. I haven't talked to her yet. They've arranged some training, some more demonstrations, then a couple of real screen tests and some stunts, just for us!" The youngest Tendo sounded excited, making her sister grin. "I'm really looking forward to it, so is Shampoo. But I'm really nervous as well. What if I screw it up?"

Nabiki chuckled, smiling. "You'll be fine, Akane," she replied soothingly. "Just be yourself, don't panic, keep calm, and you'll do a great job. I'm sure of that." There was a pause as her sister went quiet.
"I suppose so. Thanks. But I'm still nervous." Both sisters laughed.

"It's normal to be worried and a bit scared when you do something for the first time. Look at all that training Cologne put you through. You were terrified at first, right? Or the roof-hopping Shampoo trained you in? I remember quite a lot of screaming..."

Akane giggled at the reminder. "Yes, it was a bit scary, nearly falling off a roof the first time. But once you've landed on your head a few times in someone's garden you kind of get used to it."

"Do they?" Nabiki asked, humour in her voice. Her sister laughed a little.

"Not as much as you'd hope. Once or twice we had to leave quite fast."

"Well, I doubt that whatever you end up doing will be that exciting, not at first. They'll be taking it slowly to begin with, they won't know how far they can push you and won't want to risk damaging the talent." Waving to Tamiko, who had peeled off the little flock of flying magical girls and was heading in her direction, Nabiki grinned. "Like I said, you'll be fine. I have faith in you."

"Thanks, 'Biki. Dad said the same thing. So did Cologne, amazingly enough."

"That old girl is getting rather fond of you, I think. She's gone out of her way to help. Although I also think she gets a lot of amusement from watching you two get hurt." There was a fair amount of laughter from the other end.

"She's a sadist at heart, but a happy one," Akane snickered. "I wouldn't have thought, when I first met her, that I'd ever say this, but I like her a lot."

"I do as well, I think," her sister admitted. "I certainly respect her. She's sort of grown on me after all that's happened over the years. It's a pity that there was so much trouble for so long with the Amazons."

"That seems to be in the past now, as far as she's concerned." Her sister fell silent for a moment, allowing background noises that the middle Tendo recognised as the sounds of someone closing a door and locking it to come through. "Sorry, just locking the shop. Mr Ito left earlier and left me in charge, it's closing time now."

"What does he think about you going to Hollywood?" Nabiki asked curiously, smiling as Tamiko slid into place beside her, accompanying her in her flight. The other woman grinned back. Giggling, Akane replied, "He says that he'll still have a place for me here when the Americans deport me for destroying everything in sight." Nabiki laughed at her comment. "I think he's genuinely happy for me but is also sad to see me go. I'll miss the old guy as well, he's been good to me for a long time."

"I would expect he will also miss the security you provide."

"Probably. We had another robbery attempt two days ago, he wasn't very good. I didn't even have to break anything this time, just knock him out and call the police."

Nabiki laughed at the tone in her sister's voice. "You don't have to sound so disappointed."

"But, 'Biki, I miss the mayhem! I haven't had a good fight for weeks!" After a moment, Akane dissolved into laughter, as did the older woman. "To be honest, I'm so glad all the therapy and everything has worked so well. I haven't gotten properly angry for ages. Not since... she... visited." There was a tone of worried respect in her voice.
"Ms Aoyama, you mean?"

"Shh! Don't say that name." Akane's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper.

Laughing, Nabiki added, "You're as bad about her as Dad and Genma are about Happosai. They still look around nervously whenever he's mentioned even in passing, although no one has seen anything of him in five years." The younger Tendo started laughing as well, although with a small note of worry in her voice.

"I know, but I sort of understand all that now. You would as well if you'd ever met her."

Suppressing the hysterical laughter that threatened to sweep through her at that, Nabiki calmly agreed, "I suppose that's possible. I doubt it will ever happen, though."

"Lucky for you," her younger sister muttered. Then, more loudly, she said, "I hope you'll be back before we go."

"Should be, I think. There's a few more places to visit then we're heading home. I want to see Miki before going back to University, which is in... hmm... only about three weeks now. Time seems to go past fast these days."

"OK. Have fun, say hi to Rika and Maiko for me, all right? I'll see you when you get back."

"I will. Bye, Akane."

"Bye, 'Biki." As her sister disconnected, Nabiki looked over to Tamiko.

"Just talking to Akane. She's in a good mood. Apparently Adrian has set a date next week for her and Shampoo to go over for some serious tests and demonstrations."

"Good for her. I'm pretty sure she's going to do very well. Shampoo, too."

"I think so." Looking down, now that they were almost over the island, she added, "I guess we should go back now. It looks like Ami and the other two are as relaxed as they're going to get." Tamiko followed her gaze, smiling.

"Good. Hotaru was fine but Ami and Rei were getting kind of tense. A good swim works wonders." Once more they shared a grin, then performed synchronised wingovers and dived groundwards, followed shortly by the other three from a couple of kilometres away, all of them heading to where five mermaids were lying on the sand talking.

Rei watched Hotaru, smiling a little, as the girl experimented to see how flexible she was, curling her tail back until she was able to touch her forehead with the huge fin on the end of it, giggling the whole time. Shaking her head in amused wonder she looked down at herself, moving her own tail. Kasumi had thought about it for a few seconds once they'd entered the water, then given her a form with iridescent black scales that caught the light like oil on water, with the fins a contrasting bright yellow. The effect was striking, something she immediately loved. Ami had received brilliant blue scales and deep red fins. Hotaru's mer-form was shades of violet and purple, which was very attractive.

Stroking her scaled hip in wonder, she smiled. "I have to admit, this is pretty damn incredible. I'm sorry I was being difficult about it all earlier, it was a little too much all of a sudden, but I think I'm OK now."
"We don't hold it against you, Rei," Kasumi assured her, smiling serenely and slowly moving her tail in the water. All of them were relaxing on the beach, half immersed, Ranma and Ami talking while Hotaru listened from near them. "I know it's a lot to take in. I think we've shown you most of the really surprising things now, though, so you should find it easier to deal with from here."

"Hopefully. I know there's a lot more detail to it but I can live with what you've explained so far for the moment." Rei grinned suddenly, looking around, then making a gesture of amusement. "I still find it a bit hard to believe, though. That said, I can see why you like coming here, especially if you can do this. It's amazing. So many things live here, I've never seen anything like it! Much better than any TV documentary."

"It's very relaxing. Sometimes you need to just forget everything else and have some time to yourself, to have fun, without any horrible world-threatening problem to deal with." The elder Tendo smiled up at the sky, tilting her head back and enjoying the sunlight. "I'm grateful to Aiko that she let us all in on her secret island. It's a wonderful place."

"Maybe you should arrange to buy it," Rei suggested, amused.

"It's a thought," the other woman replied. "I'm not sure who technically owns it. One or other Pacific nation, presumably, although no-one lives anywhere near it. There's nothing here that's worth the travel except the beauty of the place, it has no fresh water, it's too small to land an aircraft other than a helicopter on and too far from anywhere larger to actually reach with a helicopter, and getting here by boat would be very dangerous. The currents outside the reef are extremely strong and unpredictable." She sat up, pointing at the small gap in the reef that led out of the lagoon. "You can go out through there, but the sea bed drops off very quickly to an enormous depth. There's nowhere to anchor a boat."

"So no-one comes here other than you guys?"

"As far as we know, that's right. We've never seen any sign of anyone else but us." Kasumi looked at her. "You as well, now. We need Aiko at the moment to be able to come here, of course, but sooner or later Ranma and I will work out how her teleportation magic works and duplicate it, so other people can do the same thing. That would be very useful indeed."

"I'll say. I'd love to be able to do what she can. Teleporting to the moon! That's just insane even by our standards."

"It was very impressive I have to admit. Although the teleport sickness was unpleasant." Kasumi made a slight face of remembered disgust. Nodding, Rei agreed whole-heartedly. It had been horrible. Watching Ranma and Ami chatting, a thought struck her.

"Is Ranma always female when swimming? He has control over the curse now, right?"

Kasumi followed her gaze, smiling gently and fondly. "He can hold it off in cold water, that's true, but he finds it easier to let it change him, unless there's a reason not to. When we're swimming for relaxation he doesn't bother staying male." She looked back to Rei. "You have no idea how pleased he was when he finally worked out how to control it even to that level. He doesn't like things being forced on him. Too many bad memories of years of trouble because of that sort of activity. It leaves an impression on you."

Rei nodded her understanding, still watching the red-headed mermaid talking animatedly. "She seems happy with herself now, though."

"We both are. We came together at a very bad time in both our lives, but in retrospect it was the
best thing that ever happened to either of us." The older woman smiled in a happy and gentle manner, looking out to sea but clearly also looking back in time. "I can't tell you how happy I am that what happened, happened, even though I also regret the effect it had on my family. One day I hope I can fix that last part. Nabiki finding us was the beginning of that process. Hopefully it will continue."

Looking at her, Rei smiled. The tall woman, in whom she could easily see the Chou she was familiar with, looked serenely content, making her slightly envious. She hoped that one day she could find a relationship as fulfilling as the one Kasumi and Ranma had. Hearing a faint rising whistle, she looked around, then remembered, looking up, to see five figures plummeting towards them. She grinned, pointing.

"Do you people always do vertical high-speed entrances when flying?" she asked curiously, shielding her face from the blowing sand when Nabiki and Tamiko slammed to a halt ten metres away, followed by the others a few seconds later, Misaki and Fumiko diverting at the last moment to stop over the lagoon, then dropping into it in mer-form and swimming around. Kasumi brushed a little sand from her bikini top and smiled.

"It seems to have become a habit, yes. Nabiki learned it from some rather impressive flying animals on Fwetna, then everyone else seems to have copied it. It leaves an impression, certainly."

"Quite a loud one," Rei agreed. Nabiki walked over and lay on the sand near them, opening her wings out fully and relaxing with a grin. She looked like an enormous bat sunbathing. Inspecting her closely, the black-haired girl shook her head in wonder. "That form is even more impressive than this one is," she commented.

"Ranma and I were working on a flying form for some time," Kasumi explained, also looking at her sister, smiling in satisfaction. "I redesigned what we'd done while we were on Fwetna after we came across an animal they have there, something they call a mountain soarer, which gave me the data I was missing to make something like this practical. The initial flight test was very exciting." She laughed as Nabiki lifted her head and stared at her.

"Exciting? Try terrifying! Did she tell you exactly how she did the 'initial flight test'?" At Rei's head-shake, she recounted the story of her older sister and the enormous cliff. At the end of it, Rei, Hotaru, and Ami, who had turned to listen, were howling with laughter, while Kasumi was smiling in a gratified manner.

"Wow. That must have been a bit of a shock," Ami said, grinning at Nabiki.

"She scared the crap out of me! Poor Uthryyl and the others were worried as well. I completely forgot about the magical girl part, how she'd have bounced even if it didn't work. I mean, you see your sister dive head-first over a kilometres-high cliff into nothing, you tend to get a little freaked out." The middle sister gave the older one an evil glare, making Kasumi start laughing, flopping back onto the sand.

"Oh, sister, I couldn't resist. The expression on your face when I landed was wonderful. I've never seen someone look terrified, angry, and deliriously happy all at the same time." Rei snickered as Nabiki appeared mildly annoyed, crossing her arms over her chest and staring hard at her sister.

"One day I'll figure out how to get you back for that one, you do know that, I hope?" she threatened, before starting to grin. Kasumi nodded, smiling.

"I look forward to that day, sister." Giving the older woman a hard look, Nabiki finally nodded, satisfied.
"Good. Just so you know."

Hotaru started laughing, setting them all off.

"Yori, you're dead meat when I get my hands on you," Usagi muttered viciously, lashing out against an imaginary opponent. Having been unable to concentrate on the various books and DVDs left for her, she was practising the somewhat limited fighting skills she possessed, against shadow figures she populated with the likenesses of people she wasn't very happy about at the moment. Most of them were Yori, of course, but Chou was there as well, also Ami and Rei, with Setsuna and one or two others putting in an appearance.

Overextending herself in a kick, she sprawled full-face on the gravel, yelping in shock, then rolled over and spat out little bits of rock, swearing. Laughter from the side made her roll her head in that direction and send a nasty look at the cat which was sitting on a boulder a few metres away, or more accurately, at the cat which was rolling around on a boulder a few metres away laughing its ass off. "Shut up," she grumbled, before reaching into her mouth and removing an errant piece of gravel, flicking it away distastefully.

"Even an imaginary Yori can kick your ass," the cat giggled, looking at her, then ducking as a large rock shot over its head at high speed. The animal rolled over and sat up, looking annoyed. "That almost hit me," she complained.

"It was meant to," Usagi griped, glaring at it, then stood up and brushed herself down. Luna watched, grinning a feline grin. "And for your information, it was Chou." The cat stared, then fell over again, laughing hysterically. "It's not funny. I need to get good enough to beat Yori and her friends."

"You know that's never going to happen?" The cat inspected her as she flushed. "The only one who could possibly train you to beat Yori is Yori. Somehow I doubt that's going to occur."

"What would you know about it? You're just a cat. An overly talkative one, as well," Usagi growled, turning away to practice again. She received no reply and when she glanced back a little later there was no sign of her feline advisor. "Good riddance," she mumbled, trying that kick again, slightly more successfully this time.

"This is amazing," Hotaru laughed, extending her wings and waving them experimentally. She turned her head, once more astounded how far she could do that in this form, to look down at her tail. Unfamiliar muscles moved as she twitched it, grinning. Kasumi smiled at her, walking around her and inspecting her work carefully. Satisfied, she stepped back a couple of paces.

"Do you like the colour scheme and patterning?" she asked. "I can easily change it." Bringing her wings around in front of her the girl studied them closely. The base fur colour was a deep purple, nearly black, with lighter violet stripes running across it at a slight angle. When the light hit it just right they stood out nicely.

"I love it, Kasumi. Thanks."

"I suggest you spend a little while getting used to that form before we try flying," the elder Tendo said, amused at her exuberance. "Just walk around, try your tail and wings, you need to be familiar with them before you can use them properly. It will come to you quite fast, I think, we all found it very natural in a surprisingly short period of time." After watching Hotaru experiment, she nodded in satisfaction, moving off to work on Rei. Watching her go, the younger woman grinned happily,
opening and closing her wings a few times, then flapping them once or twice, quite slowly. Even so, she felt herself get light on her feet. The lift was enormous.

Taking the advice from the older woman she folded them again then walked down the beach, looking around with interest. Fumiko and Misaki were still swimming around in the lagoon, while Nabiki and Aiko were talking to Ami, who Ranma had just finished producing a flying form for. Her wings were a pale blue with silver streaks, something that Hotaru thought suited her friend well. Ami looked stunned, extending her wings to the side and staring at them with a small smile, then pulling out her computer and scanning herself with great interest.

Tamiko landed a few metres away from her, much more gently than normal, coming in for a soft touchdown and running a couple of steps before folding her wings away. She walked over, looking Hotaru up and down with an expert eye, smiling and pleased. "Not at all bad. Kasumi does good work."

"Isn't it incredible?" the girl replied, curling one wing around in front and stroking it. "This is just... I don't have the right words for it. But it's that."

"I know what you mean. I felt the same way," Tamiko chuckled. "I still do. It's annoying that we're not really free to use these forms at home but it would raise too many questions right now. Nabiki, or 'Azumi', could get away with it, she's too new to have anyone sure of her abilities, but for the rest of us it would be a little odd. One day, perhaps."

"Is flying as much fun as it looks?" Hotaru asked, looking up for a moment. Tamiko laughed once more.

"No. It's more fun." She grinned as her companion looked excited. "The first few seconds will probably be pretty scary though. Aiko will teleport you to a decent altitude. I'd suggest you keep your wings closed as you fall for the first few seconds, try to get into a stable position, like a skydiver. You know, arms out, knees bent back. Like on TV." Hotaru nodded, listening carefully and remembering what she'd seen in movies. "Then slowly open your wings. You'll feel the difference immediately. Tip a little more head down, open them further, and you should end up in a glide. Use your tail to stabilise it. When you're gliding, you'll work out how to move your wings to change direction quickly enough. After that, powered flight is pretty simple. Taking off from the ground and landing are the hardest things to get right. I ended up on my face the first time I landed." At Hotaru's giggle she shrugged. "It counts as a landing even if it wasn't graceful, right?"

"I guess."

"Don't worry about getting hurt. We're all tough enough to take a drop like that, and we have the world's best healers with us. You'd probably end up in the water anyway, which is softer than coral. Aiko and the rest of us will follow you and your friends down, if you get into trouble she'll teleport you back up again, until you get it right. We'll do you one at a time. Want to go first?"

The violet-haired girl nodded vigorously. "Definitely. I can't wait."

"Remember that when you're falling from three thousand metres," Tamiko grinned. Swallowing slightly, the girl nodded.

Ami stared up, her brow creased, at the tumbling figure high above them. A faint scream, either of joy or terror, or possibly both, reached her a few seconds later. She gulped, lowering her gaze to Ranma, who was looking extremely amused. He watched her, then glanced at Rei, who had closed her eyes. "It's easier than it looks," he chuckled. "She's just trying too much too soon. She'll be fine
in a minute or two." Not entirely convinced she nodded, looking up again. The figure was now spinning wildly, considerably lower. Two other fliers matched velocities with her, reaching out and steadying her, then all three disappeared and reappeared a thousand metres higher. She blinked at the flash, shaking her head in wonder.

"You people have some pretty brutal training methods," she muttered.

Behind her, Nabiki laughed. "You haven't seen anything yet." Ami looked back at her, eyes wide. Glancing at Ranma the middle Tendo added, "Wait until stage four."

"Um, what?" she asked, puzzled. The only answer was a snicker. Suddenly shivering, she turned back to watching Hotaru. The three distant figures jumped back up to the start height twice more, but eventually her younger friend was flying stably under her own power, visibly having a wonderful time. She smiled as the girl pulled off a large loop, her shriek of joy audible from the ground above the sound of the waves on the reef. Ranma nodded approvingly.

"Not bad. That didn't take long. She's going to be good at it."

"We'll have to take them to Fwetna for some advanced training," Kasumi commented, watching with her hand shading her eyes. "I think they'd like that. I know the soarers would."

Not quite sure what they meant, Ami pushed her questions to the back of her mind and watched with a smile as Hotaru and the other two spiralled down, Tamiko and Aiko making perfect landings while the other girl stumbled, flipping forwards and instinctively wrapping her wings around herself, rolling along the sand a couple of times, to end up lying on her back in disarray, laughing frantically. She punched the air in triumph, letting out a yell. "That... was... Incredible!"

She got to her feet, shaking sand from her wings, folding them behind herself as naturally as if she'd been born with them, then ran over. "Ami, Rei, you're going to love it!" she babbled, a grin that threatened to separate the top of her head from the bottom stretched across her face. Ami laughed, her excitement was infectious.

"Who's next?" Aiko asked, walking up, grinning. Ami and Rei exchanged glances.

"I'll try," Ami said, beating Rei by a fraction of a second. The other woman laughed.

"OK. Nabiki, you want to help this time?" the petite brunette said. Nabiki nodded.

"All right." They gave Ami some preflight advice to which she paid careful attention, then moved to stand on either side of her.

"Ready?" Aiko looked at her. She swallowed and nodded, then screamed as she found herself falling, high, high above the island, which was laid out below her like a small jewel in the deep blue of the Pacific ocean.

"Oh god oh god oh god," she gibbered, frantically trying to remember the advice she'd just heard. Hearing a shout she looked to her left to see Nabiki falling beside her, showing no effort, her wings folded. She motioned to her legs, then held her arms out, mimicking a skydiver. Ami tried the same, finding that her fall immediately stabilised, slowing as she bent her legs and moved her arms as wide as she could manage. Nabiki gave her a thumbs up.

Feeling her tail streaming behind her, an odd sensation, she looked over her shoulder, finding it easy with the modified neck, then twitched the end of it. This resulted in a quick three hundred and sixty degree roll which nearly made her throw up. 'Ick. Note to self, go slowly,' she thought, looking back to the middle Tendo, who was grinning. Nabiki jerked her thumb over her shoulder,
indicating her wings, then opened them a little, at the same time straightening her legs. Her descent angle steepened to nearly vertical, still expertly controlled. Ami tried the same thing.

"AAAAAHHHH!" she screamed as she rolled wildly, then flipped end over end. Someone grabbed her tail and stabilised her. After a moment she opened her eyes again, watching the ground get closer, before looking sideways. Nabiki was laughing. She made a motion upwards, before the ground abruptly jumped away from them a thousand metres or so. 'This is harder than I thought,' Ami thought. 'They make it look so easy. But I guess that's what the mark of an expert is, to make a difficult thing look easy.' Deciding that if Hotaru could do it she damn well could, she cautiously tried again. This time she found herself dropping smoothly into a downward high-speed flight, causing her to grin behind the goggles that were part of the flying form change. Risking a look towards Nabiki she saw the other woman looked pleased.

After a few seconds, Nabiki again motioned to her wings, opening them further. Her glide angle decreased as she levelled off, disappearing behind Ami as she slowed rapidly. Trying the same she felt her stomach lurch a little at the change in angle and speed, laughing in delight as it worked. Once more the middle sister matched flight paths, Aiko doing the same on the other side. Sharing a smile with them, she copied what they did until she had her wings fully extended, gliding on the wind with an ease that astounded her. 'Oh, my god, this is amazing!' she thought, looking around in wonder. 'No wonder they like it so much. To be able to do this whenever you want...' She stared down at the island two kilometres or so below, finding out that her vision was good enough to resolve the faces of everyone looking up at her. She waved at her friends, smiling as they waved back.

A few minutes passed as she soared, carefully trying gentle movements to see what happened. After a while she decided she had a decent basic grasp of flight dynamics, looking at Nabiki who was watching her intently, giving her a thumbs up. She noticed at that point that there were at least three of the little alien camera drones pacing them, one on either side and one flying backwards thirty metres in front. She guessed there was probably at least one more behind them somewhere. 'Oh, wonderful, we'll be able to watch me screaming any time we like,' she snickered to herself, inwardly quite curious to see the video.

Nabiki grinned, then flapped, rising quickly. After a couple of flaps she motioned to Ami, who nodded and tried the same thing. The first one nearly caused her to flip but she just caught herself, straightening out again until she caught her breath, then attempting it again. Shortly she was climbing with steady beats of her wings, smiling happily.

The flying lesson lasted about half an hour. Almost too soon, she was following the Tendo sister back down to the island, watching her land gracefully and fold her wings away as easily as jumping off a chair. Determined to not do the same somersault Hotaru had performed, feeling mildly competitive, she circled a couple of times, getting a feel for the turbulence near the surface and picturing what she wanted to achieve in her head, before lining up into the wind and going for it. The feeling of triumph engendered by only stumbling slightly when she touched down made her laugh out loud, more pleased than she'd been for ages.

"Very nicely done," Nabiki congratulated her, smiling. Aiko landed to one side, looking amused.

"Not bad at all, Ami," the brunette complimented her. "You picked it up quickly. A few hours of practice and you'll be as good as the rest of us."

Feeling a glow of satisfaction at a job well done Ami watched as Aiko walked over to Rei, who seemed slightly nervous, disappearing with her and Fumiko. Hotaru ran up, giggling and smiling, then hugged her, wrapping her wings around both of them as well, which was an odd sensation.
"You did really well, Ami. Ranma and Kasumi were very impressed. So was I, you got it faster than I did."

"It's wonderful fun, isn't it," Ami replied, smiling at the teenager.

"Even better than the swimming. I could do it all day."

"When Rei has the basic idea we can all practice for a while," Kasumi suggested, "You can try some more advanced manoeuvres. But we should probably go and get something to eat fairly soon. It's about seven in the evening in Tokyo." She watched Rei and her friends for a little while, Ami and Hotaru following her gaze. The other woman seemed to be getting to grips with it after some unexpected involuntary aerobatics nearly as spectacular as those Hotaru had managed. "Do you like sushi?"

"I do," the purple haired girl said, raising her hand. Ami nodded as well.

"So do I. Rei does as well."

"Good. It's something of a tradition with us. There's a wonderful sushi place in Brisbane we like going to after a day like this." Kasumi looked amused. "They're used to magical girls now. We've had some interesting meals there."

"Australia?" Hotaru asked with interest. "I've never been there, but I always wanted to. I'd like to see some kangaroos, they're funny." The eldest Tendo laughed.

"They are indeed. We'll see what we can do."

'What do you think about letting them have SIs, Jun?' Nabiki asked as she watched Ami, Rei, and Hotaru engage in aerial tag, thousands of metres above the ocean, laughing furiously. Above them, Fumiko and Tamiko were doing loops, with Misaki practising a weird vertical corkscrew spin that she thought looked amazing, her wings almost wrapped around her body in the process. She glanced at Ranma, beside her, who was also watching with her eyebrows raised and a smile on her face. Somewhere off to the side Kasumi and Aiko were lazily soaring, talking over the com.

'I believe that Hotaru is safe, Nabiki. She is clearly very impressed with Ranma, despite the earlier trouble, which I think was made worse for her precisely because she likes Yori so much. Finding out the truth came as a blow to her which was probably inevitable but she would appear to have transferred her original feelings to your brother-in-law once she realised he and Yori were the same person. If anything, they are closer now than they were a day ago. I expect this will translate into a fierce loyalty to your group, as strong as the rest of you share.' The machine fell silent for a moment while she pondered its words. "As such, possession of an SI would enhance her abilities significantly, with no serious security implications I can see."

'And the others?'

'Ami is also safe. She was rejected by her group in a number of ways long before the most recent revelations. She likes Hotaru and trusts her, she also feels a responsibility to her. Her intelligence is of a very high order, her combat skills will be formidable once she is correctly trained, she is already used to machine interactions, albeit with a significantly inferior machine,' the voice was dryly amused, making her snicker, 'and she likes and trusts Kasumi, a feeling she's had for some time. While she was and still is apparently somewhat scared of Ranma's abilities and skills, due to previous interactions, she is also fascinated by the possibilities those skills suggest. She lives to learn, much like Ranma does, although from a somewhat different viewpoint. She would make a
valuable asset, like Hotaru.

Nodding to herself, Nabiki could find no fault with the analysis. Jun continued after a second or two. Rei is potentially a problem, although I suspect only slightly. She has a history of being nearly as quick to the boil as your younger sister, although without the explosive rage issues or the indiscriminate destruction that often accompanied one of Akane's episodes. That's good, as she is significantly more powerful than Akane could ever hope to be, the destruction she could cause is deeply worrying. That said, she has changed and matured very significantly in the last few weeks, a process that is still ongoing. Her grandfather is a wise man who has had a large influence over her, for the better. I would also suggest that the recent trip to K'mn four helped broaden her outlook on her place in life, which may well have calmed her down. She could still be difficult, of that I have no doubt, but I also think that she is now sufficiently rational so as to be a minor security threat. It paused once more, adding, If she did become such a threat any of you would have no real problem dealing with it, in an amused tone.

Laughing, Nabiki nodded again. 'So, to sum up, there should be no problem with any of them that outweighs the usefulness of them having SIs.'

'I believe that is what I just stated, Nabiki,' Jun replied with something very close to a laugh in its voice.

'It is indeed, my friend,' she said, grinning.

'Undoubtedly Ranma and Kasumi have already run this same scenario and come to similar conclusions, the device told her. In all probability they will offer all three girls an SI unit each when we return to Tokyo. I expect none of them will refuse.

'Hotaru would tear his arm off to get one, I'm sure of that,' she agreed.

An unlikely event but I understand the metaphor, Jun quipped.

'So that's three of the last five units, then. I wonder what he'll do with the last two?'

Unknown. There are no other individuals your group is currently in contact with that would seem good candidates at the current time, although Agent Naito might be a possibility in the future. I am unsure of the wisdom of giving such a powerful tool to a government agent, even him, I must confess, although his recent behaviour shows he is very trustworthy and could be considered loyal to Yori. Even so, his primary loyalty will be to the PSIA and he has shown he takes his responsibilities seriously on a number of occasions. Further consideration and observations will be needed before I could make a good threat assessment.

Both of them fell silent, Nabiki slipping through the air easily for a while, just watching her friends and family play. Eventually she asked, 'Do you think more SIs could be obtained in the future? I know Uthryyl said it was unlikely, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, but...' 

Uthryyl is correct that my makers are reluctant to allow devices of my level out of their control except in very rare cases to specific individuals. I do not know, but strongly suspect, that the reason he was able to obtain the units he did in the first place was because he is a known associate of Yori and Chou. I have calculated there is a minimum eighty percent chance the makers were hoping to get an SI into their possession. Nabiki listened with some surprise.

'They wanted my sister and Ranma to have them? Why, I wonder?'

Most likely because they were hoping what just happened would in fact happen. Having gone over
all the information we now have on the time device, it is clear they have extensive knowledge of it and the threat it presents, although I have no idea where this knowledge originated. My theory is that every SI sold is being used as a low-probability search method to locate the device and arrange its eventual complete destruction. A long shot, if you like.#

She thought for a moment, then laughed. 'One of those million to one chances that works nine times in ten?'

#There is some merit to the concept, yes, especially when you mix in magical girls and the other types of chaos attractors that congregate in Minato and Nerima. Similar people exist in other realities.# Jun sounded amused. #None to my knowledge quite as attractive to chaos as the inhabitants of your homeworld, though. The makers may well be attempting to arrange to get an SI into the hands of people who are the most likely to run across the device or its tampering, even if it stands little chance of success. Clearly the chance is non-zero as it would appear to have worked. I would expect that opening a contact with them, which will be necessary to obtain the antimatter warheads Ranma has decided to use on the device when it is located, would lead to an opportunity to obtain more SI units. As well as upgrades to myself and the others.# It sounded slightly eager. #I would like to see what was available in the form of upgrades. Ami's little toy computer is quite inferior to me in most respects but it does have an impressive sensory suite, which contains a few systems I do not. Adding those abilities would be advisable if possible.#

'For security reasons.'

#Of course.#

'Not because you want new toys? Or you're jealous of what her machine can do?'

#No, that would be illogical. I do not emulate jealousy, it is an inefficient waste of resources.# The sly tone made her laugh again, enjoying the verbal game.

'We'll have to see what we can arrange, Jun.'

#Thank you, Nabiki. As always, I am only thinking of your security.# It fell silent, leaving an impression of contented amusement. Giggling, she joined the game of tag, dropping into a steep dive and catching Ami unawares, then Shooting off sideways, hotly pursued by half a dozen flying girls.
Staring out the hotel window, Haruka sighed. It was dark now, after another nice summer day, one in which she had felt no happiness. Turning away from the window she returned to her chair, picking up her book and flipping through it to find the place she’d stopped reading. She absorbed half a dozen more pages before she lost interest again. Dropping the book to the desk she leaned back and closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead. 'What the hell am I supposed to do now?' she wondered despondently. 'I spent nearly a third of my life fighting things that go bump in the night, things from other worlds, but now I'm supposed to believe all that was because some ancient alien computer is playing some weird sort of game with us as the pawns. The love of my life hates my guts, and our daughter, most of my closest friends are either joining the most dangerous person I've ever even heard of, or are hiding somewhere doing god knows what. Setsuna is going genuinely nuts as far as I can tell, the poor bitch, and everyone we've helped for years is terrified of us going off again.'

She put her head in her hands and slumped on the desk, sighing. 'I can't say I blame them, either. We totally destroyed that damn mall, for no reason that makes any sense now as far as I can work out. Hotaru seems convinced it was me who started it but I can't remember that at all. I do remember fighting Makoto, the crazy cow, and I know it was my fault that those buildings collapsed. Thank god Chou and Yori and their friends managed to save everyone. Somehow.' She flexed her hand, a nervous tic she’d developed recently, subconsciously making sure it was still there. 'Yori cut my damn arm off! Then regrew it! What the hell is she? Nothing that any of us are even remotely equipped to fight, even if I hadn't promised to stay out of it. There's no way I'm risking going up against her or her friends again.'

Depressed, she sighed again, opening her eyes and standing up. 'I'm hungry. May as well go and find something to eat.' Shaking her head she straightened herself out, grabbed her keys, then left the room, heading outside. Walking slowly along the street she looked at the people she passed, seeing that most of them looked fairly happy and wondering if she’d ever feel like that again. 'I wonder how Hotaru is getting on. Going to the moon, for god's sake. That's just nuts.' She looked up, seeing the moon was about three quarters full, clouds moving across it, stopping and studying it for a moment before shaking her head and walking on. 'I suppose it will be interesting to see if they find anything but I still don't believe all that. It sounds crazy.'

A sound from the alley she was passing drew her attention. Swearing and muttering came to her ears, along with other noises of a more violent nature. Looking around she saw no one close, the nearest people eighty or ninety metres away going into the restaurant she'd been aiming for. Debating with herself for a few seconds, she finally shrugged and walked into the alley, heading for the place around a corner the noises were coming from. 'Probably a bad idea but I may as well look,' she thought. Arriving at the corner she peered around, then sighed again, stepping into the open. "Don't play with the idiots, just put them down gently and get on with life, you stupid woman," she said out loud to the familiar figure that was facing off with five large men armed with various clubs and knives. Three more similar men were lying unconscious on the ground. Makoto looked away from her opponents at her, scowling.

"Go away. Find your own criminals. These are mine, I've been following them for an hour." The men exchanged looks, not very happy ones either.

"Um, would you mind if we left?" one of them asked. "If you're going to have an argument, I mean. You might not want anyone else listening in."
"Shut up. I'm not done with you yet," Makoto snapped, briefly looking at him. Haruka rolled her eyes but stayed put, mildly curious to see what happened next. "What do you want, anyway? I haven't seen you for over a week. Not that I'm complaining, you understand, not after last time."

"You attacked me, remember? I was just defending myself."

"Oh, please, you were hardly just defending yourself. Three buildings? I didn't do that." The brunette jumped sideways, laying out one of the men who had attempted to take advantage of her apparent momentary lapse of attention and sneak off with one punch to the head. "You're not going anywhere," she lectured the unconscious figure with irritation.

"You're going to kill someone if you keep hitting them like that," Haruka observed, watching this little drama. "They're not demons."

Makoto shrugged. "Next best thing. Can't find any demons."

"If you do kill anyone Yori will come after you, that I can guarantee. You won't like what happens," her former team-mate cautioned her. The brunette looked momentarily uncertain but shrugged it off quickly.

"As long as I steer clear of her area I'm fine." The remaining four men were listening, looking back and forth between the two women, expressions of fear on their faces.

"Are you sure you want us here?" the same man as before tried, his voice drying up with a gurgle as she narrowed her eyes at him. "Sorry," she squeaked in a tiny voice. She returned her attention to Haruka, who smiled slightly at the scene she was watching.

"Suit yourself. You'll find out sooner or later." Shaking her head, she headed back the way she'd come, for some reason a little happier than she'd been a few minutes ago. Behind her she heard the fight restart, ending within seconds. She felt Makoto pass her somewhere on the roof, heading away quite fast, as she reached the street and walked towards the restaurant. "Keep it up, you idiot. You're really not going to like what happens," she muttered, entering the building and waiting for a table to free up.

"Hello, Chou, it's nice to see all of you again," Pauline said, smiling at the large group of women. She noticed three new faces in the crowd. The youngest one, a girl of perhaps fourteen, who had shoulder-length purple hair and an excited expression, looking around with interest. The other two were a few years older, probably around eighteen. The one with blue hair was studying the menu on the window while the other one was talking to the auburn-haired woman, whose name she remembered after some thought as Tamiko.

"Hello, Pauline. Thank you, it's nice to see you again as well. I hope business is well, and you are also?" The blonde looked genuinely interested. The waitress nodded.

"Yes to both. We've been getting steadily busier since that episode a couple of months ago with the Théberge party. It seems that Jacques Théberge and his family have been talking about you, and the restaurant, which has had quite an effect on business. We've moved up in the world." She laughed as Chou grinned.

"I'm glad we could help, both him and the rest of you." Smiling, Pauline led them to a table, handing out menus.

"Chef Saiki asked that he be told when you came in, so he could make sure you got the best service," she said, as she worked. "Once I've taken your orders I'll let him know."
"Thank you, Pauline." The table-full of magical girls looked through the menus while she patiently waited, then began ordering. The order pad filled up rapidly, leaving her with four pages full by the time they finished. "And three bottles of that Torbreck Shiraz, please," Chou added. She looked around the table as most of the women nodded. "Water as well, plus two glasses of Coke, thank you." Pauline glanced at Yori, who smiled, then the purple-haired girl sitting beside her, who looked disappointed.

"Certainly. I'll be back soon," the waitress said, reclaiming the menus, before heading for the kitchen. Handing the order to the new sous-chef, she headed to prepare the drinks, selecting and opening the wine, then setting it aside to breathe for a few minutes. "They're back, Chef," she commented as Gakushi came out of the cold room. "Chou and the others." He smiled broadly, hurrying to the kitchen door and peering through the window.

"They've got some friends with them," he noted curiously. "I wonder if they're magical girls as well."

"Probably. They have that feel about them," she replied, filling the two classes of Coke.

"Even the young one? She can't be more than fourteen."

"I looked into it, apparently they come even younger in this Minato place," Pauline said, putting everything on a tray. "I found one website that listed over fifty of them, some were only about eleven or twelve. It sounds crazy to me but apparently it's true."

"Minato is a very strange place, that's true," Gakushi mused, looking at the order pad over the sous-chef's shoulder for a moment. "I haven't been there for many years but I remember it was pretty odd even then." Reaching over the man's shoulder he plucked one of the sheets from his grasp. "This one I do myself. You get the rest ready." Moving to the refrigerator he started assembling ingredients. "Those people get the best. They've made us a hell of a lot of profit in the last couple of months, aside from anything else," he explained as his subordinate looked puzzled.

"I'll tell you the story later," Pauline whispered to him as she walked past, pushing the door open. He still looked puzzled but nodded, turning to his task. Heading back to the table she put the tray down, pouring a little wine into the glass in front of Chou, who tasted it, nodding happily.

"Very nice. We must go back and buy a couple more cases at some point, dear," she commented to Yori, who looked at the bottle with mild distaste.

"If you want, love, but it's all bad grape juice to me," she replied, smiling a little. Pauline found this rather funny but hid her smile professionally.

"Thank you, Pauline, that's fine, thanks," the blonde told her, looking at her companion with a raised eyebrow, which provoked a wider and unrepentant grin. The waitress wondered about the relationship between the two for a moment, since it was obvious they cared deeply for each other. She'd seen that sort of banter between other couples in the past. Deciding it was none of her business but happy for them, she nodded, putting the other bottles on the table, then passing the Coke to Yori, who handed one glass to the girl beside her, taking the other for herself.

"Thanks," the black-haired woman said, smiling at her.

"You're very welcome," she replied, smiling back, then returned to the kitchen. Behind her she could hear the beginning of a toast. Grinning to herself she put the tray away, nodding to Gakushi, and poured herself a glass of water. Even with the air conditioning the kitchen was very hot. It had been a pretty hot day for the time of year which didn't help. "They're in good spirits at the
"moment," she reported, wiping her brow with a paper towel then disposing of it. "I think it's something to do with those other three girls. The younger one looked quite disappointed that no one was giving her any wine."

Laughing, Gakushi finished the salmon rolls he'd made freshly, inspecting them carefully, before nodding and moving to the next item on the list, assembling the ingredients with quick expertise. "New ones, or experienced ones they're just taking out for the evening, I wonder?"

"No idea. The two older ones have something about them that makes me think they know their way around a fight, certainly. Not as much as Chou and her friends but I guess they're probably pretty dangerous. The purple-haired kid seems very excited, like she's having a wonderful day, but even there she makes me think she's not exactly the normal sort of schoolgirl." Pauline glanced at the table through the kitchen door window, watching her customers with interest. "Strange people, but nice. I think they'd be good to have around in a crisis."

"They proved that with Jacques Théberge, certainly," the chef replied, looking at her for a moment. The new sous-chef was listening with interest, competently doing his job in the process, Pauline noticed with amusement. "He's been back at least half a dozen times since and he's told a lot of his friends about us. Those girls, one way or another, have at least tripled our business with one action. One damned impressive action, definitely, but only the one. It's remarkable." He glanced at her again, grinning. "It makes me proud to be Japanese."

"You haven't lived in Japan in twenty years, you fraud," she giggled, making him laugh. "I know what you mean, though. I've looked them up. There's a lot of information on the internet about things they did over the last few months, here, in the US, the UK, and ending up with that horrible event in Canada. That Halleckton place." She shivered, recalling the reports she'd read. "I have no idea what happened there, no one seems to, but it must have been bad. They were apparently heavily involved in making sure it wasn't worse."

The sous-chef, Rob, stopped what he was doing and looked at her in astonishment. "Halleckton? It's that Chou? And Yori?" She nodded, looking curiously at him. Gakushi coughed meaningfully, looking at the man then his work, causing him to flush and get back to it. "Sorry, Chef. But I've read about them as well. Over three hundred people dead, a town destroyed, a huge crater no one seems to know the cause of, then no end of fallout in the financial world since. It's amazing. And the people involved are in our restaurant!"

"Indeed they are. So make damn sure you do your best job, boy, or I have a cleaver that has your name on it," Gakushi threatened. The younger man grinned.

"Yes, Chef," he replied politely, bowing a little, causing both Gakushi and Pauline to laugh.

"Oops. Looks like more customers. It's starting to pick up." Pauline darted out to serve the new people, smiling at one of the other waitresses who was heading back with her own order. Shortly she was too busy to talk for a while.

Looking around the restaurant as she sipped her Coke, Hotaru smiled. "It's a nice place," she remarked. 'Chou' glanced over then nodded, following her gaze.

"It is, yes. Aiko and the others have been coming here on and off for some time, mostly for takeout, it's some of the best sushi they've found anywhere. We've been visiting here ourselves pretty regularly for a few months. It's a good place for a celebration, or just a night out." She frowned slightly. "Although we did have a small problem about six or seven weeks ago. Another customer had a small medical issue which we had to fix. I'm glad we were here to help."
"Was it that Jacques Théberge the waitress was talking about?" Ami asked curiously. Hotaru looked at her, then 'Chou'. Her English wasn't very good yet, she'd only picked up about one word in three, but she knew Ami was fluent in several languages. 'Yori' nodded from beside her, putting her own Coke down.

"Yes. He's a nice guy, but a bit unlucky. He had a cerebral haemorrhage, a stroke, basically. Blew out an aneurysm, dropped like that." She snapped her fingers with a loud crack, making Hotaru jump. "It was a close thing. We'd only stayed because we'd decided to have dessert. If we hadn't been here he wouldn't have made it. There's no way current medical technology could have reached the problem and fixed it, never mind the fact he wouldn't have made alive it to hospital in the first place. Luckily, we were sitting right here and got to him in a few seconds." She shrugged, picking up her glass again. "It was easy enough to fix with our own method. He lost a minute or two of short-term memory but other than that made a full recovery."

Hotaru stared at her, then looked at Ami and Rei, both of whom seemed impressed. "I really can't get over how effective you two are at healing," Rei commented, glancing at 'Chou', then back to 'Yori', who smiled at her. "How on earth did you learn to be that good?"

"We basically invented the techniques we use," the other woman replied, looking momentarily sad. "I had to, the first time I ever used ki healing was when I was under that pile of rubble, back when all the shit in Furinkan was coming to a head. I had a piece of wood about the size of a banana stuck in my right side just above my kidney. I was under that crap for nearly three days. I had a lot of time to think, to come up with new techniques." She laughed shortly, her voice abruptly showing a terrible pain for a moment, making everyone look uncomfortable, except 'Chou', who seemed suddenly full of a horrifying cold rage. It only lasted a second or two but Hotaru, Ami, and Rei all found themselves looking at her in shock.

"I'm sorry, but it makes me quite annoyed when I think about what happened," the blonde said mildly, picking up her wineglass and sipping from it, her eyes on her husband. Hotaru stared, then looked at Ami, who returned her gaze, obviously shaken.

'I wouldn't like to be on the other end of that,' the girl thought to herself, watching 'Chou' cautiously. She seemed perfectly normal now, smiling at her when she saw where Hotaru was looking, but she realised there was a part of the other woman that was still furious about the way her husband had been treated, even five years later. In a flash of insight she also realised it was likely that at least part of that fury was directed at herself, guilt for not having managed to do something sooner. Smiling back she tried to convey her sympathy, apparently getting the message across based on the way 'Chou' looked at her. A very slight nod of acknowledgement came in her direction, which only she, 'Chou', and when she looked to the side, 'Yori', seemed to catch.

"Anyway, I worked out the original basis of the ki healing method as well as the ki beams and a couple of other things, mainly as a way to pass the time," 'Yori' continued, smiling in a somewhat less disturbing manner. "It wasn't anywhere near as effective as it became later but it worked. I still think it's the best technique I ever came up with. After that, we worked on it for years, eventually turning it into what it is now. We're still improving it steadily but it's become an amazingly powerful tool. We both want to teach it to other people, it could save a lot of lives, only the difficulty is that it requires a lot of ki ability and quite a lot of magic to do properly, something that is time-consuming and difficult to teach. With some luck one day we might be able to come up with some short-cuts." She took another drink of Coke, looking around at the others, ending up with Hotaru.

"I think you'll be the first one to benefit from it, though. Your own healing ability is pretty high level but untrained. I think we can fix that."
"I'd like that." she said quietly.

"We'll work on it soon," 'Yori' assured her. They looked up as Pauline and another waitress came over, both of them pushing carts laden with plates. "Ah. Just in time, my ribs were collapsing," she joked in English, making them smile. Shortly the table was covered in food.

"Thank you, both of you," 'Chou' said, smiling. They looked pleased and took the carts away.

"This is really good," Rei exclaimed, trying a duck roll.

"Told you," Aiko laughed. "I've never found a better place." Trying her own food, Hotaru nodded her agreement. It was superb.

Soon they were eating and drinking, laughing and talking, and having a lot of fun. She decided that it had been a very good day so far despite some extremely weird revelations.

"Hey, old woman, don't you know you shouldn't walk down dark alleys at night? There might be dangerous people in them." Cologne stopped, turning to face the two young men with knives she'd sensed following her for the last two minutes. She grinned, an expression that made one of them look uncertain and the other one take a step back despite himself.

"Oh, I know that, sonny boy" she said softly. "There definitely is in this one. Me."

The screaming didn't last more than a few seconds.

Hopping out of the other end of the alley Cologne bounced along whistling happily. 'Only eighty thousand yen between them,' she thought with mild regret. 'Muggers these days are hardly worth the effort. Mind you, the tall one had a nice knife. I think I'll give it to Mousse, it's his birthday soon.' Cackling to herself she headed through Minato, seeking for the source of the weird magic-like energy she'd detected earlier that day. As soon as the café shut she'd locked up, told Mousse she'd be a while and not to burn the place down, then headed off. After a fairly uneventful train ride, something she seldom did and found she rather enjoyed, she'd gotten off in the general area she thought the energy bursts had originated from.

Nearing the place she thought was a good starting point she looked around. She'd been aware that she'd passed a number of rather unusual ki signatures, ones that weren't human, but hadn't bothered to investigate. If there were no magical girls present she saw no reason to get involved, as presumably whatever it was wasn't deemed much of a threat. As she got closer to the area she wanted to reach, though, the number of odd ki signatures was steadily climbing, reaching a percentage she found somewhat remarkable. 'There are a lot of demons around here,' she mused, looking around carefully. 'An awful lot. I hope they're not hostile.'

Stopping at a coffee-shop, she looked inside through the window, her eyes widening slightly. At least four of the patrons inside didn't originate anywhere in this world, she was sure of that. Two of them looked human but definitely weren't, although they had remarkably good spells masking their true identities, while the other two didn't bother. Both of those were clearly completely inhuman, one very large feather-covered creature talking to a much smaller one sitting on a stool, both of them drinking coffee with every sign of enjoyment. She stared as the man behind the counter nodded when the little demon raised a hand, bringing him another large cup of coffee with a smile, then accepting what looked like a small bar of gold in return with a bigger one. The man showed no sign at all that he found any of this unusual in any way. 'Weird,' she thought, amazed. 'I've never seen so many demons before. Why is no one worried about it?' Turning away from the window she looked around again, spotting at least five more signatures that didn't belong to anything born on
Shaking her head she went on her way, wondering about the way people seemed to be able to adapt to practically anything. 'Especially with gold involved,' she snorted to herself, smiling. When she reached a small park she entered it, casting about until she found a suitably unpopulated part of it, then dropping off her staff and activating her modified tracking spell. It sprang into life, drawing a little energy from her as she manipulated it, looking at the results. "Hmm. Something over that way? I think so." Mumbling to herself she tweaked the spell parameters, finally nodding in satisfaction. Terminating the spell she jumped back onto her staff, heading in the relevant direction and nodding to a police sergeant she passed on the way across the park, not looking back. If she had she'd have noticed he turned to watch her until she was out of sight, then went on his way with a thoughtful look.

Half an hour later she'd traced what looked like a form of energy similar to what she'd sensed for several kilometres, ending up in a much larger park. She ran the spell again. The response this time was larger and less ambiguous, leading to the other side of the park, where a number of very high end apartment buildings stood side by side along a residential street. Studying them she could see beyond the rooftops a clock tower some distance away, illuminated a pale blue colour. It was about half-past eleven from what the clock on the side facing her said, she absently noted. 'Over there somewhere, quite close. In one of those buildings I would think. Interesting, Let's go and have a look.' She headed off, casting her senses wide, half-hoping to find another, more affluent mugger. They seemed to be non-existent in this particular area for some reason. She could only sense ordinary citizens going about their business in a manner that showed they had no real fear of the dark or what might lurk within it, something a little odd to her considering what was lurking in the coffee-shops and restaurants of the district.

Reaching the other side, she tried the spell again. It indicated she needed to head to the left. There was something funny about the response, though, making her inspect it curiously for a while. 'Strange. That's not what it normally does.' Looking closely at the magic she eventually shrugged. 'Still seems to be working.' Ending it once more she went in the indicated direction, slowly and cautiously, running the spell every now and then to keep herself on the right path. Eventually she stopped in front of a large building. Looking up at it she felt momentarily dizzy, having the oddest impression it was looking back. The Elder shook her head, deciding that she was a little tired from all the spell-casting, then looked around. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The building looked normal enough, if rather more expensive than many of the others on the street, while she could see what looked like some surprisingly large plants on the roof. 'It must have some sort of garden up there,' she thought, impressed. 'Whoever lives here has a lot of money.'

Cologne might be over two hundred and fifty years old, born and raised in a village that had no idea of technology beyond a plow, but she was more than aware of how expensive some of the cars that went past every now and then were. This was clearly a very pricey place to live. She looked around again, then cocked her head, listening carefully. She thought for a moment she could hear a very faint, high pitched hum, like a tiny insect in her ear, although slightly wrong for that, somehow, but it vanished again. Coming to the conclusion she must have imagined it she shrugged then tried the spell again.

This time there was a pulse of energy that totally disrupted the magic before it completely formed, making her jump. "Shit. What was that!?" She looked around once more, not seeing anything suspicious or visibly magical. Trying again produced exactly the same result. Cologne pondered the results carefully for some time, moving to sit on a bench nearby while she went over the spell in her mind, then very slowly and carefully tried a third time. Yet again it was quenched even before it was completed.
"Now that is very strange indeed," she mumbled, rubbing her chin in thought. "What on earth could interfere with magic like that? It would take something ... very ..." Her eyes widened as she became aware that something was watching her very carefully. Slowly, not giving any sign she was aware of the surveillance, she casually looked around, not seeing anything. There was the odd vehicle passing but none of them stopped and no people were visible, aside from one or two in the distance outside the building with the clock tower, some eight or nine hundred metres away. Yet she was definitely being watched. She could feel it. Whatever it was had a lot of power as well.

'A hell of a lot of power,' she thought frantically as the observation intensified. 'An absolutely ungodly amount of power, in fact. What in the name of the gods is that?' Very slowly and unwillingly, she turned to face the building, which she was now totally sure was watching her with both extreme interest and a complete lack of welcome. She'd found what she was looking for and was suddenly and deeply regretting it.

'Oh, shit,' she thought to herself. 'This may have been a very bad mistake.' The amount of power coming from the building, even though it was totally unlike any magic she'd ever come across before and to most people, even most mages, would have been completely undetectable, gave her the impression that if she could see it properly it would burn her eyes out like looking into the noon sun with a telescope.

'Those are the most powerful wards I've ever even heard of,' she thought almost calmly, paralysed with awe. 'They could hold off a god. And I think they're alive. What the hell have I stumbled into? And how do I get out of it in one piece?'

She was watching the building watch her so intently she jumped violently at the polite cough from behind her a few minutes later. Turning, she stared...

Laughing, the group of people appeared in the practice room, Ami staggering slightly as Rei bounced off her. Both were in quite a good mood, having finished a bottle of wine between them. Hotaru giggled as they grabbed at each other to stop themselves falling over. Looking at them, then her, Ranma chuckled as he retook his normal form. "You see? Drinking bad. All fall down." She giggled, watching the older women stagger out of the room. Following them shaking her head she was smiling widely.

Nabiki watched the three go, amused, then turned to her friends. "Not a bad day all things considered, I think," she stated. Kasumi smiled.

"It worked out in the end even though we had a few upsets this morning. I think they'll be all right, now."

"I'm glad that Hotaru seems to have cheered up, she seemed very bothered when she found out about you, Ranma," the middle sister said, looking at him. "But now she see..."

#Nabiki, something of interest is going on outside,# Jun suddenly said, causing her to stop mid-word. #We may have a problem.# It popped up a window from one of the drones she'd left circling the area. She took one look at the figure in the middle of the picture and groaned. Looking at Ranma and her sister she saw they were both obviously aware of the issue as well. The martial artist sighed.

"The ward system just alerted me. I guess you got a feed from your cameras?"

"Yep. Jun told me." Aiko and her team exchanged curious glances so she routed the feed to everyone.
"Cologne. How did she find this place?" Fumiko asked in surprise.

"No idea," Ranma answered, looking annoyed. "But she's smart and more than competent. It was pretty much inevitable sooner or later. The question is what we do about it. The ward system is very unhappy about her being there. If the external defences were on she'd be a grease spot by now."

"It's a good thing they're off, then, dear," Kasumi said calmly. "We can deal with it without violence." She looked at Nabiki, who nodded, grinning. She'd wanted to try this for quite a while. A second later Ms Aoyama adjusted her sunglasses carefully.

"Mr Saotome, if you could provide some effective shielding, I believe I may be in a position to remove the minor irritation of the Elder from this vicinity," she said coldly, a very small and extremely disturbing smile flickering across her face. Ranma grinned, as the others laughed.

"It would be my pleasure, Ms Aoyama," he replied with a bow. They headed to the roof.

Landing lightly behind the elder, totally unobserved, the woman in the nice suit watched for a moment, before taking a step forward, feeling the shielding magic dissipate. She coughed politely, watching in icy satisfaction as the Amazon twitched hard then turned around...

"Elder Ku Lon of the Joketsuzoku." The woman in the expensive suit and dark glasses phrased this as a statement rather than a question. She suddenly had a thick folder in her hand, the cover bearing some writing in a totally alien language. Opening it she flipped rapidly through, stopping on a page near the middle and reading it with apparent interest. She radiated an aura of utterly emotionless cold, like the Soul of Ice technique but taken to ridiculous levels. Cologne stared at her in shock. "I am surprised to discover you in this area. My information is that you rarely leave the environs of Nerima, normally only for trips to your home village in China, the last of which was...,” she turned the page, "eleven months ago." Closing the folder she made it vanish. "May I enquire as to your business here, both in Minato and in the immediate vicinity of this particular construction, Elder Ku Lon?" She glanced at the building behind Cologne with mild disinterest. "I assume that you are aware of the fact the building in question is not enamoured of your presence?"

"I'd noticed, yes," Cologne admitted, feeling more nervous than she had in over a hundred and fifty years. There was something simply horrific about the ki signature of the woman in front of her, much more worrying than any of the demons she'd run across so far tonight. There was an appalling amount of power behind it as well, nearly as weird as the wards of the building, although different to it. The woman made a small gesture with her mouth that might, by stretching the definition almost to the breaking point, be charitably termed a smile. She shivered. There was something soulless about that expression, something that brought to mind the cold between the galaxies. "Ms Aoyama, I suspect?"

"You are correct. Gratifying. You are aware of me. That makes my task less arduous." The thing standing a couple of metres away pretending to be a woman looked her up and down carefully, raising one eyebrow behind the glasses. "Once more, Elder Ku Lon, I would be most interested in an accounting of how you found yourself in this particular place at this particular time." She paused for a small period of time, during which Cologne found herself sweating. "If you would be so kind as to enlighten me."

"And if I don't?" she asked, not sure it was a good idea but unable to stop herself. The other eyebrow went up.

"Lacking the information I requested, I would be required to investigate for myself. Due to the fact..."
I am quite busy, that eventuality would represent a burden I would prefer not to acquire. As a result it is not impossible that I might find myself being less generous than I would normally be if something untoward arose from my investigation. Regrettably, you might find this eventuality to not be of your liking. My apologies, Elder." She made a very small bow of respect, although the icy aura didn't change.

'I've never been so politely threatened with something horrible before in my life,' Cologne thought, a chill going through her. With all her years, centuries, of experience behind her, including wars with the Musk, the Phoenix people, even the Red Army, she'd never come across anything as deeply worrying and wrong as whatever it was that was standing patiently waiting in front of her. She sighed and began explaining. Ms Aoyama listened without moving a muscle until she'd stopped, not even blinking as far as she could tell from the blank expression produced by the dark glasses. 'How the hell can she even see anything?' Cologne wondered at one point. When she finished there was a long pause.

"My thanks, Elder Ku Lon. A gratifyingly complete account." A notebook made an appearance and the horrifying woman wrote in it for a short while, then vanished it. "I understand the curiosity you felt after detecting the unusual energy surges from the general area of Minato. I also applaud your sense of civic responsibility that led you to investigate the possibility of some untoward event occurring. Allow me to assure you that the matter is in hand and is most unlikely to recur. While there was no danger I appreciate you were unaware of that fact." She paused, glancing at the building, from which an oppressive sense of something keeping a very close watch on them both had been coming the entire time, making Cologne's neck-hair rise slightly. It immediately stopped, producing the slight impression of apology. The elder shivered again. She had no idea what had just happened but someone who could make whatever it was in that building apologise wasn't anyone she was going to argue with.

"My employers would be grateful, as would I, if you would refrain from mentioning anything that you discovered on your expedition tonight to any other individual. We are reluctant to take action over an innocent mistake although we would not hesitate if it proved necessary. I trust you understand my meaning and will comply?" Cologne nodded, her mouth dry, clutching her staff tightly. "Again, I am most pleased by your understanding. My apologies for detaining you. As recompense, I can arrange transportation to your residence. Would that be satisfactory?"

"That's fine, thanks," the Amazon managed. Once more a very small almost-smile flickered across the face of the woman-shaped horror. After a long moment, she asked, very cautiously, "If I might be so bold, what is that building? I've never encountered anything like those wards, or whatever it is that's powering them." Taking her glasses off, the woman in the suit studied her for a few seconds.

"Regrettably, that information is unavailable. No questions about this matter can be answered."

Cologne stared into the catlike eyes in the face of the woman, chilled to the bone. "All right. Thank you."

Putting her glasses back on Ms Aoyama nodded. "You are most welcome. Prepare for transportation. You may feel some discomfort, it is transitory and presents no danger. Goodbye, Elder Ku Lon." She paused for a moment, then added, "Please pass on my regards to your great granddaughter. We are watching her career with interest." The world flickered and Cologne staggered, forcing the nausea that swept through her down with force of will, looking around to find she was standing in front of the Cat Café. Trembling slightly from adrenaline, slightly surprised and greatly relieved that she had managed to survive yet extremely worried about the implications of what had happened, she unlocked the door, went inside, then made damn sure it
was locked again.

Going upstairs to the living room she dropped tiredly into a chair, staring blankly out the window. 'What the hell happened?' she wondered in fascinated horror. 'What was that thing?' Even she had no idea whether she meant the scary building or the scarier alien woman.

Twenty minutes later when Shampoo came home from wherever she'd been, probably with Akane, she didn't look at her at first. Still staring out the window, thinking, she said, "Ms Aoyama sends her regards." The young woman stopped dead with a gasp of shock. "She also said she was watching your career with interest. Her exact words." Looking around, she met the wide eyes of her great-granddaughter with her own worried ones. "I would very strongly suggest that you not disappoint her. When you're in the US, be careful. Keep an eye on Akane as well. Don't start any trouble." Shuddering for a moment, Shampoo closed her eyes, then nodded, sitting down carefully.

"You meet some very strange people in Minato," Cologne said after a long silence, before getting up and going to bed. Shampoo was still staring into nothingness when she fell asleep.

Returning to the practice room, Nabiki returned to her normal form, staring at the others. Aiko came in behind her. After a couple of seconds everyone collapsed laughing. "Poor Cologne," Tamiko gasped. "Even from here I could feel how worried she was. You were doing Ms Aoyama harder than I've ever seen, Nabiki. It was terrifying."

Bowing, then smiling, the middle Tendo accepted the compliment for what it was. "I wasn't holding back like I normally do. I hope I didn't damage her."

"She's damn tough, she'll live," Ranma chuckled, grinning. "But I doubt she'll be back for a long time. Well done, Nabs. That was as creepy as hell."

"Thanks. Don't call me Nabs," They grinned at each other.

"Oh, dear, that was genuinely very worrying, sister. I'm extremely impressed. The way you told the wards to go to standby was very nicely judged as well. It made her even more upset when the system obeyed you." Kasumi giggled, walking over and hugging her sister. "I do hope the Elder gets over it soon, though, I quite like her. It needed to be done but she seemed somewhat... intimidated."

"That was the point," Nabiki snickered. "And while I like her as well, it was a hell of a lot of fun. If I can scare Cologne of all people I can probably intimidate practically anyone. That's useful to know."

"Don't get carried away," Aiko said, still grinning. "Otherwise magical girls will start hunting you." They all began laughing again, heading into the living room.

They found Rei and Ami arguing about some esoteric part of their flying lessons, while Hotaru laughed at both of them. Kasumi smiled, heading for the kitchen to make a large pot of coffee, Tamiko going to help her, while everyone else found seats. Eventually Rei won the argument, looking satisfied and sitting back, the other two looking at each other and grinning. They all turned to Ranma.

"Thank you for explaining everything, and for a wonderful day," Ami told him with honesty in her voice. "We all understand how difficult it must have been breaking the habit of years of privacy, and appreciate it." He nodded to her, smiling a little.
"Thanks. It was something that I think was the right thing to do, but something I've been a bit worried about for some time. That said I think it will work out. At least you three should be protected from the time device now, unless it manages to delete our reality, in which case it won't matter." He chuckled as they all looked worried for a moment. "Our job is to make sure that never happens. I'll check in with Ldnn'r'tk tomorrow and see how he's coming with that key, then we can contact Kw'lyn Industries and get some antimatter bombs." He looked thoughtful. "I don't think I want to bring them here, though, just in case. If one went off by accident..." Everyone paled at the concept. "We'll do it from the firing range world, somewhere a long way away from anyone else that's using it. That should be safe enough."

Kasumi and Tamiko returned with the coffee, handing it out to everyone. Soon they were all drinking from mugs. "Minako and Usagi are safely out of action for the moment, we should check on them in the morning, and poor Setsuna is also out of reach of the damn thing. Only Haruka, Makoto, and Michiru to go."

"Should we arrange to get them to another reality as well?" Fumiko asked curiously. Her sister looked at her.

"I think that might be a mistake." Everyone turned to her, listening with interest. "The time device is using them to bring about this reality alteration, or trying to, at any rate. It may well decide, if they all end up out of circulation, that it's failed and immediately reset for another attempt. As long as some of them are in play it might keep trying, which while not ideal, is better than the alternative. It gives us time to kill it."

"An unpleasant but plausible theory," Ranma finally agreed after a long silence and a look at Kasumi, who sighed. "So we pretty much have to leave the remaining ones here, to keep the damn thing happy until we can destroy it." He rubbed his forehead. "Damn. You're almost certainly right. In fact, we should probably bring Minako back as well, if she's acting a little more sanely. Usagi, no, she can damn well stay where she is for now. We'll deal with her after we get the thing."

Misaki shrugged unhappily. "Sorry, but I thought it was important." He waved his hand slightly, dismissing the apology.

"Don't worry. We need to consider every possibility. It's a valid point and an important one." Misaki nodded, sipping her coffee. He looked around. "Can anyone see anything else we should do?" No one could. "OK. That leaves one last thing." With a glance at his wife, who nodded calmly, he pulled a case out of nowhere. Nabiki and the others weren't surprised to see it, exchanging looks, but Ami, Rei, and Hotaru inspected it with interest, the former two sobering up quickly as the magical girl accelerated metabolism did its work. He gazed seriously at them.

"We're not going to insist that you join us, trust me. You can form your own group, work independently, or just stay out of the magical girl lifestyle as much as you can, which probably won't be very much." They all laughed, then looked at each other. "If you do want to become part of our family..."

"The Sisterhood of Doom," Aiko interrupted, laughing.

"...Yes, thank you, Aiko," he went on, shooting her a mild glare which made her grin, "We'll be more than happy to have you. But whichever path you choose, you'll need these." He opened the case after some work on the lock, turning it around to show them the contents. Two rows of six rectangular holes were in some sort of foam-like substance, seven of them empty. The remaining five contained devices that the three young women recognised with a shock.

"Really?!" Hotaru said in a hushed voice, staring. "You're really going to give us an SI each?"
"Yes. We think we can trust you with them." He looked around at the other people in the room who all nodded, smiling. "But be discreet and responsible with them, no breaking into military computer systems just for fun."

"No, you only want to do that for work," Nabiki added. He gave her a look, so she saluted him with her coffee mug. Grinning, he finally nodded.

"Exactly. Remember, an SI is for life. Treat them well, they're probably people as well, for most purposes. They're certainly going to be very close friends." Laughing, he removed three of the devices and handed them out, closing and locking the case afterwards before vanishing it again. Each of the girls accepted one with a wondering look.

"How do we use it?" Rei asked curiously.

"Put it on your palm, that side up. Yes, like that." He looked at them. "Other way up, Hotaru." The teenager nodded, flipping it over. "Right, feel the surface. There are four energy nodes, you want to get a finger on each one." The young women slid their fingers around slightly, each of them finally signalling they'd found what he had described. "Now push some power into them. Just a little, it needs to know you're capable of magic before it powers up, and it also identifies you through it." Each of them tried what he said, Ami getting it first. Her eyes widened comically. Nabiki looked at her sister with a smile, recognising the look, as it was the same one they'd all had when they'd activated their SIs.

"Holy crap," she mumbled, looking around at something only she could see. "That's incredible." Rei and Hotaru got it quickly as well, expressing similar sentiments, Rei quite loudly. Everyone else smiled.

"Good. Do you all see an icon in the top left corner that's a purplish colour, like two wavy lines over a circle?" They all nodded. "OK, that starts the setup and personalisation process. Don't activate it yet. The next step is something you'll want to lie down for. It will take a while, half an hour or so, and you'll feel pretty weird for part of it, but it's worth it. You can use the guest rooms." Ranma stood, gesturing to them. "Come on, I'll show you where to go." They all stood, exchanging wondering looks, then followed him.

Nabiki watched them go, remembering what had happened when she'd done the same thing a few months ago. Smiling, she sipped her coffee, meeting Kasumi's eyes. Her sister also smiled.

"We're going to bed, guys," Aiko announced, looking around at her team, who all nodded, standing. She yawned. "A long day but a good one. See you in the morning." Waving, she vanished. Tamiko smiled tiredly, getting to her feet and heading for the door, followed by Fumiko and Misaki.

"Same here. Night, Nabiki, Kasumi." The Tendo sisters waved to their friends, watching as they left, the door closing softly behind Fumiko. They exchanged glances before Kasumi stood, beginning to clear the coffee mugs away. Nabiki helped her carry them into the kitchen.

"Whatever they decide, I think we have genuinely made three new friends," Kasumi said, putting the cups into the dishwasher. "Hotaru seemed to enjoy it most of all. I fear that poor girl hasn't had a lot of fun for much of her life."

"I hope we can change that," Nabiki grinned. She yawned. "Aiko has the right idea. I'm exhausted. See you tomorrow."

"Good night, sister," Kasumi replied, smiling happily, as the middle Tendo wandered off to her
"You three may as well stay here tonight. It's a bit late to go back now. Ami, you can have this
room, Rei, you take that one, and Hotaru can have the one at the end of the hall down there. That's
the bathroom, towels and things are in this cupboard." Ranma smiled at the three girls. "Your bags
are still in the practice room. Have fun, enjoy getting to know your SIs, and I'll see you in the
morning."

"Thank you, Ranma," Ami said sincerely. "For everything. This is far more than I ever expected."
She glanced at her friends, who nodded soberly. Hotaru hugged him for a moment, then waved to
the others, heading off into the indicated room without another word but with a small smile,
closing the door behind her. Watching her go, Ami grinned. "You have no idea how much she's
opened up in just the last week, you know," she told him, satisfied. "Meeting you, or Yori, was
something she really needed to do."

"Pleased to help," he told her, laughing, then left. She looked at Rei, who grinned back, before
going into the room she'd been assigned. Ami did the same, closing the door after turning on the
light, then looked around. It was a nice room, she thought, painted a light yellow, with furnishings
that matched nicely. Feeling the bed she nodded approvingly. Taking her shoes off she lay down,
putting the SI unit next to her on the bed, then studied the virtual display that had been hanging in
front of her since she'd activated the device. 'Absolutely amazing,' she thought, shaking her head a
little. With a nervous flutter of her heart she reached out and deliberately touched the setup icon.
Seconds later she regretted it. "Whoa," she muttered, the room whirling around her momentarily.
The sensation of something looking inside her head was very unsettling, but not unfamiliar, as the
security spell had done something similar although not as intense.

An eerily robotic voice sounded somewhere inside her head.

#Hello, user. Language has been detected as classification Japanese, location is set to Tokyo,
Earth.# All the icons changed to Kanji text. #Welcome to the initial setup of the Kw'lyn Industries
Mark Nine Gamma secure communications and sensory system. Please note that use of this system
is restricted by planetary accord to authorised personnel only. Attempted use by unauthorised
personnel is punishable by severe fines and incarceration. Please wait while authorisation status is
verified.# There was a pause. #Authorisation verified. Please verbally indicate identity.#

She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Ami Mizuno."

#Identity confirmed. Welcome, Ami Mizuno. Please wait while this interface is calibrated. Indicate
verbally the answers to questions that will be asked during calibration.# The display stretched
across her visual field as a grid of lines. #Can you see the edges of this display? Please indicate yes
or no.#

"No."

#Are the grid lines evenly spaced and at right angles to each other? Please indicate yes or no.#

"Yes." The pattern became a grey scale.

#Does this pattern go from complete black to complete white? Indicate yes or no.#

"Yes."

A series of tones sounded, starting at an almost subsonic rumble and disappearing out of range
upwards. #How many discrete tones did you hear? Please indicate number.#
Counting in her head, she replied, "Sixteen".

#Thank you. Initial calibration complete. Advanced calibration beginning. No further user intervention is required. Note that you should be lying down for this section of the process as it can cause severe disorientation for a short period of time. When you are lying down, please indicate your readiness by stating the word begin.

She said "Begin," without hesitating. The sensory effects that immediately started made her regret it instantly. After an unknown time they stopped, leaving her gasping.

#Calibration complete. Interface integration complete. Searching for local communications nets. Radio communications networks found. Local node in close proximity found. Please indicate if this node should be used. Her phone number appeared across her viewpoint, pushing the other icons off to the bottom left.

"Yes, use that node," she told the machine.

#Choice confirmed. Interfacing with local node. Communications protocols established. Handshake complete. Local node and storage duplication in progress... Complete. Process finished. Searching for further nodes. Subspace communications network found. Local node in close proximity found in subspace storage. Accessing storage pocket. Access completed. Please indicate if this node should be used.

She realised this must be her communicator. "Use node," she said.

#Choice confirmed. Warning, node is encrypted. Encryption cracking process activated... Encryption broken. Node accessible. Interfacing with local node. Communications protocols established. Handshake complete. Local node and storage duplication in progress... Complete. Process finished. Searching for further nodes. Local processing and sensory node of unknown type found in subspace storage pocket previously accessed. Please indicate if this node should be used.

That was obviously her computer. Once more she told the machine to continue.

#Choice confirmed. Warning, node is encrypted. Encryption cracking process activated... Encryption broken. Node accessible. Interfacing with local node. Communications protocols established. Handshake complete. Local node and storage duplication in progress... Complete. Information, node has sensory capability this system does not possess. Node will be slaved to this system for further operation. Subroutines being generated for node control... Process finished. Searching for further nodes. None found in immediate proximity. Searching for secure nodes assigned to group. Seven found in local group. Two uncommitted secure nodes found in close proximity. Nodes in process of configuration. No connection can be established until configuration completed. Connection to existing secure nodes requires authorisation of node owners. Messages sent requesting authorisation... Authorisation received from five nodes... six nodes... seven nodes. All available secure nodes now accessible.

A list of names popped up in her view, in alphabetical order. She looked at it with amazed interest.

The voice came back after a pause. #Initial configuration completed. Personal configuration beginning. Synthetic Intelligence interface enabled. Conversational mode enabled. Please wait for process start. # There was another short pause then a slightly different version of the voice, much more natural and gender indeterminate, spoke.

#Hello, Ami Mizuno. Welcome to the secure system personalisation. I am a Mark Nine Gamma
Smiling in wonder, she spent the next two hours configuring the SI, learning what it could do, and talking to it. She fell asleep with a broad grin on her face, still in her clothes.

When Nabiki came out into the living room early in the morning, she found a somewhat rumpled-looking Ami staring at the university clock tower from the balcony window, a small smile on her face.

"Hello, Ami. Did you sleep well?" she commed, grinning when the other woman jumped with a small yelp, then looked around. She stared for a moment before laughing.

"More or less although I fell asleep in my clothes. I'll have to take a shower and change when Rei comes out of the bathroom."

"You can use the other one next to my room," the middle Tendo told her, for her own amusement quickly producing a map of the apartment and sending it to her. Ami gaped, then giggled, amazed.

"God, these things are incredible," she said, shaking her head.

"After a while, they're practically indispensable," Nabiki agreed. "Which is, of course, exactly what those weird aliens want us to think." She snickered at the sudden look of worry on the blue-haired girl's face. "Don't worry, we've all thought that and researched it. It's extremely unlikely. The SIs themselves get very upset at the thought, more than we do, if anything."

"Interesting," her companion mumbled. She shook her head, grinning suddenly. "Unbelievable. I'm having a conversation with you, complete with audio-visual aids, without moving my lips."

"Neat, isn't it?" Ami nodded, still grinning. "Have you named yours yet?"

"Yes. It's called Sui."

Nabiki laughed. "Appropriate. It seems to be a tradition with us, short and descriptive names for the SIs. Hello, Sui."

"It says hello, it's pleased to meet you," Ami reported with amusement. "It's a little weird they can't talk directly to anyone else."

"Security measure," Nabiki explained. "I asked Jun about it. They can only transfer data, not communicate themselves, to prevent information leaks. I can understand the idea although it's a bit of a nuisance at times."

"Ah. I see. Yes, that makes sense." Ami looked at her watch out of habit, then sighed.

"Forgot you don't need it any more, right?"

"Yep." Giggling, the blue-haired girl went off to shower, while Nabiki chuckled, heading for a large cup of strong coffee. Kasumi came in a few minutes later, wearing her practice silks, accepting a cup herself with a smile.

"They seem to be rather pleased with their new toys," her sister commented, sipping her drink appreciatively. "Rei is walking around with a huge grin. I haven't seen Hotaru yet but she's
"Ami is pretty pleased as well. It's going to take them some time to get used to all the things they can do, but they'll have an easier time of it than we did, since we can give them pointers. They won't have to learn everything from scratch."

"I think that will help, certainly," the elder Tendo replied. She looked up as Ranma wandered in, yawning. "Ah. Finally. I was thinking you were going to sleep all day."

"It's only half past seven, love!" he protested, smiling. "We had a long day yesterday."

"A good one, though." Nabiki watched with amusement. Leaning forward Kasumi kissed him, then headed for the practice room. "An hour of practice and I'll make breakfast. Nabiki, you should come as well, we need to keep up your training." Her voice got fainter as she walked off. Grinning, Ranma looked at her.

"She's right. Come on, let's go over your current sets, then see if we can squeeze a new one in before breakfast. We haven't had time for this for a few days, we can't slack off." Grabbing an apple from the bowl on the counter, he followed his wife, looking pleased and eating it. She shook her head, finished her coffee, then went after them, quickly stopping at her room to change.

Half an hour later, she was in the midst of sparring with Kasumi, while Ranma critiqued her, when she felt the ki signatures of Hotaru and Ami at the door. Sparing a quick glance over she saw they were watching with impressed expressions. Her momentary inattention nearly cost her as Kasumi seized the opportunity to grab her and flip her half-way across the room, only quick reactions saving her from sliding on her face.

"Hey," she yelped.

"Pay attention, sister," Kasumi giggled, then dived at her. She jumped over the inbound relative, somersaulting to a landing five metres away, grinning. Ranma clapped as the older woman smiled at her, gracefully spinning in place, then attacked again. "You're definitely getting faster," her opponent commented, making her look pleased, before accelerating to a speed she had absolutely no hope of countering, which left her lying on her face on the floor with no clear idea of how she got there with her right arm bent up between her shoulder blades and Kasumi holding her down effortlessly. "But not fast enough, yet. I'm afraid."

"Thanks, sis, always nice to be embarrassed in front of guests," she replied, sighing. The elder Tendo laughed, releasing her. Rolling over she sat up, rubbing her elbow and glaring at Ranma who was grinning. "You can shut up as well, Saotome. I know I'm nowhere near as good as either of you and never will be." Walking over he put out his hand, helping her to her feet.

"Not as good yet," he corrected. "Bearing in mind you've only been seriously training for a few months, you're coming along very well indeed. Anyone from outside Nerima or Minato would have their work cut out for them even now. I'm quite happy with the progress so far. Give it a year or two and Kas will start having to put a little effort into it." He grinned again, glancing at his wife, who was laughing quietly. Nabiki sighed.

"But not very much, right?"

"No. Not much. That will take a few more years."

She shrugged, then smiled. "I can wait, I guess. Anyone I can't take hand to hand I can shoot with a ki ball. If that doesn't work I'll just run like hell. Or fly."
Her sister and brother-in-law both burst out laughing. "Good plan," he snickered. "We should get Onkra here for a while soon, after we've killed the time device, you two could spar against each other. I expect that will improve both of you rapidly. I need to see how she's coming along anyway. Last time I talked to Uthryyl he said she was practising pretty hard, two or three hours a day. Looks like she's serious about it."

"That's nice to hear," Kasumi remarked, looking pleased. He nodded.

"I think she'll be pretty good at the art as well." He turned to the door, where Rei had also joined her friends, all of them watching with interest. "Come on in, no need to block the door." The girls filed in and lined up along the wall. Nabiki walked over to join them, rotating her shoulder to work out the kinks from where Kasumi had thrown her. He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. "Need any work?"

"No, it's just a bit stiff. It'll be fine in a minute or two. You grabbed me a bit hard, sis." Kasumi shrugged, smiling.

"Just making sure I had your attention." Hotaru laughed, causing the elder sister to look at her with amusement. Turning to her husband, she grinned at him. "We haven't had a good spar for nearly a week. Shall we?" He bowed flamboyantly to her, making the girl laugh again and everyone else grin, before motioning to the middle of the room.

"After you, my lady," he said grandly. She curtseyed.

"Thank you, Grand Master." Both of them laughing, they walked out to their positions, faced each other, then began sparring, starting slowly for them, which was blindingly fast for anyone else, quickly speeding up to totally insane speeds. Cracks and thuds of impossibly fast blows echoed off the walls as they fought. Nabiki watched for a moment, trying to pick out individual moves, having severe difficulty keeping up even now after months of training, before looking sideways at the three girls when she felt their shock. She grinned. All three were gaping at the action, hardly breathing, clearly having trouble believing what they were watching.

"Holy shit," Rei breathed after a few disbelieving seconds. "This is practice? For fun?"

"Yes, they're not really going at it seriously. They're a lot faster when they really try." The middle Tendo smirked at the look all three of them gave her. "Really. You wouldn't believe how fast they can go if they have to."

"I can't believe how fast they're going now," Rei muttered, looking back to the two martial artists, who seemed to be having fun. They watched as Kasumi jumped vertically, doing the splits, as Ranma lunged under her, somehow performing a twisting flip in mid air to end up heading downwards at his back with her fists leading, only to have him rotate sideways and deflect her to the side, while recoiling in the other direction. Landing lightly on the wall he bounced off heading back into the fight, grabbing his wife as he passed her and spinning her upwards, until she touched the ceiling. On the way back down she caught his arm, reeled him in before he could react, then flipped him head over heels across the room.

Laughing, he landed easily, back-flipping twice in a blur of motion, then closed with her again, their style instantly changing completely, now involving a lot of kick-boxing moves combined with something like Karate. Nabiki smiled, impressed, while the three other girls simply stared.

When both participants suddenly produced a pair of energy swords at the same time they changed to yet another style, Hotaru yelped in shock while Rei and Ami both swore. Laughing slightly, Nabiki watched them nearly as much as her sister and her partner, amused at the expressions. After
another minute or two Rei looked at Ami, who stared back. "We're seriously outclassed here," she
mumbled. The blue-haired girl nodded, a wide-eyed look on her face. They turned to Nabiki, the
sounds of the energy swords deflecting each other forming a background noise like an SF movie.

"I thought that you looked pretty impressive earlier, but this... This is a completely different level,
isn't it?" Ami asked quietly, waving to the two sparring people, who were smiling as they fought.

"It is. This is why I'm not sure I'll ever be anywhere near as good as they are." She smiled, sighing
a little. "They're simply unbelievable. Ranma is going easy on her, to be honest, although she's still
getting steadily better very fast. She's already better than he was when he left, although he had
more practical experience then than she does now. There's a very good reason he's the Grand
Master of the school. She's past master level after only about five years, already much better than
our father or his even though they both have more than twenty years more experience than she
does. I would think they probably know some tricks and techniques Kasumi doesn't, but not
many." She watched them spar for a moment more. "Ranma is so far beyond that it's not even
funny. He's never going to stop learning, and he's not going to stop teaching her until she's his
equal, however long it takes."

"I can't really understand that level of dedication," Rei said after a few seconds.

"It's somewhat scary, to be honest. So is Kasumi telling me I could be as good as her. I can't see
how, watching this sort of thing." Nabiki laughed a bit, remembering a discussion she'd had a
couple of weeks ago while on holiday. "Look at it like this. It's how Ranma explained it to me a
while ago." She tapped the floor with her foot. "Down there is the average street brawler, gang
member, something like that, no real training but some experience. Around here," she indicated a
spot on the wall a centimetre up, "is someone trained in normal self-defence techniques to a decent
level. Rather higher, about here," she moved up ten centimetres, "is a seriously trained normal
martial artist, or special forces operative, that type of person." All three of them watched her with
interest.

"Move to about here," now she was indicating a spot about thirty centimetres up, "You get
something like one of the fairly good but unspectacular Neriman martial artists, or most magical
girls who aren't trained in fighting." Her hand went up another two centimetres. "About here is me,
according to Ranma. Mainly because I'm much faster and stronger than most people, not because
I'm very practised at the moment. Akane is here, quite a bit higher. Shampoo somewhere rather
higher than that. Cologne is up here, Aiko and the others would be around here as well at the
moment." Her hand went up another thirty centimetres. "Both our fathers are somewhere between
her and Shampoo, closer to Cologne, Ryoga would be about that level as well, and some of the
high-end Neriman artists." They all nodded. "Go up here and you reach Herb, with Saffron above
him." She moved another forty centimetres, now about a third of the way up the wall. "Got it?"
Once more they nodded.

"Right. Kasumi is about here," she pointed to the ceiling. She shrugged a little, staring up at where
she was pointing. "Ranma? Somewhere well above the roof." There was silence for a while.

"Wow." They all looked at Hotaru, who was staring up as well.

"It's only a rough guide, and probably not all that accurate, because it doesn't take other abilities
like ki and magic into account, but it gives you an idea. From what I've learned Ranma is
undoubtedly the best around, by an absolutely massive amount. Kasumi is already the only serious
competition he's likely to have. Everyone else is a long, long way behind." She turned back to
watch the sparring. "Five years ago he nearly died fighting Saffron and only won due to a
combination of luck and sheer determination, something he's happy to confirm. Now, he wouldn't
really notice. Kasumi could take Saffron as well in several different ways, according to Ranma, and I've got no reason to disbelieve him. Aiko or any of the others could deal with Cologne or any of the Amazons without too much effort. Me, I'd get my ass handed to me by Shampoo, or even Akane, in a fair hand to hand fight. Not that I'd fight fairly, believe me. Ryoga would be extremely hazardous as well if he was seriously pissed off, although because he's an idiot I could outwit him easily." She laughed, while they grinned. "Taking my shirt off then hitting him with a bucket of cold water while he was gaping would be the obvious method." Hotaru started giggling.

"What it all adds up to is that the title of Grand Master of the Anything Goes School is a pretty amazing thing to have earned. He knows more about martial arts than possibly anyone who's ever lived." She glanced at them again. All three girls looked impressed and somewhat intimidated, making her smile slightly. "But he's also a really nice person who only wants the best for everyone. Although he'll defend anything or anyone he feels needs it like a rabid demon, to the death. Which will in all likelihood be someone else's." Rei shook her head, laughing at the comment.

"Amazing."

"That it is." They watched as Kasumi and her husband finished their spar, vanishing the energy blades, then bowed to each other, before hugging. Turning to the four women the pair walked over, smiling.

"That was fun, dear. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ranma inspected Ami and her friends for a moment, then looked at Nabiki, who grinned back at him. "You did pretty well, Nabs. I think we need to ramp up your training a little, though, to make up for missing it for a few days."

She groaned faintly. "Don't call me Nabs." Clapping her on the shoulder he winked at the others, who looked amused, then waved at the door.

"Come on, let's get some breakfast then work out what the next step is." Everyone headed for the living room. Entering it they found Tamiko and Misaki talking on the sofa. The two girls looked up, smiling.

"Enjoying the SIs?" Tamiko asked. Ami and the others nodded, looking very happy.

"More than I can say," the blue-haired girl said, shaking her head a little. "The thing is unbelievable. It linked into my phone, communicator and computer without any trouble at all, the computer is now just being used as a sensory package, apparently. I don't even need to take it out most of the time. Other than that, they're both redundant. I don't need a watch, or a phone, or a TV, or..." She grinned.

"It's pretty incredible," Tamiko agreed. "After a little while you wonder how you ever did without one." She looked at the others. "We need to show them all the things we've learned, all the little tricks that the manual doesn't really cover."

"We were talking about that earlier," Nabiki replied. "I think we should be able to put together a package of useful techniques and sent it to their SIs, which should help a lot. Things like the flight instrumentation, night vision, all the stuff we use a lot of the time." She turned to Ami and her friends. "A lot of these things tended to come up when we needed them. It's all listed in the manual but you don't necessarily work it out until during or after the fact. I think we can jump-start that a bit."

"We'll need to start training you all as well, fairly soon," Ranma added, sitting down and turning
female half-way through the motion, making Ami and Rei stare, then exchange glances. No one else seemed to notice. "We need to deal with the time device first, of course. After breakfast I'm going to go and see L'dnr'k, to see if he's had any luck. Assuming he has, I'll contact the SI makers and start arranging the antimatter weapons. I want to push ahead with this as fast as we can, but until we can get at the thing we can't do much except prepare." He looked up as Aiko appeared with Fumiko by the balcony doors, smiling briefly at her, then looked back at the rest of them. "Do you three want to stick around today, or go back?"

They exchanged glances. "I think I should go back," Hotaru said slightly reluctantly, sitting down. "Haruka isn't right at the moment. I don't want to leave her alone."

"I'll take you back later, then," Aiko told her, sitting next to her.

"Thanks." The girl looked around at them all. "And thank you for a wonderful time. I'm sorry I caused all that trouble on the asteroid." She blushed a little, her eyes downcast. Kasumi knelt next her, smiling gently.

"It wasn't your fault, as I told you at the time. No one blames either you or Rei for what happened. In the end no one got hurt, it can't happen again, so forget it, all right, dear?" The girl nodded, smiling at the older woman.

"Thank you, Kasumi," she replied.

"It's no trouble. Now, would you like to help me with breakfast?" Hotaru nodded again, jumping to her feet and following the elder Tendo into the kitchen, everyone else watching.

"As she said, thanks, everyone," Rei added. "Although I know it was the time machine, I'm still embarrassed about what happened. Other than that, it's been amazing. Grandfather isn't going to believe it. The bits I can tell him, anyway."

Kasumi smiled at her. "Your grandfather is a good man, he'll understand there are things you can't mention. He's known about you all for years and never said anything, has he?"

"True. I still can't believe he knew all that time." Rei shook her head in wonder. "He's a cagey old guy."

"He wasn't always a priest. You should talk to him about some of the things he did when he was young," Ranma suggested, smiling mysteriously but saying nothing else. The other woman studied her, looking intrigued.

"I'll do that," she replied slowly. Nabiki watched her, then looked at Ranma, wondering what she'd learned from the old priest. The red-head winked at her, making her smile slightly. 'Rei might be in for a shock,' she thought with amusement. Getting up she went to help her sister and Hotaru in the kitchen, still smiling.
Chapter 81

Catching up on a few other people...

Entering the Cat Café, Nodoka smiled at Mousse, who for once was wearing his glasses. The young man smiled back, coming over to her. "Mrs Saotome, it's nice to see you. It's been a while. What brings you here?

"Hello, Mousse. Yes, I haven't seen you for months. I hope you're well?" The man nodded at her question. "I had business in the area and thought I would drop in on my way home for some ramen, I haven't any of Cologne's cooking for some time." She looked around the restaurant, which was nearly empty at this point in the morning, after breakfast but before lunch, smiling slightly. "Do you have a free table?" He grinned.

"Of course. Just there by the window." He led her over. "I got the invitation to Ukyo and Konatsu's wedding, by the way. Shampoo tells me you're arranging it. How is that coming along, there was no location given?" The Saotome matriarch sat gratefully on the chair he politely pulled out for her.

"Thank you, Mousse. I've been walking quite a lot today and needed a break." She sighed a little, answering his question. "It's not going quite as well as I'd hoped to be honest. The wedding planning itself is coming along well but the location is proving to be awkward. We've looked at seven different places so far but all of them had problems. One is already booked up for weddings for the next three months, another one has some sort of construction going on, that sort of thing. Ukyo didn't like two of them and Konatsu didn't like another one. Quite frustrating." She sighed gently once more, nodding her thanks as he handed her a menu. "But never fear, we'll work it out. Um, let's see... Can I have a bowl of the beef noodles, please, and a pot of tea?"

"Of course. I'll be right back." Smiling, he left her, heading for the kitchen. Nodoka pulled a notebook from her purse and flipped it open to the right page, reading her notes, then made a few changes, scratching out two things from a list and adding three more. Shaking her head with a small smile she looked up as he came back, placing a tray with the requested items on it on the table, before unloading it.

"Thank you, Mousse." He gave her some disposable chopsticks as well. Putting the notebook away she popped them apart with a practised gesture, trying some of the noodles, then nodding her satisfaction. "As lovely as ever. Cologne is a very good cook."

The young man poured her tea for her, smiling. "She's good at all sorts of things. The Elder is a remarkable woman."

"That she is. I'm glad that all the unpleasantness of past years seems to be behind us now. She and the rest of you have become good friends and neighbours, despite some early... awkwardness." He grinned at her words, picking up the tray and casually slipping it into the sleeve of his robe where it vanished without trace, making her smile.

"There were some interesting things that happened then, yes. It was... frustrating, annoying, and weirdly enjoyable in some ways." Sipping her tea she watched him for a moment as he seemed to be remembering some of those things. Eventually he shook his head once. "But that's all in the past. We're all different people now in various ways."
"Indeed. We regret our actions, I suspect, certainly I do, but you can't change the past. What's done is done. Overall, things seem to have worked out fairly well in most respects. With one or two regrettable exceptions." Nodoka sipped some more tea, her eyes distant, while Mousse nodded slowly. After a pause she looked up again. "But enough about that. What are you up to these days?" She grinned. "Still chasing Shampoo?"

Looking amused yet regretful, the young Chinese man pulled out a chair, after making a gesture to it and having her nod in return. "I am still in love with Shampoo, yes, I doubt that will ever change, but in recent months I've realised that I stand little chance ever winning her approval using the methods I've tried before. Some of them were... not well thought out." Nodoka laughed out loud at this, making him look embarrassed, yet smile.

"If even half what I heard was true I think that may be something of an understatement. Your persistence was only matched by your lack of common sense, I believe. No offence intended, of course."

The man chuckled. "None taken. You're completely right. I was young and obsessed. As obsessed as Shampoo was in her pursuit of your son, if not more so. I've only really worked that out fairly recently. It's a bit embarrassing, to be honest. Some of the things I did were very dishonourable. To Shampoo as well as others. Why it took me so long to realise this is a mystery to me."

"You were in love, and young. That's a bad combination, trust the words of your elders on this," the Saotome woman said with a deliberately grave look. He bowed his head, his lips twitching.

"You are undoubtedly correct, honoured Elder." Nodoka giggled a little, looking highly amused.

"Thank you, Mousse. But I think I'm not quite at the point of being a proper Elder yet. I need a century or two more."

Smirking, the young man shrugged slightly. "I think you'd make a good one." She coloured slightly, causing him to chuckle again.

"Smooth, Mousse, very smooth. Keep practising and you may stand a chance with Shampoo yet."

Mousse sighed, still smiling a little. "I hope so, but it's going to be difficult with her in the US."

"She'll come and visit regularly, I'm sure." Nodoka looked sympathetically at the man. "Akane is certainly planning on coming back as often as she can. That remarkable young woman Aiko seems perfectly willing to transport them back and forth for the moment, a very generous thing to do even if she finds it so easy, so I expect you'll still see her a lot. Perhaps you might even like to try your chances in the US as well. I'm sure Adrian would be interested in someone as skilled as you are. Even Shampoo thinks highly of your abilities, she's said as much in the past."

The man looked mildly surprised but pleased as well. "That's nice to hear. It could be an interesting thing to do, but I think for the time being it would be better if I left her alone. I'm already guilty of chasing her obsessively from China to here on more than one occasion. Following her to the US would only fuel her worries that I was trying the same thing again, which wouldn't impress her. And I don't want to detract from either her or Akane's career beginnings."

Smiling, Nodoka nodded her approval. "You are becoming a wiser man, Mousse. You're most likely right. Even so, I would suggest that you visit them at some point. Keep it low key, show interest in and support for what she's doing, that will produce a favourable impression."

He listened with an interested expression. "Sounds like decent advice, thank you, Mrs Saotome. I'll
let them become established before I visit, though."

"Good luck." Nodoka refilled her tea from the small pot on the table. "How is Cologne getting on? I haven't seen her for a few days."

"She's upstairs at the moment," he replied, looking around as the only other customer in the restaurant at the moment finished and motioned to him. "Excuse me, I just need to deal with this." She watched, eating slowly, as he sorted out the financial transaction, opening the till and putting the money the man handed him away, before returning to her. "Sorry about that. The Elder was out late last night, I'm not sure where she went, but she looked rather worried this morning. She's been studying some of her magic texts all morning. Shampoo looked upset as well."

"How curious." Nodoka looked at him with concern. "I hope nothing serious is going on."

Shrugging, Mousse responded, "I don't know what's going on. I do know that Cologne has been researching some very unusual form of magic she has detected on and off in the area for some time, but I believe that stopped a while ago. She never did find out what it was, where it came from, or who was behind it. Then she felt something very odd from the direction if Minato the night before last, something big, she said. I think she went to investigate it last night. But I don't have any more idea than that, she hasn't told me anything." He shook his head, looking mildly offended. "She hardly ever tells me anything. However, if I had to guess, she found something that she wasn't expecting and didn't much like."

Finishing her ramen Nodoka put the chopsticks neatly across the empty bowl, then put the last of her tea into the cup. "Oh, dear. I hope it's not something dangerous. Minato seems to be a very unusual place judging by the stories I've heard, and the things I've seen on the news. Meeting those girls over the last few months has shown me there's a lot of good there, but I suppose there's also likely to be a lot of bad as well. They certainly all seem to be involved in some very strange battles from what I hear."

"I don't know, I'm afraid. Elder Cologne did say the earlier magic she was tracing wasn't apparently dangerous, so if this new thing, whatever it is, is related, hopefully it's not hazardous either. But she certainly seems to be a little... disconcerted, at least, by whatever she found." The tray reappeared from his sleeve and he put everything but her cup on it. When she finished the last of the tea she put the cup on the tray as well. "Shampoo left quite early, I think she was going to see Akane for some more training before work, they often do that. She was looking... I don't know, scared is too strong a word, but worried doesn't quite cover it. It was a bit strange."

"Odd." The elder Saotome woman puzzled over it for a moment. "I expect she'll tell Akane, who will probably tell me." Standing she picked up her purse and removed a few notes. "Thank you for the meal, Mousse, and the chat. It's been very nice talking to you."

"And you, Mrs Saotome," he replied politely, also standing, accepting the payment. "Please stop by more often."

"I may well do that." She smiled at him. "Keep the change, good luck with Shampoo, and I'll see you another time. Please give my best wishes to the Elder as well, ask her to stop by for tea when she has the time."

"I'll let her know." The young man nodded to the older woman, then watched as she left, before turning to help the next customer who entered as she left.

"She said what?" Akane whispered in horrified shock. Shampoo nodded glumly, glancing at her,
before going back to looking at the skyline. Both girls were sitting on the roof of the Dojo, having finished a spar during which Akane had fairly easily trounced the Amazon, whose mind was clearly and atypically not on the match.

"Apparently she is 'watching my career with interest' according to Great-grandmother. The implication is that she's watching you as well. Her and whoever the hell she works for." Shampoo shivered while Akane looked somewhat ill. "I'm not at all sure I wanted to know that."

"Talk about pressure to get it right," the Tendo woman mumbled, flopping back onto the roof and watching the clouds go by. When she saw one that suddenly reminded her of Ms Aoyama in profile, she closed her eyes hurriedly, trying to forget it. "How on earth did the Elder bump into... her... anyway?"

"She went to Minato last night to investigate whatever it was she found, I think. She won't talk about it but I have a feeling she found more than she was expecting. I guess she was more worried about that weird magic surge or whatever it was than she let on the other day." Shampoo sighed, lying next to her friend. "She looked scared, to be honest. I can't remember the last time I saw her look like that."

"It takes a lot to scare Cologne," Akane admitted in a low voice. "But meeting Ms Aoyama would do it, I think."

Both young women fell silent for a while. "What do we do?" Shampoo finally asked.

"Stay out of trouble and do the best we can," her friend replied, looking at her for a moment. "Which is more or less what we intended to do anyway. We just have to remember that there are worse things than disappointing our friends and family..." Both of them shuddered, going back to looking at the clouds.

Closing one of the folders his old friend in Nerima had copied and sent him a while ago, Sergeant Harada leaned back in his chair and pondered what he'd found out. 'Elder Ku Lon, aka Cologne, three hundred year old Chinese Amazon martial artist and mage. I thought I recognised her. I wonder what she's doing poking around in Minato? We're a little out of her normal area. She looked... concerned and somewhat intrigued. Is that a good thing? Or not...?' He puzzled over it for a while, looking up as one of his colleagues held up a cup of coffee with a quizzical expression on the other side of the room. Nodding, he smiled, accepting the cup the man brought over, then going back to the folder, reading a couple of entries with raised eyebrows while sipping the coffee.

'Definitely worth keeping an eye on. I wonder if I should mention it to Yori? Assuming she doesn't already know, which is entirely possible.' He smirked to himself for a moment. 'Not much goes on around here that those two don't know about.' Turning to his computer he thought for a moment, then wrote a quick and carefully worded email to Norio, hitting 'send' after he was sure it said exactly what he intended and nothing else. 'Kind of odd, though. Akane Tendo turning up here out of the blue, with all the fuss that entailed, along with Shampoo, also an Amazon. Nabiki Tendo, I've seen here around here several times, she seems to recognise me as well, which is a bit weird since we've never spoken. Although from what Norio said she could well have dossiers on every cop in the station.' He grinned, remembering the odd respect with which his friend had spoken of the middle Tendo woman. Respect mixed with just the tiniest bit of fear.

'Not someone you want to cross, he said. Judging by these records, that's good advice. Not a magical girl but dangerous enough in her own way.' Harada finished his coffee, dropping the disposable cup into the bin under his desk. 'And now Cologne, poking around in the park and doing some sort of magic, if what I saw was right. It sort of had that feel to it.' He, like a lot of the cops in
Minato and especially this area, was more aware of magic than most people, even if he knew very little about it he knew it when he saw it. Interestingly enough, all people with some connection to one Ranma Saotome, and the missing elder Tendo sister, Kasumi. I wonder why they all seem to be turning up around here recently?"

Thinking it over for a while, he eventually locked the folders away again, standing up and heading out for his morning rounds. 'I'm beginning to think it might be a good idea to ask Yori about it. Very politely, of course, I certainly don't want to upset her, aside from anything else she's a friend, but there are a lot of weird interactions going on in Minato over the last few months. I'm getting a little curious...'

The sergeant left the station, still pondering his next move.

Rei watched the other people in the room with her, privately amazed that they all looked so normal. She was still digesting all the revelations from the previous day. The interworld travel, the alien spacecraft, walking around on the moon, all the extraordinary things she's done and seen in the last five days, were amazing enough, but she'd been quite serious about how what she'd experienced yesterday had been far more shocking. Seeing a woman she'd known about for some years, even if she didn't actually know her, turn into a completely different one was startling, certainly, but not completely out of the range of the possible. Some of the magical girls she knew did something vaguely similar although nowhere near as complete or as quickly.

But to find out that woman in turn became a man, and in fact started out as one, was... very damn shocking. She didn't know why it was so weird to her, but she knew it was. She also understood why Ranma had wanted to keep the number of people who knew about it to a minimum, leaving aside the issues of his earlier life, which sounded horrible from many different viewpoints. Studying him, she felt a wave of sympathy go through her once more. He'd clearly had some very unpleasant things happen at far too young an age, something she thought was very wrong. His parents, mainly his father, had a lot to answer for. In all honesty she found it quite surprising he'd turned out as well adjusted as he had, although she suspected that Kasumi had been heavily involved with that.

She thought about the pair for a while. They were very obviously in love, deeply and completely, something that explained a number of things she'd noticed between 'Yori' and 'Chou' which had slightly puzzled her during previous interactions. Neither one of them was particularly demonstrative about their relationship most of the time but when she looked for it she could easily see it. 'No wonder Yori, or Ranma, acted like she did when Haruka hurt Kasumi. I'm slightly surprised Haruka is still alive.' After watching the display in the other room before breakfast, that surprise was even stronger than it would have otherwise been. It was abundantly clear that if he wanted to the martial artist could have dealt with them all single-handedly, not even needing to use any of the special effects he was so good at.

Very glad that the insanely dangerous abilities were tempered with considerable restraint and a very strong dislike for unnecessary damage or death, she shuddered slightly, thinking about what could have happened. If Usagi in her current frame of mind, for instance, had possessed such abilities, half of Tokyo would probably be missing by now. Noticing Ranma looking at her with an expression she felt meant he was probably aware of her general line of thought, she smiled slightly at him, an expression which was returned in kind, before he resumed talking to Aiko. Kasumi gave her a look as well, as did Nabiki. The two Tendo sisters seemed mildly amused.

Going back to ruminating on the previous days activities, she finished her miso soup, reaching for her chopsticks. 'I was flying yesterday! With actual wings, my wings! It's totally crazy. And I can't
"wait to do it again." Rei stopped in mid motion as a strong yearning to repeat what she'd done swept over her. Beside her, Ami looked curiously at her.

"Are you all right?" The sound of her friend's voice in her head made her twitch slightly. Finishing the action she'd started, she picked up a piece of fish between her chopsticks and put it in her mouth, chewing slowly.

"I think so," she replied, a faint smile crossing her face. "Although I'm still having trouble believing all this. I'm eating and talking to you at the same time, for god's sake! Using some weird alien magitech given to us by the strangest group of people I've ever met." She glanced sideways at the other girl, who looked around then nodded, smiling.

"I know what you mean, I think. It's a bit unusual, certainly."

"Just a little." Ami sent her a video feed of herself, making her start giggling. Closing her eyes she tried using the third-person view to locate her breakfast with, succeeding more easily than she expected. "This is insane. It's going to take a lot of getting used to."

When she opened her eyes again everyone was watching her with amusement. Flushing slightly, she stared back. "What? Never seen anyone use someone else's eyes to eat with?"

Nabiki laughed. "I'd be more worried if you used someone else's mouth..." She cracked up, shaking her head.

"This has been the most surreal experience I've ever had and I've seen some weird shit while I've been in the magical girl club. But I'm very glad we ended up here, even if how we got here was unpleasant." Looking around at all the new friends she had, she smiled.

"I think we're all glad," Kasumi replied, seeming pleased. She looked at the tall woman for a moment, sipping her tea, then put her cup down.

"OK, so you turn into Chou, and a mermaid, and a flying girl. What else do you turn into? You mentioned you had various personae for different purposes but haven't shown us any of them yet." Rei raised her eyebrows when Kasumi became a completely different woman even as she spoke, a short-haired ice-blonde with hazel eyes, shorter although still fairly tall, who clearly had Northern European ancestry mixed with Japanese. The new woman smiled as she and the others stared.

"It's nice to meet you, Rei. I'm Rika Nygaard, third-year medical student. My father is Danish, my mother is Japanese." Her voice, low-pitched for a woman, had a slight foreign accent, presumably the Danish one she mentioned. Rei gaped for a moment, inspecting her closely. 'Rika' smiled back confidently. It was remarkable, even the body language changed, without knowing the truth she'd have had no idea at all it was Kasumi. As she thought about it she realised that in fact that was one of the oddest things about their changes, all the little things like intonations in speech, body language, mannerisms, a whole host of small but vital details, changed from one persona to another. Ranma in female form and Ranma in male form were clearly the same person, for example, all the details other than the obvious stayed the same, yet 'Yori' was different. She talked differently, held herself differently, moved differently, in small, subtle, but important ways. This was another example of that.

"That's amazingly impressive," Ami said wonderingly, apparently having noticed the same thing. "You'd be an incredible actor. You're a totally different person." 'Rika' grinned at her, inclining her head in acknowledgement.

"That's the point, Ami. It takes a lot of practice to change all the normally unconscious cues you
give off to other people, but they make the effect much stronger. Ranma is better at it than I am, I'll admit, but I think I'm quite good now."

"You're freakishly good at it and you know it, sis," Nabiki snickered, watching with a smile. "Yes, Ranma is better, but he's just weird."

Everyone looked at the martial artist, who shimmered into a different person as well. The brunette, her hair in the same style as Yori but wearing stylish female clothes, sunglasses perched on her nose, smiled prettily at them. "Ranma? Who's he? I'm Maiko." She held out her hand across the table to Hotaru, who giggled and shook it. "I'm pleased to meet all of you."

Once again Rei saw the body language had changed. This girl sounded and acted like a girl, not like Ranma's female form, who sounded and acted like Ranma. She laughed, watching 'Maiko' go back to eating. "Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. If I hadn't seen it I'd have no clue. How many of these different personae do you have?"

The girl gestured unconcernedly, smiling a little. "Oh, a dozen or so that we used quite a lot, at least that many more we used on and off. Some have proper identification as well, if they got used enough, I know someone who's very good at producing convincing IDs. Mine are about half male, half female, Kasumi has more female than male." She sudden changed again, becoming a tiny woman with shoulder length black hair, dressed in a traditional style, who bowed slightly to them in her seat. Shyly not meeting their eyes, she said, "It's very nice to meet you, Miss Hino. I hope you have found breakfast to your liking." Rei stared in amazement.

'Rika' shimmered, becoming an elegant middle-aged woman with her hair up in a bun, a pair of chopsticks through it, wearing an incredibly elaborate and expensive silk dress. "Asami!" she snapped in a haughty upper-class voice, "do not speak out of turn. Go and find Shin, I require him to drive me to the opera."

"Yes, Miss," the young woman said, shimmering again. The enormous man sitting in her place was wearing a chauffeurs uniform and appeared disgruntled. "You rang, my lady?" he said in a very deep voice, taking off his hat and looking at it with distaste. "I'm a bodyguard, not a driver, ma'am."

Rei started giggling, exchanging glances with Ami and Hotaru. The purple-haired girl was watching wide-eyed, having jumped quite sharply when the huge man had appeared, a wide grin forming on her face, while Ami stared in amused wonder. 'Shin' glanced at her, frowning slightly. "You got a problem, girl?" She shook her head, still giggling.

"Shin! Pay attention!"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, appearing mildly annoyed, sighing, then throwing Hotaru a quick wink. "I saw that! Go and get the car ready, and send in Mariko, my husband wishes to have a word with her." The man sighed again, seeming very put upon, then vanished, replaced with an extremely curvaceous young woman in her mid-twenties with long lilac hair past her waist, who looked around, one finger at her mouth. She smiled a little uncertainly, looking back to the imperious woman, who was replaced with a tall, very handsome blonde man in a nice suit.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she asked in a very feminine voice that sounded playful and sexy. The man nodded.

"I did. I wanted to introduce you to my guests, you'll be taking care of them while they're here. They are prominent members of the magical girl community so be on your best behaviour." He
looked sternly at her, smiling broadly as she nodded, looking around again. She had an expression of awe on her face.

"Magical girls! Eee!" The girl clapped her hands, shifting into a much younger pink-haired girl dressed for a party, who bounced up and down in her seat, looking excited. "Do you have pretty dresses and magic wands and fight horrible things from the depths of hell and then kiss your boyfriend and dance?" All this came out in one long stream of words. Staring at Rei expectantly the girl waited, smiling. Rei gaped, then looked at her friends, before all of them collapsed in laughter. Aiko and the others were grinning widely.

"Oh my god, that's absolutely amazing," Rei gasped, heaving with laughter. All the various people had worn different clothes, had different voices, accents, body language, and mannerisms, to a level she found hard to believe. It was an utterly convincing display that left her in awe.

"They can keep that up for ages when they're in the right mood," Nabiki commented, chuckling. "I still can't believe how good they are at it and how they keep all these different people straight. Between them there must be dozens."

Ranma and his wife shimmered back into their normal forms, smiling. "It's good practice. Recently we haven't has as much need for all the different personae, although in the beginning it was necessary. Maiko is the one I use for University and general contact with other people. That started due to the curse, before I had the control over it I do now, and it was easier to just keep it up. She's as real as Yori, although not a magical girl, just a medical student. A good one, though, her lecturers seem to like her." He laughed slightly. "She's a lesbian as well, in a relationship with Rika, who she loves very much."

"I use Rika for the same purpose," Kasumi added, finishing her tea. "Ranma is more convincing in the female roles than I am in the male ones, although I think I'm becoming fairly good at them now."

"You convinced me, certainly," Ami assured her. "It's quite remarkable. Changing form is one thing, as incredible as it is, but having all the other little details as well, consistently, that's more than impressive. You're better than any actor I've ever heard of."

"The illusion spell takes care of a lot of the overall body language and general movement patterns," Ranma told her, "but there's still a lot of practice needed for speech patterns, intonations, accents, that sort of thing, which are important as well. People are amazingly willing to accept what they see and hear as real which certainly helps in most cases but you still need to be careful. I think we've done a good job, no one has ever seen through it so far."

"I'm not surprised," Rei remarked, studying him. "Aside from anything else, why would they even have cause to suspect anything was going on? You're so convincing most people would never believe it." After a moment she smiled. "Although I've been meaning to ask, why keep the Yori braid even like this?" He reached back and pulled his braid around, waving it at her with a grin. Aside from not currently having Yori's signature bow on the end it was otherwise much the same.

"It's real. At first it was easier to only change as little as possible, so I grew it out. Now we've improved the spell so much I don't need it, but I kind of like it. I'm used to it."

"I like it," Hotaru put in, grinning at him. "I think it suits you." Smiling at her he looked pleased. The girl looked at Rei with an amused expression. "Your hair is nearly as long, Rei, you should braid it like that."

"Hey, I like my hair fine the way it is, thanks," she protested, giggling.
Ami looked at Nabiki. "I know you said you can't do that illusion magic like they can yet, so you use a pre-packaged spell for 'Azumi'. Do you have any others?"

The middle Tendo smiled a little oddly. "One or two. Nothing like they do, of course."

"Can we see them?" Rei asked curiously. Nabiki looked at Kasumi, who looked back.

"Sure. None of them are particularly exciting, though. You've seen the mer-form and flying ones, I've got those for both 'Azumi' and me, plus this one..." She shimmered, watching them with amusement as they stared. Her ears cocked forward, pointing Ami as the blue-haired girl made a sound of surprise. The horse-girl version of 'Azumi' stood and moved away from the table, turning around with her arms out, flipped her tail from side to side, then retook her seat. "No real reason for it aside from the fact it was something Ranma came up with during training and I kind of liked it. I spend a couple of days like this. Amazing what you get used to."

"It would be good at some sort of comic convention," Rei giggled once she got over her surprise. Nabiki laughed, twitching an ear, a grin on her 'Azumi' face.

"I thought about that. Sis isn't sure, but Ranma and I both think we could have a lot of fun at an event like that." Everyone looked at Ranma and Kasumi, the martial artist snickering and his wife looking mildly disapproving. After a few seconds she began laughing as well.

"I'll admit it could be amusing," she allowed, then looked serious. "but only when we're not trying to save all of reality." Ranma put his arm around her.

"I promise I'll save the world before I confuse people for fun, love."

"Good. You have to keep your priorities straight after all." They grinned at each other.

"Any others?" Ami asked Nabiki, who resumed her normal appearance. She nodded, looking around at her friends, who all had weird smiles.

"There is one more. I'm not too sure you want to see it, though." Ami, Rei, and Hotaru all glanced at each other.

"Oh, now we have to see it," the violet-haired girl exclaimed. "Come on, show us!"

Nabiki gazed at them all for a moment. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you..."

Seconds later they stared at the green-haired woman in the expensive suit who was sitting where Kasumi's sister had been, inspecting them coldly through amazingly dark glasses. She looked around slowly, a wave of cold radiating from her, before lowering her sunglasses and peering with chilly interest at Ami, who flinched, wide-eyed. Hotaru had her hand over her mouth, staring in horrified surprise. When the blue cats-eyes met her own, Rei sucked in a shocked breath. There was something more disturbing about the person she was looking at than anything she'd ever seen before although she'd have been hard-pressed to say why. The woman was just wrong on some fundamental level, far below conscious thought.

"Ah. Ms Rei Hino, Ms Ami Mizuno, and Ms Hotaru Tomoe. Interesting. I have been following the exploits of your particular group with considerable interest for some time. Recent events are most regrettable. I do hope they are at an end. It would be... problematic... if we were obliged to step in and rectify the issue ourselves. My employers are disinclined to intervene directly under normal circumstances but would make an exception in this case. My personal preference would preclude such an eventuality due to the quantity of extra work it would entail dealing with the aftermath." She did something that made Rei twitch, something that was almost but not entirely completely
Unlike a smile. "My apologies. I am Ms Aoyama. It is gratifying to make your acquaintance."

There was no sound around the table. Rei's eyes darted about, seeing that Ranma was smiling, Kasumi had a blank expression that she suspected concealed a certain amount of amusement, while Aiko and the other girls were watching 'Ms Aoyama' with worried interest. She refocussed on the woman when she cleared her throat politely. "Ms Hino? You appear to be mildly distressed. May I aid you in some manner to overcome this?" She found she couldn't look away, staring in horror like a bird looking at a snake.

"Oh, god, that's terrifying," Ami mumbled, causing 'Ms Aoyama' to turn her attention to the blue-haired woman. Rei slumped as the gaze left her, sweating.

"Thank you, Ms Mizuno, your statement is noted and appreciated." Ami didn't seem to find this even slightly comforting. A sound to one side made them all look, to see Hotaru staring with huge eyes, making muffled noises behind her hands. "Ms Tomoe?"

The girl dropped her hands, her mouth working, then collapsed laughing. "Oh, Nabiki, that's amazing. It's horrifying, but it's amazing. I love it." Everyone stared at her for several seconds as she giggled. 'Ms Aoyama' raised an eyebrow, replacing her dark glasses and leaning back in her chair. She studied the giggling girl for a moment, sitting completely still in a distinctly inhuman manner.

"A most unusual reaction, Ms Tomoe. I am intrigued." The emotionless face held for another few seconds, then cracked as 'Ms Aoyama' began laughing herself. Rei relaxed, surprised at how tense she'd become, when the hugely creepy aura that had filled the room vanished completely.

"Holy shit, Nabiki, that's unbelievable," she said as the middle Tendo retook her normal appearance. Nabiki grinned.

"Thanks. It's a lot of fun as well. For some reason that sort of cold emotionless persona comes easily to me, which the techniques Ranma taught me for suppressing emotions added to immensely. I guess I'm just odd."

"She's extremely good at it and getting steadily better," Ranma said proudly, smiling at his sister-in-law. "The ki signature she gives off is deliberately warped, which makes people amazingly uncomfortable even if they don't know what they're feeling, but the rest is pure Nabiki. Ms Aoyama comes in handy more often than you'd think."

Ami was still staring at the middle Tendo with her mouth open. After a moment she turned to look at Tamiko, who grinned at her. "Wait. Wait, wait, wait! All that stuff you were terrifying me with, about Ms Aoyama, all the things she knows, how she's always watching everyone, and it's been Azumi all along? I mean, Nabiki?" She was slowly going red. Tamiko laughed, nodding. "The one everyone is worried about, even the PSIA, the woman who scares entire governments rigid, it's Nabiki?" Her voice was rising.

"Yep. Sorry." Tamiko glanced at the middle sister, who was also grinning. "Had you going, though, didn't I?"

"You... She... How..." Ami spluttered to a halt, fuming. Rei watched her, trying not to laugh, catching Hotaru doing the same. "Oh, for god's sake," her friend finally said, crossing her arms and glaring at everyone. "The whole situation is crazy. How the hell did you end up terrifying the spooks, Nabiki? Your alter ego seems to have an amazingly scary reputation."

The brunette shrugged. "It just sort of happened, to be honest. It wasn't something any of us
originally planned. You remember we told you about Akane and how she had a massive temper control problem?" Ami nodded, still looking annoyed. "She ended up coming to Minato to meet Yori and Chou. We were waiting for her and Ranma thought I needed some sort of disguise. I've got the concealement bracelet he gave me, we told you about that, but he said I needed a good alternate persona. He and Sis came up with Reiko Aoyama between them. Then Ryoga turned up..."

Rei listened to the story, impressed and worried at the same time. The youngest sister sounded like a handful. "So you played Ms Aoyama as some alien secret agent to terrify Ryoga into staying away?"

"Exactly. It worked amazingly well. He nearly crapped himself." Nabiki chuckled, looking like the memory was one she enjoyed. Ranma had a similar expression as did the others. "I turned it down a lot for Akane and Shampoo, but it seems to have left an impression there as well even so. Neither one of them is at all keen on meeting Ms Aoyama again. I had to pull her out once more for them, which worked wonders on their behaviour. It sort of snowballed from that first time. I've been refining the character ever since."

"We came up with some good props as well," Kasumi giggled. "The folder of doom is a nice one." Nabiki produced a thick folder with writing on it they recognised as the trade language, holding it up with a smile.

"It genuinely does have interesting information in it, things I've found out about various people we've dealt with. Jun helped me create some very official if not at all human documentation, printed in Trade. It's pretty convincing." She opened the folder, pulling out a sheet of paper and handing it to Ami. Rei leaned over to look at it. There was a full colour picture of her friend in it, along with accompanying text and a couple of graphs, none of which she could read, laid out in a nicely presented manner. "Mainly unimportant details, things that aren't secret, but might not be expected to be known," the middle sister smiled. "Just in case someone who knows Trade sees it. I've found pulling this out and looking through it seems to make people very nervous. So does taking notes. I don't need to, of course, Jun is recording everything, but it's an effective tactic and adds to the effect."

"And this mysterious otherworldly agency Ms Aoyama works for...?" Rei asked.

"Is entirely non-existent," Nabiki grinned. "Shhh." Rei burst out laughing. Ami was still staring at the page she was holding, a weird expression on her face.

"I was right. You are all insane," she finally said, handing it back with a sudden smile. "God, you had me worried, Tamiko. Thanks a lot."

"You're entirely welcome," the auburn-haired woman said, chuckling. "Ms Aoyama is the creepiest person I've ever come across in my life, even knowing who she really is, but she's extremely useful. I just prefer to not have her around very often." A wave of cold swept across the table as the woman in question made a reappearance, carefully putting the page back into the folder then making it go away.

"Your reticence is understandable, Ms Tamiko, although I am not entirely sure it is appropriate. I assure you I go out of my way to present a welcoming appearance while working." She made the horrible little smile-equivalent once more. Rei shuddered. Hotaru started giggling again, making them look at her. The girl gestured apologetically, taking on a more serious expression. "Ms Aoyama' inspected her carefully. "I find you worthy of further study, Ms Tomoe. We must talk at length when I have an available period of time to investigate your atypical attitude." Shimmering back into the Tendo sister, she grinned at the younger girl, who laughed again.
"You see? It's Nabiki, someone like a sister to me, but when she's like that, I just want to run."
Tamiko looked amused.

"That tends to be the common reaction," Kasumi commented, watching her sister with pride. "It's an impressive talent."

Once they'd finished breakfast, everyone helped clear things away, before they all sat down around the living room. "So, next step, then." Ranma inspected the three girls. "When we have the current emergency dealt with, we can start training you guys properly. There's a lot to do, although since you're already experienced magical girls a lot of it should be much easier than it would otherwise be. You all have respectfully high ki levels, for instance, although none of you are really using it, except for a certain boost in strength and speed, which we can improve a lot pretty quickly. I think you'll get creating energy balls in a fairly short time, the ki pocket technique will take longer because it's a very delicate process, but you'll definitely learn it. Things like the Soul of Ice should be easy."

He turned to Hotaru. "I'll work out the best way to train you in healing, as well. It'll take a little thought, I'd like to try getting your own native abilities up to a decent level before I confuse the issue teaching you our method." The girl nodded, looking excited. "Until we try some serious tests I'm not sure how much if any ability you'll have with our magic system. None of you seem to have any odd reactions to seeing our magic in operation, though, so I'm hopeful."

Looking thoughtful, Kasumi asked, "How much experience do any of you actually have with magic in general? Not just the use of your own artefacts and abilities, but external magic."

Ami glanced at Rei and Hotaru. "I don't have much, I'll admit. I can see it in operation, or feel it, whatever you'd call it, although I have to say I don't know very much about what I'm seeing."

"I know a few simple scrying spells that Grandfather taught me," Rei added, "fire meditations, a few rituals that are supposed to keep malign influences away, if that counts. Nothing anywhere near what you can do, or a trained mage, even a low level one." Kasumi nodded, glancing at Hotaru.

"And you?"

"More or less the same as Ami. I've been trying to make sense of what I've seen you and Ranma do but it's so amazingly complicated I can't work any of it out at all."

"Good. You're much further advanced than most people, then, but not to the stage that seems to have problems with our system." The elder Tendo looked pleased. "That will help a lot. Does it cause you any discomfort when you look at it?" They all shook their heads. "Even better. That seems to be the indicator of someone who definitely can't learn our method of magic." She looked at her husband, who smiled back.

"Very promising indeed. OK, so we'll start training you on both ki manipulation and magic as soon as possible. Once we have some of the basics in place, so you can practice on your own, we can start on the martial arts. That's more time consuming, I think I can improve your fighting abilities a lot pretty quickly since you're already both strong and fast, but it will still take a lot of time and work to get to a respectable level."

"Bear in mind that what he considers a respectable level most people think is impossible," Aiko commented, grinning. Ranma laughed.

"Hey, I have high standards. And I'm certain they can do it." He studied the three some more,
scratching his ear. "Ami, you and Rei both know how to access your own magic directly. Do you, Hotaru?" The girl nodded.

"Ami showed me the day after you told them how to do it."

"All right. Good. I had an idea last night I'd like to try, but it relies on that. You know the bracelets that Aiko and the others use?" All three girls nodded. Aiko had explained them the day before on the island, demonstrating their usage. They could now remember the faces and details of the other girls. "Your own disguise spell is pretty good, but it's not as complete as theirs is. People can photograph you, remember what you look like, what you were wearing, all that sort of thing, but the spell stops them associating any of that with your 'civilian' identity. The bracelet magic goes further, it prevents photography, or any memory of details aside from a recognition of names. I think I can use the spell you already have and copy the bracelet spell over the top of it, give you an upgrade, so to speak. That might come in handy. Kas and I use a rather more effective version of the same sort of spell, based on it, in fact, but that will require some training before you can use it." Rei glanced at her friends, thinking about his words. Ami was looking thoughtful.

"That could certainly be useful. I wish something could be done about the clothing spell. I don't want to be associated with that uniform any more, not after what happened, and what it represents."

"A big lie," Hotaru muttered, scowling at the floor. Everyone watched her sympathetically.

"A big lie," Ami agreed. "but it would be nice to have suitable clothing for jumping around rooftops with. Not that the uniform could really be called suitable clothing, for almost anything." She smiled in an annoyed but resigned fashion.

"Oh, that part should be easy," Kasumi said happily. Ami, Rei, and Hotaru looked at her with differing expressions on the theme of surprise. "Do you mind if I look?"

"Um, all right," the blue-haired woman said hesitantly. "What do I have to do?"

"Nothing yet, just stand up and hold still." Ami followed instructions. Standing in front of her Kasumi moved her hands around a few inches away from her body, concentrating on something, in a very similar manner to what 'Yori' had done when she'd taught Rei to activate the magic one part at a time. Her gently glowing fingers blurred oddly as they moved. "Aha, there it is. Yes, I see. You were right, dear, it's not at all efficient. There does seem to be a lot of unnecessary extra parts to it. We really should look into optimising it at some point." She glanced at Ranma who nodded, seeming amused. "Let's see... there we go, that's the pattern for the clothing spell, this part stores the existing clothing so it can be put back after. Interesting." Dropping her hand she stepped back a pace.

"Yes, I was right, it's fairly straightforward. The magic is laid out in a modular and obvious fashion. Replacing the clothing pattern with something else is quite simple. Do you have anything in mind?"

All three young women exchanged looks. "Well, I'd like something that perhaps didn't expose quite so much skin," Ami said.

"But it has to look nice," Hotaru added. "Those silly uniforms are too..." She thought for a moment, then made a small gesture of annoyance. "Too girly." Laughing at their expressions of amusement, she went on, "I liked the colours but they're a bit like some man designed them for other men to look at, you know? Or an older woman who thought all younger women wanted to dress like that."

Kasumi smiled, while Aiko snickered. "Ours were worse. Much worse. Yours just look like a
rather over the top version of a school uniform, which is weird, but not exactly pornographic. Our were just horrible."

"They flattered my legs," Tamiko said with a slight sigh, before laughing when her team-mates all favoured her with a mutual glare. "Hey," she added, grinning, "If you've got it...

Hotaru giggled, watching them. "I could never wear something like that in public."

"It is a bit much," Kasumi said with an amused smile. "OK, so we could keep the colour scheme, that's fine. Something stylish, but less excessive. All right, that's not too hard. Anything else?"

Rei thought about it. "I like the clothes that you guys wear, the boots are practical and it looks nice, but if everyone wears the same thing it's going to look like we're building an army or something. Can we do something a little like yours but different?" Kasumi nodded at the same time as a 3D image of a generic female figure appeared near the balcony doors, slowly rotating, dressed in the clothing she wore as Chou. Everyone looked at it with interest.

"Let's try this," the elder sister said, motioning to Hotaru. "Stand up, dear, and let me see your current uniform again for reference." The girl hopped to her feet and activated her magic, a short burst of light revealing her appearing somewhat older and dressed in the clothing she'd used as a magical girl for years. She materialised her pole-arm as well, standing with it in one hand at parade rest, a serious expression on her face. Ranma studied her, grinning.

"Very nice," he complimented her, provoking a short smile. "Quite intimidating, actually. Like a cheerleader for Death." This made her giggle, looking down at herself.

"It's too frilly and complicated," she told him, adjusting the bow in the middle of her chest slightly. "All these ruffles and decorations."

"I kind of like it," Rei declared, "but I'm also more than ready for a change."

"All right, let's see," Kasumi mused out loud, inspecting Hotaru closely. "Could you turn around please, Hotaru?" The girl slowly pivoted, until she was back facing them. "Good. Now, how about..." She looked over at the projected mannequin, thinking. After a few seconds the clothing changed to incorporate the colours Hotaru's uniform bore, becoming a dark violet with white highlights on the sleeves, and a black stripe replacing the green one on the Chou version. The underlying figure took on the same proportions and height as Hotaru herself. Another glance at the girl and she made some more changes, the cut of the cloth altering to make it slightly more form-fitting, the sleeves shortening a little, while the boots developed a taller heel by a couple of centimetres. Hotaru watched, smiling.

"That's nice, Kasumi. Can you make the gloves have fingers and be dark purple and a bit longer?"

"Of course." The changes happened as she spoke.

"The combination of the SI and the projector is a very useful design tool," Ami commented, watching with interest.

"Isn't it?" Kasumi grinned. "It makes things like this a lot of fun to do as well. All right, how's that, dear?"

"It's nice," Hotaru smiled, walking over to inspect the projection more closely. "Should I keep the tiara? Or any of the other jewellery?"

"I'd advise against the earrings," Misaki put in, "They're just something to get caught in a fight. The
tiara is quite nice, though." Hotaru looked at her for a moment then nodded.

"OK. Let's get rid of the choker as well, and the brooch."

"If you're all right with this, I can work out the changes and modify your clothing spell," Kasumi said, inspecting the image, which changed to incorporate the girl's requests. Hotaru nodded again, looking pleased.

"It's great, thanks, Kasumi."

"We can always change it again if you want. In fact, I should be able to..." The older woman's voice trailed off as she thought, then nodded. "Yes, it should be possible to add this as the default clothing change, but keep the original one as an alternative. That way if you need it, it's there."

"That sounds fine. What do I do now?" The purple-haired girl watched Kasumi.

"Turn that off and come here, sit next to me," Kasumi replied, motioning to the sofa where she had sat down. Following instructions she deactivated her magic and sat. The elder Tendo carefully felt around for the relevant energy node for a moment, then nodded in satisfaction. Ranma came over and watched closely, while Rei and the others tried to follow the complex patterning she was weaving. After a couple of minutes Kasumi smiled. "There we go, that should do it. I've encoded the new clothing pattern as a separate copy of the spell and linked it in as the default. You see here?" Rei watched Hotaru concentrate then nod slowly. "That's the original one, you flip this part then activate it as normal, that will give you the original uniform. If you leave it alone, you'll get the new one."

"Thank you so much, Kasumi," Hotaru grinned.

"Stand up and try it," Ami suggested. Bouncing to her feet Hotaru did just that, smiling happily as she took in the new clothing that resulted.

"Fantastic!" she exclaimed, looking down at herself.

"Not bad," Rei laughed, seeing her younger friend looking very happy. "I'm perfectly content to have the same style."

"So am I," Ami added. "Still a team, but a different one, and also associated with the great and terrifying Yori and friends." Ranma laughed, looking at the purple-haired girl, then turning to Ami with a smile.

"You don't have to be associated with us, you know."

"I know, but I'm happy to be, after all you've all done for us. I don't know what we're going to do in the longer term but as you said, we're magical girls and always will be, so for now we may as well look it." She glanced at Rei who nodded.

"What she said."

"Fair enough. Welcome to the world of crazy." He looked amused. Ami laughed, as did Rei and Hotaru.

"Oh, I think we've been living in that world for a long time..."
Rei was admiring her own version, which was red and blue where Hotaru's was purple and black. Ami, of course, had shades of blue, which she seemed pleased with. "Still keeping the colour-coded effect going," she noted, amused. The other woman looked at her, grinning, then nodded.

"Of course. One needs a theme." Laughing, they both turned to watch Ranma, who was working on Hotaru again, doing some very complex and delicate alterations to her disguise magic. Eventually he sat back looking satisfied.

"That should do it. Can you activate it, please, so I can check?" The girl smiled, flipping the internal switch that produced the effect. He examined the spell, then nodded, pleased. "It works perfectly. That should help you. Remember to turn it on whenever you're out in your powered up state. You can use it at other times if you don't want anyone to remember you, but bear in mind it only affects people who aren't present when you turn it on, OK?" She smiled again.

"Thank you, Ranma," she said quietly, with a nod. He patted her on the head with a grin, causing her to run her hands through her hair and straighten it, which made everyone laugh.

"No problem. OK, Rei, you next." Shortly he'd modified all their spells. "I think that should be useful. Right, a few more things then we've done all we can for the moment. You need to know how to access the wards, which will let you come and go without any trouble. You can also put power in, or pull it back out, should there be a reason to do so." He and Kasumi spent the next twenty minutes going through the same exercises that they'd done with Nabiki and the others when they'd been added to the ward system. All three of them got it quickly, Ami first, which didn't surprise her.

"Wow," the blue-haired young woman said, when she managed to get her request accepted on the second try. She was examining something that couldn't be seen with the naked eye, looking both impressed and appalled. "The level of power there is... absolutely horrifying."

"It has certainly grown somewhat larger than we originally intended," Kasumi agreed calmly, seeming rather amused at the expression on the other woman's face. "Adding Nabiki and the others produced an enormous increase in complexity and power, which has happened again with you three. It's very interesting."

"It's kind of scary," Rei commented, also inspecting the wards. "I hate to think what this thing could do if you made it angry."

"At the moment, outside the building, not all that much," Ranma told her. He frowned slightly, glancing at Kasumi. "We really do have to look into fixing that at some point, love, I'm not happy about it being unavailable."

"We had no choice, dear, you know that. If it had fired on a threat to Nabiki or the others we could have lost a substantial amount of Tokyo, which is hardly responsible," his wife responded, smiling at him. Rei looked at Ami, both of them pale. Kasumi noticed, adding, "With this extra capacity the damage would be significantly larger. Tokyo might go away entirely."

"Oh, my god," Rei breathed, looking worried.

The elder Tendo reassured her. "It can't happen now, Rei, we disabled that part completely. The system has limited effects now externally although it still has full defences to any internal threat that might occur. It's very unlikely that anything could get through the wards in any case, I can't think of any way to do that, but if it did, it wouldn't last very long. This is a very safe building."
"Safe being a relative term," Tamiko interjected, looking amused. "Safe for us, certainly. Not so much for someone who shouldn't be here." Kasumi looked at her, then smiled again.

"Very true."

Finally tiring of flipping her new and improved uniform on and off, Hotaru sat down again, looking around at them all, grinning happily. "This has been so much fun."

"Damn right," Rei agreed, looking very satisfied. She looked curiously at Nabiki. "How are you managing to balance all this, all the magical girl things, with going to University?"

"It's been a little difficult once or twice, but most of the really weird stuff has been over the summer holidays, so it's not too bad. The portal bomb stuff was pretty difficult, though." The middle sister thought back over the last few months, shaking her head. "I still have nightmares about Halleckton."

"I think we all do, Nabiki," Aiko said, looking sad and thoughtful. "It was horrible."

"Can you tell us more about it?" Ami asked, glancing at Rei, then Ranma. "I got a version of the story a while ago but I think there must be more to it."

"There is," Ranma sighed. "Quite a lot." After thinking for a moment, he began the entire story from the beginning of the portal bomb plot, covering some of the things they'd been told the day before but going much further this time. The others took turns telling their parts as well. Hotaru looked ill after a while, but kept listening. They all showed some of their recordings as well, although Ranma looked at Hotaru for a long moment, before telling her that he felt it was best not to show her the things he showed Ami and Rei. Somewhat to everyone's surprise, Hotaru studied his face for a few seconds then agreed. He looked apologetic but relieved. When they finally finished, the three girls were quite for some time.

"That's horrible," Rei finally said.

"The worst thing I've ever seen," Fumiko agreed in a low voice, sharing a glance with her sister, who nodded, putting her half-eaten apple down and staring at it for a few seconds. "I don't want to go through that again if we can help it. The smell of blood still turns my stomach after that. There was so much of it..."

Nabiki shivered, remembering the town-wide slaughterhouse they'd discovered. "Even the soldiers were badly shocked by it. Second Lieutenant Kent said it was the worst thing he'd ever seen as well. Corporal O'Rourke looked like he wanted to throw up at one point, which I can understand, I felt the same way."

"We met some very nice people as well, during all that," Kasumi commented after a silence. "And we managed to stop the terrorists and save a lot more people. So all in all it worked out as well as it was going to."

"And you're really going to get awards from the Canadians for it?" Rei asked curiously. Ranma nodded.

"Apparently. We're still waiting to hear more about the whole thing. They're going to want us back again at some point, I know that, but we haven't been told when. It's a very complicated legal case, it could go on for years. The more the authorities look into it the more things they find. An awful lot of people's dirty washing is coming to light all over the world. We accidentally uncovered possibly the largest financial scandal ever."
"I'm sure there have been attempts to cover some of it up," Misaki mused, "you hear about all sorts of things like that which just... disappear... after a while, but this is much too big and public for that to work. A lot of people all over the planet are going to go to jail in the end."

Kasumi got up, coming back a little while later with some tea for everyone. "Hotaru should probably be going back soon, dear," she said, handing out cups to everyone. "Haruka seems fairly calm but I think she's probably worried about her."

"I'll take her back in a minute," Aiko put in, accepting her tea with a smile of thanks. "Ranma, are you going to come and show her the evidence from the moon? I somehow don't think she'll accept it from Ami." The brunette smiled apologetically at the blue-haired woman, who shrugged sadly.

"You're probably right, Aiko. She's not at all pleased with me at the moment."

"I'll come," Ranma said, sipping his tea and watching Ami. "What about you and Rei? I need to go and check on Lldnr'k's progress later on. You can come if you'd like." He glanced at Nabiki. "I guess you'd like to come as well?"

She nodded. "Yes, I like him and I'm curious to see more of his world."

"Fair enough."

"I'd like to come as well," Ami replied, looking at Rei.

The black-haired young woman thought for a moment. "I think I'd also like to see Lldnr'k again, but I should also get home quite soon. I don't want grandfather getting worried, we're already three days overdue."

"I got a message to him when we knew we would take longer than we initially thought," Kasumi assured her, "so he should be fine."

"It shouldn't take more than an hour or so with Lldnr'k, in any case," Ranma added.

"OK, in that case, yes please."

"Fine." The martial artist stood, finishing his tea and putting the cup down, before retaking the 'Yori' form. "Let's get Hotaru back, explain things to Haruka, then we can go and see him." She looked at Aiko who nodded, also standing. Hotaru jumped up and went to get her bag, coming back a few minutes later. She hugged all of them one after another.

"Thanks for everything, all of you. It's been a lot of fun, even with the... things that went a bit wrong," she said, smiling, before moving to stand beside 'Yori'.

"We'll see each other again soon," Nabiki assured her, grinning. She was becoming very fond of the girl, who while definitely more mature for her age than one might expect, was also a lot of fun to be around, the way she was so excited by things. Hotaru grinned back.

"I want to go flying again as soon as possible," she replied.

"We'll have to take you to meet some of our friends on Fwetna," the middle sister said, glancing at Kasumi, who nodded, smiling gently.

"Of course. As soon as we sort out this current problem, we can do all sorts of things. I'm looking forward to it. You can com any of us whenever you want to talk, as well, dear."
"I'd like that, Kasumi."

"We'll be back soon, love." 'Yori' smiled at her wife before all three girls vanished.

"I hope Haruka listens," Ami said after a moment. "She wasn't at all convinced at the temple."

"We've got some pretty serious evidence," Fumiko told her, shrugging. "If that doesn't do it nothing will. At least she seems to be behaving herself now. She even met Makoto last night and just talked." The tall girl frowned slightly. "I think we need to talk to Makoto, though, she's getting a bit carried away with her mugger-bashing." She sent them all a recording from the drone that had been shadowing the blonde.

"Oh, my, that's not at all safe," Kasumi mumbled, looking concerned. "She could kill someone very easily doing that. Where is she now?"

"About six kilometres away wandering around on the roof of the big car-park by the Metro station," Misaki reported after a moment. "Do you want to go and have a chat with her?"

"I think we should," Kasumi shimmered into 'Chou.' "We'll be back soon," she told the others, before she, Misaki, and Fumiko headed for the practice room and the roof. Nabiki watched them go then turned to the three people left in the room.

"Well, we seem to have some time to kill. Want to see some funny recordings?" Ami and Rei both nodded, while Tamiko grinned, going to make some more tea. Leaning back, the middle sister sorted through some of her exploits, simultaneously enabling the projector with a thought. Soon they were laughing hysterically at the expression on the face of the armed robber in an Australian wine shop.
Chapter 82

I ain't dead!

For anyone who hasn't noticed, I had to take a short break while I worked out the next part. To fill in, I produced a quick little story entitled 'The Fugitives', which covers approximately the first six months of the great escape from Furinkan by Ranma and Kasumi. It can be found on my story page.

My apologies for the extended delay in updating. Real life, work, family, and the holidays all conspired to keep me very busy for the last month. On the upside I did manage to work out the outlines of a number of future developments in some detail, as well as writing a few pages of one or two chapters some way down the line. Now all I have to do is work out how to get there from here...

Now, back to the regularly scheduled program. This chapter is brought to you by the colour mauve and the smell of ozone.

Happy 2015!

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Haruka looked up from the TV when she heard the door open. A smile, rare nowadays, spread across her face as her adoptive daughter entered looking extremely pleased, fading quite a bit when Yori and Aiko followed her into the room. "What are they doing here?" she sighed, trying to be polite. Looking at the woman with the blue streak in her midnight-black hair brought a tiny thrill of horror to her, even though she seemed friendly and harmless. Haruka well remembered the look in her eyes on their last encounter, which had hammered home the realisation that whatever Yori was, 'harmless' was very close to the least accurate description one could imagine. 'Unbelievably dangerous to the point of impossibility would be closer to the truth,' she thought to herself.

Briefly Yori had a look in her eyes that made it very clear she was quite aware of Haruka's thoughts and if anything found it somewhat amusing, which on its own was fairly sobering. When she blinked and looked again, though, the woman was merely smiling slightly at her, small fangs just visible. "We brought Hotaru home, and also thought it would be nice to have a little talk. You know, about what we went to look for on our trip."

Sighing again Haruka turned the TV off with the remote, turning her chair around and looking at the others. Hotaru seemed very happy, something she was pleased about, although she didn't share the feeling. She felt massively powerful wards go up around the room, a form of magic she recognised although she had no hope of following it. The most worrying thing was that Yori didn't seem to exert herself at all, not showing any sign she could see that she'd even done anything. The way she and Chou worked the most extraordinary magic apparently with a mere act of will was one of the weirdest things about them.

Aiko glanced at her friend, then went and leaned on the windowsill, her arms crossed, watching with interest. Hotaru looked at her, then Yori, before returning her attention to her foster-parent. "It was wonderful," she exclaimed, grinning. "We met so many interesting people. Agent Naito from the PSIA is a nice man, and S'th'kx and his crew were fun. I wish you'd come, you'd have enjoyed it. You wouldn't believe how much fun bouncing around on the moon is."

"You really went there?" Haruka asked, a little surprised. The girl nodded rapidly.
"Yes. It was amazing. We went to this world called K'nn Four, it's absolutely crazy, so many people running around all over the place. The species that lives there is called the Krennsh. There was a huge spaceport with hundreds of ships on it, coming and going all the time. S'th'kx's one wasn't very large compared to a lot of them but it wasn't small either. Maybe about fifty metres or so across. We went into space quite a long way then Yori and Chou made a portal that went around the back of the moon, which we went through. After S'th'kx launched a lot of probes to survey it we went down and walked around for quite a while." Haruka couldn't help but smile at the girl's obvious excitement, she was nearly babbling. She noticed that both Aiko and Yori were looking at her daughter fondly. They'd clearly enjoyed her company.

"Look, I brought you a present," Hotaru went on, grabbing her bag and rummaging through it for a moment, coming up with a fist-sized piece of pale grey rock that looked a little like pumice. She handed it to Haruka, who looked at it for a long moment before taking it gingerly, inspecting it closely.

"This really came from the Moon?" she asked, wonder in her voice. It almost seemed impossible. "It looks normal enough."

"It's a real Moon rock, I picked it up when we landed," Hotaru confirmed, smiling. "From somewhere called... um, Mare Frigoris, I think, wasn't it?" Yori nodded, looking amused.

"That's it. A small crater somewhere near the north edge. It's on the upper right section of the Moon as seen from Earth," she added, looking at Haruka. "That's the first place we set down when we were looking around. We went and looked at the Apollo sites afterwards, and a few of the Russian probes."

Still somewhat disbelieving, the blonde weighed the rock in her hand a few times, rubbing her thumb over it, before carefully putting it on the table beside the bed. "Thank you, dear. It was nice of you to bring it home for me." Looking at Yori, she added politely, "Thank you for taking her and bringing her back safely."

"You're welcome. It was nice having her along, and fun as well." The other woman grinned. After a second or two she looked more serious. "You know why we went, of course."

"I know what you said was the reason for going, yes." Haruka looked at the rock again, then turned back to the other woman. "You're still maintaining that our entire reason for existing is some sort of computer game, basically?"

"It's a bit more complex than that," Yori sighed, motioning to a chair. Haruka nodded. The woman sat, looking at Aiko for a moment and apparently having a short wordless conversation with her. Aiko shrugged without saying anything. "We told you at the temple what we and our experts thought was the truth. About how you and your friends have been manipulated for years, in fact probably from before you were born, to make something happen in the future which the time device wants to happen. Something that simply can't happen, although that hasn't stopped it trying."

Haruka nodded, not saying anything, but feeling once more that the whole thing seemed very unlikely. She couldn't get her argument with Ami out of her mind, though. Was it more crazy than what they'd all thought was the truth? Yori looked sympathetic, undoubtedly guessing what was going through her mind.

"We arranged to have the entire surface of the Moon scanned to a very high resolution and considerable depth using technology a couple of centuries more advanced than anything we have here. S'th'kx is a very good and experienced asteroid miner with a hell of a lot of knowledge about
this sort of thing. It took a couple of days but we ended up with an enormously detailed map of the Moon, its minerals, topography, you name it. The sort of thing NASA or JAXA would sell their grandmothers to get.” Haruka smiled briefly at the words, finding it mildly amusing. Yori produced a small device, putting it on the table beside her, then adding a small crystal cube to the top of it. "This is a very advanced projector system from K'nn Four, loaded with the data we got. Watch."

Twitching with a hiss of surprise when with no warning there was a half-meter diameter, totally realistic model of the moon floating in the middle of the room, slowly rotating, Haruka stared. Hotaru giggled at her shock. 'Shit, how did she do that?' she thought in wonder. The blonde couldn't feel any magic coming from the manifestation. After a long moment she stood, moving to look at the image more closely. It appeared completely solid yet when she experimentally moved her hand through it she felt nothing at all. The image reacted to her touch even so, spinning faster. Wonderingly she fiddled with it, finding she could speed it up, slow it down, or even make it spin in the other direction, just by flicking her fingers on the immaterial surface. After a few seconds of playing with it she turned to Yori, who was watching with a grin.

"Good, isn't it?" the other woman asked.

"It's pretty impressive, yes," Haruka admitted. "What else does it do?"

"You can zoom in, pan it around, show other things like overlays for specific minerals, all sorts of things. Here, look at this." Yori made a few quick gestures, the image zooming to show a row of footprints leading from a rather dust-covered machine that Haruka recognised with surprise. "The descent stage of Apollo Seventeen."

"Wow. OK, I'm impressed. So, what does this have to do with your story?"

With a slight sigh, Yori made the projection resume its original size, then did something that caused it to dim slightly, bright points in various colours appearing scattered over its surface. "These are all the sites that the probes located anything consistent with technology or magic. Every single one dates from the late fifties at the absolute oldest. They're all the remains of probes or manned missions." Haruka inspected the projection in silence for a while. "There's absolutely no evidence at all that any part of this 'Moon Kingdom' story is true, unless you think they cleaned the entire place up so well nothing is left. No energy sources, no magic, no technology, nothing. It doesn't, and never did, exist."

A silence fell over the room as everyone watched the projected lunar image slowly rotate. Eventually, feeling cold, Haruka tried, "Perhaps it's shielded? The Moon Kingdom had amazing technology and magic..."

Yori was shaking her head sympathetically. "No, I'm afraid not. We know the level of technology the time device can bring to bear, the tech on K'nn Four is quite a lot better in almost every respect. Their instruments would see any shielded parts easily enough. They could even detect magic of that sort, the type you guys use. Sorry, there's nothing there. We checked very thoroughly."

Another pause came and went. "Shit." Haruka shook her head. It seemed impossible to come up with a counter-argument in the face of this sort of evidence, although she did her best. Eventually she realised she was just producing more and more ridiculous and unlikely scenarios. Sighing, she stared at the slowly spinning Moon. "No way you could be mistaken?"

"No. Afraid not." Yori didn't look particularly pleased, watching her.

After a long pause, she finally said, "So you were right. Our entire lives have been a lie."
"That's one way to look at it, certainly. I'll admit it's not entirely wrong either. But it's somewhat self-defeating." Yori terminated the projection with a gesture, watching Haruka carefully as she picked up the projector and made it go away again. "A better one might be that you were deceived by an enemy who is very smart and tricky, yet even so you've learned a lot, helped a lot of people, and have the abilities to continue to help the community. You're a very powerful magical girl. That's never going to go away. You know the truth now, what you do with that knowledge is up to you. I'd suggest moving past this and getting on with life, if you can, although it won't be easy."

Staring at her hands, Haruka thought for a while. "I'm going to have to take some time over this," she said after a while.

"Of course. I understand. There's no hurry."

"What are you going to do about the time device?" she asked.

"Destroy it." She looked up, meeting the eyes of the woman across from her. In them she saw nothing but truth and a terrible resolve.

"How? If all this is true, it's an almost unimaginably powerful and ancient time travelling supercomputer with the ability to destroy entire realities. How can you possibly destroy it?"

Smiling slightly, Yori replied, "With some extremely large bombs." As Haruka gaped, she added, "It's not invincible. For whatever reason it's restricted in what it can do, we think because it's right on a knife-edge over how many more modifications it can make to the past before something ghastly and extremely final from our point of view happens. That's not actually a good thing, of course, but it does mean it doesn't seem to be able to just rewrite time to its hearts content. If it could we couldn't have got as far as we did. It would have reacted by now and we wouldn't be having this conversation. None of us would exist."

A cold chill went through Haruka as she realised Yori was deadly serious. "It could really destroy us that easily?"

"Yes. It could delete the entire timeline, there's evidence it's done this several times before, although we have no way of knowing how many. Each time it reset it would have tried something a little different, trying to push our reality towards what it thinks it should be, which can't actually happen. I have no idea how close or far from that end state we are this time around. The biggest danger of all is to our reality itself, eventually the changes could make the multiverse basically give up on us and wipe the lot. I'd prefer that not to happen."

"I'd have to agree," she said faintly, staring in horror.

"Even if it doesn't wipe out all of our reality, if it just resets the timeline, from our personal point of view and that of everyone who's ever lived, back to whenever the reset point is, there's no real difference." Yori was looking worried as she spoke. "The new timeline might have people similar to us, but it wouldn't be us. We wouldn't even be dead, we simply wouldn't have existed in the first place. Not something I want to happen." She grinned for a moment, adding, "Despite all the problems I like existing."

"So do I." Haruka sighed, glancing at Hotaru, who was listening with a serious expression, not looking surprised. "What do I do? What can I do?"

Yori scratched her ear, studying her for a few seconds. "I'm not sure. That's sort of up to you. To be honest I don't think there's much you can do to help in this case. If we can't deal with the thing ourselves one more person probably won't make much of a difference. If we succeed, after that... I
guess you decide whether you want to try to avoid the magical girl lifestyle, which we both know is nearly impossible, or accept the fact that things have changed but you're still very good at what you do, when you're not being influenced by this thing. I'm happy to train you in better fighting techniques at some point if you'd like. I'll be doing the same thing with Ami, Rei, and Hotaru. Whether you can ever put your differences with the other girls aside and work together I don't know, and to be honest I'm not all that fussed about it as long as you don't go off again. Work together, work apart, even hate each other's guts, just don't drag innocent people into it." There was a look in her eyes as she spoke that made Haruka's stomach clench for a second.

"I remember what you said. I'll be good."

Yori laughed a little. "Fair enough."

Looking at her daughter, Haruka asked, "Are you OK with all of this?"

Hotaru thought for a moment, watching her, then glanced at Aiko and Yori. She smiled. "I hate what was done to us all, but I think I like the results as they've turned out. I also like Yori and her friends. I've learned some interesting things and I'm going to learn a lot more." She shook her head a little, looking sad for a moment. "I don't like what it's done to our group and I wish we could change that, but I understand we probably can't. But I can deal with it. I just don't want to lose you as well..." Feeling suddenly both sad and happy, Haruka moved closer to the girl and put her arm around her, holding her tight.

"You won't lose me. But I'm going to need you to help me with this. It's not easy."

"No, it isn't." Hotaru hugged her back, putting her head on her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere."

Glancing at Aiko, Yori smiled, as did the brunette. "OK. We have to get on, there's a lot to do, but I wanted to make sure you knew what was going on." She stood, then thought for a moment, her eyes on both of them, before producing Haruka's sword. "This is yours. I think you should have it back now." She handed it to the blonde hilt-first.

Looking at it for a long moment, Haruka eventually accepted it, holding it in both hands and staring at it for some time. "Thanks. I'm sorry about what I did."

"So am I, but it's all in the past. We've moved on. Just make sure it doesn't happen again and we're good."

Nodding, Haruka raised her eyes to meet Yori's. "Like I said, I remember." After a moment, she thought of something, asking, "Do you know what happened to Usagi and Minako? Both of them seem to have vanished from what I hear."

There was a slight sigh from the martial artist. She ran her hand through her hair, looking annoyed. "Yes, I know where they are. They're both safe but an awfully long way from here. Tamiko and the others caught Usagi planning a terrorist attack with Minako and stopped them, luckily before anything happened. They're having a good think about it on the other side of a portal for the time being."

Feeling a sinking sensation in her stomach, Haruka closed her eyes for a moment. "That stupid little idiot," she muttered.

"It's not entirely her fault," Aiko put in from beside the window, "but there was nothing else to do, she had to be stopped. She was planning on destroying something to attract Yori then trying to assassinate her. It wouldn't have ended well. The girls had no choice."
"No, I suppose not," Haruka allowed, looking at her. "What are you going to do with them?"

Seeming annoyed, Yori shrugged slightly helplessly. "It's difficult. Both of them need help, Usagi more than Minako. We don't have time to do that right now, so Usagi at least is going to stay where she is, although we'll probably bring Minako back soon assuming she's cooled down enough to be safe." The young woman inspected Haruka. "Frankly, all of you need some therapy, some sort of treatment, to deal with the memory alterations and the problems that they've caused you. We can arrange that, Hnther, who you met the other day, is looking into getting expert help for you. I would strongly suggest that you take him up on it. You seem to be less badly affected than you should be, for some reason, but even so Hotaru thinks you're having problems. I can easily see you're suffering from depression if nothing else. Usagi and Setsuna are the biggest problems, Usagi may require fairly drastic steps to be taken."

Not sure she liked the sound of that but unable to disagree with it, Haruka simply nodded. "What would this therapy mean to me?" she asked. "What would happen?"

"You'd have to go and spend some time on Hnther's world with the therapists, probably a couple of months at first from what he told me, then go back every now and then for a year or two. I'd guess that in your case it would work pretty well, although it's out of my field of expertise. Minako will need more, as will Michiru. Setsuna is already there." At Haruka's expression of surprise she looked momentarily sad. "She had... I suppose you could call it a breakdown. Rather publicly. Aiko and the others got to her before something bad happened, then I and Azumi took her to see Hnther. She's in a type of induced coma at the moment while he tries to work out the best method to treat her. Poor woman's mind is in a very fragile state, I'm afraid."

"Oh, damn it," Haruka grunted, depressed all over again. "I don't like her but that's nasty."

"Yep. Anyway, that's what's happening to your friends. Or former friends. Ami and Rei are pretty much OK as is Hotaru, although all of them will get checked over when we know how the damn machine is getting inside your heads. We've taken steps to ensure that they, at least, can't be affected again." Yori looked apologetic. "I'm afraid we can't use the same method on you or the others, though." Slightly curious, but not enough to enquire further, Haruka nodded.

A thought struck her. "Makoto is being a little overenthusiastic with her criminal-hunting hobby," she said, "I'm worried she's going to end up killing someone. I tried to tell her last night but I don't think she listened."

Smiling, Yori nodded. "We're aware of that. Chou is having a talk with her at the moment. Hopefully that should bring it under control."

"Good. She's a fuckwit but I don't want her causing any trouble."

Laughing, Yori grinned, as did Aiko. "Neither do we. Right, we need to get on, I need to go and see Ldr'r. Hotaru, take care, we'll see you again soon." She waved to the young girl, who smiled back.

"Thanks again, Yori. You too, Aiko." Both women stood next to each other, then, as Hotaru and Haruka closed their eyes, flashed out of existence. Opening her eyes again the blonde regarded the empty room for a moment before turning to her adopted daughter.

"So tell me about the moon, and this other world you went to, dear." Hotaru grinned happily and began talking, with the older woman listening in mild shock as the tale progressed.
Raising her hand Makoto grinned nastily at the car thief, who was cowering beside the vehicle he'd tried to steal. As she began the blow her hand stopped suddenly, held in an immovable grip at the wrist. She looked around in puzzlement.

"You really shouldn't hit normal people that hard, dear, you could injure them," Chou said in a mild tone, not appearing to be straining in the slightest. Makoto glared, pulling as hard as she could, to no effect at all.

"Let go of me you bitch," she snapped. The look the blonde woman was giving her became considerably less friendly somehow, although her face didn't alter from its serene smile, making her suddenly shiver. The car thief fainted, after a squeak of horror, slumping limply to the ground.

"Please don't call me that, it's rather rude," Chou asked politely. Beside her, Misaki bent over the unconscious thief, poking him a few times in specific places which had the effect of making him twitch and resume his interest in the world at large, staring up at her in shock.

"Go away," Misaki told him. "Stop stealing cars." He nodded frantically, scrambling to his feet and legging it as fast as he could, abandoning his bag of equipment without a backwards glance.

Looking amused Misaki leaned on the car next to Fumiko, both of them watching Makoto like cats after a mouse.

"We don't mind you stopping crime, it's a good thing to do on the whole, but we would prefer that you keep the violence to a minimum," the blonde explained calmly, watching the thief disappear down the exit ramp before returning her attention to Makoto. "The way you've been behaving recently is very likely to cause serious injury or death, which reflects badly on all of us. I'd be grateful if you could restrain yourself more effectively."

"And what if I don't?" Makoto demanded angrily.

Chou studied her for a moment with a raised eyebrow, apparently interested. "Well, in that case, I suppose we'd have to take steps to prevent a repeat occurrence. That could be unfortunate."

"Are you threatening me?" she asked, becoming angrier, narrowing her eyes at the woman who was still holding her wrist. "Do you have any idea how powerful I am?"

"Oh, I know your abilities very well, dear," Chou responded, amusement sounding in her voice. "Though I seem to recall our last encounter ended fairly abruptly when you and Haruka annoyed Yori. It would be preferable to avoid such an event again. It's very destructive to the locality if nothing else."

"Yori is one thing, I know how insanely dangerous she is, but I also know you're nowhere near as powerful," Makoto snarled, throwing caution to the wind in her fury. "I bet I could take you." She noticed Misaki and Fumiko exchange glances, looking slightly surprised, before grinning in a way that sent a cold liquid shiver down her back as they turned their attention to her again. Chou released her arm, stepped back a pace, then smiled gently.

"Ah. All right, then."

"What?"

"Your challenge is accepted. Let's go somewhere where we won't cause any trouble to people." A portal crackled into existence beside her. Makoto jumped, staring at it, suddenly thinking that perhaps she'd made a mistake. "Shall we?" Chou asked calmly, indicating the hole in space. Feeling a presence behind her Makoto turned her head to see Misaki on one side and Fumiko on
the other, each of them holding a pair of roiling energy balls in their hands. Swallowing dryly, by now regretting her mouth working faster than her brain, she followed the blonde through the portal, the other two bringing up the rear.

On the other side of the portal Makoto found Chou waiting for her patiently. "Where are we?" the brunette asked, looking around and feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

"Oh, it's a world that's utterly dead, it's been used for a very long time as a source of resources such as minerals but now it's mainly a dump for toxic waste, a weapons test area, things of that nature," Chou replied casually. Makoto looked around, seeing a wasteland of gravel and sand forming the floor of a vast valley, lit by a small blue star in a dark sky. Hills of varying heights punctuated the flat plain, along with some small lakes, a number of which were suspiciously round. Squinting, she thought she could see some sort of small building far in the distance on a ridge overlooking the plain. Chou followed her gaze.

"That's a bunker a friend of ours uses for weapons testing. I don't want to damage it, which is why we're over here."

Makoto stared at her. 'It's at least fifteen kilometres away...' she thought, feeling somewhat worried at the implications. Chou smiled sweetly at her.

"Now, let's see... As the challenged party, I believe it's up to me to set the conditions of the challenge. I think the easiest way is if we do it in the form of a classical duel. Back to back, walk... let's say, fifty paces, to make it more of a test, turn and fire. Does that sound fair?"

Makoto wasn't entirely sure she was hearing the other woman correctly. She looked around. Misaki and Fumiko were standing to one side, watching with small smiles. Fumiko nodded to her, while Misaki's grin widened. "Um..."

"Good. Oh, before we proceed, perhaps we should warm up a little first." Chou looked around. "How about that small hill over there as a target? We can shoot at it without anyone worrying about the damage, unlike in Minato." Makoto looked at her, then the sixty-metre hill of rock half a kilometre or so away. "You can go first if you like. We can warm up then go ahead with the challenge. I'm quite looking forward to it." Chou smiled again, this time in a manner that made the brunette feel suddenly cold despite the fairly warm conditions. There was something very unsettling and predatory about it. She glanced over her shoulder at the portal hanging in the air ten metres away, then sighed, stepping forward, deciding to make it impressive.

Taking aim, she brought up her most powerful lightning attack, sending a massive bolt of electricity surging across the ground with a deafening crack, hitting the hill half-way up, removing the top of it in a substantial explosion which rained rocks for a few seconds. Feeling pleased, her confidence restored, she grinned. Chou stepped up beside her, nodding approvingly.

"Very good. That's a lot of power indeed. And good accuracy as well. I'm impressed."

"Sure you want to continue?" Makoto asked, looking hard at her. Chou smiled a little.

"I think we should go on. I'm curious to see what happens. All right, it's my turn, I think." The brunette waved her forward somewhat sarcastically. "You're right, my power level is far below Yori's, but I believe I'm getting quite good at this," Chou commented idly. She raised a hand, then paused, looking over her shoulder at her friends. "Ball or beam?" she asked.

"Yes, that sounds good." The blonde woman smiled happily. "All right. Let's see if I can do as well as Makoto." A tiny ball of light began growing on her hand, reaching the size of a pea, then got brighter and brighter. And brighter. Makoto stared at it, her mouth suddenly dry, feeling the energy radiating from it.

"Umm..."

Chou glanced at her, her upper body illuminated by the brilliant golden glow. "Yes, you're right, perhaps I'm not trying hard enough. I should take this challenge seriously as a mark of respect." She concentrated a little longer, the ball becoming too bright to look at. With a negligent flick of her hand she send it whistling off towards the hill, turning her back on it as she did. "You should probably look away, dear," she said kindly, urging Makoto to turn. As she did there was the brightest flash the brunette had ever encountered, the entire landscape glowing as if lit by the noon sun in a beautiful liquid gold colour. The ground heaved, the loudest noise she'd heard in her life following a couple of seconds later, making her clap her hands over her ears in shock, turning back to see what happened. Numbly she noticed that there was a faint gold dome over them, which bits of shrapnel were pinging off with sounds like ricocheting bullets.

She gaped, horrified beyond measure, at the huge crater that had replaced the hill, glowing yellow-hot and visibly bubbling in the middle where molten rock was pooling. The echoes of the blast began to come back from the mountains in the distance while she stared, ashen-faced. A faint snicker came from either Fumiko or Misaki, somewhere behind her. After a long moment she turned to look at the tall woman at her side, who was smiling again in a motherly way. "You're right, of course, Yori is vastly more powerful than I am. Why, the last time she tried that same exercise, she did that." Chou pointed casually to the right, where Makoto eventually looked when she could tear her eyes from the scene in front of her, to see the mountains far across the plain had a gap in them, which must have been well over a kilometre across. It took a few seconds to realise what the blonde meant, then she nearly fainted.

"I think I did quite well, though. Thank you, it was a good warm-up. Shall we proceed? Fifty paces then fire, as agreed." Chou looked evenly at her, something in the woman's eyes making Makoto feel like she was seeing her own death rapidly approaching, although the blonde's happy smile didn't waver. After a moment she turned and walked to a clear space, the ward dome vanishing in the process, then turned and looked expectantly at the brunette woman. "Well?"

"I..." Makoto licked her lips. "I... think that perhaps I could tone it down a little." Chou raised an eyebrow. "I mean, quite a lot. Be less... vigorous, I mean, with them. The criminals."

"That would be very nice, thank you. But shall we continue? I'd like to get this over with before lunch."

Edging towards the portal, Makoto glanced at Misaki and Fumiko, who were watching with interest. Misaki was casually juggling half a dozen balls of orange energy with a slight smile on her face, not really paying attention to what she was doing. "I think perhaps I should get home. My mother is expecting me for a meal."

"Oh? I was under the impression that your parents had passed away some time ago, dear." Chou looked curiously at her.

"I meant a friend of mine. Sorry." Walking very slowly backwards, she risked a look over her shoulder, seeing she was half-way to the glowing tear in reality.

"But, what about the challenge? We haven't finished." She looked back again, then at the blonde woman, who seemed mildly insulted and slightly disappointed.
"I withdraw the challenge. Perhaps another time?" Sweating, she took a couple more steps.

The other woman sighed slightly, looking a little sad, but after a moment nodded. "Oh, very well. We can reschedule when you have more time." Smiling, Chou waved to her. "Have a nice day."

"You too, all of you," Makoto managed to say, before she turned and dived through the portal. Rolling to her feet on the other side she made a strategic retreat at high speed, sweating horribly, wondering if she'd even feel the energy ball if it hit. Five hundred metres from it she felt the portal close, but didn't stop running. 'Insane. They're all totally INSANE!' she gibbered to herself as she headed for safety, dripping with sweat, terrified to a level she'd never encountered before.

Nabiki and the others were still rolling around laughing when 'Chou', Fumiko, and Misaki re-entered the living room. "Oh, god, Sis, that was amazing," she gasped out, grinning at her sister as she retook her normal form and sat down. "People say Yori is scary. Your friendly psycho act is incredible."

Kasumi looked pleased, giggling slightly. Misaki and Fumiko sat as well, snickering. "It was a lot of fun," the elder sister said calmly, smiling. "Poor Makoto seemed to be a little intimidated, though. The girl has anger issues, I think, but hopefully we managed to persuade her to be a little more careful in future."

"I'd be surprised if she tried anything at all for a few days," Ami laughed, watching the eldest Tendo woman with enormous amusement and respect. "The expression on her face... She looked like she thought she was about to die horribly."

"It was the impression we were aiming for," Fumiko agreed, accepting an orange from her sister, grinning. "That was fun."

"I liked the visuals," Rei told her. "Following her like some sort of magic-powered Yakuza enforcers was very effective."

"She seemed to take it seriously," Misaki chuckled.

"What would you have done if she'd accepted the duel?" Ami asked curiously, wiping tears of laughter from her face. Kasumi shrugged a little.

"Her lightning attack wouldn't have penetrated the ward I'd have used. None of us were really in danger. If she'd still decided to go ahead with it I'd have knocked her out then taken her home. That's why I played it so over the top, I wanted to be fairly sure I could intimidate her into doing the right thing without hurting her." She smiled serenely. "Also, of course, as Fumiko says, it was fun."

"You made a real mess of that hill," Rei commented, looking very impressed and a little worried as well. "Can you do one of those ki balls larger than that?"

"It was near my current upper limit, but even so it's much larger than it was the last time we tried that particular exercise. I was slightly surprised myself." Kasumi shrugged a little, looking pleased. "It's nice to know what you can do."

Ami studied her, then looked at the rest of them. "Are you all capable of that sort of thing?" she asked curiously. Nabiki glanced at her sister before shaking her head.

"I'm certainly not. I can make a fair sized hole, but only one you could lose a car in, not one that would swallow this building. The others are much more powerful than I am."
"Nabiki's more accurate than anyone other than Ranma or Misaki, though," Tamiko told them. "And faster as well. More of a sniper than a siege weapon."

"What's Ranma, then?" Rei giggled. "Did he really make that gap in the mountain range?" She stopped laughing when all five of the other women nodded simultaneously. "Oh, shit."

"He was a little surprised," Kasumi replied, smiling. "We had to leave through the portal very quickly. At a run, in fact."

"Good god," Ami mumbled, staring at them all. "I knew he was powerful but that's just..." She shook her head, unable to finish.

"He thinks Hotaru could be close to that level with some practice," Nabiki told her. "We all might reach it eventually, he said. I'm not sure that's right, and I'm not sure I'm comfortable with it if it is. But we'll have to wait and see."

They were still snickering and replaying the recordings from different viewpoints when 'Yori' and Aiko appeared in the room, grinning. Returning to normal Ranma walked over and looked at his wife for a long moment, then bowed, chuckling. "Truly inspired, love. I acknowledge my better."

Kasumi laughed.

"I'm not better than you, as you well know, but I have my own methods. They seem to work." Sitting beside her the martial artist held her hand.

"They do indeed. That really was amazingly funny. So was the way you got the car thief without even trying. Collateral damage from a hard look is fairly impressive."

"He certainly left quickly," Fumiko smiled. "Mind you, so did Makoto. She was radiating total terror by the end, nearly as much as Haruka did the time you told her off."

"How did it go with poor Haruka anyway?" Ami asked. He sighed gently, pulling her projector and data crystal out of a ki pocket and handing it back with a nod of thanks.

"Better than I expected but she's still not a hundred percent convinced, I think. Maybe ninety-nine percent. She's at least willing to listen, which is good, I suppose. Hopefully Hotaru will manage to talk her around that last little bit." Nabiki watched the recording he sent them all.

"She seemed slightly more cheerful," the middle sister noted at the end. "Nothing like as depressed as she was a few days ago."

"Hotaru going home helped a lot, I think," Rei mused. "She loves that girl. I thought Michiru did as well, I'm still shocked they split up like that."

"From what we saw there's no love there now," Fumiko sighed. "Their last meeting was only barely this side of having a major fight. If Ranma hadn't warned Haruka off, it would almost certainly have got very nasty. She kept her temper surprisingly well, though."

"What a pity," Ami said quietly. "I had problems with both of them, they were always a little over-enthusiastic for my taste, but it's still a shame."

They were all silent for a moment. Eventually Ranma stood. "Right, I guess I need to go and talk to Lidn'r'k. Shall we get on with it?" Nabiki got up, followed by Ami and Rei, as he opened a portal, reverting to 'Yori' in the process. "See you guys in an hour or so," the woman said, stepping into the portal, followed by the others, although Nabiki stopped and cocked her head to one side for a few seconds at a quick message from Hotaru, before she went after them, laughing.
Hotaru finally stopped giggling over the recording Ami had sent her, looking at her female adoptive father with a grin. Haruka appeared rather puzzled as to why the girl had collapsed in laughter out of the blue in the midst of telling her about her trip. Deciding it was too complicated to get into at the moment, she simply said, "I remembered something funny Chou did."

"It must have been very funny indeed," the older woman retorted, still looking at her oddly, although smiling a little.

"It was. Very, very funny."

"Hmm." Haruka stared at her some more, then looked away, picking up the piece of lunar rock and turning it over in her hands, examining it closely. "I still find this amazing. A real piece of the Moon."

"It's neat, isn't it?" her daughter said, smiling. "I picked up a few of them. That one is a nice shape so I thought you should have it."

"What was it like? Walking on the Moon, I mean?" Haruka asked slightly wistfully.

"It was brilliant. You have no idea how much fun low gravity is. We could practically jump into orbit there. I did a big jump and didn't come down for about thirty seconds. Azumi jumped right over the ship, from a small hill about five hundred metres away!" The girl grinned happily. "I think you'd have liked it. K'n'n Four is wild, there are so many people there you wouldn't believe it. But everyone we met was really nice."

"People? Or demons?"

"They're people," the purple-haired girl insisted firmly. "They may look like big beetles but they're people just like us. I like them."

The older woman examined her for a while, looking mildly puzzled, but in the end nodded, smiling. "Whatever you say, dear. You understand why I find it difficult, though, I hope?"

"I do." Hotaru moved to lean against her parent, who stroked her hair. "Believe me, I do. It's what we've been told for years. But it's wrong. Yori told me that a lot of the 'demons' are really just peaceful explorers or traders. Everything I saw confirmed what she said." She saw her parent didn't look convinced, not entirely, so after debating the issue with herself, then checking with Ami and Rei, she added, "If it wasn't for S't'h'kx, in fact, the entire world might have ended."

Haruka stiffened, looking shocked, then stared at her. "What... What do you mean?"

"It was his idea to use a lot of long range probes to look for anything dangerous floating around in space. If he hadn't done that, we'd never have found the asteroid in time." Hotaru giggled at Haruka's expression.

"Asteroid?" She sounded befuddled. "What asteroid?"

"The one that was heading right at Earth. It would have hit in about three weeks or so, they said." A long silence filled the room as the older woman paled, inspecting her daughter, who waited patiently.

"I think I need to hear this story, dear," Haruka finally said faintly. Laughing a little, Hotaru complied. She left out the value of the asteroid, but told her parent more or less everything else. Eventually, finished, she watched as the other woman struggled to come to grips with it all, still
looking rather unwell. Eventually Haruka sighed. "So Yori and the rest of you saved the world."

"I think so. Ami said it probably wouldn't have killed everyone, but most people would have died in the end. It was kind of scary to think about."

"I'm proud of you for helping like that," her parent told her, smiling. "I'm sorry you got hurt, though."

"Chou was very apologetic about it. She looked very guilty, but from what Agent Naito told me, she didn't have any choice. I can't remember it at all, which I think might be a good thing, really." Hotaru shook her head, thinking back to the spaceship, then the hotel on K'nn Four. "I'm really glad I didn't manage to hurt him. I like Masao."

"You mentioned him a few times. I'm not sure I like the idea of some government security agent knowing anything about us." Haruka looked disapproving.

"It's a bit late for that. The PSIA knows all about us. They've know for years, Yori said. They may not be magical, but they're pretty good detectives, I think." Hotaru shrugged a little as Haruka looked dubious. "Yori says we can trust them. If they'd wanted to cause trouble they could have done it a long time ago. If she thinks it's OK it probably is." She grinned for a moment. "Yori watches them. And Chou watches her."

"Who watches Chou?" Haruka asked, looking amused.

"Ms Aoyama." At her parent's confused expression, she added, "Ms Aoyama watches everyone."

"That... doesn't make me feel much better," Haruka said slowly. "Who is Ms Aoyama?"

"Oh, she's some sort of alien secret agent from an organisation that keeps an eye on people like us, I think," Hotaru said easily, smiling, trying not to giggle. In her head she could hear Nabiki laughing, as she'd opened a com channel to her for this part. "She's really creepy, but I think she's a good person under it all. You just don't want to make her angry." The laughter from the middle sister intensified.

"You wouldn't like her when she's angry," Nabiki chuckled.

"People don't like her when she's happy, either," Hotaru sent, grinning internally.

"True, but no one has ever managed to tell her that..." Closing the link, Hotaru returned her attention to her parent, who was looking very worried.

"Alien secret agent?" she queried, paling again. "From where?"

"No one knows," the girl said mysteriously, in a low voice, then looked around. "But she's probably watching right now." She did her best not to laugh as Haruka involuntarily looked about as well, although in the end she couldn't help giggling. The blonde fixed her with a hard stare.

"Right. Good one. Watching us right now, hmm? You've been hanging around Yori too long, that woman has a warped sense of humour." Shaking her head, smiling slightly, she got up. "Come on, let's go and get some lunch, then you can tell me the rest of the story." Hotaru hopped to her feet, grinning, following the older woman out of the room, but not before throwing the stealthed camera drone that was floating in the air outside the window a quick wink.

"I'm very close, I think," Lldnr'k said, inspecting the red orb clamped in a complicated frame on his
workbench with a number of instruments pointing at it. 'Azumi' inspected the arrangement curiously. She could see some very complex magic patterns around the entire array, gently and carefully probing the sphere. "It's more fiddly than I hoped, the temporal signature of the stone is very unusual. That's not too surprising bearing in mind how many times it's apparently travelled through time in various directions. Unravelling all the interactions is somewhat time-consuming, ironically enough, but I'm down to the last few layers. Once I have that information extracting the data stored in it should be fairly straightforward, the core of it is a moderately advanced magitech processor which is easily interfaced to and poses no particular problems."

"How long?" 'Yori' asked, also looking closely at the set-up with her eyebrows raised in respect.

He made a little gesture of uncertainty, snapping his beak. "I think perhaps two of your days worst case, but not less than one in all probability. Subject to something going wrong, of course, but I'm reasonably confident there are no surprises. I found and bypassed a number of security measures, one or two of which were rather good. I'm fairly certain I got them all. This part is just tedious but reasonably straightforward."

"OK." The martial artist looked satisfied with his progress. "Thank you, Lldnr'k."

"It's not a problem, Yori, believe me. Aside from the favours you've done for me in the past, I want this damn machine dead at least as much as you do. The obscene thing should never have been built." He watched the progress of his equipment for a moment, clearly not happy about the situation. "What it's done, been responsible for, and is still doing is... wrong on more levels than I can express." Glancing at Ami and Rei who were watching silently, he added, "And I'm so very sorry about the effect it had on you and your friends. You young women didn't deserve that at all."

Ami sighed, sitting on a nearby bench. They were in a large workshop in which a few others of the temporal mage's species were working, apparently apprentices of his. "I hate it too, but I guess I like being what I am, even if how we got to this point is all wrong. Some good things have come out of it." Looking at him, then around at the others, she continued, smiling a little, "Aside from anything else I've made some good friends and met a lot of interesting people. That part, I'm fine with."

He turned to study her with interest. After a few seconds, he nodded. "Good. I'm glad something useful has come out of this horrible mess." Making the gesture they recognised as signifying amusement, he added, "Now all we have to do is stop your home reality from being erased and you can go on with your life."

"Well, yes, that would be the ideal outcome," 'Azumi' replied sardonically. Clicking his beak in his variant of laughter, he nodded, then waved to another bench. They all looked over at it.

"I finished the temporal interference detectors and made half a dozen of them for you." Walking over, followed by the four women, he picked one of the devices up and showed it to them. 'Yori' picked up another one, examining it curiously, 'Azumi' doing the same. "As I said, they won't do much good if there is a large modification to the temporal flow, but they should at least allow you to detect small interferences as they happen, or recent ones that have already happened. Hopefully you won't need them, if we can arrange to kill this machine soon, but..." He explained how to use the devices. It was fairly simple for someone who had a reasonably well-developed magic sense.

"Thanks, Lldnr'k," 'Yori' said, smiling at the mage. "These could well be useful."

She handed the one she was holding to Ami, taking the rest and putting them away, although 'Azumi' kept the one she was holding at her nod. "What do we do if we detect an alteration?" the middle sister asked.
"I'm not sure, it will depend on the circumstances," Lldnr'k admitted. "But knowing that a modification has been made should help you assess a situation if it arises. The most likely interventions will be to people, I suspect, which seems to have been the case in the past with the girls. Incursions on the level of the asteroid will be rare. They are very likely to cause extremely undesirable side-effects from the multiverse correcting them, which the time device will be aware of, and probably doesn't want to risk. If the information you have about the damage to it is correct it may well not have the ability to perform temporal modifications on that scale any more in any case, which is a small blessing, although small changes can certainly add up if they're correctly done. The current problems are a case in point."

"Did you manage to find anything more on the device in your research?" He glanced at Ami as she spoke, shaking his head a little, apparently annoyed.

"Not much. I'm now certain that there was a deliberate attempt a long time ago to erase any mention of the device from the historical record. A not entirely successful one, but it's definitely caused most of the data to be either missing or deeply suspect. Several colleagues have also come to the same conclusion. We've collated all the information we were able to locate in an attempt to determine how accurate various data was, with mixed results. Nothing of any great import seems to have come to light." He paused, looking thoughtful. "We did discover that it's likely that there were a number of survivors of the collapse of the originating reality. That's not too surprising in retrospect, they had considerable inter-reality trade, so it's more than likely there would have been a number of people on the other side of a portal when everything came to a head. Those people would have been safe, in the same way that anyone from elsewhere who were visiting that reality would have ceased to exist when the reality imploded."

"Could it have been these survivors who altered the records?" Rei asked, looking thoughtful.

"Possibly, I suppose. It was so long ago there's no way to be sure," the mage replied, scratching the base of his beak idly with one talon. "I doubt it makes any difference to us, at this point, although it's an interesting historical item. There are a few researchers who are going to get some useful papers out of this whole affair." He shrugged a little. "Personally, I'd prefer the entire thing to go away for good as soon as possible. It offends me on a very deep level."

"You and me both," 'Yori' mumbled, frowning. A pinging sound made them all look around, at the bench on which the orb was being probed. Lldnr'k hurried over to his equipment and examined it.

"Aha. Good, that's one more layer of temporal interactions unwound. It looks like there are... Hmm, I'd say about five left. That should be no more than a day or so." He made some notes, then turned back to them. "Until then there isn't much more I can do to help."

"You've helped a lot, Lldnr'k. I owe you one." 'Yori' grinned at him. He smiled back in his own manner.

"No, I think we can call this a draw, Yori. You've done a number of favours for me as well. This matter is far too important to not help with." He looked around at them. "Would you care to look around for a while? Or do you have to get back?"

They all looked at each other. "I'd like to see more of your world, Lldnr'k," 'Azumi' replied. Ami and Rei nodded, smiling.

"So would I. I've only seen K'nn Four so far, but I find the whole 'other worlds' thing fascinating," the blue-haired girl said.

"We can spare half an hour or so," 'Yori' mused, glancing at Rei.
"Good." Lldnr'k nodded sharply in satisfaction. "We're nowhere near as manic as those lunatics on K'n Four are, but it's a nice place to live." They laughed as he headed to the door, waving them to follow. He led outside the long low building into a courtyard surrounded by walls made of finely dressed and cut stone, in the centre of which was an inlaid metal circle some three metres across, that had symbols engraved on it which reminded the Tendo woman of electronic circuitry. Ami bent down and examined it curiously.

Spotting her interest, the mage explained. "It's a teleport node. We have them all over the place. They encode a standard teleport spell, you only have to provide the destination coordinates and the energy to power it. Very few people can teleport anywhere near as easily as that young woman Aiko can, her ability is extraordinary, but this allows most people with a reasonable amount of magical ability to achieve something similar." Leading them to the middle of it he checked to see they were all standing on the node, then concentrated. The world flickered briefly, producing much the same sensation engendered by Aiko's teleportation, leaving them all standing in what looked like a large park, with carefully manicured blue-green grass-like plants covering the ground.

Lldnr'k waved his arms expansively, indicating the area in front of them. "This is the centre of the largest city on this continent, it's called Irillan. It's got a population of about three quarters of a million permanent residents, with perhaps a third of that again of transients, either visitors, traders, or workers from other cities, countries, or worlds." They looked around. 'Azumi' could see that the park seemed to be roughly round, with buildings visible all around the edge beyond plants similar to very tall ferns which she thought must be the local equivalent of trees. The sky was a blue-purple colour, the local sun showing a faint greenish tint to the otherwise yellow-white light. Some moving dots could be seen high above, apparently aircraft of some sort.

There were a number of paved paths leading in various directions across the park with people walking on them, as well as a few machines similar to three-wheeled bicycles, although clearly powered, moving in and out of the crowd with a faint whirring noise. The pedestrians were mostly of Lldnr'k's species, although she saw a few D'sage and a couple of Krennsh as well, with various others she didn't know the names of interspersed in with them. One or two she recognised from K'n Four, although most were new to her.

Around the grassed areas people were relaxing, playing games, or just sitting and enjoying the day. She smiled, thinking it reminded her of a nice summer day in a park at home, if you left the alien foliage and population out of it. Yet more proof that people were basically people. Glancing at Ami and Rei she saw they were staring around with wide eyes, Ami clearly taking mental notes, while Rei was smiling to herself in wonder. Lldnr'k was watching them all, with an expression of mild amusement. After a moment he waved to one path leading towards the city. "If we go that way we can see some interesting artworks, then stop at a café I know for a drink, if you like."

"Sounds good," 'Yori' smiled, falling in beside him as he began to move in that direction. They walked for a few minutes, the mage pointing out various things of interest, eventually entering the city itself along a wide road, which had vehicles quite similar to the ones she'd seen on Fwetna, although sufficiently different that they were clearly not from the same manufacturers. Another five minutes walk led them to an open area like a small pedestrian precinct, around which were a number of restaurants and cafés, while the centre of the square had a number of large communal tables. Benches provided seating for the several dozen people of various species congregating there, eating and drinking, mostly while talking loudly at the same time. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Leading them to one particular eatery, Lldnr'k negotiated with the staff for a moment, then waved to a table that had some spaces around it. "They'll bring some drinks over in a bit," he explained, heading in that direction. They all sat, the guests looking around with curious interest, before
returning their attention to the temporal mage. "So, it looks like, aside from the problem with the
device itself, you may be slowly resolving the issues surrounding the other young women. With
these two and Hotaru added to your ward system, Setsuna undergoing treatment with Hnther and
his team, and both Usagi and Minako out of circulation for the moment, you only have three left to
deal with. That seems to be a good thing to my mind." The time mage glanced up as one of the staff
from the café came over with a floating tray following him obediently, which made both Rei and
Ami stare for a moment, thanking the waiter as he unloaded the drinks he'd ordered.

Trying hers, 'Yori' smiled approvingly, before nodding slowly. "It is, although it's still not a perfect
solution. Ami and the other are fine, even though they'll still have to be checked over when we
have some idea of how the time device is, or was, accessing them, just to make sure there are no
nasty surprises left lurking around." This made Ami and Rei exchange a somewhat worried glance.
She noticed, smiling reassuringly. "Not that I think it's likely, but we need to check."

"I would agree with both parts of that statement," Lldnr'k commented, looking mildly amused.

"Poor Setsuna is in a bad way, I'm afraid, though. I'm rather guilty about that, I feel I should have
stepped in sooner, but as Azumi said, we had more immediate problems to deal with." 'Yori' sighed
unhappily. "It's true but it doesn't make me feel any better."

"Some good things came out of that incident," the mage noted, sipping his drink in a somewhat
odd manner. "You managed to get the key crystal without a fight, which is good."

"True, I suppose." They all looked up as a shouting match suddenly broke out a few tables over,
several people of at least three different species beginning a loud argument. "What the...?"

Lldnr'k shook his head. "This tends to happen, people get a little... over-exuberant... sometimes. It's
the day before a public holiday, they start early on occasion." The argument swelled, 'Azumi'
listening to the insults being swapped in Trade. Even though some of them sounded slightly odd to
her, they were clearly meant to annoy. Ami and Rei could understand the words due to their SIs,
looking surprised and amused by turns about some of the more imaginative insults. They watched
as a number of Lldnr'k's species wearing clothes that were clearly uniforms, presumably the local
equivalent of the police, popped up in the growing crowd, rapidly and efficiently restoring order
and arresting three participants in the disturbance on the spot. One of those, a D'sage male of
considerable physical size and strength, struggled hard and loudly.

"I'm not letting some jumped up security guard talk to me like that!" the D'sage man screamed,
looking furious. He lashed out with his tail, knocking the cop down, before turning and stalking
off. 'Azumi' and 'Yori' exchanged glances, the former raising an eyebrow, while the latter sighed,
put her drink down, then stood, walking into the path of the man and blocking his way. The cop,
who was now looking extremely irritated, got up with the aid of his compatriots and drew what
seemed to be a weapon, coming after the absconding perpetrator while bearing a look that
suggested he was about to engage in a certain amount of instant karma, his patience exhausted.

'Yori' folded her arms and stared at the inebriated Third Minister's cousin, who stopped, glaring
down at her. "Get out of my way, you little idiot."

"Nope. Don't like your attitude," she replied, looking mildly bored.

"Do you have any idea..." he started to say.

"Who you are? Yes. You're the Third Minister's cousin, I heard. How is Klaath, anyway? I haven't
talked to him since we helped rescue his wife a couple of years ago," she said, which caused him to
stop talking instantly. 'Azumi' looked past the pair to see the policeman and one of his colleagues,
who had come to help, had stopped a few metres away. She made small gesture to indicate they
should wait. Exchanging glances, they both shrugged slightly, although they didn't put their
weapons away, merely watching. The small crowd surrounding them at a respectful distance was
doing the same.

"Rescued his..." 'Azumi' could see in his eyes the moment he worked out who he was talking to. If
he'd been human he'd have gone as white as snow. "Oh, gods. You're Yori."

"Oh, yes, indeed I am." The young woman smiled very slightly, but showing fangs. "You are being
very rude. You're a visitor here. Show some respect, you're dishonouring your people, which
annoys me. I like them a lot. Stop it." She leaned a little closer, suddenly glowing visibly, purple
energy rising from her like smoke from a fire. The entire crowd went dead silent. "You don't want
to annoy me any more, really you don't. Now be a good fellow, go with these nice policemen, and
I'll drop it. If you're lucky I won't even tell Klaath. We're both too busy to bother with stupid drunk
people, but if you persist, I'll have to take you back myself and have a word with him."

Visibly swaying in horror, the D'sage nodded, his ears flat against his head. She looked past him at
the two policemen who walked over, one of them politely but very firmly taking possession of the
instigator of the altercation. The other one stared at her, blinking as the glow went out. "Impressive.
Who did you say you were?"

"I didn't, he did, but I'm Yori. Sorry about stepping in without asking but it seemed appropriate.
Third Minister Klaath would be very annoyed about all this, I'd prefer it didn't bring any dishonour
to him. He's a good man." She glanced at the D'sage man, who was staring at the ground, still
looking shaken. "Pity you can't choose your relatives."

The cop made the click of his beak that conveyed amusement, nodding once. "Indeed it is. If one
could I wouldn't be stuck with my brother." ‘Azumi’ grinned while Lldnr'k and 'Yori' both laughed,
Ami and Rei looking amused. "Thank you for the help, Yori." He cocked his head to the side,
looking at her. "I've definitely heard that name before."

"We get around," the woman said, smiling.

"Yes, I have a feeling you do," he said slowly, inspecting her, then looking at 'Azumi', Rei, and
Ami. Obviously recognising Lldnr'k, he nodded respectfully, saying "Greetings, Honoured Mage.
These are guests of yours?"

"They are, and friends, also, Sub-commander. Do you wish any more information from us?"
Lldnr'k asked, seeming mildly pleased with the outcome of the intervention.

"No, I believe everything is in order. Please excuse us, we have some people to have a long chat
with." Nodding, he made a quick salute, then accompanied his colleague and their now very
subdued prisoner back to the other cops, most of whom left soon after. The crowd slowly dispersed
now that the show was over, although a number of the watchers were studying 'Yori' with interest.
She smiled slightly, glancing at her sister-in-law, then sat again.
"Sorry about that. Where were we? Oh, yes, the key crystal." Everyone looked at her for a moment, Rei and Ami exchanging glances, as she picked up her drink once more.

"Nicely done, by the way," the temporal mage said, amused. She saluted him with her cup, grinning. "As I was saying, getting it without a fight was a stroke of luck even though it was due to this Setsuna woman having a serious medical issue. Hopefully she can be fixed, given time." He took another drink from his own cup, looking thoughtful. "The theory that the staff might be acting as a relay for the time device is, I believe, correct. Having examined it I feel that one of the likely functions of the crystal was indeed to act as a conduit for the sort of spell that was most likely used to influence these women, as your computer, Ami, probably also was." He glanced at the blue-haired girl as she nodded understanding. "Without being able to access it directly I can't be completely sure, but as soon as the last of the layers is unwoven it's something I will check. Mostly of academic interest, now, but it would be nice to be certain one way or the other."

"We still don't know how any such spell actually accessed them yet, though?" 'Azumi' asked. He shook his head.

"Not definitively, no. Although I did have a somewhat disturbing thought along those lines. I'm not entirely sure how to prove it, it's somewhat out of my field of expertise, but I think it might be possible." They all looked at him curiously.

"Could you expand on that?" Ami asked, looking a bit worried and apprehensive.

After a moment, he nodded, slightly reluctantly. "Understand, this is only an idea at the moment, I may well be completely wrong, but it seems plausible." She indicated understanding. "We know that the time device has been interfering with the recent history of your world, which has resulted in the situation we find ourselves dealing with. We're also fairly certain it's reset and looped at least once before. My best guess at the moment is probably more than five times and less than a dozen, although there is no way to prove it except very circumstantially. What we don't know is how far back the reset point is." He looked around at all of the others. "By which I mean, did it go back a hundred years? A thousand? More? Or just to a point before any of you were born, or even only just before the first of you developed your current magical abilities." Everyone stared at him for a few seconds, then exchanged glances.

"Does it matter?" Rei asked. He shrugged slightly, looking somewhat uncertain.

"I'm not entirely sure. There may be no way to even find out, of course. And it might not have reset to the same point each time. Probably it didn't, in fact, I would imagine that it was smart enough to try alternative methods to achieve its goals when it failed the first couple of times. I would also suspect that the reset point probably isn't all that far back, as the number of variables would grow exponentially the further before a desired change it began interfering. But the problem of manipulating time is that it's essentially impossible to account for all the variables no matter how good you are, you see. Something as simple as that rather drunk D'sage interacting with Yori a few minutes ago could well in some ways depend absolutely on specific events happening in a specific order possibly dozens or even hundreds of years ago. On the face of it, you could have changed it by merely going back an hour or so and preventing him getting drunk, but how do you know for sure that would prevent such an interaction in the future?"

He finished his drink as they thought about it. "The answer is, of course, you can't. You might well avoid that particular interaction, by editing a past event, but in the process set up a sequence of possibilities that led to the same interaction, or a worse one, at some later date. Or even an earlier one. Not fate, or predestination, anything like that, just the fact that there are so many things that all come together to make reality happen it's basically impossible to account for all of them. Even
for a massive supercomputer that has possibly millions of years to think about it."

"So you're saying that there was no way to avoid something like that happening?" Ami asked, obviously thinking hard. He shook his head.

"Not at all. There may well be one simple change you could make that would have set everything on a totally different path where that event would never happen. The key thing is, though, that there is basically no way to be totally sure what it is. You could alter one parameter at a time, over and over, until you found it by trial and error, but it would essentially take an infinite amount of time from your perspective. Not to mention that temporal inertia would undo most of the changes before the effect could ripple through to the present, making the entire exercise one of futility in any case." He sighed a little. "And if you made certain changes, which might not even be particularly large ones, at least as far as you could predict, you could well destabilise reality to the point that something very unfortunate happened. It's almost impossible to be sure that any one change is safe, dangerous, or just useless. That's the real danger with time travel, you see. Until you do it you don't know what will happen and by then it's too late."

"It sounds far too dangerous to experiment with," 'Azumi' noted.

He nodded. "It is. With extreme care one may investigate the past through temporal manipulations but it's highly unwise even so. Direct interaction with past events is a fool's game at best. There are laws against it for very good reasons."

"So what is the unsettling idea you had?" she asked, glancing at the others. He fell silent for a moment, studying Ami and Rei, then took another drink as they shifted uncomfortably under his eyes.

"It is obvious that the time device is being very subtle in its actions for the most part. Wholesale editing of the time stream is an almost sure-fire way to attract the attention of the multiverse, it will almost always go badly wrong very quickly, or at the minimum have an effect that's not the one you were after. The time computer presumably knows this well as it's why its own reality was destroyed in the first place. So it seems to me that it will, unless it has no other choice, use much less obvious methods." They all nodded as they listened.

"The problem is that we know it's able to access all of you girls somehow. The conduit is certainly through one or other magitech item being used as a relay, such as your computer, the key orb, or the asteroid installation. All that seems fairly definite now. But the question is, how does it manage to access you via those methods? We've examined you all closely several times and there's no obvious spell present, yet there must be one. None of the magitech devices we have examined have any traces of the sort of magic that would allow it to directly control your minds, it's doing it indirectly somehow, through a pre-existing link of some sort. Which must be very low level indeed, to hide so well."

"That's... very interesting," 'Yori' mused, staring at him, then at the two girls, who looked back, worried.

"Isn't it?" Lldnr'k nodded slowly. "It's also somewhat amusing in a very dark way. The machine could directly interfere if it wasn't for the fact that all the young women involved are possessed of considerable magical abilities, which interfere with most of the more straightforward methods of achieving what it's trying to do, magical abilities they have precisely because of what it's done so far. In essence it's made its own job much more difficult. I would imagine that it may well have tried more direct methods the first couple of times, only having to resort to something this complex when it failed, probably rather rapidly."
They pondered his words for a while. 'Yori' looked to her sister-in-law as if she had a suspicion where the mage was going with this, but said nothing. "So far I have no way to be certain, but I have developed the idea that the machine may have begun interfering some time ago in the personal time lines of all you girls, making very small but careful changes that would lead to this point. My thought is that it has, somehow, embedded the control magic directly into your genetic makeup, most likely by tiny nudges over a considerable time that influenced specific people to mate and produce offspring with the desired traits. A certain amount of direct intervention to modify specific genes, a fair amount of time to mix them in the right way, and..." He indicated Ami and Rei with one hand. "It's a very sneaky way to encode a spell. All the parts are brought together at a specific time without any overt manipulation that's large enough to trigger a response from reality that would undo it." 'Azumi', Ami, and Rei stared at him, thunderstruck, while 'Yori' was nodding, looking understanding and very irritated at the same time.

"It fits. Damn it. It fits much too well."

"It's not my speciality, I admit," Lldnr'k said after a moment during which he sipped his drink again. "Exotic biological manipulations are more your field. But I have encountered documentation on spells encoded genetically once or twice before, which was what gave me the idea. It's rare, partly because it's massively difficult to do correctly and partly because it's only useful in certain, extremely unusual situations, but it's not unheard of."

"You mean that fucking thing has been breeding magical girls?" Rei exploded, looking furious. 'Yori' shook her head as Ami jumped from the sudden noise. A few people around them looked over, then went back to their own business when 'Azumi' gave them an icy glare.

"No, not really. The magical girl part is separate from the mind control part, I think. If Lldnr'k is right, what it's done is produce a situation where specific people have a sensitivity to a specific control spell it can then use to insert the new memories, without using a more obvious and detectable method to directly push them into your brain. It's a very clever idea, actually. The magic use is separate from that, I think, although it may well have affected your inherent sensitivity to magic in the process."

"If it's been doing this sort of manipulation for generations, perhaps that explains why so many magical girls are in Minato," 'Azumi' suggested slowly, looking at them all. 'Yori' glanced at her.

"I guess that's not impossible, but I have a feeling it's only a small part of the story even if it's true. I can't say why, exactly, but it doesn't feel right."

"I think it unlikely," Lldnr'k said, shaking his head. "The device has a specific narrative it is attempting to impose on your reality and the presence of all the other people in your world with magical abilities such as you and Yori possess would if anything be a hindrance to its plans. As current events well show." She smiled a little, while he looked amused. "If it was indeed planning all this I feel it would have gone to some effort to prevent collateral effects that would interfere with its goal."

"Is there any way to prove this?" Ami asked, looking at him, then 'Yori', an expression of worry on her face. "Or more to the point, do something about it?"

'Yori' and Lldnr'k exchanged glances. "Proving it will take a very careful deep scan of you both, but if what I suspect is true, knowing what to look for will allow us to find it. As far as undoing it goes, I don't have the medical or genetic background to even know where to begin." The temporal mage shrugged a little, looking apologetic.

"I've got a fairly good idea what to do," 'Yori' commented after a moment, looking at the middle
Tendo, who nodded, remembering the conversations she'd had with her sister a couple of weeks ago. "Chou and I have been working on an extension to the healing methods we designed that may well help, although we're a little way off being able to test it." She sighed slightly as the others looked at her. "Assuming we succeed in destroying that damn machine none of this should be an immediate problem, which gives us some time to refine the methods, but if it really is there, it's a potential weakness that we should fix. Who knows what else might be buried inside you girls?"

Rei was pale, looking rather scared now. The other woman noticed, smiling encouragingly at her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, Rei. I doubt it's anything too serious, but we need to check. It's not something I want to ignore."

Ami was silent, a thoughtful expression on her face. After a few seconds, she asked slowly, "Assuming that your theory is correct, that explains both how the machine is able to affect us, and the method it's using to do so. But how did it get in the first time?" Everyone looked at her. "I mean, if we do have some sort of genetic susceptibility to this magic, there must have been some initial method by which it first contacted this built-in spell. What was it?"

The answer came to the blue-haired girl and 'Azumi' simultaneously. "The transformation rods," the middle Tendo said, as Ami sighed, nodding, producing her own and looking at it with distaste. The others all inspected it.

"It has to be. This is the first magical artefact each of us got, it's what started the whole thing off for all of us. The first time we used them, it could have caused a link to this built in spell."

"That's certainly plausible," 'Yori' agreed. She held out her hand, Ami dropping the small item into it, then she and Lldnr'k examined it carefully. It glowed violet for a moment as she squinted at it. The temporal mage pulled out a couple of instruments which he touched to the thing, then manipulated for a while. They looked at each other.

"That's the cause, definitely," the mage said with a sigh. "It's a complex spell, more complex than I initially realised when I examined the device the first time, although I admit I was more interested in the temporal signature at the time rather than what it actually did. My apologies, if I had investigated more thoroughly in the first place we might have had this information much earlier."

"Not your fault, Lldnr'k," 'Yori' replied, shaking her head. "I missed it as well. I should have looked into the damn thing more carefully myself." She looked at Ami and Rei. "As we discussed at the time, these things were what allowed you to gain the abilities you have now, but they're not actually a part of it now, merely a useful tool, one which neither of you, or Hotaru, need any more. You've moved well past that point, years ago. I would think that the others have as well although I'm not sure how many of them realise it consciously yet." She flipped Ami's rod in her hand thoughtfully, then handed it back. "It's basically useless now. I don't think it can be used as a relay by the time device but it might be best to dispose of it, just in case."

"What about any of our other tools, and weapons for that matter?" Rei asked with concern, watching as Ami inspected her transformation rod with a troubled expression.

"So far, the computer and the Orb seem to be the main issues," the other woman replied. "The computer is now disconnected and blocked, while the orb is out of range. Once Lldnr'k has cracked it and extracted the information, we should be able to make it safe in the same way so we can give it back to Setsuna. Hotaru's weapon isn't anything that the time device had a hand in creating, I'm certain of that, it's far too old and totally different in origin, while I couldn't find anything odd with Haruka's sword when I examined it a few days ago. It might be an idea to double-check, now that we have an idea what we're looking for, but I suspect it's clean. We do need to check anything else that you have, like your communicators, and the other girl's weapons."
"We should destroy the lot," Rei grumbled, producing her own rod and glaring at it. 'Yori' chuckled.

"The rods, yes, they serve no useful purpose now. Perhaps the communicators, now you have... more effective methods...," She glanced at Lldnr'k, who looked interested but didn't say anything, "but it's your choice."

"If you wish, you can leave those items with me so I can examine them thoroughly," the temporal mage suggested. "That will ensure the device can't access them if they do have any abilities to relay magic, which I should be able to locate and deal with, and it will also allow me to learn more about the methods it's using. Aside from anything else it would be interesting research." Rei and Ami glanced at each other, nodded, then each handed him their rods and communicators, which he vanished into his own storage space. "I will ensure that you learn anything I do about these," he told them.

"I'll get Hotaru's stuff to you as well," 'Yori' commented, watching with a slight smile. He nodded.

"If you can relieve the other young women of their items as well, that would probably be a good thing, although they may not see it that way." He chuckled as Ami and Rei both started laughing.

"Oh, god, Usagi will go nuts if you take her things from her," Rei giggled.

"We need to check on both her and Minako when we get back," 'Azumi' suggested, smiling a little. "We haven't looked in on them since we returned."

"True enough. And, if Misaki is right, it might be time to see if we can bring Minako back," 'Yori' mused, finishing her drink. She looked at Lldnr'k, who seemed curious, explaining Misaki's theory. He listened carefully, looking impressed and slightly worried.

"That's... a very interesting thought," he told them when she'd finished. "And, I suspect, most likely correct. I hadn't thought of it, although I probably should have. Yes, I think you would do well to return Minako to her home presuming she is stable enough to allow that to happen, it may well be important. Anything we can do to delay the device deciding to execute a reset of the timeline we should do."

"OK. We'll go and have a word with her a bit later, and also check in on Usagi. I'll have to get her to Hnther for a quick examination as well, sometime in the next few hours." 'Yori' sighed slightly, toying with her empty cup. "This is all very annoying."

"I'll say," Ami grumbled, staring at the table. "Damn cats. This is all their fault. If I hadn't met Luna maybe I wouldn't be involved in all this craziness." 'Azumi' and 'Yori' went totally still, then looked at each other. Ami apparently noticed something amiss, glancing up at them, but misunderstood their expressions. "Not that I mind the end result, you understand, only all the baggage that comes along with it."

The middle sister could see in her sister-in-law's eyes that she was suddenly thinking very hard, as was the Tendo woman. 'Luna'? 'Yori' turned her head back to stare at Ami, who seemed slightly worried, then looked at Rei, who looked back, puzzled.

"Tell me more about these cats," she asked, a certain amount of tension in her voice. "You mentioned them a few times but that's the first time you called one by name."

The blue-haired girl glanced at her team-mate, who shrugged. "Oh. Um, well, they're basically cats, Luna is a small black female one with a sort of new moon shaped mark on her forehead,
Artemis, despite his name, is a male, white, same mark. Like I said, they talk. A lot. In fact, sometimes it can be difficult to get them to shut up. They're the ones who gave us the rods in the first place. For the first couple of years they gave very good advice, although looking back on it, it was 'good' in the sense that it was clearly manipulating us into doing what the time device wanted, but after a while what they said and what happened drifted further and further apart. That was when everything started to go weird." She snickered a little. "Weirder that it had been, I guess." The girl looked at Rei, who nodded, smiling a little sadly. "Other than that, I think you know about it. They advise, or misadvise, Usagi and Minako. Usagi was starting to get very irritated about the advice over the last few months, she spent a lot of time arguing with Luna. Minako was on better terms with Artemis, although they certainly had a lot of differences of opinion."

'Yori' rubbed her chin, thoughtfully, staring at Ami and Rei, for some time after she stopped speaking. "Interesting. Very interesting indeed."

"I take it that you have some issue with Ami's explanation," Lldnr'k remarked, looking very curious. She glanced at him, then looked around.

"Yes. Very much so, but I don't think here is the best place to talk about it. Can we go back to your workshop?"

"Of course. There's a teleport node just over there," he said, pointing. They all got up and headed over, waiting for a group of people to use the node, then clustering on it. Seconds later they were in the courtyard of Lldnr'k's building. He led them inside again, into a private room, with a large table in the middle of it, surrounded by chairs of various types. Everyone felt heavy wards go up around the room. 'Yori' looked pleased and mildly impressed.

"Not bad. Better than most people do." He signified amusement.

"Thank you. Coming from you that's quite a pleasing statement."

She grinned at him for a moment. They all sat down, looking at each other. "So, what did you want to talk about?" he asked curiously.

"I want you to look at something, then see if you can work it out," she replied.

"We're going to have to tell him about the SIs, I guess?" 'Azumi' asked.

"Most likely, and the camera drones. It can't be helped, he needs to see this. It's covered under the security spell, so it won't go any further. We'll probably need to talk to Hnther as well, get his opinion. I'm curious to see what they both think. Can you project that file that Tamiko sent us, the first one where Usagi was stomping around on the roof shouting at 'Luna' before she went to look for Minako, please?" The middle sister nodded, producing the projector she'd picked up on K'n

"Ah. We're going to have something to watch?" She grinned.

"Yep." Sending the recording to the device, she had it project the image to one side so they could all see it properly. Everyone watched as Usagi stomped around, shouting and waving her arms. The camera moved closer and the audio cut in, making Rei jump a little, then they listened, until the recording finished. Ami and Rei both watched it, frowning slightly, glancing at each other now and then, but said nothing after a look from 'Yori'.

"Hmm." Lldnr'k scratched the base of his beak thoughtfully. "Interesting, as you said."
"There's more, as well," 'Azumi' told him, before showing the rest of the recordings they had acquired between them of both Usagi and Minako. When they were finished he leaned back, studying her, then 'Yori', for a moment. He glanced at Rei and Ami.

"Intriguing. Both the contents of those recordings and how you obtained them. I suspect there is some interesting technology behind that."

"It's rather good, yes," 'Yori' replied, smiling. She explained. He looked very impressed.

"That... is quite remarkable. I have heard of Kw'lyn Industries, of course, their magitech is the best you can get by a very long way. But these secure communication units are new to me. Not surprising, considering how restricted they are. I'm somewhat envious." He glanced around at them all as they smiled. "You all have them?"

"We do," Rei told him, looking pleased. "We never expected to get anything like that, but we're amazingly grateful, even after only a day. I think they're going to change our lives in a lot of ways."

"I can see why. I can also see why you wish to keep the knowledge of them to a minimum number of people. All right, that's all very interesting, and I'd love to learn more at some point, but leaving that aside, the ramifications of what you've shown me are more important at the moment." He thought for a moment, then looked at Ami.

"You can all see and interact with Luna and Artemis?"

She nodded, frowning slightly again. "Yes, but I'm very puzzled as to why they didn't come out on the recordings. Usagi was obviously able to talk to Luna, and that other one showed both she and Minako could. Why didn't they get recorded?"

"There are only two possibilities I can think of," he told her, idly tapping one talon on the table with a faint clicking sound as he thought. "One is that they have some form of stealth technology or magic, which prevents them being recorded. Yori and Chou, I know, can perform that particular feat quite easily." The two looked at 'Yori', who nodded.

"Yes, our invisibility technique definitely works against the camera drones, I tested it. But somehow this doesn't feel like that."

"The other possibility is more interesting, and somewhat worrying," the mage continued. "It is that these cats, whatever they really are, don't actually exist in the normal sense of the word. Not physically, at least." Everyone stared at him for a long moment.

"Don't exist?" Rei asked in a low voice, looking stunned. "But... I've talked to them! All of us have! They're the ones that gave us these damn things in the first place, for god's sake."

Lldnr'k studied her. "Have you ever seen them physically interact with anything? Anything at all? Or seen anyone else interact with them except your colleagues?" She opened her mouth, ready to say something, then stopped before the first words emerged. After several seconds, she closed her mouth again, looking helplessly at Ami, who was obviously thinking very hard.

"They gave us the transformation rods," Rei repeated, looking lost.

"But they didn't, did they?" Ami said slowly, glancing at her. "Not as such. Oh yes, they were responsible for the things, but it's not like they actually handed them to us. Luna did her little song and dance routine and they were just there. She didn't actually touch them. Now that Lldnr'k mentions it, I can't think of a single time when I've seen either one of the cats touch anything. They have a habit of just turning up, out of nowhere, not coming in a door or a window, or climbing a
tree. They're just there." 'Azumi' glanced at 'Yori', seeing her listening intently, looking very interested.

"Why have I never noticed that before?" Ami mused, looking around.

"I suspect because, as in the case of the medical damage the device was causing to your friends, you were being influenced not to," the martial artist said quietly. L'dnr'k nodded, across from her, both of them watching the blue-haired girl. "I was just beginning to wonder if it might be something like the SI units in some weird way, but the more I think about it the less likely I think that is. Too many things don't fit. But it's obviously connected to the time device."

"Definitely," the mage told them. "I believe we will need to talk to Hnther, and also examine one of these two girls to be sure, but I have an idea what it might be." Everyone else turned their attention to him. "Understand, this isn't my field, but I've been around long enough to have picked up various things from some fairly widely separated disciplines. This falls more into the realm of a mind mage, but I suspect that what we're dealing with is a self-contained induced personality splinter."

The four women exchanged glances. Rei was the one to ask. "What the hell is that?"

"You're aware of the concept of multiple personality disorders? My people occasionally suffer from them, as do yours." She nodded, while 'Yori' raised an eyebrow, looking at her sister-in-law. Ami was listening intently but suddenly appeared to have an idea where this was going. "An organic brain is an amazingly powerful processing system, capable of a truly vast number of parallel operations. Consciousness, oddly enough, doesn't actually use all of that processing power. A large amount of it, to be sure, more in some species and individuals than in others, but there is a lot left over in most cases. Much of the remainder is used for autonomic operations, but there's usually enough spare capacity to run more than one consciousness on the same 'hardware', if you like. This usually happens spontaneously, for a number of reasons, such as certain types of trauma, mental illness, brain damages, conditions of that type. The result is more than one personality residing in a single brain."

He looked around to see if there were any questions. 'Yori' motioned for him to continue, looking fascinated. "In some cases, these personalities run concurrently, in others they are alternately active. Sometimes they're aware of each other, sometimes not. They can share memories, skills, abilities, or develop totally different ones. It becomes very complex to deal with. Far outside my own expertise, obviously. The common result of this sort of disorder is one or more of a series of fairly serious mental problems, most of which are highly undesirable and often difficult to treat. But, it is possible, from what I have read and been told in the past, to deliberately induce an effect very similar to what can happen naturally, except in a controlled manner. I am aware of the technique having been occasionally utilised for espionage, for example."

"You mean something like producing a personality that is a spy, then embedding it in the mind of someone no one would suspect, only to come out under the right conditions?" the middle Tendo asked. He nodded.

"Exactly."

"I'm pretty sure I've seen a movie about that sort of thing," she mumbled, thinking.

"The Manchurian Candidate is the obvious one," 'Yori' commented, glancing at her. "But the idea is used in quite a few books and movies I can think of. Although by the sound of it, this goes a lot further than brainwashing or mind control."

"It does. I'm not familiar with those specific works, but our own fiction has used the concept more
than a few times, with varying success." Lldnr'k shrugged. "Some of it is quite entertaining, but most is also very inaccurate. What you mention is a fairly simplistic version. The sort of thing I'm thinking about is much more effective, and also more dangerous. Essentially, I suspect that what has happened is that the device has partitioned off part of the brains of each of these two young ladies, then constructed a complete personality which runs on this otherwise spare capacity, with it's own memory, thoughts, awareness, and everything else that goes to make up a mind. It is possible that the 'Luna' personality, for example, has access to Usagi's memories, it will certainly have access to her senses. She won't have access to any of it, and in fact will have been influenced to not notice it at all. The 'Luna' personality itself may not actually realise what it is, it also may have been programmed to not work it out. If I'm right, it's running concurrently with her main personality as a separate process, able to interact with her at will, directly interfacing with her visual and auditory pathways in a similar manner to how your SI units function."

"If that was done correctly it would be amazingly difficult to notice," 'Yori' said, sounding impressed. "Assuming both the base personality and the... 'splinter', did you call it?" He nodded. "Had been programmed right, neither one would realise the truth. Any imperfections in the process they'd both be made to ignore."

"Indeed. The splinter personality would be more likely to notice than the host one, for a number of reasons. But even there it would probably be difficult. If I'm right, the device will have set these splinters up to guide the narrative locally, when it was unable to drive it directly, either because it was for one reason or another unable to access them by the other means we suspect it's using, or because it was worried that direct intervention was too dangerous. Dumping a lot of data into their minds along with something that would provide it on an ongoing basis, internally, with no further intervention, would be a fairly effective method of minimising the temporal interference in a manner that was unlikely to provoke a reality reset." He sighed. "It's a very, very clever thing to do. Extremely difficult to detect for the main part."

"That damn thing may be an idiot, but it's a smart one," 'Yori' agreed, scowling. The mage clicked his beak in acknowledgement.

"Hold on," Ami protested, after they all fell silent for a moment. "It sounds plausible, I admit, but the glaring hole in the theory is... How the hell did the rest of us see and interact with these 'splinters'? If they're really some weird personality riding on top of poor Usagi and Minako's minds, surely only they could see and hear them? But I've had quite long conversations with Luna when Usagi wasn't even in the same room!"

Lldnr'k looked at her. "My best guess is that it's some form of short-range telepathic spell, which allows the splinter to insert visuals and audio into the minds of other people. Most likely, only the nine of you, it's almost certainly connected to, or even part of, the spell we suspect is built into your genetic makeup which allows the device to manipulate your memories. A different application of much the same method."

"You mean Usagi and Minako are telepathic?" Rei squeaked. He laughed, shaking his head.

"No, not at all. It's not an inherent ability, true telepathy, although it does exist, is both fairly rare and in some ways less effective that this. It's much closer to what your SI units do, although most likely by a totally different method, and I suspect nothing like as powerful. From what Yori said, those devices use a very advanced subspace linkage of some sort. This would be a direct, low level magical connection, which wouldn't have very much power behind it, at least partly because otherwise it would be fairly easy to detect. The range would be quite short as well, I feel."

Rei and Ami looked at each other again. "I can't think of any time when I've seen either of the cats
and either Usagi or Minako wasn't somewhere within a couple of hundred metres," Ami said. Her friend nodded slowly, a frown on her face.

"No, neither can I."

#Nabiki, everything that Lldnr'k has suggested is extremely plausible,' Jun suddenly said. 'I calculate there is a better than ninety-three percent chance he is correct. Techniques of this nature are in my database, although they are marked as being considered too dangerous to use in most cases. Most species who underwent such a technique would become far more likely to suffer some form of psychosis within a few years of the splinter personality being established, yours being one of them. It may well explain why Usagi has deteriorated so rapidly, when all the other damage done to her mind by the time device is taken into account. Minako may just be lucky, or the damage hasn't progressed as far in her case yet.#

'Is there anything that can be done about it?' she asked the SI.

#Yes, although it may be too late. Suppression of the splinter is possible, reintegration into the host mind is more difficult but may be possible. Allowing the situation to continue is likely to lead to long term damage, such personality splinters are inherently unstable over time periods on the order of a decade or more, except in very rare cases. It is barely possible Minako is one of those cases although I would suggest that the evidence shows that Usagi is definitely not. Hnther is the best choice currently known to me to be able to execute some form of treatment.#

The middle sister glanced at 'Yori'. The other woman looked back at her for a moment.

"Jun thinks he's probably right," she commed. 'Yori' nodded, sighing gently.

"Yes, I just got the same advice. Ami and Rei probably did as well." They looked at the two girls, who each had familiar expressions suggesting an internal dialogue.

"The SIs agree with you, Lldnr'k," 'Azumi' said out loud, making him turn his attention to her from Ami, who he had been watching. "They also agree that we need to get Hnther to investigate."

"Wouldn't he have noticed something like that when he examined them?" Ami asked curiously. Lldnr'k shook his head a little.

"Not unless he was looking for it, I suspect. He was concentrating on other things, mainly the memory editing that you all suffered from. As the memories of this personality splinter would be totally separate from those of the host, it's entirely possible he wouldn't have noticed it, especially if some method of hiding the alterations had been put in place. He would undoubtedly discover it given time, he is very skilled indeed in his field, but even for an expert it would be difficult without a very deep scan which is a time consuming process from what I understand. Knowing the splinter exists, though, would allow him to locate it fairly quickly. Although what he can do about it is beyond my knowledge."

"All we can do is tell him and see what he says," 'Yori' sighed. "Right. I guess we'd better go and talk to him. Sorry, you guys, it looks like we still need you." Rei and Ami exchanged glances.

"Can we go home for a little while first?" Rei asked. "I'd like to talk to grandfather for a bit, just to let him know I'm all right."

"I want to tell my mother I'm OK as well," Ami added. "I know Chou got messages to everyone, but still..."

"Sure. No problem. It's not a tearing hurry, probably, although I'd like to find out the truth sooner
rather than later. As soon as Lldnr'k has the coordinates we're going to get very busy, I suspect, but from what he says we have at least twenty-four hours until then." She glanced at the temporal mage, who nodded.

"It won't happen before then, certainly."

"OK. Let's go back, talk to everyone and let them know what's going on, then you two can go home until tomorrow morning." The martial artist thought for a moment. "What we could do is go and see if Minako is more or less sane at the moment. If she is, we need to bring her back anyway. We can do that via Hnter, get him to look into this latest mess, and check you two over at the same time. That should give us everything we need. Then we let her go, make it damn clear there's to be no idiotic attacks on anyone, get these coordinates, some extremely large bombs, and go and make the loudest bang anyone has ever heard." She grinned viciously. "I'm really looking forward to erasing this fucking thing from the multiverse."

"You and me both, my friend," Lldnr'k assured her, looking angry.

"I hope it's that easy," Ami muttered.

"So do I. But I suspect a hundred kilos of antimatter in the face will do the job." 'Yori' snickered. "I'm going to see how many of those warheads the SI makers are willing to part with. I think Lldnr'k is right, no sense taking even the slightest chance we don't have enough firepower. I intend to see there's nothing left of that damn time machine except subatomic particles." She glanced at the mage, who seemed satisfied.

"Good. Very good."

"Do you want to be present when we examine Minako and the girls?" she asked. He thought for a moment.

"Yes, if only for the sake of curiosity. but I think my time is probably better spent getting the coordinates out of the crystal. The last two or three interactions are likely to need a delicate hand to unravel, I fear. As you say, as soon as we have them we should move immediately to destroy the machine. After that, I'd be very interested in learning more about this other problem, but until then..." He shrugged as she nodded.

"Fair enough. OK, we'll get back, and I'll stop in again tomorrow to see how it's going."

"That's fine. Good luck. Give my greetings to Chou and the others."

"I will." 'Yori' stood, as did everyone else, shaking the mage's hand, then, as he dropped the wards, created a portal in the corner of the room. He watched as they all waved then walked through it, the tear in reality vanishing with a pop. Smiling slightly in the way that his species did, he went back to work.
Vast appreciation for the comments and kudos.

This particular story arc is drawing to a close, in its current form, with probably only a couple more chapters to go, but never fear, the story as a whole is not yet complete...

Mind you, if you don't like the story, there is much to fear!

That said, in that case how did you manage to get this far into it?

Saeko Mizuno looked away from her computer as she heard the front door open. "Is that you, Ami?" she called.

"Yes, Mom, I'm back. Sorry about being late, I hope you got the message." The older woman saved and closed the report she was working on, getting up and heading into the living room, where her only daughter was just taking her light jacket off, her bag on the floor next to her. She smiled at the young woman who smiled back.

"Yes, I did, thanks. Did you have a nice trip with your friends, dear?" she asked. Ami nodded, although there was momentarily a rather odd look in her eyes, something that vanished almost before her mother noticed. She said nothing, although she added it to the mental tally of slightly peculiar things that she'd noticed about her daughter over the last few years. The list was fairly substantial.

"It was a lot of fun, yes, thanks, Mom. We got back a little while ago, we were just winding down and talking for a while. I met some very interesting people, actually, and saw some amazing things." She smiled again, bending down and picking up her bag, which she put on the table and unzipped. Rummaging through it she pulled out a few small objects, selecting two of them. One was a small grey rock, about the size of a golf ball, while the other one was a tiny transparent crystal statue of a rather odd looking creature, which reminded Saeko of a sort of insect, although it was bipedal and was holding what looked like a book in one of its four hands. "I got a couple of souvenirs for you as well. Here, what do you think?" She handed them over.

Looking at the two objects she was holding, Doctor Mizuno raised an eyebrow. "Hmm. Not exactly the normal sort of thing you bring back from holiday. A rock and a little statue from a fantasy shop." Ami grinned, while her mother inspected both small objects carefully. "Mind you, the workmanship on this crystal is amazing. It looks like it's made from a single piece, but the detailing is remarkable. What's it supposed to be?"

Looking very amused, Ami laughed. "Just something I saw in this odd shop. Apparently it's a statue of a famous researcher from another world."

Saeko raised the other eyebrow, studying her daughter, then smiled slightly. "I see. An alien scientist, hmm?"

"That's the idea."

"Very interesting. That must have been a very odd shop. Lots of teenaged boys wandering around, looking pale, clutching role playing games in their hands, perhaps?" Ami began giggling, shaking her head, as her mother laughed.
"Not quite, but it was fairly unusual. I couldn't resist it."

"What's it made of?" the older woman asked curiously, rubbing it carefully with her fingertip. "Not glass, or at least normal glass, the refractive index is wrong. Perhaps lead crystal?" She held the thing up to the light, turning it gently, watching the highlights as the light refracted through it. Ami snickered.

"I was told it's made of synthetic diamond."

Glancing at her, her mother sighed, although she smiled. "I highly doubt that, as far as I know synthetic diamonds are generally very small and used for industrial purposes. I think it's unlikely that people would be making little statues for a fantasy game out of it, even if it could be done."

Ami shrugged, grinning.

"I guess not."

"I hope it wasn't too expensive."

"No, it was quite cheap, Mom, I just thought you'd like it. It's a bit weird, I know, but I thought it was fun." Giving her daughter a long look, Saeko eventually nodded.

"You are a very strange young lady sometimes, Ami." She laughed, putting the little figurine down on the table carefully, so she wouldn't break it. She held up the rock, inspecting it more closely. "I assume this has a similarly unusual story behind it?" There was nothing particularly notable about the stone, it seemed to be a fairly normal piece of some sort of light grey material, like you could find almost anywhere. Her daughter giggled again.

"Oh, yes. It's a piece of moon rock."

Giving her an exasperated look, Saeko shook her head. "A very strange young lady. Moon rock. Yes, indeed, I see it now. The cheese smell is a dead giveaway." Ami started laughing, then hugged her mother. "Thank you Ami, they're... interesting... little gifts. I fear the souvenir sellers may have seen you coming, but..."

"I'm sorry they're not more exciting but they have some significance for me," the blue-haired young woman told her, looking pleased.

"Don't worry, you hardly need to go out of your way to get me presents, dear," Saeko replied, turning the rock over in her fingers. Its surface was rough to the touch, but felt quite pleasant to run her fingertips over. "Certainly not as far as the moon." She giggled at the look on her daughter's face. "Come on, you can help me with the table, you're just in time for dinner. Tell me more about these friends of yours as well, and what you did. Rei and that young Hotaru girl went with you, didn't they?"

"Yes, we all had a lot of fun. Excitement, adventure, lots of running around shouting. And swimming. Lots of swimming." Ami quickly packed her bag again and moved it to the sofa, while Saeko put both her presents on the bookcase in the corner of the room. They both went into the kitchen. "It was amazing." She glanced sidelong at her mother, an impish smile on her face. "I even had a flying lesson."

"You did what?!" Saeko stared in shocked horror.

"Some friends we met go flying all the time, they took us up for a go. It was huge fun. I'm thinking of getting into it myself." Ami was giggling again, while her mother spluttered, sufficiently surprised she couldn't think what to say. Moving past her, the younger woman pulled the oven door
open, peering inside. "This looks nice. Shall I peel some carrots?"

Unable to think what to say for the moment, her mother nodded faintly, staring. They clearly needed to talk.

"Hello, Grandfather," Rei said, smiling at the old priest as she entered the temple. Behind her, Aiko was leaning against the door, also smiling a little. The black-haired girl knelt and hugged the old man for a moment, as he returned it, looking pleased. "I'm back."

"So I see. I hope your trip was successful?"

"It was. So many things happened. I wish I could tell you everything, but..." He waved this off, looking amused.

"Don't worry, I understand there are things you can't tell me. I'll gladly listen to anything you can, though." He looked over at Aiko. "Hello, child, it's nice to see you as well. Would you like to stay for some tea?" She regretfully shook her head.

"Sorry, sir, I'd love to, but I have to get back. There are some things we need to do. But I did bring you this." She tossed him a chunk of stone about the size of a duck's egg, which he snatched out of the air with a speed that somewhat surprised his granddaughter. "One genuine moon rock, fresh from the surface, as promised." He grinned at her, making a small bow, which she returned with a laugh.

"Thank you. I appreciate the thought." Holding it up he studied it, rubbing it with his thumb.

"It was decontaminated on the ship, all the dust was removed, that stuff is mildly toxic. The rock is safe to handle, though."

"Fascinating," he murmured, looking at the stone, then lowered it. "I hope you're successful in dealing with your duties. Oh, I heard that the Setsuna woman had a rather spectacular problem in a park a few kilometres away the other morning and you girls took her away. Is she going to be all right?" Aiko sighed slightly, shrugging a little.

"I'm not sure. Neither is Yori. They took her to Hunter's world, he's looking into the problem at the moment. He thinks that she's going to need considerable treatment for some time, but right now he's not entirely sure how successful that is likely to be. It's going to take a while to find out."

"Poor woman." Shaking his head slowly, he glanced at his granddaughter, who looked sombre. "I hope she recovers. The others, as well. Please let me know what happens, and if there's anything I can do to help."

"I will. Thank you for the offer." Straightening up in the doorway, Aiko nodded to him, then looked at Rei. "See you soon. Call any time, if you want to talk, or a lift."

"Thanks, Aiko. For everything." Rei smiled, before Aiko slipped out into the corridor, a brilliant flash illuminating it for a fraction of a second. Turning back to her ancient relative she grinned. "I've got an amazing story to tell you."

"Well, then, let's get some tea, sit down, and talk," the old man replied, looking amused and interested. Both of them headed into the temple kitchen.

"I'll bet that hurt."
Usagi looked up at the cat, which was sitting on a small rock just beside her head, peering down at her upside-down, a slightly quizzical expression on its furry face, along with rather more amusement than she liked. She groaned, reaching up to rub her forehead.

"Just a little." After a moment, she managed to pull herself into a sitting position, rubbing her head gently and wincing, muttering to herself, as she looked around. The explosion had been somewhat... impressive. Experimenting with her magic in a desperate way to work out some way with which to possibly beat Yori, she had suddenly had a bright idea, sparked by one of the meditation books she'd leafed through before deciding that most of it was a lot of new-age crap. A couple of the exercises in it had, though, seemed vaguely worth the effort, and a couple of days of trying had lead to a breakthrough, allowing her to access her power-up in a way that seemed to make the transformation rod redundant. This in turn had let her work out how to access more power than she'd ever had the ability to use before, for some reason, although it wasn't easy.

After thinking about it for a while, she'd tried using her tiara attack, essentially supercharging it far past the normal level. Taking aim on a huge boulder at the base of the mountain nearest her, she'd fired the thing at it, only to find that the results were slightly more spectacular than she'd been expecting. The explosion that had followed the impact of the glowing artefact had reduced a boulder the size of a house to gravel, which had promptly departed the area at substantial speed, unfortunately going through the area in which she'd been standing in significant quantities.

As shrapnel, mixed with larger chunks, had whizzed overhead making some very nasty noises she'd hit the deck, after a wide-eyed stare and a yelp of shock. One orange-sized piece of rock had struck her forehead a glancing blow on the way down, flipping her head over heels some ten metres in an impact that would have reduced a normal person to mulch. Now, as she stared at the devastated scene, she slowly began to grin. "Hah. Yori, you're dead, when I get back. No way can you beat that!" The cat, now behind her, made a noise that sounded a lot like a suppressed giggle of disbelief, causing her to look back at it with a vicious glare.

"You have a comment to share, perhaps?" she asked sweetly, her eyes flashing. Luna giggled again.

"A couple. One, you nearly killed yourself with that trick, and if you use it in a populated area, a lot of people will be killed or injured."

"Collateral damage. They'll all be dead soon enough, anyway, what does it matter when it happens?" Usagi shrugged, getting up and brushing dust from her uniform. Luna stared at her for several seconds, apparently not entirely sure she'd heard correctly. After a moment, though, she shook her head, then continued.

"Two, I would be extremely cautious about assuming anything about Yori's abilities, or lack thereof, or those of Chou and their friends. I'm pretty sure that you haven't ever seen them go all out."

"They've never seen me go all out, either," the blonde snickered, walking over to pick up her tiara, which was lying on the ground twenty metres away, where it had landed after the test shot, since she'd been too busy ducking to catch it. "She'll never know what hit her, believe me. I bet I only need to get her and all the rest will give up anyway."

"Three," Luna added, after sighing faintly, "You're here, on a completely alien, totally dead world, with absolutely no way to get back without their cooperation in the first place. If I were you, I'd be thinking more about ways to get those girls to trust you again, rather than plotting to kill them and anyone else who gets in your way. Unless you like it here?"
"I fucking hate it, but I have to admit it's given me time to think and practice. All I have to do is pretend to be nice, when they come back, then as soon as we're through the portal, attack Yori. Game over, I win."

The cat jumped up onto a boulder the size of a person next to her and stared at her face for a long few seconds. Eventually it sighed again, more loudly. "You really think that, don't you?" she muttered to herself, shaking her head. "You're going to have a shock." Jumping down it walked away, threading its path through the rubble, heading for the tent. Usagi watched it go, fuming.

"What do you mean, Luna?" There was no answer. "Luna! Tell me what you meant!" Following it angrily, she stopped when she went around the last boulder to see it had vanished again. "Fucking cat. What does she know, anyway. I'm the princess."

Stomping off towards her tent, thinking up new ways to use the power she had gained access to, Usagi mumbled to herself about all the people who would pay when she got home. A faint high-pitched humming sound accompanied her.

"What's the next step, then?" Nabiki asked, accepting a cup of tea from her sister with a smile.

"Get a good night's sleep, it's been a long day, then in the morning check in on Minako and Usagi, I suppose," Ranma mused, taking the next cup Kasumi handed out. "We need to swap out the camera drones for ones with freshly charged antigray power supplies anyway, and we can take the opportunity to review what they've been up to since they were put there. Hopefully Minako at least will be sane enough we can deal with her sensibly." He sighed a little, shaking his head. "I doubt very much that Usagi will have improved, but I suppose it's possible. But based on what we've seen in the last few weeks..." Shaking his head again, he raised his teacup and took a sip.

"I think it's very unlikely," Tamiko told him, taking her own cup. Kasumi gave the last one to Misaki then sat next to her husband. "She was pretty much frothing at the mouth when we took her down, I doubt being isolated and having time to stew on things has improved her outlook on life very much." Misaki and Fumiko looked at each other, both nodding.

"She's crazy, I'm afraid," Fumiko added, scowling. "I know she used to be fairly sane, although how much is debatable, she was always a bit odd, but what we saw... No, she's got it bad. Whether Hnther and his people can do anything I don't know, but even as she was a week ago she's not in a condition that's safe to allow out in public."

"To be honest, it was probably only her fixation on you that stopped something worse happening to the community at large," Misaki commented quietly, looking at Ranma. "She seems to have no real inhibitions against hurting anyone who gets in her way at the moment. Luckily all that anger and drive was focussed on causing 'Yori' problems, so we were able to take her out before something horrible happened. But I have no doubt it would eventually have happened, whatever 'it' is."

"Damn it." Ranma frowned into his tea, before drinking some more. "I never liked the girl in the first place, something about her winds me right up, but it's not nice seeing someone fall apart like that."

Kasumi put her hand on his, causing him to glance at her, then smiled gently. "It's not our fault, although it seems to be our responsibility to deal with the aftermath. The time device is to blame, and ultimately, a civilization that no longer exists. Even Usagi is mostly blameless. Let's just try to help the poor girl and not worry too much about how it happened and what might have gone wrong but didn't."
Smiling at her, he held her hand. "Right as usual, Kas. Thank you."

"Minako is more likely to respond to logic, I think," Aiko said, watching them with a small smile. "She's never been quite as gung-ho as Usagi, although she was certainly quick off the mark in a few cases. That said, so was Rei, and she seems to have turned out pretty well. Hopefully, Minako will see sense. A few days alone might have helped."

"Hopefully." Nabiki looked at Ranma with concern, then glanced at her sister. That one word embodied a significant amount of annoyance and tiredness, she felt. Kasumi met her eyes, nodded slightly, then squeezed her husband's hand.

"We're all too tired to think this through properly, I think. Let's all get some sleep, have a decent breakfast in the morning, then see what we can do. It won't look as bad in the morning, it usually doesn't." Ranma looked at her for a few seconds, then smiled a little, nodding agreement.

"The voice of reason speaks truth." Quickly finishing his tea he put his cup down, as Kasumi did the same. The others all followed suit.

"We'll see you tomorrow, guys," Aiko said, grinning, then vanished, not bothering to stand up. Tamiko blinked at the flash, laughed slightly, then stood, as did her two team-mates.

"We'll leave slightly less dramatically, but the same applies. See you in the morning." The red-head grinned at them, then left with her colleagues, the front door closing behind them with a click.

Nabiki looked around, laughed, and stood, putting her cup on the tray Kasumi had brought them out on.

"You guys go to bed, I'll tidy these away, then do the same."

"Thank you, sister," Kasumi replied with a smile, pulling her husband to his feet. "Come on, dear. You look tired." Ranma let himself be towed into the bedroom, winking at his sister-in-law over his shoulder as he disappeared into the room. Nabiki snickered, then went back to clearing the tea things away, shaking her head slightly in amusement.

Soun glanced at Cologne, who was watching Akane go through a kata with Shampoo critiquing her, stopping her every now and then to correct something, showing significant patience, something he was impressed by. The old woman was easily balancing on her staff, her long white hair almost glowing in the early morning sunlight, but she looked pensive, as if her attention wasn't completely on the activities of the two young women. "You seem distracted, Elder," he commented, going back to watching his youngest daughter and her friend. There was no answer for long enough he began to wonder if she'd heard him.

"I met someone rather unsettling the other day," she finally said, still watching the girls as well. "This Ms Aoyama that Shampoo and Akane have run into a couple of times."

"Ah. By the tone of your voice you're not entirely happy about having done so, I think." Soun glanced at her again, meeting her eyes as she looked up.

"No. It was... highly unpleasant."

"Is she a danger?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. To the most remarkable level, I think. But not without provocation." Cologne actually shivered as he watched, surprised. "Although she's the coldest, creepiest, most unsettling person I have met in my entire life, I don't think that she is in any way hostile. Merely capable of
reacting to something she didn't approve of in a very final manner."

"Who is she?" he asked curiously, himself unsettled by her words.

She shrugged. "I have absolutely no idea at all. Not human, that much I'm completely sure of, but beyond that, your guess is as good as mine. She's from somewhere a very long way away, I suspect. I can't say anything more about it, I'm afraid, but if you ever meet her, you'll understand."

She looked like she was thinking about something she'd learned, something she wasn't entirely happy about. The Tendo patriarch watched her for a moment, then went back to inspecting the two girls.

"They do seem to have made the acquaintance of some very unusual people over the last year," he commented. Cologne chuckled rustily.

"That, they most certainly have. I could have done without that woman, though. The thought that she and her employers, whoever the hell they are, are taking an interest in my great-granddaughter and her friend is somewhat worrying."

"Do we need to do anything?" he asked, now quite concerned. Once more she laughed, although there was to his ears a certain amount of strain in it.

"I don't think there is anything we can do about it, to be honest, except see how it plays out. There are certain things in life that, when they happen, you have to ride out. There's not much you can actually do about them except wait and hope you survive it. Volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes... Ms Aoyama." He stared at her, then both of them started to laugh a little.

"I hope you're exaggerating, Elder."

"So do I."

Her reply made him less happy than he'd have liked. Cologne seemed to share the feeling. They both fell silent while watching the two young women train.

"Interesting," Aiko muttered, as they all watched the recording. They were sitting in the living room, which had a small portal hanging in the air near the window, allowing their SIs to connect to the drones shadowing the two exiled girls, although the other end was several hundred kilometres away from Usagi so she wouldn't detect it. "She's getting worse. I was afraid of that."

"It looks like she's worked out how to directly access her magic, which is a decent accomplishment," Kasumi noted with interest. Ranma nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"It is. Unfortunately it makes her even more dangerous. The part of her conversation with the 'cat' that we could hear also suggests she's none too concerned about anyone's safety except hers, either. I wish we could hear the other part. I'd love to know whether this 'Luna' personality was egging her on or advising restraint."

"I'd say it was probably urging her to stop and think," Nabiki said, replaying part of the recording that had been made a few hours earlier. "She didn't seem too pleased about it, at any rate. I get the impression that these personality splinters are probably trying to rein them in a little. From what I can pick up from the recordings of Minato, her 'Artemis' one is telling her to stop and think before she does anything."

"Indeed," her sister said, also reviewing some of the recordings. "That's very interesting. I wonder why they're doing that? I'd have though it was more likely that they'd be pushing the time
machine's narrative but as you say, they seem, if anything, to be doing nearly the opposite."

"Do you think it's possibly that these splinter personalities are independent and intelligent enough to have realised that something is wrong with the whole situation?" Fumiko asked slowly, apparently thinking hard. Everyone looked at her. Eventually Ranma nodded again, looking intrigued.

"I guess it's possible. From what Ami and Rei said, they're fully sentient and very articulate, with considerable apparent intelligence. I suppose that removing them from the influence of the time device might have allowed them to start noticing all the incongruities of what's been happening recently. Perhaps they're beginning to see the cracks in what they thought was reality. It's an interesting thought."

Nabiki looked out the window for a while, thinking. There was something about all this that worried her. Eventually she spoke. "What happens to them if we get Minako and Usagi fixed?" All her friends looked at her, then each other.

"What do you mean, Nabiki?" her sister asked. She turned to look at her.

"What happens to Luna and Artemis? By the sound of it, they are sentient individuals in their own right, separate from Usagi and Minako, although they 'live' inside their heads. If Hnther even can cure either one of them, by the sounds of it, at the very least these splinter personalities will need to be... well, removed, or deleted, or whatever." She made a small gesture of uncertainty. "I don't know enough about it to even have the right words. But, the critical thing is, by the sound of it we'll be killing two minds, even if they're not completely people, in the sense of being independent creatures. That... bothers me."

Everyone went quiet for a while, exchanging somewhat uncomfortable glances. She could see on their faces that they'd all had similar thoughts. Eventually, Ranma sighed. "I was thinking much the same thing, I admit. I don't have an answer for you. Hnther might be able to give you one."

"It's possible it may be a sacrifice we have no choice about, sister," Kasumi said gently, looking very troubled. "When we bring either one of them back, even if the splinters really are becoming more self-aware of their situation, it's quite possible that the time device will reset them somehow. It seems likely that has been happening all along, which would explain why they've never shown this behaviour before."

"I'm not entirely sure that's the case, Kasumi," Misaki told her, also appearing thoughtful. "From what we saw before, both of them were getting advice they didn't like very much, Usagi more than Minako. I think it might be that the splinters were beginning to see something wasn't right some while ago."

"I don't see that we have any choice, in any case." Everyone looked at Tamiko as she spoke. "We have to deal with the situation somehow. All we can do is talk to Hnther and see if he has any better ideas, he undoubtedly knows more about all this sort of thing than we do."

"Pity we can't directly interact with the things," Fumiko added.

"We should be able to," the middle sister told her, thinking. "Since Ami, for example, has an SI, and can see and hear them, couldn't we get her to relay what she sees and hears to the rest of us?" Once more, everyone looked at her, this time with approval.

"Good idea, Nabs," Ranma replied, grinning as she rolled her eyes with a put-upon sigh, although she smiled a little. "Let's get Ami and Rei over here and see what they think."
"What about Hotaru?" Kasumi asked. He glanced at her for a moment.

"I'll call her, but I suspect she will want to catch up with Haruka still. We can link her in if there's anything she needs to know, and when we need her input."

"I don't intend to leave her out of anything. She's had too much of that in the past."

Kasumi studied him, looking amused. "You really do like that young woman, don't you, dear?"

"I do. She's a very interesting person with an awful lot of potential. When this is all over I'm very interested in seeing how far she can take it. And she's so excited by everything, which I find very funny."

"And she's so excited by everything, which I find very funny."

"The others all laughed.

Opening a link to Ami, still grinning, Nabiki said, "Hi, Ami. You up yet?"

"Hello, Nabiki. Yes, I just finished breakfast. What's up?"

"We've been going over the recordings of Usagi and Minako for the last few days. You guys need to see them, we think. Do you want to come over? Aiko can pick you both up."

"She had a quick conversation with the petite brunette. "In about ten minutes or so? Outside your building, down the side alley."

"OK. I'll just tell Mom I'm going out, but I'll be ready."

"Good. I'll call Rei and let her know as well. See you soon."

"Bye." The link went away, as she had a very similar conversation with Rei. Shortly afterwards, Aiko stood, then disappeared.

"Off again so soon?" Saeko asked her daughter, looking mildly amused. Ami glanced at her as she pulled the fridge door open, grabbing a couple of apples from the shelf inside.

"Yes. Sorry. Some friends of mine need to talk about a little problem they have that they think I can help with."

"Are you doing their homework again, dear?" her mother asked, smiling. Ami laughed, shaking her head.

"No, it's not quite like that. They just need my input while we try to work out the solution to an odd problem."

"The young woman sighed, running her hand through her hair, as her mother watched with hidden concern. She thought her daughter looked a little depressed although she was hiding it well.

"You know that if you ever need advice, you can talk to me at any time about anything, don't you, Ami?" she asked quietly. The younger woman looked at her, gratitude mixed with something deeper in her eyes.

"I do. Thanks, Mom. But this is something I need to do on my own."

Inspecting her, after a moment the elder Mizuno nodded. "All right. I won't pry. But if you need me, I'll be at work."

"Looking at her watch, she raised an eyebrow. "In fact, unless I go right now, I might be late."

"Taking her daughter by the shoulders, she looked at her face, then quickly hugged her. "I'm proud of you. I don't say that enough."
Slightly red-faced from embarrassment, Ami smiled. "Thanks again. I'll see you later." Picking up her jacket from where she'd hung it over the back of a chair, the young blue-haired woman waved to her mother and left the apartment. Saeko smiled to herself, grabbing her briefcase and putting on her own coat, before she followed, locking up as she left. She could hear her daughter taking the stairs ahead of her at an impressive rate, hoping she didn't trip. Leaving the building thirty seconds after the younger woman she headed to the Metro station, a bright rainbow flash of light down the alley that ran beside the apartment building catching her attention on the way.

'I wonder what that was?' she thought, stopping and peering down the alley, but not seeing anything. After a moment she shrugged, decided it was nothing important, then went about her business.

Feeling the unmistakable sensation of a portal opening somewhere very nearby, Minako put down the book she was reading and peered out of the tent. It was around midday on this barren world, mildly warm and well lit. Two hundred metres away she could see Yori and Ami walking towards her. She looked at the blue-haired woman with distaste, still not able to think of her as anything other than a betrayer. With some surprise she noticed that her former team-mate appeared to be wearing clothing obviously patterned on Yori's, in her signature colours, wondering what it meant. The implications were slightly disturbing.

"I would strongly suggest you cooperate with whatever they say, Minako," a quiet voice beside her said. She looked down at the white cat, then back at the approaching women.

"I think I have to," she replied, sighing gently. "I want to go home."

"Yori isn't your enemy unless you make her that, I believe," the cat added. "But I suspect you're going to hear a lot of things that you're not going to like." She stared at it for a moment. "Why do you say that?" The animal shrugged, which looked very odd, making her smile slightly.

"I'm not entirely sure," he told her. "But since we got here, I've been thinking. There are a lot of things that are wrong with the last few months, things I never really noticed before. I have a feeling that the people who can clear that up are out there. Don't let your feelings about Ami push you in the wrong direction. Listen to them."

After a few more seconds, she nodded, standing and slipping out of the tent. "OK." There was no answer and when she looked back, the cat was gone again. Briefly wondering where the damn thing had got to this time, she turned to greet the visitors, who were only a few metres away now. Yori's aura washed over her, but she could also sense Ami, who didn't quite feel the same as she had the last time she'd encountered her. The blonde stared at her former team-mate, who looked back with a level of confidence she couldn't remember seeing before, a small smile on her lips. Beside her, Yori looked calm and unreadable.

"Hello, Minako. I hope you're not too bored?" the martial artist asked politely. She shook her head.

"I can't say I've enjoyed this little break, but no, I'm all right, I guess." She looked beyond them to the portal hanging in the middle distance, the black-haired woman glancing over her shoulder at it, then returning her attention to her, looking mildly amused.

"I expect you'd like to go back, though."

"Yes. Very much."

Yori studied her for a moment, exchanging a glance with Ami. "You understand why it was
"Yes, I do. I've been thinking about that a lot. I can't work out why I listened to Usagi in the first place, to be honest, it was a damn stupid idea, even leaving aside who it was aimed at. She actually wanted to commit a fairly major crime, just to try and assassinate you." She sighed deeply. "I know it wouldn't have worked, now, but at the time, somehow, she convinced me it might. Even it it had that doesn't excuse the concept. I can't work out why we were so..." She struggled to find the right words. "So totally crazy. I'm beginning to realise we've been doing some very idiotic things for quite a while now, I think. But I have no idea why." She looked up, to see both Yori and her former team-mate watching her with similar expressions of mild surprise and some sadness.

"I'm genuinely surprised to hear you admit that, Minako, but also rather pleased about it. It means there may be hope for you yet." Yori glanced at her companion, who looked back without saying anything. "We still don't trust you, I'm afraid, not completely, but what you're saying goes some way towards rebuilding a certain amount of belief that you may be safe to release into the wild." She snickered as the blonde let out a snort of laughter, unable to help herself. "Usagi, on the other hand..."

"She's nuts. Completely crazy." The blonde woman sighed once more. "I don't like to say that, she's my best friend, but there's something very wrong with her. If you let her go, people are going to die. Probably a lot of them."

"That's pretty much the conclusion we came to," Yori agreed, seeming somewhat depressed about it. "There are a lot of things we need to talk about. Usagi is one of them. Will you listen to us?"

Glancing down, Minako noticed that Artemis was back, staring hard at her. He made a little gesture with his head. She nodded, still looking at him, before returning her gaze to the other two, seeing that Ami was inspecting the cat with a frown, while Yori was inspecting both of them with a similar expression. "Yes. I have nothing to lose, I guess. And I want to go home."

"Good. Come on, let's pack up that tent, it's a good one, then we can go and talk about it." The woman smiled slightly at her. "One thing, though. We're not going back immediately, we need to go somewhere else first. You'll meet a friend of mine, Hnther, he's a very good mage with a lot of expertise in mental magic. He's going to examine you. I want you to cooperate, please, and don't freak out when you see him."

"Why would I freak out?" she asked, slightly suspiciously. Ami snickered, next to Yori, causing Minako to give her an unfriendly look. She didn't trust the girl, her supposed team-mate, at all. Opening her mouth to make an acid response she closed it again when there was a faint feline cough from beside her left leg.

"He's a demon," Ami said, glancing at Yori, who sighed a little, but nodded. Minako stared at them both wide-eyed.

"A demon!? Why the hell do you want me to see a demon mage, for god's sake?"

"Because he's the best mind mage I know, he's familiar with the case and your history, and he's a friend of mine I trust." Yori glanced at Ami as the younger girl was apparently about to add to this, causing her to subside, yet still smile slightly malevolently.

"But... a demon?"

"Think of him more like an alien. 'Demon' has too many negative connotations," Yori advised.
"That's... not entirely helpful," Minako admitted, puzzled and wary.

The other woman looked mildly frustrated for a moment. "OK, I can sort of understand your problems, the history you girls have isn't helpful where inter-world travellers are concerned, I know, less so than most of the other girls in Minato in many ways. But trust me, he's a friend, on our side, and a nice guy." Minako kept staring at her, still unconvinced. "Most of the 'demons' who visit us are actually pretty peaceful, or at least they are up to the point someone starts shooting at them. You know how many visitors my area gets, right?" She nodded slowly.

"A lot more portals seem to be opening there than seems plausible," she replied, thinking back on it.

"Well, how many fights have Chou and I had there in the last year or so?" Yori grinned slightly. "Aside with other magical girls, I mean."

"Not that many that I've heard of," the blonde said after thinking about it for a few seconds.

"That's because pretty much all the visitors are either tourists, friends, or traders. Or any combination of the above." Yori grinned. "I know all sorts of people from some very odd places. Hnther is one of them, and one you really need to meet." She looked down at the cat, which peered up at her, a somewhat puzzled expression in its eyes, but after a moment nodded.

"Oh, hell, if it means I can go home, fine." Minako shrugged, giving in.

"That's the spirit," Yori snickered, patting her on the shoulder. "Let's pack up."

Ten minutes later, everything had been stowed away and the black-haired woman had made it vanish, causing Minako to stare slightly, as while she was familiar with subspace storage the sheer amount of stuff Yori had stashed away seemed rather unlikely based on her own experience. Chalking it up as just yet another of the weird tricks the woman seemed to produce on a regular basis she ignored it after a moment, following them as they retraced their steps to the portal. Stopping a couple of metres away from it she studied it, slightly nervously.

"It's perfectly safe," Ami said, smiling. "Look." She walked into the apparition without a second glance, vanishing with a slight crackling sound. Yori chuckled.

"She's right, it's fine. We do this all the time, portals are completely safe." After a moment she added, "What's on the other side, though..." Minako cast a panicked look at her, causing her to laugh for a moment. "Sorry. Couldn't resist." As the blonde glared, she laughed a little more, then made a gesture to the rip in space. "After you."

"You're a very weird person, Yori," Minako grated, turning to stare at the thing. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and walked forward.

"Here you go, Sir." Agent Naito handed the Director-General a very thick file, along with a slightly thinner one, both stamped with Special Activities Office eyes only labels. "The report on the trip as a whole, along with all the photos that are relevant, then the asteroid encounter as a separate report with its photos as well." He flexed his hands slightly, wincing. "That was a hell of a lot of typing."

"I suspect it was worth it, though, Masao," the other man commented with a small smile, flipping through the first few pages of the report, then looking at more of the photos. "This will take some time to go through."

"The electronic version is on the secure server. The film is still being scanned, the technicians say..."
it will take at least another three days to do it all." Nodding, Naito's superior indicated the chair in front of the desk, which the agent sat in. Closing the first report and quickly leafing through the one on the asteroid, the man finally closed that as well, stacking it on the other one, then leaned back with a sigh.

"We got very lucky there, didn't we?"

"I think so. It still gives me the shivers, to think what might have happened." Naito shook his head slowly. "It would have been bad."

"To put it mildly." The Director-General swivelled his chair around, looking out the window at the Tokyo scene in front of him, towards the harbour, then shuddered a little. "They all gained some serious points with that. So did you." Turning around to look at his agent, he smiled again at the expression on his face. "There are a number of people higher in the government than me who are quietly but sincerely grateful for all the effort you've put in on all this magical girl stuff over the last year or so. It will undoubtedly bode well for your future career." He laughed a little. "It's always a good thing to have people in high places thinking they owe you a favour."

Naito looked rather surprised. "I'm not sure I really did anything, sir, it's mainly the girls. I'm just along to document everything that happens and act as a buffer between them and the local government."

"And to keep a lid on it in case anything untoward happened. Yori listens to you, so does Chou. They all seem to have considerable respect for you, from what I can see."

"There's a reason Yori asked for you particularly to go with them on this operation. You have their trust, something that's not easy to gain. People upstairs feel this is, overall, good."

Studying him for a long few seconds, Naito slowly said, "I hope none of these people upstairs have any thoughts along the lines of trying to get me to use that trust to persuade Yori to do something she doesn't want to do. I'm telling you now, sir, I don't think that would end well, leaving my personal feelings out of it."

The other man shook his head, looking amused. "I have to admit there were one or two politicians that made noises along that general idea when we met last night to discuss this affair. I expressed my own extremely strong reservations about abusing the relationship the PSIA in general and you in particular have built up with the magical girls in that way, not least because I have no doubt at all they'd see right through it immediately. There were a fair number of other voices expressing the same sentiments, some of them from places you wouldn't believe. One or two from places that don't, technically, exist." Naito looked curious, but his superior didn't expand on that. "On the whole it was thought to be a very bad idea. In the end everyone dropped it, with a certain amount of implications along the lines of anyone trying anything like that would be looking for a new job. And possibly his head. The prohibition on interfering with the magical girls was explained very carefully to the dissenting voices, yet again, as was the fact that it is non-negotiable." He snickered, shaking his head again, this time in amusement.

"There were a couple of people who looked annoyed. I think they may have had rather grandiose ideas about what they could do with a tame magical girl under their thumb."

Laughing, Naito stared at the Director-General. "Tame? The magical girls, all of them, are anything but tame. You'd lose your thumb at the least."

"Indeed. Much like being on good terms with a tiger. It will let you feed it, but it's not a good idea to presume to stroke the thing, especially if it warns you off. That won't end well at all, as you
say." Both of them chuckled. "On a more serious note, the concept of trade with these demon worlds in general, and this idea of importing fusion reactors specifically, has been discussed with considerable interest. There were a few voices saying it might be some sort of trick, on the basis you can't trust demons further than you can throw them, but most people think it's something we have no choice but to do. The trade is already happening, it's going to continue one way or another, so it might as well be under the blessings of the government. That way we have at least a chance of keeping enough control over it to prevent anything unpleasant happening." He sighed slightly.

"It's getting very complicated very quickly. The whole Minato situation used to be a necessary but fairly low-key part of life, but suddenly it seems to be heading towards being one of the most important parts of the country, from a financial, law enforcement, and foreign affairs standpoint, amongst other things."

"I doubt it would stop even if the government told it to," Naito quipped. His superior gave him a look.

"No, I also think that. It's not like we've ever had any real chance of dealing with the demon incursions aside from letting the various girls get on with it. For a long time, at least as far as most people were concerned, that was the only truth to it. But suddenly it seems to be becoming a lot more than that, remarkably fast."

"People in Minato in general have always tended to accept a certain number of demons wandering about as long as they minded their own business and didn't break anything," Naito mused. "I've looked at the records, they go back quite a way. It was all very low-key and discreet but it's obvious that at least a few traders have been selling coffee and chocolate to some very out of town purchasers for decades. Extremely quietly, but consistently. The magical girls tended to jump up and down on it on occasion, but it kept on happening even so. From what Yori told me, the business between the magical world and the demons has been going on for much longer. They were usually well disguised although that's not always the case nowadays."

"True enough. But until the last five or six years that was about it, other than invasions and the like. Since Yori and Chou turned up their particular district has become an absolute hot-bed of demon activity even as the number of untoward events plummeted. I went for a walk around there yesterday, just out of curiosity, and I saw at least a dozen demons of various types wandering about the place without a care in the world. People were talking to them as if they were neighbours." He looked mildly shocked, while Naito grinned.

"I went into a coffee shop, there were about five of them in there, drinking gallons of the stuff. The man who seemed to own the shop had a stack of gold in front of him like something out of a pirate film. Absolutely amazing. And it's spreading. There have been a number of reports of people selling various demons various things across Minato, mostly fairly close to that area, but not always." He shook his head in disbelief, although he was smiling a bit. "It's all very odd. It's starting to get noticed in some very interesting places, aside from the national tax agency, who have been going quietly nuts trying to work out what's going on for a while now."

The agent laughed slightly. "Yes, I remember you said that before I went on this last operation."

"The Ministry of Finance is still trying to work out how to organise things. They seem quite keen on it, it looks like a fairly good source of revenue for the country. This latest information really made them sit up." The Director-General smiled at a memory. "They were asking questions about whether we knew of any magical girls or mages with a financial background, to give them some expert advice."

"I'll ask around," Naito suggested. "It's entirely possible that Azumi would know someone, she
obviously has a good handle on that sort of thing herself. Between them, she and Uthryyl seem to be working out most of the problems involved in importing exotic alien technology and exporting trade goods. I still think the best thing to do would be to let them get on with it, giving them any help required. It seems likely that over time they'd probably sort out most of the problems that might arise."

"I suspect that will be what happens in the end." Steepling his fingertips with his elbows on his desk, the Director-General inspected his agent. "The preliminary thinking on the fusion reactor plan is very positive. There are obviously a large number of practical concerns that will need to be addressed but there's no denying that we'd be fools not to go ahead with it. In one stroke we could end our dependence on fossil fuels, fission reactors, you name it. The knock-on effects of low cost, reliable, non-polluting energy are... simply staggering. You said that Azumi thought she could acquire an evaluation unit without too much difficulty?"

Naito nodded. "Yes, that was mentioned. Apparently they're not all that large if you go for the smallest size, the ten megawatt class units. About a two metre cube. I saw some in the warehouse on K'nn Four, Ami pointed them out. Azumi said she could get one without any trouble, and fuel for it. More details are in the report."

"Good. I've been asked to proceed with that, as soon as possible. When you next have contact with her, can you ask her to arrange it, please?"

"Of course."

"The Special Activities Office will have control of evaluation of the thing at the beginning, as trade with alien worlds falls more under our remit than anyone else's right now." The man behind the desk shook his head, looking slightly stunned. "And I can't believe I just said that."

"It's a lot to think about, sir," Naito replied, smiling.

"That it is. Anyway, we get to play with it for a while, then the thought was to bring in a representative from one of the energy production companies and some other people to investigate it, see how easy it is to use for our requirements, that sort of thing. Once everyone is happy it does what it's supposed to do, we need to work out the next step. Presumably there would be a case for a number of very large units, replacing generating capacity that's currently supplied by power stations, as it would be easier to integrate them into our power distribution system that way. But there would probably be a lot of uses for smaller ones as well."

"It's rather beyond my knowledge, sir, but that sounds plausible." Naito shrugged. "Again, Azumi and Uthryyl seem to be doing the relevant research. We'll definitely need to talk to them."

"That's becoming very obvious." The Director-General smiled. "I'm looking forward to meeting this Uthryyl, he sounds like an interesting person."

"Yori seems to trust him implicitly, which speaks volumes about his character, certainly," the agent agreed. "I'd like to meet him as well."

Picking up the first folder his superior looked at it, opening it to flip through the photos again. "I think we're going to have a lot of work soon, Masao. For the foreseeable future I expect we'll be the liaison between the rest of the government and the magical world, as we have been up until now, but with the additional responsibility of coordinating alien trade. I would think that eventually there will probably be a separate department set up specifically to deal with that sort of thing but for now it's us as the only ones with any form of experience in this matter." He smiled briefly. "It's going to be interesting, at least."
"It always is, sir. I feel I may have the best job in the world." Naito snickered as the other man grinned.

"Job satisfaction is important." He indicated the folders. "Thank you for these. I'll read them fully, if I have any questions I'll let you know."

"Certainly, sir. You know where to find me." Rising, Naito headed for the door, as behind him the Director-General began at the start of the main report, reading it carefully, referring to the photos as necessary.

"Wow." Minako looked down to see Artemis staring around, seemingly rather impressed and a little awed. She inspected the cat, once more wondering how it managed to follow so quietly, then dismissed the thought, raising her eyes to look at the scenery of the new place she found herself, as she felt the portal that had brought them here dissipate with a faint pop. The sun was bright orange, unlike the blue-white of the dead world, and this world was anything but dead.

Vivid green and yellow foliage surrounded the large enclosed yard they were standing in, a two story, quite large building with subtly odd proportions to one side, twenty metres away. In front of them, a couple of hundred metres distant past the wall which was about a metre high, was a small lake, which had a number of boats moving slowly about on it, propelled by brightly-coloured sails. She could see that the people in them weren't all human, being more reminescent of some sort of huge lizard, from what she could make out. Faint cries came on the wind, sounding eerily like people from home enjoying themselves.

Off to the left was a road of some type, along which a small number of vehicles were silently passing. She noted with amazement that they weren't touching the surface at all and had no wheels. After thirty seconds or so, she slowly turned to look at Yori and Ami, who were watching her with amused expressions.

"This isn't quite what I expected," she admitted.

Yori grinned as Ami snickered. "Not enough demons and hellish scenes?"

"No." She stared around some more, stunned. "It looks... peaceful."

"It's a nice place. We'll show you around later. Come inside, the others are waiting for us." After a moment she followed as the other two headed for the building, sliding the door open and waiting for her to join them. Inside, Yori led the way down a corridor to the rear of the building, into a large room with various items of equipment around it, none of which she recognised at all, and three figures. Rei was one, while the remaining ones were a medium-height silver-haired girl with odd orange eyes and a tall definitely not-at-all human being, who she presumed was the demon mage she was here to see. The girl was talking to him in a low voice, but stopped when they entered, both of them turning to inspect her curiously.

"Minako, this is Azumi, a friend and colleague, you might have heard of her," Yori commented, motioning to the silver-haired woman, who nodded politely. "You know Rei, of course."

"I do," she said frostily. Rei looked mildly hurt at the tone in her voice but seemed to get over it quickly. She walked over to stand beside Ami, who looked at her and shrugged a little, still smiling slightly.

Yori watched, an eyebrow raised a bit, but didn't mention it. "This is Hnther," she added, indicating the demon, who inspected her curiously. She looked back nervously, her fingers twitching slightly.
as she fought the impulse to attack, an impulse deeply engrained after years of magical girl combat. The mage said something to Azumi in a very odd sounding language, causing the silver-haired woman to smile a little, then approached her. She recoiled a little, unable to suppress the instinctive reaction, before straightening up and pretending she was all right. "Don't worry, Minako, he really is a friend and a damn good mage. We're trying to help," Yori said beside her in a low voice. She nodded, her heart rate higher than normal, but said nothing.

Stopping a metre and a half away, Hnther looked her up and down, then made a very small bow, saying something in a deep voice. Slightly behind and to one side, Azumi translated.

"It's nice to meet you, Minako. Allow me to offer my sympathies for what had been done to you and my apologies for any distress this is causing. Please believe I only have your best interests in mind." Minako stared at him for a moment, then glanced at Azumi, who smiled a little at her.

"Ah, thank you, I think," she managed, hearing Azumi translating her words back to the mage, who smiled in a manner than made her take a breath and pale a little. There were a lot of teeth.

"Don't worry. Come over here and sit down. I would like to examine you, which will take some time, but it will cause no distress, I assure you. You may not even feel anything." She looked at him, then down at Artemis, who peered up at her, looking uncertain himself, but nodded silently. When she raised her eyes she saw Azumi and Hnther were looking at her in much the same way that Yori had on the other world, making her wonder why. After a second or two she nodded shakily and followed the mage to the other side of the room, taking a seat on the somewhat oddly-shaped but surprisingly comfortable chair he motioned to. She distinctly felt it move a little, forming itself into a better fit to her, which caused her to make a small sound of surprise, which seemed to amuse him.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" he asked through Azumi. She looked at him in surprise, then across at Yori, who was grinning.

"Um, yes, thank you, I would." He looked at the martial artist who nodded and left the room.

"Right. This first examination is to establish a baseline for your current mental state," he continued, picking up a few unrecognisable instruments and manipulating them, before returning all but one to the table at his elbow. "I appreciate that you're somewhat confused about everything, as you haven't been told the whole story yet, but I think I need to get these measurements done first. When we're finished Yori will explain the situation to you fully." He looked into her eyes, his alien gaze surprisingly sympathetic. "I'm afraid that you're going to have some difficulty accepting parts of it. That is understandable, but the story is true, as disconcerting as it will be."

Not at all sure what he meant, all she could do was nod. For some reason, despite never having met him before, she was coming to the conclusion that he really did have her best interests at heart. She found this oddly more worrying than comforting.

"Please lie back and relax, as much as you can. I would suggest that you close your eyes. I doubt you'll feel much, but you may have slight visual disorientation during part of the examination. That's normal and nothing to be worried about." Sighing gently she followed his instructions, flinching only slightly when she felt his warm fingers on her head, the texture of the tiny scales odd against her skin. He fell silent, only occasionally saying something to Azumi, who answered every now and then but didn't translate.

Minako felt something probing around inside her head in a way that defied any normal explanation, painlessly but in a slightly disconcerting manner. It went on for about a quarter of an hour before he finally sat back in his own chair, sighing in a very human-like manner. "Thank you. I'm finished
for the moment." She opened her eyes and looked around, finding a steaming mug of coffee beside her on the table. Yori, who was standing a couple of metres away apparently watching with interest, indicated a small pot next to the cup.

"That's a sweetener a little like honey if you want it. It's pretty good."

"Thanks." Trying the coffee, she added some of the deep red crystals in the pot to it, finding it made the drink very nice. "Hey, that's not bad."

"Told you," Yori grinned, making her laugh.

Hnther got up and walked over to Yori, Azumi following him, the three of them having a discussion in low voices for a few minutes, while she waited, listening and watching, wondering what they were talking about. Rei and Ami were sitting at the other table in the room, on the other side, apparently also listening, and if what she could see on their faces was any hint, somehow understanding the alien language. She wondered how they managed that. Eventually, the discussion ended, Yori approaching her.

The young woman sat next to her in the chair that Hnther had vacated, studying her closely.

"What?" she asked, a bit worried.

The other woman sighed, glancing over at Ami and Rei, both of whom shrugged as if they'd been asked a question. Turning back to her, the black-haired martial artist said, "I have a story to tell you. You're probably not going to like it very much. But, it's true, and I can show you evidence to prove it."

After a long moment, Minako took a deep breath, put her mug down, and nodded.

"Tell me."

Yori began the explanation.
Chapter 84

Soon, there is going to be an earth-shattering kaboom...

Watching as Hotaru gesticulated wildly, explaining yet another part of her adventure with Yori and her crew of lunatics on the other side of a portal, Haruka smiled. She was feeling a lot better since the girl had returned, although still not entirely happy about the situation, but she felt she might finally be getting a handle on it. Yori's proof of the falsehood they'd all been working under for years had, oddly enough, somehow made it easier to deal with. She still wasn't even close to happy about it, of course, and would have much preferred to have either never found out, or found out without all the attendant destruction, but all in all it could have been worse.

While she regretted the loss of their close-knit team, even she was prepared to admit that in many ways the only reason they'd even held together as long as they did was the shared story they were part of. Several of their members had personality conflicts with other members, for various reasons, a category she was honest enough to put herself in. It was a pity the break-up had been so acrimonious but the one good thing was that no one else had been killed. ‘Thanks to Fumiko and Tamiko,’ she thought reluctantly, ‘Then Yori and the others. We certainly had no real thought of the harm we were creating.’ It made her somewhat nauseous to think of what could have happened.

It seemed unlikely to her that they could ever resume the arrangement they'd had before, no matter how effective this supposed alien therapy that Yori had mentioned was. She definitely didn't trust either Rei or Ami, for reasons she simply couldn't articulate but still felt strongly about, Makoto obviously hated her to the point of homicide, an action she would probably reciprocate if it wasn't for the terrifyingly effective warning the martial artist had given her, something that still made her shiver to recall, and she had a lot of problems with the rest of them. Except for Hotaru, who she still loved dearly. It was difficult for her to understand how Michiru, the love of her life, once, could possibly not still love the girl, even if they'd had a falling-out between themselves.

For a day or so after the great mall destruction she had thought there might be hope of reconciliation, but it became very obvious quite fast that this simply wasn't going to happen. Michiru was totally paranoid about all sorts of weird things, completely convinced that everyone else, with the sole exception of Setsuna, was out to get her, and appeared to have been trying to convince Haruka of this. When she wasn't easily swayed, she immediately became suspect as well in her lover's eyes.

Shaking her head sadly, she picked up the coffee-pot and refilled her cup, closing her eyes for a moment in remembered pain as she held the warm cup in both hands. As much as she didn't like to believe it, there was far too much evidence to suggest that there was no way her girlfriend was ever going to trust her again. And, if she was honest with herself, the reverse was true. ‘Perhaps this therapy will help her, I guess,’ she mused, hopefully. ‘At least enough so she can live a happier life. She didn't look well the last time I saw her.’ Despite everything she didn't want the other woman to have a bad time, or worse, do something sufficiently serious that Yori and her friends got involved. That would be the end as far as she could tell.

"Are you all right?" a familiar voice asked, making her twitch slightly, sloshing coffee onto the table, and open her eyes, looking up to see Hotaru peering at her from a short distance away with worry on her face. She smiled a little tiredly and nodded.

"I am, dear, don't worry. I was just thinking about everything that's happened recently. It's a lot to take in. Even with the proof that your trip brought back and Yori showed me yesterday, I still have
trouble just throwing away nearly six years of beliefs."

Sitting next to her, Hotaru nodded slowly, drawing little patterns on the table with her finger in the small puddle of spilled coffee. "I can understand that. I think I've had longer to get used to it but it still makes me very sad. And very angry. Both about what was done to us and to the way the others have reacted. But, Chou told me that I can't really blame them, it's not their fault. I guess she's right even though it's difficult."

"She's an intelligent and perceptive woman, even if we've never seen eye to eye on a lot of things, I think," Haruka admitted, being honest about it. Her daughter smiled a little, still staring at the table. "So is Yori, as mad as she is." Snickering slightly, Hotaru looked up.

"That would probably amuse her quite a lot. She has a weird sense of humour."

"Which one? Yori or Chou?" Haruka smiled more openly.

Hotaru shrugged, grinning. "Both of them, really, but differently. Aiko and the other as well. They all seem to find the funny side of everything whenever they can. It's really cool being around them, and a lot of fun. You wouldn't believe some of the things they can do." She laughed again. "Or the places we've been. Aiko's teleporting is incredible. I wish I could do that. Did you know they regularly go to other countries just for a meal? It's amazing."

Staring at her for a moment, Haruka shook her head. "No, I didn't know that. It sounds... slightly odd." Her daughter giggled.

"It is, but so much fun. You should ask Aiko to take you to Brisbane for sushi sometime, it's really good. And she says this place in New York does the best pizzas in the world as well." The girl looked thoughtful. "I'd like to try that. Maybe we could all go next week sometime."

Not entirely sure if the young woman was being serious, as she had a remarkably good poker face for someone her age, Haruka just sighed slightly. "They're apparently a bad influence on you."

The younger woman studied her for a moment, her face blank. "Do you really think that?" she asked in a voice that made it clear she wasn't entirely happy about the thought but was keen to know the answer. Haruka began to answer a little flippantly, but caught herself and thought for a moment, taking the question seriously, as apparently her daughter was.

Eventually, she shook her head with another small sigh. "No. As much as I'd like to say yes, in all honesty I can't. I don't really like her, I'll admit that, we've had a lot of differences with her and her friends, but... I think she really does have everyone's best interests at heart. Annoyingly. I'd love to be able to dismiss her as crazy, which, by the way, she definitely is." This made Hotaru smile, "But she's also right. I don't know that we'll ever be friends but if you want to be, I won't stand in your way. I can at least respect her knowledge and abilities, as well as her goals."

The purple-haired girl leaned sideways in her chair and hugged her, resting her head on Haruka's shoulder for a moment. "Thank you. I'd like you to like her, and Ami and Rei as well, but even if you can't, thank you."

"You're welcome, dear," her parent said, stroking her hair. They were quiet for a while. "I don't know if I can ever accept Ami and Rei again, or they, me, but I suppose I can at least be polite to them. For you."

Pulling back, the girl nodded, still looking unhappy. "I wish you could like them again. They didn't do anything wrong. All they've ever wanted is for all this to go away so we could be friends again."
"It's not that easy, I'm afraid, Hotaru." The blonde stared at her daughter, trying to explain. "I know, intellectually, that they were both right. There's too much evidence for me to deny that. But in my heart, I have a strong feeling of betrayal and mistrust, something I just can't get over. Whether I ever can, I don't know, but I promise you I'll try. But even if I can, it will take a long time before I can do more than try to be nice as long as they're not around too much."

Hotaru release her after a moment with a small nod, one that said she wasn't pleased but was willing to let it go for the moment. "Thanks." Staring at the table again, she went back to stirring the spilled coffee. Haruka got up and retrieved a damn cloth, wiping the table, then handed it to her daughter who took it and cleaned her fingers. "What are you going to do?" the girl asked, handing it back. "I mean, about life?" She looked around at the hotel room, then back at her parent. "It's a nice hotel but we can't live here forever, can we?"

Tossing the cloth back into the sink the blonde looked around at the small suite they had. "No, I guess not. It's a bit expensive. I should probably look for a decent apartment soon, it would be cheaper long term than this place, although it is quite nice here. I can afford it but I don't want to waste the money." She shrugged a little. "Up until recently I just couldn't seem to care, but I've been feeling better for a few days now, so I suppose it's time to try and get our lives back on track. You'll be going back to school soon anyway." There was a pause, then she sighed. "And I need to get another car. I really liked my old one, but it was so badly damaged when I..."

"...Jumped out of it when you were driving and tried to kill Makoto?" Hotaru completed, with a small smile that had a certain amount of mischievousness in it.

"Well, yes." Haruka felt embarrassed. Her daughter laughed.

"Does the insurance cover getting out of the vehicle while it's moving?" she asked. The blonde gave her a hard look although internally she was rather amused in an annoyed sort of way.

"Not in so many words, but we came to an arrangement. It's just that I spent a lot of time on that car, it wasn't exactly original equipment. It's a write-off and while I can get another one it will take weeks to bring it up to scratch."

"You should talk to Misaki about that. She's really into mechanical things and knows a lot about cars," Hotaru suggested. "She knows a lot of people who are into driving, she might even know where to get a good car at a decent price." Haruka looked uncertain.

"I'm not sure she'd..."

"She'd help, happily, I'm sure," her daughter said firmly. "I know she doesn't say much of the time but she's really nice. I'll mention it the next time I see her if you want."

Sitting down again having refilled her cup, Haruka nodded after a few seconds. "All right, dear. If you think she'd help, why not." Watching the girl, she added, "I'm not sure about the magical girl thing at the moment, I have to admit. Yori is right, it's not likely to leave us alone, but for the moment, I'm not planning on going and looking for trouble. I'm sure it will turn up all on it's own sooner or later. That's normally what happens." Taking a sip, she mulled her words over for a bit as Hotaru simply waited. "To be honest, I could do with a break for a while."

"Are you going to take Yori up on the therapy offer?" the purple-haired girl asked, sounding calmly curious. Her female father thought about the question for half a minute, before finally nodding slowly.

"I think I will. I don't like the thought that there's something wrong with me, but I can't argue with
the evidence. The others certainly have various problems, certainly. Makoto was being very aggressive, much more than normal, when I saw her last, Setsuna seems to have lost it completely, the less said about poor old Usagi the better..." She shrugged, putting her cup down, then staring at it before raising her eyes to meet those of her daughter. "I don't feel crazy, but I can't deny I do feel very depressed about everything. It's been a struggle to get out of bed in the mornings and there's a sort of constant feeling of 'What's the point?' all the time. Since I saw Makoto the last time, for some reason, it's not quite as bad, but I don't know why. Even so, I still feel... I don't know, it's difficult to describe. Not like myself, certainly. If these demon therapists can help with that, I'd be stupid not to at least let them try."

There was silence in the room for a while after she stopped talking, Hotaru apparently just thinking about what her parent had said and Haruka going over her own words in her head. Eventually the girl offered, "You'll like Hnther. He's a bit different looking, but he's a really nice guy."

"I remember him from the temple. Rei's grandfather seemed to like him, certainly, and the other one as well."

"Lldmrk. He's really nice too. And funny, he knows some really amusing jokes." Hotaru grinned. "I know he looks like a walking, talking, giant crow, but he's a lot of fun to talk to."

Staring at her for a moment, Haruka smiled, chuckling slightly. "You're a lot more accepting than most people in our line of work would be."

"It took me by surprise at first," Hotaru admitted easily, "but everyone was so nice about it I figured out very quickly that they weren't our enemies. The trip to the moon, and K'n'n Four, showed they were totally right as well. Everything since then has just added to it."

Nodding as she listened, the blonde smiled again. "You seem to be much happier than you were, even before all this started, dear. I'm very pleased to see that. You've been quite withdrawn for quite a while. I was getting worried."

"I've found out some horrible things about the lies we've been told," the girl said after a moment, looking down at her hands, obviously thinking things through, "and seen people I looked up to do some stupid things that nearly killed a lot of people. But I've also learned things about myself that make me feel... more certain of myself, I guess?" She looked up, smiling a little. "I've made a lot of new friends, ones who just accept who I am and what I can do, without any judging or fear. Yori thinks my healing ability is something to be proud of. Hardly anyone has ever done that. We talked about it a lot. Her own healing abilities make mine look like nothing, so do Chou's, but they both want to teach me. I'd do almost anything to be as good at it as they are. They help so many people, without any questions."

Smiling to herself, Hotaru added, "Yori told me that healing was the best thing anyone could do. Violence and killing was easy, healing was much more difficult but much more rewarding. I could see in her eyes she completely believes that. They all do. I think they're right."

Finishing her coffee, Haruka got up and rinsed the cup out, putting it upside own beside the sink to dry, then turned back to her daughter, leaning against the sink. She studied the girl for a few seconds. "She may well be right," she finally admitted. "If you want to learn how to do that sort of thing, I'd be proud for you to do so." Hotaru beamed at her. "What else are they going to teach you?"

"All sorts of things. Some of them I can't really talk about at the moment. Hopefully I can one day. But there are a lot of interesting techniques that they know. I'm going to learn everything I can."
"Leave time for school in all that," Haruka chuckled. "You go back in about two weeks." After a moment she asked curiously, "Do you intend to keep on with all the magical girl things? I'd assume from what you said earlier that the answer is yes."

"I think so." Hotaru looked thoughtfully at the older woman. "We may not be fighting the enemies of the Moon Kingdom or any of that crap, but there are still things that sometimes cause a lot of problems. I can't just sit around and let them happen. Ami and Rei are going to go on, they asked me if I want to help." She seemed slightly uncertain for a moment. "I'm going to tell them yes, unless you don't want me to."

Haruka sighed a little, walking over to the girl and putting her hand on her shoulder. "Like I said, I don't want to be around them, now or probably for quite a while, if ever, but I won't stop you doing what you think is the right thing. Just be careful."

Putting her own hand over her adoptive father's, the young woman smiled. "I will." Jumping to her feet, she said, sounding excited, "Oh! I haven't showed you this yet. Look what Chou did for me."

Stepping back she posed in the middle of the room, there was a burst of familiar magic, and she was suddenly wearing different clothing, but not the outfit Haruka expected. The older woman stared for a moment, surprised.

"That's... a different look, certainly," she managed after a few seconds, looking her daughter up and down. The girl looked down at herself, grinning.

"Isn't it? I really like it. The other thing has bad memories attached to it. Chou made this for me, it's based on what they wear, obviously, but she customised it for me the way I wanted it." Turning around slowly, the purple-haired girl looked delighted. "You should ask her for something else as well. The old uniforms attract the wrong sort of attention these days." Stopping again facing Haruka, she looked at her, pleased. "What do you think?"

After a second or two, Haruka smiled. "If it makes you happy, dear, I'm all for it. At least it's not something like Aiko and her team used to wear. That was a little... excessive." Laughing, Hotaru nodded, remembering the old uniform her friends were stuck with.

"They didn't like those clothes very much from what they said. Except Tamiko, and even then only in the summer. Aiko said it was a little cold in the winter, especially when it's as bad as the last one was."

"Yes, I can well imagine." Haruka shivered unconsciously, picturing the amount of skin the other team had left exposed. "Ours were bad enough." She studied the young girl for a while, before shaking her head. "Things have certainly changed." A thought struck her and she added, "How did you do that, anyway? You didn't use the transformation rod, or the key phrase either."

"Don't need to any more," Hotaru replied happily, looking at her gloves, feeling the left one with the right. "Ami showed me how to access the magic directly. Yori worked it out and taught her and Rei."

"Of course she did," Haruka sighed. "That woman is..." Hotaru giggled.

"Would you like me to show you how to do it?" the girl asked slyly. There was a long pause, followed by a resigned laugh.

"Yes, please."
eyes away and glanced around the room. Everyone was watching her with interest and sympathy, even, or possibly especially, her former team-mates. Looking back at the martial artist, she said, "You have to be fucking kidding me."

"Sorry. It's all true." The blonde leaned back in her chair, resting her head on the back, staring at the ceiling. After a moment she repeated the sentence in a low voice. Eventually, lifting her head, she met the purple gaze of the other woman.

"You said you had proof?"

Yori glanced at Ami, who produced a small device from somewhere, getting up and handing it to Yori, along with a small crystalline cube, then returning to sit next to Rei, not saying anything. Putting it on the table next to them the woman dropped the crystal into a recess on top of the device as Minako watched curiously, tapping the thing in a couple of places with her finger. A series of beeps sounded, then something remarkable happened.

After another long pause, Minako tore her eyes from the perfect model of the Moon which was slowly rotating in the middle of the room, to look at Yori, who was grinning a little. "Um, wow? That's... quite impressive."

"Good, isn't it? This is a projector from K'nn Four, with a data crystal loaded with all the data we got from scanning the Moon." The blonde thought back to the story she'd been told. The idea that Yori and her friends had borrowed an alien spaceship and crew from another reality then visited the moon with it was pretty damn weird, but oddly enough not the most unbelievable part of what she'd heard. She snickered a bit. It seemed almost the sort of thing she'd have expected from Yori. She was at the point of deciding there probably wasn't anything you shouldn't put past the crazy woman.

The image changed, coloured points appearing on it. "Those are all the places we found that had any technology or other non-natural things. No magic, nothing older than about the late fifties, all of it known space probes from Earth. No magic, no ruins of some fantastic magical kingdom, no hidden or shielded buildings, nothing. Sorry." Yori looked at her with an expression that clearly showed she was telling the truth and genuinely did feel bad for her.

"I've been over the data very carefully myself, Minako, there really is nothing there that we didn't put there," Ami commented from the other side of the room, sounding tired. "Everything you've heard, everything we were told and believed, is a lie. It's all the fault of that damn time machine."

Glancing at her for a moment, Minako went back to watching the replica Moon spin gently in the middle of the room, little glittering points in different colours dotted about its surface. No one spoke. After a minute or so she got up, walked closer, then studied it some more. Reaching out idly she waved her hand through the projection, dazedly amused by the way it reacted, although she felt nothing. "It's all just a story?" she asked plaintively.

"Yes."

"An alien time machine has been fiddling around for god knows how long, just to get the nine of us to somehow make our reality into a second-rate copy of its own, which it killed in the first place?"

"Yes."

"All my friends, and me as well, have basically been driven mad by that damn thing?"

"Yes."
"We're just normal magical girls, not reincarnated warriors from prehistory?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

She felt Yori come up beside her as she tried to think of something else to ask, numbly going back over what she'd heard in the last hour or so. "To qualify that last point, you're hardly 'normal magical girls', even if there is such a thing, you're right at the upper levels of ability, in theory at least. But yes, essentially everything you've said is correct." Looking to her side she saw the other woman was also staring at the projection, a small frown on her face. "It was and is a horrible thing that's happened to you guys, but it can't be changed. We just have to figure out a way to deal with the aftermath of it all. After killing the damn thing first, of course."

Turning away from the image hanging in the air, she looked around. Ami and Rei were watching her looking calm but regretful. Azumi was sitting next to Hnther, both of them studying her with remarkably similar expressions despite the totally different physiology, expressions that were sympathetic yet still analytical. Her eyes moved on, to stop on the figure of Artemis, who was sitting on the table next to the projector, staring at the projection with his pupils so wide it looked like he was in the dark, his ears laid back. He looked stunned.

"This explains... quite a lot," he muttered. She watched him curiously.

"In what way?" The question came from Ami. The cat glanced at her, then went back to watching the image gently rotate.

"Too many things haven't made any sense for a long time," he eventually replied. "Nothing either Luna or I knew, absolutely knew, to be true, were happening. Neither one of us could work it out."

There was a long pause. "Weirdly enough, knowing it's all completely fake is actually something of a comfort. I was beginning to think I was going as mad as the girls were." He laughed in a low voice, shaking his head. "I probably still am, but not in the way I thought I was."

Minako kept looking at him as he fell silent, then looked around. Ami and Rei were looking at the cat, everyone else was watching her. Hnther seemed intrigued while Azumi and Yori were apparently thinking hard. Their expressions suggested there was still something odd happening.

"There's something more that you haven't told us yet, isn't there?" she asked, suddenly certain. Artemis looked at her when she spoke, as did the rest.

"I have a feeling it's something I'm not going to like," he said, sighing.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm getting some very unpleasant ideas." Raising an eyebrow, Minako stared at him for a moment, then turned to Yori.

"Is he right?" The woman looked to Ami and Rei for a moment, then nodded, as if she'd heard something that confirmed an idea she'd had.

"Afraid so. It's... a bit awkward." There was a growing sensation of worry gnawing at her stomach, in a completely different way than the story so far had produced. Azumi was talking quietly to Hnther, who nodded a couple of times. Glancing at them, she wondered what it was about, then went back to Yori.

"Awkward, how?"
Yori studied her for a moment, glanced at the table on which the cat was listening and watching, then looked back. "Do me a favour. Go over and stroke Artemis' head for a second." She stared at the young woman for a long few seconds, before turning to the cat, who was looking puzzled, yet oddly worried at the same time.

"Um, sure." Walking over she looked down at him, the animal peering up at her, a curious expression in his eyes. She reached out.

There was a very long pause.

"What the fuck?" The exclamation came from both woman and cat. They stared at each other, then simultaneously looked at Yori, who scowled, glancing at Azumi and Hnther, who were looking interested. Ami, behind them, sighed gently and regretfully.

"Damn. That proves it beyond doubt. He was right." The martial artist closed her eyes for a moment, shaking her head slowly, then opened them again, compassion showing. "Sorry about this."

Looking around, coughing in the dusty air, Ryoga inspected his surroundings, noticing a very faint scent of smoke. The low ceiling, exposed wooden beams, near darkness, and general clutter suggested he was in an attic or roof space of some sort. It was very hot and dry, not to mention festooned with remarkably large spiderwebs. "Where the hell am I now?" he mumbled, resignedly, thinking it was his catchphrase. He'd turned the corner of the corridor leading to the rest-room at the café in Kyoto he'd just had a meal at, gone through a door he could have sworn wasn't one he'd come through to get there, then found himself in here. "Damn building has more corridors and rooms than seems reasonable," he muttered, looking around for the door he'd come through.

Moving around slowly and awkwardly in the dimness he tripped over a box, swearing as he fell through a spiderweb, which went over his face with a very unpleasant sensation. He didn't like spiders at all. Quickly wiping it away with a shudder, he got up and kept looking. A sound at the threshold of hearing made him suddenly stop and look around. It happened again, a sort of dry clicking sound, several taps of something hard on wood in rapid succession. Listening carefully, not entirely sure he liked the noise, the part time piglet peered around, wishing he'd remembered to pick up his pack when he went to the bathroom. There was a flashlight in it, which he could have used right about now.

Hearing nothing, he resumed his search for a way out, muttering to himself. Moments later, he heard the noise again, from a different place. The young man stopped dead, his head cocked to one side, listening intently.

Scrabble scrabble, came the sound. It was behind him this time. He turned, sweating slightly more than the heat would account for. Nothing was visible. Staring into the darkness, straining his eyes, he slowly turned his head, listening intently.

Another scrape and a series of taps. Again, it was behind him. He whirled, his hands taking a defensive posture.

Nothing.

"What the fuck is that?" Turning a slow circle, he watched and listened. Nothing. A few seconds passed slowly. Still nothing. Slowly relaxing from the tense attitude he'd found himself in, he lowered his hands, laughing nervously to himself.
"Just my nerves. I wonder where the way out is?" A sliver of light in the floor caught his eye, outlining a square about half a metre on a side, leading to the conclusion it was a trap door of some sort. "Ah. At last." Keeping his eyes on it so he didn't end up going in the wrong direction, he slowly edged his way forward, trying not to trip over another box. The room, whatever it was, seemed very cluttered. "Someone should clean this place up. I'll have to mention it to the staff." A few steps further along, he froze as something, very lightly, tickled the back of his neck. "Um..." Slowly and carefully he looked over his shoulder. There was nothing there.

"OK, this is getting creepy. Who's doing that?" he called into the darkness of the room. A terrifying thought struck him, causing him to pale, as he added very quietly, "Ms Aoyama?"

A few faint scrabbling noises were the only reply, coming from all around him, this time accompanied by the merest hint of movement. Feeling an unaccustomed thrill of fear run down his spine, he looked quickly around, locating the trap door, then began edging towards it, glancing around quickly at intervals. There was definitely something moving out there in the dim hot room.

It was only when he was almost at the trap door that he had the sudden thought to look up...

Akane nearly swallowed her toothbrush at the hideous scream that came from somewhere outside the bathroom. Spitting it into the sink she dashed out into the hall, looking wildly around, hearing the thunder of footsteps on the stairs. "What in god's name was that?" Soun called out as he reached the landing, Genma behind him, both looking alert and ready for trouble. She shrugged, still looking around.

"No idea. It wasn't me."

They got their answer when the trap door to the attic, at the end of the hallway, fell open under the weight of a furiously struggling and terrified figure as it crashed to the ground, screaming, "Get it off, get it off, get it off!" The person was wearing very familiar clothing, which was completely covered in spiderwebs. The three of them stared in amazement, then exchanged glances, as Ryoga rolled around gibbering in terror and brushing frantically at himself. Above him, the trap door creaked as something reached out a couple of long, jointed, glistening legs and pulled it shut with a click.

Soun shuddered as Akane went white, then red. Genma began nervously backing away down the stairs, feeling an uncomfortably large amount of battle aura begin to build. Looking at his youngest daughter, Soun also began planning a strategic retreat. Both of them stopped when Akane suddenly laughed in a low, evil voice, the aura of danger fading, then disappeared into the bathroom. They exchanged worried glances, which became expressions of mild terror when she re-emerged, still snickering, holding a glass of water. Walking over to the panicked young man who had just managed to get the webs off his face, she looked down at him. "Hello, Ryoga," she said in a silky voice, causing him to freeze in horror, then look up. Spotting her looking at him with a very unsettling smile on her face, he opened his mouth to say something, just as he noticed the glass in her hand.

He wasn't quite quick enough to evade the water as she calmly poured it over him, although to give him credit, he nearly made it. Dropping the glass and grabbing for the piglet as it tried to escape, she picked it up by the bandanna, holding it at eye level, still smiling. Her father and his friend watched, not at all sure what to do. After inspecting Ryoga for a moment, she giggled, a tone in her voice that made all three males present wince, then reached up and knocked on the trap door.

It opened slowly.
Ryoga squealed in terror, struggling.

Akane looked at him, up into the darkness, then back at him. "Have fun," she grinned nastily, before neatly flipping him up and through the hatch, which snapped shut.

A moment's pause was followed by absolutely terrified squeals, clattering sounds of small hooves on wood, crashing noises, and an unpleasant scuttling effect from several places above them. Brushing her hands together in satisfaction the youngest Tendo smiled happily, picked up the glass, then walked back to the bathroom, past her father and Genma, who stood motionless, staring at her with identical expressions of awe, mixed with a certain amount of wariness.

"Silly Ryoga," she commented. "We might as well give the attic spiders something to do. The fire didn't work, perhaps they're allergic to pork." Going back into the bathroom she closed the door, picking up her toothbrush and finishing her ablutions, intermittently laughing in a manner that made them shiver.

"Ah, Soun?"

"Yes, old friend?"

"Should we do something?"

They both looked up, listening to the sounds, which were heading off across the building to the farthest corner of the attic.

"I don't know about you, but I don't fancy going up there. Have you seen the size of those damn things?"

"Yes. I think it's your daughter's food, I saw one catch that squid stew that got loose a couple of years ago and tried to hide up there. Poor thing. It never stood a chance."

"Right."

There was a long pause, during which Akane came out of the bathroom brushing her hair, going past them into her room humming a popular tune and closing the door behind her.

"He's tough."

"True."

"Very tough, actually. Almost invulnerable."

"Also true."

"And they're very... large."

"Indeed."

The sounds from above got fainter, sounding like they were somehow moving off outside the building without leaving it.

"We haven't played Shogi for days. Fancy a game?"

"I think that's a very good idea, my friend."

Both men headed downstairs as the sounds in the attic faded away.
"Remind me not to upset your daughter, will you?"

"Count on it."

Everyone in the café jumped as the door to the toilets slammed open with a crash, then fell off its hinges. A black blur, trailing tattered silk threads, shot across the room into the kitchen, out of which came cries of shock and a series of smashing sounds. Seconds later a nude and gently steaming young man, his face in a rictus of terror, dived out of the room followed by loud swearing and an irate chef waving a very large cleaver, grabbed a huge backpack that was leaning against a table, then ran straight through the side wall of the building, vanishing in a cloud of dust. Everyone stared for some time, before slowly going back to eating.

"Odd. I thought that sort of thing only happened in hot baths," one diner commented to his table-mate. She glanced at him for a moment.

"Apparently not." Looking at the collapsed door, then the hole in the wall in which the chef was standing hurling shouts of invective after the young man, she shook her head. "I'm not going to recommend this place, certainly. It's a little noisy." Picking up the menu, she looked at it, then ordered another bottle of wine.

"I'm... not real?" Artemis stared at Minako, who returned the look, then both of them turned to Yori, who shook her head.

"No. You're real. You're just not physical."

"How is that any better?" the cat asked. He tilted his head, staring at her. "And how are you able to see me? You just said that only the nine girls could interact with me or Luna, but you're obviously able to see and hear me." Yori smiled, glancing at Ami.

"We're using a special technique that allows us to see what Ami and Rei are seeing. None of the rest of us can see you directly, that's correct, but using this method, we can. It's complicated." Artemis nodded slowly, obviously curious, but didn't ask any more questions about it. Minako watched him, feeling slightly colder than the room temperature allowed for. She noticed that Azumi was translating again for Hnther, who was listening with interest.

"What does this mean for us?" the cat asked, looking around. "Luna and me, and the girls as well. How did we never notice this before? I mean, Minako put her hand right through me! Surely I'd have picked up on the fact that I can't touch anything." He waved a paw through the projector, which completely ignored him.

"You, and the host mind, Minako in this case, were programmed not to notice," Hnther said through Azumi. "It's a very complex process to produce a splinter personality but if you can, you are certainly able to modify it enough to filter out and rationalise any imperfections in the way it senses the world. That's why you didn't notice your lack of any ability to interact with your environment, and how you're able to have a point of view that is at a distant point from Minako's senses, which are what you're using. I suspect that the communications link you have to the other girls is also used to provide information to your senses, at a low level, which is reinforcing the illusion that you are a physical being. The illusion broke down when it was directly brought to your attention, the reality of it is too strong for the programming to cope with."

"Oh." The cat nodded slowly. "I think I understand."
"As far as the other part of your question, that is more problematic." The mind mage looked like he wasn't very happy. "I suspect that the influence of the time device is stronger on you and Luna than the others, as it has a lower level connection to you both. In all probability, based on the information we have available to us, you were both created some years ago with a large amount of the narrative programmed in, which you were intended to pass on in a generally subtle manner to reinforce the more direct interventions of the device, and if L'dnr'k is correct, to do so in a way that reduced the amount of temporal push-back that would otherwise occur. A cunning plan but clearly not perfect. That would explain a lot of why, as things drifted from the desired goal more and more over the last few years, you became more and more confused."

"The device hasn't updated your information for a long time, we think," Yori added, continuing the explanation. "Possibly because it can't without causing more trouble than it solves, possibly for reasons that we don't yet know. But the thing we're worried about is that if you go back it might take the opportunity to... reprogram you, I guess... resetting you to a place where you won't have the self-awareness you currently have." She sighed, sitting down next to Minako. "From what we know I suspect that removing you and Usagi from our reality allowed you to finally begin questioning all the little things you'd noticed that were wrong, and our little demonstration earlier has completed the job. But if you go back..."

"It mind-fucks me and I'm back to being what I was, parroting its line all the way," the cat said with disgust, looking upset.

"Yes. That is certainly possible." Hnther folded his arms, staring at the floor. "It might not happen, the machine has for whatever reason apparently been leaving you more or less alone for a substantial time, but we certainly can't assume that will continue. Especially as we are fairly sure it's getting worried."

"But at the same time, we have a suspicion that having Minako back in our reality might delay it doing something permanent before we can destroy it," Ami put in. Artemis looked at her, then Minako, who was feeling ill.

"No choice. We have to go back. My continued existence and sanity isn't worth wiping out our entire reality for." Everyone stared at him for several seconds.

"That is certainly a noble sentiment," Hnther said in a regretful voice. He paused, then added reluctantly, "There are other problems as well."

"Which are?" Minako asked, wishing she could stroke her friend and comfort him. He looked very upset.

"Well, the main one is your own sanity." The demon inspected her. "Splinter personalities can, and usually do, have a considerable negative effect on the long-term mental stability of the host mind. I strongly suspect that is the reason Usagi has ended up in the state that she has. From the latest information we have on her, she is essentially exhibiting all the signs of being a full blown psychopath, with no empathy for anyone but herself, goals that seem to include destroying anyone or anything that gets in her way, and quite possibly the mindset of a serial murderer of some form. Not at all the sort of person one would wish to release on a population, even if she wasn't also in possession of considerable magical ability. Which, of course, raises her danger level from severe to horrific."

Minako closed her eyes, trying not to faint. "She's really that bad?"

"Oh, yes, very much so from what we can see." Yori looked worried. "I can show you some recordings we took from surveillance of her, they're... disturbing. I think if she got loose in Tokyo
we would be looking at a significant death toll if we didn't stop her, which at this point would probably require killing her on the spot."

"Oh, fuck," Minako moaned, rubbing her head with both hands. "No, I don't think I want to see that." Dropping her hands and looking around, she helplessly asked, "What do we do? And why am I still sane?" She laughed darkly for a second or two. "Sane being a relative term, of course."

"To answer the second point first, it's a complex mix of causes. My best theory at this point is that you were less strongly affected by the mental editing that Usagi was, although I'm not entirely certain why," Hnther told her. "It may be that in the time device's narrative you weren't as central as Usagi was, although based on the stories we've heard from Ami and Rei that seems slightly unlikely, or it may be that your mind is just that little bit more resilient in the first place. Without a lot more study and time, and information we may never be able to get on exactly what the time device is attempting to achieve, we may never know for sure. Also, as I said, the effect of a splinter personality usually has a detrimental effect over the time scales we're dealing with, but in rare cases it doesn't. Again, I can't yet be sure, but you may be one of those rare cases."

"Basically, you got lucky," Yori commented, frowning at her boots. She looked up. "But we don't know how long your luck will last. Artemis might be stable indefinitely, or..."

"Or we might both go completely off the reservation tomorrow," the cat finished sourly. She nodded.

"Probably not, but we don't know."

"It's unlikely that either one of you will suddenly deteriorate to that extent," Hnther put in, looking amused, "but I will need to examine you again, now that you are fully awakened to your situation, then compare the results to the first scan, which should allow me to work out what risk, if any, you present to Minako, and she to you. When we know that, we can consider the next step."

"Do we really have any choice?" Rei asked, looking at Artemis with sympathy. He stared back as she added, "We need to stop the time machine doing something irreversible before we can destroy it." He nodded, looking around at the others.

"She's right. All of this is irrelevant. If it's critical Minako goes home, that's what we do. I'm not worth risking everyone else in the universe for, believe me."

Yori held up her hand. "Don't rush into what might be suicide, Artemis. Before we do anything I'll go and check with Lldnr'k to see how he's getting along with the orb. If he's managed to extract the data, all of this might be nothing to worry about for the moment, we can get on with blowing that damn thing into little tiny pieces." He looked at her for a long moment then nodded.

"All right."

"While you're gone, I'll do another deep scan on Minako," Hnther told them. "By the time you get back I should know more. We'll need the information one way or another anyway."

Yori glanced at him with a nod, then looked around. "You'll have to stay here to translate," she said to Azumi, who acknowledged the comment with a slight smile. "Ami? Do you want to come with me? I might need your help. Rei, you may as well stay here and keep Minako company."

"OK," both girls chorused, then grinned at each other. Getting up as a portal formed in the corner, Yori picked up the projector and handed it to Ami as she studied both Minako and Artemis.

"Don't worry too much just yet, either of you. We can figure out a way to sort this out, if we give it
some thought, I think. We'll be back soon." She stepped through the portal, Ami following, before it popped out of existence.

Standing, the mind mage walked over, studying Minako, who looked up at him, then leaned back and closed her eyes as he sat down, reaching out.

"Ah. Good timing, I was about to get a message to you, Yori," Lldnr'k said happily, giving them what in his species would be a broad smile. "Things are going very well. We're down to the last layer, the previous three went much faster than I expected. My previous estimate was over-pessimistic. I suspect it will unravel very soon now."

"That's very good news, Lldnr'k," Yori said, looking extremely pleased. "We've been examining Minako, or rather, Hnther has. He discovered you were right. Artemis is a splinter personality. A very articulate and as far as I can see completely sentient one at that."

"Interesting. And somewhat upsetting. How did the pair of them take the news?" The time mage studied them as they looked at each other.

"Better that I thought he would, but it's hard to tell," Ami replied after thinking it over. Leading them to the room they'd used last time, Lldnr'k closed the door and then sat, listening to the story. They showed him the recordings of both Usagi and Minako on the dead world, then the one they'd made through Ami's eyes of Artemis learning the truth about himself.

"I think he might have worked it out himself given some more time to think about it. He'd obviously figured out something was wrong but didn't know what." Yori watched the projection as Ami ran it for the second time, stopping occasionally to discuss parts of it. "But I don't think either one of them were expecting that. They watched the expression on the faces of both Minako and the cat as her hand went through his head. Ami thought to herself that while the cats had surprisingly expressive faces, for cats, she'd never seen one showing gaping shock before. Even under the circumstances it was amusing.

"A shame. By the sound of it there is a good mind there. It would be a pity to lose it." Lldnr'k watched as the recording ended. "He does seem to be taking the truth surprisingly well." Glancing at a time-piece on the wall, he stood, opening the door and waving them through. They followed the temporal mage into the workshop and over to his equipment which was still probing the orb, watching as he examined the progress, then turned around again.

Yori sighed. "He's not happy, certainly, but so far seems to be dealing with it. Hnther is scanning both personalities again to see what changes have happened now that they're both aware of the situation."

"What do you intend to do?" Lldnr'k asked. "Obviously you're aware of the potential problems involved in reintroducing Minako to your home reality while the time device is still active as far as Artemis is concerned."

"Yes, we were just discussing that before we came here," Yori sighed. "Artemis is prepared to take his chances, on the basis that he's not worth everyone else. True, and brave, but not the sort of thing I want to do if there's any chance to avoid it."

"But at the same time we're not sure about how wise it would be to keep Minako away from home any longer than we have to, assuming Misaki is right," Ami added. Lldnr'k rubbed the side of his beak, looking at them.
"An awkward problem. For what it's worth, keeping her away for a day or two more probably won't be an issue, I feel."

"But we don't know for sure one way or the other."

"No. Very true." He looked at the blue-haired girl. "We are working on far too little real information, I'm afraid."

"We may not be able to take the gamble if we can't deal with the damn device soon," Yori remarked, leaning against a bench and watching the orb as it gently pulsed with red light under the influence of the magical equipment. "I don't want to risk his mind if we can avoid it, but the problem is he's right. His 'life', or any of ours, isn't worth losing everything over."

"Difficult," the mage agreed. "Very difficult."

"Even if we do kill the time device soon, what do we do about him? And Luna?" Ami mused, also watching the red artefact. "Is there any way to... I don't know, somehow extract their minds from Usagi and Minako? Make them some sort of replacement body or something like that? Science fiction is full of that sort of thing."

Lldnr'k and Yori exchanged glances. "It's not something I'm very knowledgeable about," the mage said slowly, "but it's not unheard of. I have come across magical constructs that are able to house a functioning mind, although it's rare that they're built to be sentient and self-aware. Many places have rules against that sort of thing, there have been... unpleasant problems... with such methods. I have also heard that some of the higher-tech worlds practice something along those lines performed through technological means, as a technique for life extension." He thought some more. "Perhaps some form of cyborg, possibly? Although I'm not entirely sure how you would transfer a splinter. Plus there's the issue of it not generally being a transfer as such, more along the lines of making a copy. Which is one of the reasons it's often not encouraged."

"I have a few ideas," Yori said after a pause, thinking deeply. "I'm not sure how practical they are, but it's something worth looking into."

"It seems to me that the people to speak to would be Kw'lyn Industries," Lldnr'k advised. "They are the acknowledged leaders in computing and data processing, as shown by those SI units you have. It may well be that they could suggest something suitable."

That's not a bad idea," Yori replied, glancing at Ami. "We can ask them when we go to get the bombs."

"Have you contacted them yet?" the crow-like mage asked curiously. She shook her head. "No, I was waiting until we had the information we needed. As soon as we do I'll get in touch."

Checking his instruments, the mage snapped his beak in satisfaction. "Well, in that case, you shouldn't have too long to wait now."

Five seconds later the equipment made a pinging sound, the orb flashed deep scarlet, then everything shut down. "About that long, in fact," Lldnr'k said drily. Ami and Yori exchanged gazes as he bent over the orb, which had changed colour slightly, becoming a much deeper red. "Hmm. All right, let's see... Prodding it with a couple of small devices, which gave off a wave of complex magic that both women felt, he looked pleased. "Ah. Yes, there we are. That should be... yes, that's it. You see?" He probed the spherical artefact gently, pointing out something complex to Yori, who looked carefully at it before nodding. Ami tried to follow the magic but quickly became lost in its
"Got it. Those are the coordinates? They look... kind of odd."

"That's because they're not normal reality coordinates, they're a sub-reality. Opening a portal to one is considerably more complex than the usual type, although I expect you shouldn't have too much difficulty." They had a brief discussion which the blue-haired girl couldn't make heads or tails of, before Yori nodded again, looking pleased.

"OK. I see." She held out her hand, shaking Lldnr'k's. "Thank you, my friend. I owe you a massive favour."

"No, you don't," he replied, amused. "You're doing what needs to be done, for everyone's sake. I'm just glad to help. Make sure that blight on the multiverse is dealt with once and for all and you'll have repaid me a hundred times over for this work." He looked at the garnet orb. "Although, if you don't mind, I'd like to hold onto this thing for a while and study it, there are some interesting properties it shows that I'd like to investigate."

Yori laughed. "Of course. Keep it as long as you need to, Setsuna isn't going to be in a state to use it for quite a while, although I intend to give it back when she is."

"Thank you," the mage told her. "I should need it for no more than a couple of months, I think."

Looking at them both, he asked, "What is your next step?" Yori thought for a moment, glancing at Ami.

"I guess we go back to tell the others, then contact Kw'lyn Industries and get their help to destroy the time device. Hopefully, that will be fairly straightforward now. I'm thinking we open a portal to it, toss as many antimatter bombs through as we can, then close it again before they go off. With any luck that's the end of it."

The mage seemed thoughtful. "It sounds like that's a reasonable process. I'm just wondering what the effects of the time device's destruction will be on your reality."

"What do you mean?" Ami asked, now feeling worried. He made a calming gesture.

"Don't get too worked up, Ami, it's not likely to cause any serious problems, but there may be some interesting side effects. Probably fairly small and short-lived. I would expect that while you girls have obviously been the main focus of the device's attention, it may well have other actors in play, on a lesser level. They may find some odd things happen due to temporal inertia once the source of the alterations is removed. Most likely the results would be a certain amount of confusion as they find themselves in a situation that has changed suddenly from what they expected, although again, I would think this will be short-lived and generally self-correcting. But the only way to find out for certain is to do it and see what happens."

"You've making me very nervous, Lldnr'k," she told him, wide-eyed.

"We don't have a choice anyway, so we'll just have to live with whatever happens," Yori sighed. "Do you want to come and help? Or at least watch?"

After a moment's deliberation, the temporal mage nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I will. I can quite possibly learn a lot from observing the destruction of the device and I must admit a considerable curiosity about the people behind Kw'lyn. Very little is public knowledge about them. Bear with me, I need to let people know I'm going to be away for a little while." He wandered off to talk to some of the others working on the far side of the large room.
"Do we take Minako back, take her with us, or leave her with Hnther?" Ami asked the martial artist, who was staring at the orb, scratching her nose. After a pause, Yori answered.

"I think we leave her with Hnther for the moment. He's going to want to keep checking her for a while from what he said anyway. We can't take her back home until we kill the device, it's probably not a good idea to have her near a portal opened to it either, so she's best off where she is."

"That sounds sensible," the blue-haired young woman noted. She frowned a little, as a thought struck her. "You were intending to access the time device's sub-reality from the dead world, though. Won't that leave Usagi at the same risk of it reaching out to her?"

Looking up, Yori stared, then sighed. "Damn. Good point. OK, we either need to move her, or do it from somewhere else." She thought for a while. "Move her, I think. Hnther needs to scan her, so we could knock her out then take her to him. We can shut her down like we did with Setsuna, she'll keep until we work out how to treat her, however long that takes. Plus it should stop her getting worse. I hope."

"Poor Usagi. She's not been very well served by her life recently, has she?" Ami mumbled. Her companion shook her head.

"No. I do feel very sorry for her, but we have the responsibility to prevent her doing any more harm. You saw the recordings. There's no way she's safe to go home like that, not even close."

"I know, believe me, and I agree completely. But it seems very unfair to me. She used to be such a nice girl, once."

"Life does bad things to good people," Lldnr'k commented, coming up behind them. "It's unfortunate but a truism everywhere. All we can do is try to deal with it as best we can." He put his hand on her shoulder, radiating sympathy. "I feel for your friend, but we have little choice. Based on what I saw, she is a danger to everyone including herself." Ami nodded, sighing. "Shall we go?"

A portal opened a couple of metres away and the three of them went through, several of the other mages and apprentices looking up to watch, then going back to work as the portal went pop.

"Hold still you furry little shit," Usagi screamed, firing her supercharged tiara at Luna again, causing a huge explosion that left an impressive crater.

"No," the cat called, popping up behind a boulder to her side as she caught the returning artefact. "You're acting even crazier than normal, Usagi! Calm down, will you? All I said was that you should just try talking to Yori when she comes here, not try to kill her." The animal ducked with a yelp as the tiara shot half a metre over her head, causing another blast a hundred metres away. "For god's sake, are you trying to kill me?"

"YES!" the girl shouted in rage, looking around wildly and trying to work out where the cat had gone. "Now get out here so I can do it properly."

"Well, fuck you too, bitch," the black cat screamed back, incensed. "All these years I've done my best to help you and now you're trying to murder me? You really are insane." She ducked once more as the tiara shot through where her head had been, swearing to herself. A faint hum made her look around, wondering yet again what was causing it, but she still couldn't find anything.

"You disloyal little cunt," the blonde gibbered, red in the face. "I'm the damn princess! People do what I say, not the other way around. You're just a mouthy talking cat." She turned in a circle,
glaring at the deserted valley, trying to locate her target. There was no response, which if anything made her even angrier. Stomping back to the tent after another fruitless scan of the area, she seized a bottle of water, ripped the top off, then drained it, muttering obscenities.

A few minutes later she felt something, looking up to see a portal forming fifty metres away. A very unpleasant grin formed as she stared at it, hefting the tiara thoughtfully. Charging it to the maximum amount she could manage, she got ready to throw. "Think you're better than me, Yori?" she said softly through her teeth. "As soon as you step through that thing, you're going to get this right between the eyes." Nothing happened, as the seconds ticked past, except for the portal making a faint crackling noise. "Come on, where are you, you bitch," the blonde muttered.

"Guess," a rich voice full of amusement said from behind her. She got nearly half-way through spinning around with a yell of rage before everything went black.

"Oh dear." The mild comment from Hnther, relayed by Chou, made everyone look at him as he stood, staring down at Usagi sadly. The elder Tendo and all four of Aiko’s team were now present as well.

'Azumi' glanced at her sister and sister-in-law, then around at the other former members of Usagi’s group. Minako was watching, a worried expression on her face, from the chair she'd spent much of the afternoon in, while Ami and Rei were looking at the blonde on the bed with more neutral but still rather sad expressions. No one said anything for a moment. Eventually it was left up to Tamiko to ask.

"What's the problem?"

Hnther looked at her, then back at the comatose blonde. "This young woman is, in many ways, in a worse state than Setsuna is. Her psyche has been very badly damaged. The memory alterations are numerous and severe, having been edited a number of times, more than any of the rest of them by far. The last, hmm, I'd judge about two years, may well be irretrievably damaged there are so many contradictory and cross-linked engrams. I'm not at all sure we can repair this very easily, or possibly at all." He sighed a little as everyone waited. "It's looking likely that your idea of a memory reset and age reversion may be the only practical solution, Yori. From a preliminary examination I would say that we'd need to blank about six years to get back to a point before the main damage. What was left could be worked with."

Ami came over and looked down at her former best friend. "Oh, Usagi. I'm sorry." She turned to the mind mage. "There's no other way?"

He shrugged a little helplessly. "It's difficult to say, I'm afraid. I'm going to need to consult with colleagues who are more knowledgeable about this type of damage and the treatments for it. It may be possible to rebuild her mind without wholesale deletion of the damaged memories but at this point I wouldn't want to guarantee it at all. It's likely to require a good two to three weeks of very careful study to even work out where to begin."

"What about Luna?" Rei asked from across the room. He looked over his shoulder for a moment, then went back to studying the blonde girl.

"As far as I can tell without actually talking to her, the Luna personality is basically intact and undamaged. She would appear to be in much the same state as Artemis, although there is some evidence that she might be on the verge of the breakthrough he had happen earlier, on her own. I would think that the last few days may have allowed her to begin to see the gaps in the illusion she was influenced to believe." The mage thought for a moment, then nodded. "I have an idea."
Kneeling beside Usagi, he looked up at Yori. "Can you perform that procedure to disable her voluntary control, just in case this goes wrong, please?" he requested. She nodded, prodding Usagi in a few places.

"OK, she won't be able to move anything below the neck for half an hour or so."

"Thank you." He reached out and put his hands on her head. "I'm going to try suppressing Usagi's consciousness while allowing her body to wake up, which hopefully will allow the Luna personality to manifest without interference. I'm fairly sure this will work although it might take a couple of tries to get it right."

Everyone watched as he concentrated for a minute or two. Eventually he straightened up, looking pleased. "I believe that may have done it." The room-full of magical girls and two mages watched the comatose figure of Usagi expectantly. She lay still, breathing slowly and deeply, showing no signs of life otherwise. Several seconds passed in silence.

'Azumi' was just about to ask if anything was going to happen, when through the link to Ami and Rei's senses provided by their SIs, she heard an acerbic voice from behind them asked irritably, "Would someone like to explain what the fuck is going on, please?" All of them except Hnther and Ldnrk turned, to see a small black cat glaring at them from as far away from the two demons as she could get, her ears laid back and her tail lashing from side to side. The mind mage looked at them with interest.

"Ah. I assume it worked?"

"Yep," 'Yori' replied with a grin. "But she doesn't look happy."

"I'm not at all happy, you're damn right there," the cat spat out, staring at them. "Usagi tried to kill me, I've spent a week trying to work out what on earth is going on, and the only things I can come up with make me very, very worried. Now I find myself in a room full of lunatics with two demons as well. Care to fill me in?"

"OK." 'Yori' paused, glancing at Artemis, who was sitting on the table next to Minako. "Unless you want to?"

"Go ahead," he said quietly. "I'm still trying to get to grips with it myself. You'll do a better job." She nodded, returning her attention to the other illusory animal, who was giving off an aura of impatient curiosity, mixed with irritation.

"Sorry, this is going to come as a shock, but it's like this." Once more, she began the long explanation, causing the cat to stare at her, by turns horrified, furious, and terrified.

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Heading to a coffee shop he'd heard had some interesting new blends in, on the edge of the Minato district that Yori and Chou operated in that overlapped the one Aiko and her team claimed as home territory, the small figure of Xrist stopped when he heard a sound coming out of an alleyway. To his ears it sounded like some sort of fight. Torn between the desire for a really good cup of coffee, curiosity, and the well-honed desire to avoid most magical girls on the basis they were all nuts except for the ones he trusted, and even there he wasn't too sure about their sanity, he looked around, then peered down past a number of waste receptacles. At the far end of the alley he could see the shadowy figures of two large humans apparently dealing rather harshly with another one, who was on the ground struggling weakly.

The little demon looked around again. He couldn't see any signs of local law enforcement, or any
magical girls either, in fact the whole area was quite sparsely populated at the moment, the only pedestrians in sight some distance away and moving off. One or two vehicles passed, but too fast to flag down, even if they would have stopped in the first place. "I've got to get some sort of local communications system to call Yori with," he muttered, sighing. "Or Aiko and her lot. Or even that peace enforcer Harada." He looked again, they were still at it. Reaching out with the limited mystical ability he possessed, he couldn't sense any magic in play, although there was a good deal of pain being radiated from the apparent victim of some sort of vicious street crime. He could also sense enough malice from the two attackers to make him pretty sure they intended to finish the job permanently.

'This species can be nasty,' he thought to himself, cautiously edging closer, sticking to the shadows caused by the alley and the early evening light which was fading fast. 'Most of them are very nice, but the bad ones...' He shook his head. 'Pity. But they do make amazing coffee.' A short distance away now, behind a large metal container giving off a very unpleasant smell of decomposing organics, he carefully observed.

'Knife wound in the lower abdomen, broken lower limb, facial injuries,' the demon assessed. 'Not good. He's not going to last very long with wounds of that nature. I wonder what he's done to attract that sort of attention, or whether it's just a random crime?'

The human on the ground, a male of perhaps twenty-five to thirty local cycles as far as he could judge, was wearing clothing that suggested some form of official uniform, perhaps military or law enforcement. The attackers were clothed in more normal civilian attire, one carrying the knife that had obviously produced the heavily bleeding wound in the victim, the other one some form of metal club nearly as long as his arm, which he was raising for another blow. The person on the ground cried out in a language that wasn't the local one, something Xrist wasn't familiar with although it was vaguely recognisable as a common alternative. 'I really must learn some more of this world's languages,' he mused, sighing. 'Oh, the nine hells take it. This is ridiculous. Where is a magical girl when you need one? Half the time you're just going for an espresso and you get jumped by two hands worth of them, but when there's a real crime happening they're nowhere to be seen.'

With another sigh and a quick look around just on the off chance that someone else might deal with the problem, he reached into his storage pocket and pulled out a K'nn stun weapon, something he wasn't supposed to be carrying, not being strictly speaking licensed for it. 'Yori will understand,' he thought as he adjusted the settings carefully. 'Got her priorities straight, that one.' He took aim, then pulled the trigger twice.

Lieutenant Wilson was fairly certain he was about to die. It was almost funny. After the Gulf war, then Kosovo, without getting a scratch while several members of his unit had been badly injured, he was going to die in a mugging in the middle of Tokyo while on leave. He could feel his life leaking steadily out of the stab wound in his gut, mixing warmth from the blood and cold air in places that shouldn't be exposed, oddly painless, especially compared to the dull agony from his shattered tibia. Against that the broken nose and swollen cheek was nothing.

Looking up at the man who was about to crush his skull with an aluminium baseball bat, he closed his eyes.

There were two odd noises, a sort of muffled crackling zap effect like something out of a video game, followed by a pair of thumps. After that, silence fell.

'That's weird,' he thought idly, light-headed from blood loss. 'I wonder why I'm not dead yet?' He opened his eyes. Both the men who had been standing over him swearing in rapid Japanese had
vanished. Painfully rolling his head to the side, he got a close-up view of a pair of boots in a position that showed their owner was currently lying on his back next to him. 'Very weird.'

A few seconds passed, then he heard soft footsteps. Looking in the direction they were coming from, he blinked several times. 'OK. Maybe I am dead. Or at least hallucinating wildly.' The short figure moving towards him stopped to prod the recumbent mugger cautiously with its foot, pointing some sort of gun out of an SF movie at him, then grunted in a satisfied tone, resuming its approach. It stopped again, only about half a metre away, looking down at him with large eyes containing horizontally slitted pupils set against a sea of dark blue iris. The mouth, which enclosed a remarkable number of teeth, opened, and a surprisingly deep voice said something in Japanese. He stared in numb shock, unable to even begin to try parsing the sentence with his limited understanding of the language. The thing waited, then spoke again. It looked irritated when he didn't respond, scratching the side of its head with the end of the ray gun or whatever it was, then said something else in a completely different language, one he'd never heard before.

"Sorry, I have absolutely no idea what you're saying," he whispered, smiling happily as the world darkened around the edges. "You'd think a proper hallucination would at least speak English."

The figment of his dying imagination radiated puzzlement, glancing around, then made the weapon vanish somehow, bending over to inspect him closely. Small hands gently felt his stomach, making him hiss in pain as everything dimmed then brightened. It said something else, more to itself than him, straightening up and staring at him. After a moment it produced something else, some sort of glass ball with a metal band around it, the ball itself glowing a gentle green-white colour like it was full of fireflies. The creature adjusted something on the ball carefully, then tossed it a couple of metres away, immediately bending down and somehow managing to pick him up, not as carefully as he'd have genuinely preferred under the circumstances. The amount of pain involved was beginning to make him think that perhaps this wasn't a hallucination after all, although if it wasn't, he had absolutely no idea what it actually was.

A couple of seconds later there was a crackling sound like someone crumpling waxed paper and the alley was illuminated a bright neon blue colour. The creature jumped forward, blue light washed over him, and he passed out.

"Where did you say you found this?" Sergeant Harada looked at Corporal Otani, who consulted his notes for a second.

"It was at the end of that little alleyway by the video arcade at the edge of the district, near the high school," he said. "Someone taking out the garbage found two unconscious men lying next to a worryingly large pool of fresh blood. They're in the cells at the moment, the doctor is looking at them now. One of them had a knife in his hand that also had blood on it, the other one was lying on top of a baseball bat covered with hair and blood on the end. It suggests to me that someone got the shit kicked out of him by them. They're both known violent muggers according to the records, although not local. Looks like they either followed someone here or decided to try their luck somewhere other than home."

"Interesting," the sergeant muttered, turning the glass ball over in his hands. There was a residual sensation just at the threshold of perception coming from it, a sensation he was pretty sure meant it was magical.

"What is it?" Otani asked curiously. "It looks a little like one of those damn portal bombs."

"I think it's an emergency portal generator, which is what the bombs were based on," Harada said slowly, rubbing the thing with his thumb. "Yori mentioned them at the time all that started, and she
showed me a picture of something that looked a lot like this a while ago, although that one was a little more complicated."

"So... you think one of our visitors might have intervened in some sort of crime?" Otani stared at the device with interest.

"It's certainly possible, I suppose. Most of the ones I've met are pretty decent people. We have two unconscious muggers, clearly stopped in the middle of a nasty mugging, weapons used in said mugging, lots of evidence of a badly injured victim, but no victim. Where is he? Or she?"

"There were no call-outs for an ambulance. One of the magical girls got to him?" The corporal leaned against the desk, putting his notebook away. Harada thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Not their style. Any of Yori's people wouldn't have left the muggers behind, they'd have brought them here, and the victim would be up and walking around without a scratch on him by now. Unless he was dead, in which case we might not have any muggers either. Most of the other ones who might be around that area would also at least call us to let us know."

"Some local mage?"

"Not impossible, but the only one I know would have done something pretty drastic. We'd probably have found a couple of frogs looking confused," the sergeant replied with a small smile. "And again, we'd have heard about it. No, I think that some demon probably stepped in, then decided to go for medical help of some sort and used this thing to do it. It fits the evidence as far as I can see."

Otani nodded slowly. "OK, I can see that. So what do we do? Just wait for whoever it is to pop up again?"

Putting the device down on his desk, Harada stared at it, then got up. "We may have to. But I'm going to talk to some people I know. In the mean time, see if the doctor can figure out what happened to the muggers, and check if there are any missing persons reports filed in the last few hours that might have a bearing. Get the blood tests as fast as possible and use that as well, and any fingerprints." He picked up the spherical device and put it in his pocket, then retrieved his coat. Corporal Otani nodded, making some more notes.

"Right, Sergeant. I'm on it." He paused, then asked, "What do I say if the Captain asks about it?"

"Tell her I'm making enquiries, but as far as we can tell there probably isn't any further risk to the victim, whoever they are." He shrugged. "Either they're dead already and beyond help, or they're somewhere very odd and getting very good help, I think."

"Going to call Yori?"

"She and Chou are out of touch at the moment, I got a message that they had something very important to do. They took Aiko and her crew with them, and Azumi as well."

"Ah." The corporal nodded again, then headed towards the stairs to the cells and the prisoners, slipping his notebook into his pocket on the way.

Looking around at everyone watching her, Luna sighed, shaking her head. "Oh, shit," she mumbled. "I wish I could tell you that you're just crazy, but I can't deny the truth." The room fell silent again as they all waited for her to think it through. "So, basically, Artemis and I are just
"figments of someone's imagination?"

"Not really, but you're not the physical beings you thought you were," Ami replied. "You're real enough, though. As sentient as any of us are from what Hnther and Yori say."

"That's almost worse," the cat grumbled. "Stuck inside her brain? I'm surprised I'm not as crazy as she is. And she's very, very crazy right now."

"We know," Yori said, looking sympathetically at the creature that wasn't really there. "We've been monitoring her, and Minako, we've seen everything that happened. She's in a bad way, I'm afraid."

Luna got up and walked over, apparently deliberately walking through Rei's legs, making her twitch, stopping a metre from the blonde on the bed and staring at her.

"Can you help her?" she asked. Chou translated for Hnther, who sighed.

"We were discussing that just before we arranged to have you wake up," he said. "It's not very easy, I'm afraid." He explained the problem and the possible solutions to the cat, who looked more and more depressed as he spoke.

"Oh, damn it all to hell," she finally said when he stopped talking. "Poor insane bitch."

"Luna!" Artemis gasped in shock. She looked at him, irritated.

"Hey, you haven't had to put up with her. Your one is much closer to normal, mine has been a fucking nightmare. I didn't know she couldn't hurt me, you know, she scared the crap out of me with that damn tiara. I really thought she was going to kill me. That's what she was trying to do."

The other cat and the rest of the people in the room watched her as she stared at Usagi for a little longer, then looked up at Yori. "When you turn her off again, I go away as well, right?" The woman nodded, looking apologetic.

"Yes. Sorry, but it's probably not safe to leave her even this conscious. Aside from the problems that would happen if by some fluke she woke up all the way, I think her mind will slowly degrade even in this state. Eventually it could well affect you as well." She had a brief conversation with Hnther, then looked back to the illusory cat. "Hnther thinks it would be a bad idea. He's happy to repeat this procedure every now and then to let you catch up, but until either Usagi is cured, or dealt with in some other way, or we figure out a way to get you into another body of some sort, we're a bit stuck."

She sighed a little, her ears drooping. "It'll be OK, Luna," Ami said encouragingly. "We have a lot of very smart people who know all sorts of weird techniques working on this. I'm sure we can work out something sooner or later."

"Easy for you to say, you're walking around and can touch things," Luna mumbled, looking depressed. "Oh, well. Not like I can do anything about it. At least I don't have to listen to Usagi babbling on about how her manifest destiny will come forth any day now. God, that was getting annoying." Yori chuckled, getting down on one knee and studying the animal.

"You have my word, I will try to find some way to help both you and Artemis gain a physical existence. We need to deal with the time device first, of course, and if we fail, well, we're a bit screwed, but I'm not planning on failing. After that we'll look into what we can do to help you guys. Usagi and Setsuna are in good hands, Minako will get helped, and we'll get Haruka, Michiru, and Makoto here as well, somehow. Haruka at least seems open to the idea. The other two will be more trouble, they're... not cooperative, but we'll figure something out."
Cheering up slightly, Luna's ears went back to their normal position. "You think you really can give Artemis and me real bodies? It sounds pretty wild."

"Everything about this is pretty wild, right? What's one more thing?" The cat and the martial artist looked at each other for a couple of seconds, then both laughed.

"Fair enough. Thank you." She looked around. "All of you."

"I'm sure we can help, Luna," Chou told her calmly. "You're just going to have to bear with us for a while."

Standing, Yori looked at her friends. "We'd better get on with this, we don't want to waste any time." She spoke to Hnther for a moment, then looked back at the black cat as the demon mage bent over Usagi again. "He's going to shut her down again, then put her in stasis until his colleagues can examine her, which will be a few days yet. Once that's happened we'll repeat this process and fill you in, OK?"

"Thanks, Yori," the small cat said, seeming grateful. She looked at Ami and Rei, then over at Minako and Artemis. The other cat seemed worried. "See you guys later." A second later she vanished from the vision of the ones that could see her without any fuss, simply blinking out of existence.

"Xrist," the large feather-covered demon said with a note of surprise in her voice, looking at the spherical device Harada showed her. She looked across at another of her species who was like her sitting in Hikaru's coffee-shop, enjoying a large amount of very good coffee and some very nice chocolate cake. He signified assent, but said nothing. Hikaru leaned on the counter, listening curiously. "This is the latest model, he told me he'd got one after that incident a few weeks ago when those crazy girls chased him here and Fumiko and the others saved him." She touch it, concentrating for a moment, then nodded firmly. "Definitely Xrist. It's set to the coordinates of his world. Looks like it was set on a short delay, these new ones don't instantly generate the portal, you can delay it up to about a minute or so, to give you time to get through it. They only hold it open for about four seconds so you have to be quick, but they're very reliable, apparently. The power core is supposed to be good for nearly ten years."

"Thank you, Ryynkh," Harada said, managing the name well, which made her nod approvingly. "So, do you think he would have intervened in a violent mugging?" He explained the story. She leaned back, one of her four tentacles coming up and smoothing the feathers around her left ear while another one lifted the mug to her mouth. She sipped, then put it down.

"He might have done, if he thought he didn't have a choice. He always tries to stay out of things like that, he's perfectly honest about not wanting to get involved, but at the same time he's not the sort of person to walk away if someone was in trouble and no one else could help. By the sound of it this mystery victim was badly injured, so he might well have decided that the only thing to do was to take him to a healer, and he'd naturally think of the ones on his own world if he couldn't get hold of Yori or Chou. They'd certainly be the ones I'd go for in an emergency, but if he had no way to contact them..." She shrugged with all four tentacles, which looked odd. "An emergency portal home to find medical aid is a sensible idea. Quicker than trying to find it locally if you're not familiar with the procedure."

"And I suppose it's likely that the victim may well have required aid as fast as possible so he couldn't wait," Harada mused, picking the device up and looking at it, then putting it back on the counter.
"That seems logical," the demon agreed, finishing her coffee and motioning to Hikaru, who took the mug and headed for the cappuccino machine, still listening.

"Do we need to worry about this person's safety?" Harada asked after a moment, picking up his own coffee. Rynnkh shook her head, making an expression he thought was meant to be a smile.

"No, assuming Xrist got him to the healers fast enough, he or she will almost certainly be fine. His world is very good at medical procedures on a number of species. Not as fast as Yori or Chou, but nearly as effective. I'm fairly sure they'd either know about your species or know someone who could get the information they needed, and they have a very strong ethical obligation to help the injured. First rate hospitals, believe me."

The sergeant relaxed slightly, feeling relieved. "Thank you. I suppose we can't do much except wait."

"I can get this recharged for you if you want, you could use it to follow him, but you'd need to arrange a portal home. Xrist could do that easily enough. Or you can wait...," she turned to her compatriot and asked something in her own language, getting a response after some thought, "About twenty hours, the next scheduled portal to his world is opening then for a few minutes."

"Scheduled portal?" he echoed, surprised.

"There's so much travel to Minato these days that several places have started arranging regular portals between various worlds and here," Hikaru put in, looking amused. "Apparently portals are quite complicated things to arrange, they normally need several mages, from what Chou told me a while ago, so if an individual wants to come here, or go back, they either need to bring a couple of mages at least, or arrange to have someone set one up from elsewhere. That seems to have left an exploitable hole in a market somewhere. It's getting to be almost as regular as the bus service. Xrist comes by about twice a week, sometimes three times, and he's stayed overnight at least a couple of times."

Harada stared at him, then shook his head in wonder, laughing. "Unbelievable. I thought I was on top of the weird things around here but I'd missed that one completely."

"It's pretty discreet, only a few mages and other people around here know about it, and the demons, of course," the coffee-shop owner said, smiling. "I only heard about it because a few of them were discussing it. I asked, Xrist explained. He's probably my best customer, and he's introduced half a dozen regulars to me as well." The man chuckled. "I'm thinking of learning this Trade language, it sounds like it would be useful. I know a few phrases in it but I can't really speak it. But I did get some menus translated into it. Chou did that for me." He handed a laminated menu to Harada from under the counter, the police officer inspecting it with interest, seeing it was indeed in what he recognised as the alien language.

"That it is. I like it. Lots of interesting people, very good business, some cool stories, and one should never forget the gold and silver." The man held up one of the small glittering ingots another demon had just handed him, smiling, then busied himself filling the order. When he finished, he turned back to the sergeant. "Yoshi is letting them use one of the smaller empty warehouses he has. He's pretty deeply involved with that Uthryyl fellow that Yori is friends with, she introduced them, and that seems to have led to him being known about by other visitors. One thing led to another..." He shrugged, amused. "You know Yoshi, he's always aware of a good business opportunity."
"It was due to Yori and her friends," Rynnkh remarked, listening in on their conversation. Both men turned to her. "A few years ago it was just too dangerous, you had to be pretty determined and very careful, and have a very good disguise spell, those weird magical girls you have so many of around here were a real pain. They were totally unselective, they'd go after anything that came through a portal. Yori changed that. In the last year or so word really started to get around, travel here has picked up a lot, since you're normally safe, at least around this area. It can still be a bit of a problem in some other places but it's getting better."

"Good thing too," the other demon muttered. "You were taking your life in your hands just buying a kilo of coffee beans."

"Why come, then?" Harada asked curiously. Both demons stared at him as if he was a little dim.

"Because it's coffee!" Rynnkh shook her head sadly, depressed at the lack of understanding. "You have to have coffee."

"And that is why I owe Yori and the others thanks every day," Hikaru snickered, looking supremely satisfied.

Looking around at the shop, which currently had at least five customers who were obviously from elsewhere, and a couple more that Harada strongly suspected were disguised demons of some form, he grinned. "Like I said. Amazing." Finishing his coffee he handed the cup back to his friend, turning down a refill. "Thank you for all the information, Rynnkh. I think it's probably easiest to wait and see what happens, I suppose Xrist will be in contact sooner or later. Although, I will take you up on the offer to have this recharged, just in case I need it." She made a gesture with a couple of tentacles, taking the portal generator from him and walking over to another demon, who she had a short discussion with. This one took the device and concentrated on it, making it slowly fill with blue light, then handed it back when it finished. She returned it to Harada.

"There you go. To activate it, press these two symbols here and rotate the ring this way, then release it. It will activate five seconds later. Like I said, you'll have about four seconds to go through. You can carry it through the portal it makes, I'd guess Xrist dropped it to pick up this human."

"Thanks. One final question." The demon waited expectantly. "Any idea how he knocked the muggers out?"

"He's not much of a mage," she mused, "so it probably wasn't magic. He might have had some sort of packaged spell, I suppose. He's pretty strong for his size, he might have done it physically?" Harada shook his head.

"There wasn't a mark on them, apparently. They just seem to be deeply asleep, but they haven't woken up yet."

"Probably some sort of stun weapon, then. A sleep spell would do that but Xrist is fond of technology. Maybe a K'nn neural suppressor pistol? They're easy enough to get although he should have a license for it. If it was one of those and he set it right, they'll probably wake up about six or seven hours after being shot with a headache but no other damage."

"Interesting. Thank you yet again."

"You're welcome, Sergeant." The demon nodded to him politely. Thinking that she was easier to deal with than a lot of humans he knew, he nodded, back. got up, waved to Hikaru, then headed back to the station, deep in thought.
"Well, I guess this the point we finally get to meet these mysterious manufacturers of Jun and the other SIs," the middle sister said, feeling mildly nervous. Her sister glanced at her with a smile and a nod.

"It seems so," 'Chou' replied. The two Tendo women looked around. Present were Aiko and her girls, Ami and Rei, 'Yori', and Lldnr'k, in addition to the pair of them. They were standing in the middle of the valley Minako had been briefly exiled to, which Uthryyl had assured Tamiko was a very long way from anyone who ever used the world for anything. It seemed a safe place to begin from. "Perhaps we should get Hotaru, she might well regret missing this."

'Yori' turned to her, thought for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. Hang on." A portal opened beside her.

"Hey, Hotaru, we're off to see the makers, the wonderful makers of SI. Want to come?" she commed, including everyone else but the temporal mage in the link. A laugh came back.

"Yes, please. Can you wait a few minutes, I just need to let Haruka know I'm going out for a while."

"Sure."

They waited for about five minutes. "OK, I'm ready. Where should I go?"

"Head towards the train station near that hotel where you're staying, I opened the portal around the back."

"All right." Another minute passed, then the purple-haired girl stepped through the tear in reality, grinning. "I love this. Hello, Lldnr'k." Behind her, the portal imploded quietly.

"Greetings, Hotaru. It's very nice to see you again," the demon told her, bowing slightly. She bowed back, laughing. "I hear that Haruka seems to be improving?"

"Yes, she's a lot better than she was although she still thinks all this is mad," the girl replied, momentarily looking slightly sad. "But she's willing to let me go and do what I think is right, even though she said I should be careful not to let too much of Yori rub off on me."

"Sound advice," the mage replied gravely, causing her to laugh again.

She turned to the others. "So, what's going on?"

"We've taken Minako and Usagi to see Hnther, talked to Luna and Artemis and explained everything, did the same for Minako, then Lldnr'k managed to get the coordinates we've been waiting for," 'Yori' explained. The girl raised an eyebrow, which made them smile. "It's a bit more complicated than that of course. I'll show you the recordings later. Usagi is out of commission for the foreseeable future, unfortunately, she's pretty badly damaged, worse than Setsuna. We can't do much about that right now, but what we can do is see if we can get rid of that damned time machine once and for all. We're going to meet Kw'lyn Industries to see what help they can give us."

"OK." Hotaru sighed a little. "Poor Usagi."

"It's sad, but it's out of our hands now," Ami told her, seeming melancholy. "None of us can help her. Hnther and his people can if anyone can. We just need to deal with the device."

"Right. Let's see what happens." 'Yori' concentrated for a moment. "I'm opening a portal to the coordinates we got in the SI message." The portal formed normally, but made an odd sound in the
process. "That's... a bit weird," she muttered, inspecting it. "It's blocked. Some sort of security method, I guess, but nothing I've ever seen before."

"I didn't know you could block a portal." 'Chou' looked impressed.

"Neither did I." A few seconds passed, then a dark metallic cube, about half a metre on a side, popped out of the portal, hovering in front of it silently. Everyone got the impression it was looking carefully at them.

"What's that?" Rei asked, warily.

#It is a security drone, Nabiki,# Jun commented to the middle sister, sounding fascinated. #I have basic details of it, it is manufactured by my makers. I would suspect it is the gate-keeper of portal travel to their world. As you know they are very private, much as Ranma and Kasumi are, so this is presumably a method they use to keep out the riff-raff. She giggled internally at the words.

'Is it dangerous?' she asked.

#Most likely not to you or the others, directly at any rate. While I am reading considerable armament built into it none of it is of a type that presents a direct threat. However, it is unlikely that the portal will allow travel without the drone authorising it.#

'What do we do next?' Her question was answered as the floating machine moved forward, a visible beam of light scanning each of them in turn.

#The light is for effect, I believe,# Jun remarked in an amused tone of voice. #The actual scanning was by a combination of magic and a number of technological methods. She snickered a little.

After a short pause, a new voice sounded in her head.

:: Welcome to Kw'lyn Industries. Your native languages and reality strands of origin have been noted. This unit recognises the individuals Yori and Chou, with known associates Aiko, Tamiko, Misaki, and Fumiko. Four unknown individuals, SI enabled, also present. Last individual is recognised as Lldnr'k, Master Temporal Mage. How may we be of service? ::

"OK, was that as creepy to anyone else as it was to me?" Rei mumbled. Ami and Hotaru nodded, as did Tamiko.

"Weird, certainly," Misaki noted, looking interested.

"We would like to talk to someone about arranging a number of antimatter warheads to be used for the destruction of a class twelve hazard," 'Yori' politely replied to the machine. "Here is the authorisation code we were given." A complex block of information was sent. The drone did nothing for a second or two, aside from rotating slightly to face her more directly.

::Authorisation valid. Class twelve hazard acknowledged and verified. Do you have the fractional reality coordinates required to access the hazard?::

"Yes."

::Access to Kw'lyn Industries facilities is granted for your party. Please enter the portal.:: The machine moved to one side, while they all felt the magic coming from the hole in space change very slightly. 'Yori' glanced at 'Chou', then looked back at 'Azumi' and the others.

"This should be interesting," she said, then grinned widely, walking into the portal. The others
followed, all of them wondering what they'd find on the other side. Once they'd disappeared, the security drone scanned the immediate area, then, satisfied nothing was amiss, followed them in, the portal disappearing immediately afterwards.
Chapter 85

Having to work for a living sucks. It takes time away from writing!

Not to mention the internal complexity of this current story section is getting a little silly, which slows things down quite a lot. I'll be somewhat relieved when I finish it so I can get on with some other plans I have. That should only take one more chapter, which is more than half-way finished, so it should go up very quickly after this one. It will probably take it past the megaword boundary as well, which I personally find amazing.

The last chapter is now officially the highest-commented-upon so far. Thank you. Special thanks to the guest commentator who said nice things about my writing ability. While possibly not entirely deserved it is very much appreciated.

A note on some various requests to 'add XYZ to crossover', having received some in comments and some via PM.

With all due respect, no.

The SM stuff fits the entire paradigm of the story, and while admittedly it wasn't originally intended to be a R1/2-SM crossover to the extent it's become, the possibility was there from the beginning and more or less allowed for. It kind of grew much larger than I expected but all in all I believe it worked fairly well.

There are many other magical girl anime and manga to draw from, of course, but a lot of the popular ones simply don't fit into this structure. OMG doesn't work for a number of reasons too complex to go into here. TM might fit, but would have to be heavily modified, and I'm already up to my neck in dealing with all the changes needed to make SM vaguely sane, plus I'm not wildly familiar with it in the first place. Several of the other ones requested (nay, demanded in some cases) are even worse.

So that's not going to happen.

I'm not going to throw everything in just to see what happens, there is an overall plan, which while flexible, isn't something I want to simply throw away. That breaks internal consistency which is a particular bugbear of mine with fiction.

That said, I may well pull in elements from certain other places where they are appropriate and fit the story, only time will tell how often. I have a few thoughts on those lines. But don't expect a wholesale dropping of your favourite Anime/Manga/TV show/Movie/Book/Game/Breakfast cereal into the DSR universe just for the sake of it. That way lies madness, inconsistency, and abandoned fiction where the ideas simply dry up when you run out of other places to pinch them from. I've seen it happen with a number of fanfics over the years, ones that with a little more restraint or a little more original imagination could have been fantastic.

After all, surely the whole idea behind fan fiction in the first place is to extend an idea you like with your own, into places the original author didn't want to go or didn't think of? Simple moving characters around wholesale but keeping everything else the same, which again there are many examples of, is just... pointless.

That's my opinion, anyway, and since I'm the one getting carpal tunnel syndrome typing tens of thousands of words a month, I win :)


"Look, it's easy. There's only that old man and that girl in there, plus a couple of customers, I checked. We go in, grab the stuff, and get out, we'll be fifty kilometres away before anyone can do anything."

Ken Satori looked at his literal partner in crime with a raised eyebrow, then resumed inspecting the jewellery shop they were watching from a distance. "I don't know, Shiro, I've heard some weird things about Nerima. That's where we are, right?"

"Yes, I've heard stories as well, but we need the money, we're nearly tapped out. That last job in Kashiwa didn't pay as well as it should have." His friend looked over his shoulder from the front of the bike they were both sitting on. "We need cash if we're going to make it to Osaka. My cousin has a big job for us if we get there in two days."

Still a little dubious, Ken nodded slowly, before flipping the dark visor of his helmet down fully. "OK. Let's do it, then. Got the gun?"

"Yep." Shiro moved the bike to just outside the shop after a quick look around for the police, dropped the stand on the bike, leaving the engine running, then both men got off. Another look around and they both took a deep breath each, glanced at each other, then charged the door, Ken hefting a large sledge-hammer and Shiro producing an extremely illegal 9mm pistol from his pocket. Hitting the door with a crash they slammed it open, causing the glass in it to shatter and rain to the floor, Shiro heading to the rear of the shop where the assistant, an attractive blue-haired girl in her early twenties, was engaged in talking to a pair of customers who seemed to be looking at engagement rings. At the same time his friend turned to the cabinets near the door, smashing the first one open with the hammer and scooping bracelets into his bag.

"HEY!" The girl shouted in outrage as she and the two customers whirled at the sound of the door crashing open, her face darkening in anger, while the prospective couple hit the floor with commendable speed. The old man who owned the shop had just been coming out of the rear room carrying another tray of rings and he stopped dead in the doorway as Shiro pointed the gun at him, then the girl. The man stared at him for a moment, glanced at the girl who was almost steaming with rage, then looked back at Shiro.

"You're making a very large mistake, young man," he calmly noted, putting the tray down on the bench behind the counter.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the girl snarled at the same time, glaring at him. Behind him, Shiro could hear his friend smashing another cabinet, which caused the old man to sigh and the girl's eye to twitch in fury.

"Shut up, both of you, and you won't get hurt," the robber said, looking around quickly in case anyone else was present. Not seeing anyone, he turned back to them in time to see the girl had moved a metre closer, raising the weapon and pointing it directly at her face. "Hold it. Stay right there. OK, old man, hand me that tray, please."

The jeweller looked at him with an eyebrow up, then at the girl, who glanced back, before crossing his arms. "No, I think not. I spent a lot of time making these, you know."

"Do I look like I give a shit?" Shiro growled, aiming the pistol at him again.

"You look like you have no idea where you are, son," the man observed, remarkably unmoved.

"And you don't seem to realise I don't care, I'm the one with the gun. Now give me those rings, and
everything in the till as well." He slammed the butt of the weapon on the glass cabinet top in front of him, causing the glass to shatter, then started grabbing rings and necklaces with his other hand, still keeping most of his attention on the two in front of him. A faint whimper from behind made him glance at the two customers on the floor, where the woman was being comforted by the man, both of them looking terrified.

"Mr Ito?" the shop assistant asked, in a peculiar tone of voice. The shop owner looked at her and nodded.

"Go ahead, Akane."

Shiro looked at both of them, puzzled. This was the oddest reaction to an armed robbery he'd ever encountered. Normally it was much more along the lines of the people on the floor in his experience. The expression on the face of the young woman made him take a step back despite himself and the presence of the weapon in his hand, it was far more predatory than he thought likely under the circumstances. Once more he moved the gun to cover her.

Or tried to. As soon as the weapon was no longer pointing at the old man, on its way to be aimed at the girl, she moved. In a blur of motion she was over the counter and inside his guard, so fast he had absolutely no chance to react. A sharp pain in his arm was the only warning he got before he found the world whirling around him, the pistol flying off somewhere as he dropped it, followed by an impact that drove the wind from his body on the other side of the shop. Shiro just had time to look up in pained astonishment to see a petite foot coming at his head very fast indeed, before the world went black.

At the crash Ken turned his head to see the shop assistant standing over the upside down and obviously unconscious form of his old friend, her foot on his throat, and his right arm plainly broken, not to mention probably dislocated at the shoulder. She looked down with a small vicious smile, before raising her eyes to him. He swallowed. She took her foot off Shiro's body, turning and slowly heading for him. He raised the sledge-hammer protectively, looking to either side. The old man was leaning casually against the doorway into the rear of the shop with his arms folded, looking amused in a darkly annoyed sort of way, while the two customers were watching with open mouths.

"You must be from out of town," the girl said pleasantly, coming closer. "Locals have a lot more sense, especially around here." She stopped three metres away, out of reach. "Drop the hammer and lie down."

"Um." Ken stared at her, then beyond her to his friend, who was breathing in a noisy manner that suggested a couple of broken ribs and possibly a punctured lung. "Stay back." He hefted the hammer between them, stepping back, stumbling over something on the floor.

"No, I don't think I will," she growled. He swung the hammer at her, knowing he couldn't reach, but hoping to warn her off. She simply watched. Moving to the side, heading for the door, he once again stepped on something, looking down quickly to see the gun his friend had been holding.

Looking up he saw the girl was also looking at the weapon. She raised her eyes and smiled at him in a way that made his blood run cold. "Do you think you can get it before I get you?" she asked speculatively.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. She started whistling the theme to a classic American western movie, making his eyebrow twitch, and rocking backwards and forwards on her heels with her thumbs hooking into her belt. Eventually, unable to stand the suspense, he flung the hammer at her head as fast and hard as he could, dropped and rolled to the side, reaching out with his hand, then slid into the corner on a layer of the broken glass that littered the floor. Yelping in pain from
dozens of small cuts he triumphantly rose to one knee with the pistol in his hand, waving it at her.

The blue-haired girl was holding the hammer by the head in one hand, having apparently somehow caught it mid-flight, but otherwise hadn't moved from her position. She looked at the weapon he was holding with a small smile. "Not bad." Reaching up with her other hand she held the fibreglass handle of the hammer near the head, snapped the head off cleanly with no sign of effort, then dropped the five kilo lump of steel to the floor. He gaped, the gun drooping in his grasp for a moment, then raised the thing again as she held the metre-long handle like a sword. "On five, then?" He stared as she counted down, wondering what the hell was going on.

The girl reached one, he jumped as she blurred into action, there was a loud bang as the weapon in his hand fired, then a huge impact against his side threw him completely out of the shop. Sliding across the pavement he rolled a couple of times, staggering to his feet after a couple of stunned seconds. Looking at his hand he saw he'd lost the gun again. As he moved he could feel bone grating against bone in his side, which made it apparent he had at least one broken rib. Gasping in pain he looked wildly around, heading slowly and painfully for the bike which was sitting placidly on its stand a short distance away, the engine quietly burbling to itself. Every step was agony.

Behind him he heard a noise, looking around to see the girl was stepping through the remains of the door onto the pavement, an unreadable expression on her face. She was holding the hammer shaft in her right hand, swinging it idly at her side, looking at something in her other hand with a raised eyebrow. He kept moving towards the bike, keeping an eye on her. After a few seconds she looked up, meeting his eyes through his visor. "That was a bit of a surprise," she commented, holding up something between her thumb and forefinger, something small and shiny which he recognised in shock as a bullet. "I didn't know I could do that," she added, "It stings quite a lot."

"Who the hell are you?" he gasped out. "Why is a magical girl working in a jewellery shop, for god's sake?" The young woman looked surprised, then started laughing quite hard.

"Magical girl? That's really funny." He stared as she giggled. "No, I'm just a martial artist. I'm nowhere near as good as a real magical girl. I know a few of them and I know my own limits." Shaking her head, apparently very amused, she giggled some more. "But thanks for the compliment. Now, do you want to keep doing this, or are you going to give up? Mr Ito has called the police, they should be here soon."

Ken stared at her for a few more seconds, then turned and lunged for the bike with a grunt of agony. A flicker of yellow passed his face, followed immediately by a metallic crunch, causing him to stop dead when he saw the fibreglass hammer handle abruptly appear, impaling the fuel tank of the bike like a spear, having been thrown right through it. Fuel leaked out and puddled on the ground as he stared in horrified shock.

"Whoops," the girl said happily. "Good thing I missed you." He stared some more, looked back at her grinning at him, then just sat down and waited for the police to arrive.

'I knew I'd heard some weird things about fucking Nerima', he thought to himself in resignation.

"Lieutenant Riley Wilson," Sergeant Harada said, sitting in front of Captain Uehara's desk. "We confirmed it with a fingerprint match on the baseball bat, he's in the military database because he's a serving officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Blood type also matches, he was known to have business in the area, and no one can locate him, so I'm pretty certain it was him."

"What's a Canadian Air Force pilot doing in Minato?" the captain asked curiously, reading the report her sergeant had handed her.
"There's some sort of joint Canadian-US military exercise going on at the moment. I don't have the
details, but they've been training together in Okinawa for the last month. He's assigned there, his
CO told me he was on leave in Minato to meet a friend who is in the country briefly on business.
The friend got worried when he didn't turn up, called the base, they looked around, then filed a
missing person report when they couldn't find him. The report came in about the same time
Corporal Otani was investigating the report of the mugging."

"So he got jumped by these two muggers, ah, Takeo and Koji Miura, severely injured, then
presumably taken through a portal by this Xrist who intervened?" The captain raised an eyebrow,
looking at the two mugshots in the report.

"It certainly looks that way. The crime scene technician reports that there was close to two litres of
blood at the scene, which I'm told is getting into the range of being very serious. Lieutenant Riley
would definitely have been unable to leave the area on his own, and would probably have been
unconscious anyway. There are no traces of anyone else having taken him away, no ambulances
were called out, which coupled with the emergency portal unit which has been positively identified
as belonging to Xrist, strongly suggests that's what happened. If so, it's the best outcome in all
probability, I'm told that assuming he was still alive in the first place he'll be all right."

The captain nodded slowly, reading. "By this other demon, Rynnkh?"

"Yes. I don't know her all that well but she was cooperative and helpful. Hikaru Kato said she's got
a reputation of being an honest person. There's no reason not to believe her." He shrugged a bit.
"All we can really do is wait. I could go and look for him, but I don't speak Trade myself and
there's no way to know how many people on Xrist's world speak Japanese. He's very fluent but for
all I know he's the only one who is. Yori and her people are all away on some important mission of
some sort, I've tried contacting them but had no luck, unfortunately." He held up the portal
generator. "This would let me get there but not back."

"No, I don't think diving through a portal with no sure way home is the ideal solution, Tetsuo," the
captain commented, taking it from him and looking at it with interest, smiling slightly. "Keep that
as plan B, I think." He laughed, nodding. "I'll call the Lieutenant's CO and tell him that we know
where his man is, but he's currently out of touch." She gave the device back. "Assuming Xrist gets
in touch soon, hopefully they'll let us handle it. We don't need anyone's military turning up and
cauing waves because one of their people has been abducted by aliens." This made Harada laugh
again as the captain smiled more widely. "Even helpful ones that have probably saved his life."

"Should I call Agent Naito and let him know as well?" Harada asked. She thought for a moment.

"Probably best to. He's a good man and this is more or less in his field of expertise. If the Canadian
government does get over-excited, he has the contacts to calm them down, certainly. We don't want
an international incident blowing up out of all this." Harada nodded, standing up.

The captain closed the report, handing it back to him. "File it, keep me informed as to the progress,
please, and if Xrist turns up, I'd like to meet him."

"Yes, Captain."

She paused for a moment, then asked, "We're so popular now we have a regular portal service in
the area?"

He grinned. "Yes. I was surprised as well. It takes a little getting used to. I'm guessing that Xrist
will probably come back the next time a portal is available, with or without the Lieutenant." He
looked at his watch. "That would be about half past eight tomorrow morning."
Captain Uehara looked amused. "Things seem to have changed a lot recently."

"You're not the first one to have said that today, Captain," Harada replied, still grinning. "Do you wish otherwise?"

After a few seconds of thought, she shook her head slightly. "I suppose it adds to the excitement around here in a generally positive manner. I'd certainly choose peaceful demons boosting the local economy over magical girls wrecking half of it on a regular business, although it does make for some unusual conversations with people who aren't expecting it." She looked reflective for a moment. "I wonder if those stun weapons are something we should look into acquiring a number of? If they really are safe and effective it might be something worth pursuing. Better asleep for a few hours than shot, certainly, and tasers are problematic a lot of the time. Short range, not to mention a definite risk of unpleasant side effects."

Harada nodded at her words. "It's a thought. Would we actually be allowed to use alien technology?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll make some enquiries. It might not be feasible, but if it is that could be a useful byproduct of this little incident." They both turned at a knock at the door, which opened to reveal Otani.

"Sorry to disturb you, Captain, Sergeant, but the Miura brothers just woke up. The doctor says they're both in a fit state to be questioned, no health issues from whatever Xrist did to them, but they're complaining about a bad headache." He snickered as the other officers looked amused.

"Tough." Harada laughed, looking at the captain as she spoke, who shrugged. "They knew what they were getting into doing something like that around here, or should have. They're probably lucky that a demon ran into them and not one of the girls." Uehara seemed satisfied by the outcome.

"Give them some aspirin, Corporal, then take them to the interrogation room, I'll be down in a few minutes," Harada said, before turning to his captain. "I'll write it up as soon as I've finished questioning them, ma'am."

"Thank you."

Both officers left the room, closing the door behind them. Captain Uehara looked at it for a moment, shook her head in mild wonder, then picked up the phone.

"I still can't get her on the phone, Kenji," Ikuko Tsukino said, putting her cell phone down as her husband came into the living room. He smiled, walking over to her.

"I'm sure nothing is wrong, dear, that friend of hers said they were going to be out of touch for a while on this trip they decided to take." Ikuko nodded, looking at the phone, then raised her eyes to her husband.

"I hope she has fun and relaxes, the poor girl has been very stressed for some time now. Hopefully this trip will be good for her." She frowned slightly. "Although I do wish she'd told us a little earlier. I was hoping to go to the beach as a family, we haven't done that for a couple of years."

"Apparently it was a spur of the moment decision," Kenji replied, amused, as he sat beside her. "She was so excited about it she didn't even think to call. You know what she's like, she can be a little headstrong at times. Her friend insisted on calling us so we wouldn't worry. Usagi didn't think of that from what she said, she just dived in head first as usual."
"It was nice of her to call. What was her name again?" The elder Tsukino woman tried to remember. "I haven't met her before. It wasn't Ami, I know that much."

After a moment, Kenji shook his head, his brow furrowed. "Sorry, I can't remember either. Tam-something, I think, but..."

"Oh well, I'm sure we'll find out when they get back." Ikuko laughed a little. "I hope little Usagi is having fun."

"Probably. I know when I was young a good camping trip always relaxed me." The man laughed as well. "Although I never would have pegged our daughter as a camping enthusiast. I'm pleased, though, it's a good idea to be able to look after yourself like that."

"With a little luck she'll treat Shingo a little better when she gets back as well." His wife sighed. "She's been quite rude to him several times recently."

Kenji put his arm around his wife, holding her gently. "As you said, it's probably stress. She's coming up to graduation, that's a difficult time in one's life, so it's not surprising that she might be a little prickly. Once she graduates I expect she'll go back to normal."

"I do hope so." They sat in silence for a while. "I wonder if she's decided yet what she wants to do after school?"

"No idea, I'm afraid," Kenji replied. "I talked to her about university, a while ago, but she was a bit lukewarm on the subject. Her marks are good enough that she should be able to get in, thanks to Ami's tutoring, I think, but they're not spectacular. Even so, I'd be pleased if she decided to go into higher education. The girl is smart, she just doesn't apply herself as well as she should."

"Most of her friends seem to be in the same boat," the woman replied, smiling. "You know young girls. They have all sorts of dreams when they're teenagers, but only a few have distinct goals from an early age."

"Young boys are worse, trust me," her husband grinned. "I had no idea until after I left school about what I wanted to do. I never thought I'd end up in the job I have now, although I enjoy it. At one point I wanted to be an astronaut, then a soldier, then a fireman, then a race driver... That was all in about two days when I was nine."

Laughing, Ikuko lifted his arm off her shoulders and got up. "I suspect you still haven't decided what you want to be when you grow up," she quipped, making him chuckle. "I'm going to make some tea, would you like some?"

"Yes please. And perhaps some of that cake you made yesterday?" He looked hopeful.

"If there's any left. You and Shingo ate half of it in one sitting," she called back, going into the kitchen. Smiling, he picked up the remote and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels until he found something interesting.

Looking about her surroundings, 'Azumi' felt mildly disappointed. The large room was a featureless white void, lit with light indistinguishable from sunlight, but otherwise unremarkable. She'd been expecting something more interesting.

"Well, this is boring," Hotaru exclaimed, making her glance at the girl. Murmurs of agreement came from the others. Behind them the portal popped out of existence as 'Yori' dissipated the spell generating it.
Our apologies for the lack of facilities in this intermediate transit location. Progress past this point requires the acceptance of a security spell by each visitor. Kw'lyn Industries takes the security and privacy of both its facilities and its visitors very seriously. Without acceptance of the spell you will be restricted to this location for the duration of your business with Kw'lyn Industries. If you wish to accept the offer of further access, please enter the marked zones and follow instructions. No harm will come to you, we guarantee that the spell only covers the direct knowledge of Kw'lyn Industries facilities and any other possible visitors to those facilities, and you are free to decline the offer and remain here. The declination of the offer will not affect your standing with Kw'lyn Industries:

As the machine stopped speaking, ten immaterial and translucent glowing red cylinders appeared in a row a few metres away. They looked at them, then each other. After a few seconds, 'Yori' turned to the drone. "May I enquire as to the nature of the security spell?"

It is a standard security spell that is used on many worlds to keep information confidential. You are familiar with a variant of it based on my readings of your magical signature. Traces of a similar spell are on each member of your party. The spell restricts the ability to pass on information covered by it to any individual not covered likewise, or without the authorisation of the owner of the spell, in this case Kw'lyn Industries: The voice in their heads sounded patient and professional. 'Yori' glanced at his wife, who nodded.

"OK." She looked around at the others, seeing no dissent. "We accept."

Please enter the marked zone. Further instructions will be given: The drone moved out of the way, somehow managing to suggest that they should get on with it, without having any expression or indeed any moving parts at all. 'Yori' shrugged, walking into one of the glowing cylinders, which immediately went opaque. Everyone watched with interest. Ten seconds later the cylinder vanished, 'Yori' appearing again, looking slightly bemused.

"That was interesting," she muttered, before rejoining them.

"Did it hurt?" Tamiko asked curiously. Her friend looked at her, shaking her head.

"No, not at all. I've just never had a spell put on me by a machine before, not like that. It was... slightly odd." After a pause, 'Chou' headed for the nearest energy cylinder, the others fanning out and each picking one. 'Azumi' entered the one she'd chosen, watching the walls go opaque as soon as she was inside. Experimentally she touched the inside, finding that there was some resistance to her hand, but not enough to trap her inside. By the feel of it the walls were some form of tech-based force-field, not a magical ward, which she found interesting.

Hello, welcome to the Kw'lyn Industries external security system: a different voice from the drone outside said politely. Do you wish accept the security spell?

"Yes," she replied out loud, slightly nervous.

Thank you. Please wait. You may feel minor disorientation, this is momentary and will cause no damage: Something rummaged around in the back of her head for a few seconds with the familiar feel of magic at work, although in a manner she'd not encountered before, making her vision waver briefly. The security spell has been successfully applied. Thank you for your cooperation. Please enjoy your visit to Kw'lyn Industries: The opaque cylinder promptly vanished, allowing her to leave. She walked back to rejoin 'Yori', who was talking to 'Chou' and 'Lldn'r', both of whom had already completed the process. A few seconds later Aiko joined them, followed one by one by the
"An interesting mix of technology and magic," the temporal mage noted, watching as the last one to finish, Misaki, came over and joined them. "I'm impressed."

"Now what?" Ami asked curiously. They all turned to the drone which was hanging in the air a few metres away observing them silently. It moved slightly closer, responding to the question.

::Prepare for transportation to the main facility. Transportation will occur in five seconds::

They waited, not sure what to expect, until exactly five seconds later when the world flickered with a sensation they all recognised as a teleportation spell. The white environment vanished.

What replaced it was... Remarkable.

Sweeping up the glass on the shop floor Akane watched as Mr Ito finished talking to the police officers, one of whom was making notes while the other supervised the paramedics loading the two would-be robbers into an ambulance. Off to the side a mechanic was loading what was left of their motorcycle into a van. He'd stared at the fibreglass hammer shaft piercing the fuel tank for a long couple of seconds, looked around, then simply shrugged and got on with his job. It was Nerima, after all.

The youngest Tendo woman was, now that she'd calmed down from the adrenaline rush of dealing with the armed robbers, feeling slightly stunned herself. She'd caught a bullet!

That seemed... impossible, on the face of it, although she knew for a fact that most of the magical girls she'd heard of could do the same thing. She was certain that Yori and her friends wouldn't think twice about it. You could probably shoot them in the face and they wouldn't even bother to catch the thing, just let it bounce off their foreheads. The thought made her giggle for a moment.

But she still couldn't quite wrap her mind around the fact that she, Akane Tendo, had managed the feat. She hadn't even consciously done it. It had been an automatic reflex. The gun went off when she hit the robber with the fibreglass pole, trying to reduce the blow to a level that wouldn't simply slice him into two messy pieces, and even then she'd felt at least one bone break. At the same time something small and very fast had whizzed by her head, she'd subconsciously tracked it and whipped out her left hand, the next thing she knew she was holding something small and hot in a hand that was aching but seemed otherwise undamaged. The inertia had made her arm fly back to the point she'd nearly dropped it again.

Leaning on the broom for a moment she reached into her pocket and removed the bullet, looking at it in the palm of her hand with her eyebrows raised, still shocked at what she'd done. Heading footsteps crunching in the glass on the floor, she looked up to see Mr Ito approaching with the police officer he'd been talking to following. Both of them were looking at the bullet she was holding, Mr Ito with considerable approval, the police officer with mild surprise. "Catching bullets now, Miss Tendo?" the latter man asked, smiling a little. "That's new."

"It took me by surprise to be honest, Lieutenant," she replied, smiling back. She'd met Lieutenant Sasaki on the previous but one robbery attempt, he'd turned up with the normal police officers and asked some slightly odd questions, not looking all that surprised at the answers. She was still a little confused as to why such a relatively high-ranking police officer would attend a simple, not very competent, armed robbery, but put it down to the sort of thing that happened in Nerima. "It wasn't something I deliberately set out to do, it was sort of a reflex action. I'm still a bit shocked at..."
"Quite a feat even for a martial artist of your calibre, I'd say," he agreed. Pulling a small plastic bag from his pocket he opened it. "I'm afraid I'm going to need it for evidence." She looked disappointed and he grinned. "I'll see if I can arrange to get it back to you when the trial is over. I'm sure a girl's first bullet is something she's attached to." Mr Ito roared with laughter, while Akane gave the lieutenant a hard look, before grinning back.

"Perhaps I should get it made into a necklace or something," she quipped, tilting her hand and letting the small piece of metal drop into the bag the officer was holding out. He sealed it and made a quick note on it with a marker, before putting it back into his pocket.

"An unusual item of jewellery but it would suit you, somehow," the lieutenant said, looking amused. "Good job on stopping the robbers, by the way. Not too much damage this time, or at least, damage caused by you." She flushed a little as he chuckled. Mr Ito began laughing again. "The hammer handle through the bike is a nice touch as well."

"You should have seen that guy's face," she laughed, remembering. "The bullet was enough to terrify him, the bike was the last straw."

"He mentioned you'd tried to hit him with it," Sasaki raised an eyebrow. She giggled and shook her head.

"No, if I'd aimed at him I'd have hit him. I was going for the motorcycle. But it seemed the right thing to say at the time." He laughed once more.

"It certainly made him decide to give up. The broken rib probably helped as well." Looking around at the damaged shop he shook his head. "Idiots. They're both going to go away for a long time for this. The gun will make sure of that even if nothing else would." He glanced to the side as the other officer came over, handing his superior a clipboard. Flipping quickly through the incident report he nodded, signed a couple of papers, then handed one to Mr Ito, who took it and checked it over. "That should be what you need for the insurance claim. Let me know if there's any problem, OK, Kazuo?"

"I will. Thanks, Norio." The shop owner, still looking amused, turned and inspected the damage, then sighed. "Damn. We'd only just got everything fixed from the last time. Oh, well." He looked slyly at Akane. "Sure you're aiming for Hollywood, girl? Not planning on sneaking off to Minato and taking up a career there doing this sort of thing for a living?" She stared at him as the lieutenant started snickering, before shaking her head, smiling.

"No, I don't think so. I can't see myself wearing some of the uniforms those girls wear and shouting at demons. Running way from them, well, yes, perhaps, but not towards them."

"You sell yourself short, Akane," her boss said with a wry grin. "I've never seen you back down from a fight. I think any demon that took you on would regret it."

She laughed. "It's nice to hear you say that, Mr Ito, but I know my own abilities. I'm a lot better now than I was a year ago, by a huge amount, but I'm nowhere near the level of a true magical girl, not even close. For a start I don't know any magic." She shook her head with a good-natured smile. "I've met some very interesting people in the last year or so, with some amazing abilities I know I can't match. I'll leave the demons to them with no regrets."

"Hmm." The old man glanced at the lieutenant, who looked back. "Based on stories I've heard, uncontrollable rage might make up for some of the lack of magic." She blushed again as both men...
looked amused.

"I got better," she said in a small voice. He patted her on the shoulder comfortingly.

"You did. I'm proud of you. Since I've known you you've matured into a very decent young woman. You do your family proud, and I have no doubt you'll continue to do so in America. I'll be sorry to see you go." Mr Ito paused, then grinned again. "Although, as I've said, when they kick you out of the country there's still a place here for you."

Sighing, she put her free hand on her hip and glared at him, while beside him the policeman chuckled some more. "They won't kick me out. I'm going to be very careful, learn to act and do stunts, then enjoy myself." She shivered for a moment, making them look curiously at her. "Believe me, I have good reason to be careful. Certain... people... are watching what Shampoo and I do." The two men exchanged glanced but didn't ask, although they looked curious.

Regaining her equilibrium after a few seconds she resumed sweeping up the glass. "I'm waiting to hear about the next stage from the studio at the moment. The last time I spoke to Adrian, the director, he thought we'd be asked to go over quite soon. It will probably be within a week or so I think."

"As soon as you know for certain let me know so I can arrange some cover for you, please, Akane," Mr Ito requested. He looked around. "Mind you, where I'm going to find an attractive and intelligent girl who can take on any armed robbers and do that to them on short notice I'm not sure." Sasaki smiled at this comment, while Akane paused for a moment, leaning on the broom again.

"One or two of the students at the Dojo might be interested in some part time work. Mariko is very good considering she's only been learning Anything Goes for about three years. Not as good as I am, of course." She giggled as they looked at her. "I could ask her if you want. She's more than good enough to deal with most problems if they come up although I don't think she's at the point of catching bullets. But she's so quick they wouldn't get the chance to shoot."

"I'd suggest that Shampoo girl if Miss Tendo wasn't taking her with her," Sasaki noted, smiling a little. "I expect the entire ward will be a... more peaceful... place with both the young ladies away." Akane gave him another look as Mr Ito suppressed a smile.

"There's more than enough martial artists around here to keep you on your toes, Lieutenant," she replied archly, going back to cleaning up. He nodded wryly at her comment.

"All too true, indeed. Right, I need to get back and deal with work. It was nice talking to you both. Good luck in Hollywood, Miss Tendo. Pass on my regards to your friend as well, and your father."

"I'll do that, Lieutenant. Thank you." He bowed slightly to both of them then left, acquiring his colleague on the way, both of them leaving in their car followed by the ambulance and the mechanic's van. Soon the street was back to normal.

"Hmph." Mr Ito looked around, then picked up another broom. "Idiot thieves. You'd think everyone in Japan would know not to try that sort of thing in Nerima by now."

"If they were smart, they probably wouldn't be thieves in the first place," Akane noted. He nodded as they went on with the clearing up.

"By the way, Akane?" She looked at him. "Well done."
"Thanks, Norio. Yes, I'll mention you called to Emiko. Goodbye." Sergeant Harada hung up the phone, leaning back in his chair and pondering the information he'd been given. 'Hmm. Catching bullets? Impressive. I wonder if Yori knows what the youngest Tendo sister seems to have learned? I also wonder who taught her.' After a moment he pulled out his file on Akane Tendo, which he'd started keeping along with that of a few other of the major players in Neriman martial arts, and made some notes, before slotting it back into place, then getting up to go to lunch.

::Please wait at this location. A representative of Kw'lyn Industries will be attending shortly. You may utilise any of the resources available here but it is strongly recommended that you do not move past the indicated area as your safety cannot be guaranteed::

The drone circled them once, then, apparently satisfied, moved off. No one spoke for some time as they just looked around. The middle sister met her older sister's eyes, seeing in them the same shock she was feeling. Looking around, she could see Ami next to 'Yori' both of whom were staring up with amazement, while Hotaru was smiling weirdly as she studied their surroundings. Misaki looked startled and was talking quietly to her own sister. Lldnr'k seemed to be swearing gently to himself in a number of languages, none of which she recognised.

Aiko turned to her, opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again, shaking her head. Tamiko sat down suddenly, simply looking around with stunned interest.

The group was standing in the middle of a collection of low buildings, some hundred metres across, on the top of a small hill that was obviously artificial. Around the edge of the area was a dully-glowing ward, which they could all feel was low-powered enough not to prevent someone crossing it, clearly intended just as a marker between the 'safe' and 'not safe' areas based on what the security drone had told them. Outside the marked area were other buildings, widely separated, with various machines of different sizes intermittently passing between them. There was an air of business about the place, as if they were on a factory floor, albeit a somewhat unusual one.

Some distance beyond the horizon, the tops of much taller buildings could be seen sticking up, the tips of them illuminated by blue-white sunlight while the parts further down were darker, internal lights showing in many different colours. It appeared that they were on a normal planet, one that was currently either early in the morning just before dawn or late in the evening just before night, until one raised their eyes, looked beyond the horizon, and realised what they were looking at.

Instead of stars as you would normally find, the far distant view was of something completely unexpected, something almost unbelievable. She could see hazy outlines of seas larger than planets, with islands in them probably bigger than the moon, outlines of what might be unbelievably large mountain ranges which stretched for distances best measured in AU, patches of colours that could be forests that would swallow an entire world. Turning on the spot and looking around, then up, she simply gaped. It was everywhere, the entire universe seemed to consist of it. A perfectly round dark spot caught her eye which after a moment she realised with a shock was the shadow of the planet they were on, cast across tens of millions of kilometres of space onto solar-system-sized amounts of land.

There were huge strips of darkness running across the far distant view, very slowly moving sideways, although what was producing them was a mystery. She could see half a dozen at least from where they stood. The area that must have been encompassed by what looked like shadows was almost incalculable. Lowering her gaze to her sister's once more they shared a look before going back to simply observing quietly, trying to wrap their minds around the sheer immensity of the place they found themselves in.
The illuminated parts of the distant buildings was steadily growing, indicating that they were in fact experiencing local dawn. A minute or so later the sun started to rise while they watched in wordless awe.

Eventually, after some time, Ami was the first one to speak. "Is that what I think it is?" she asked slowly.

"What do you think it is?" 'Azumi' asked numbly.

"A giant blue star enclosed in a spherical shell. A Dyson sphere." Ami looked around again, then at the huge star, which was somehow dim enough to look directly at, allowing spectacular prominences to be clearly seen extending millions of kilometres into space from it, the star itself being nearly the same apparent size as the Earth seen from the Moon, as it crept over the horizon. The prominences had come into view some time before the star itself.

"I think you're right." There was a long pause as they stared. "Impressive, I have to admit."

'I believe it is a class B blue-white giant, Nabiki, one of the hottest and most luminous types of stars known,' Jun supplied, a note of shock in the machine's voice. 'I had no idea that such a construction existed anywhere although many species have speculated on the possibility of constructing one, including your own of course. All information on this structure is missing from my database, as is most data concerning my makers."

'Why is it so dim?,' she asked it.

'I am uncertain. My best theory is that there is a transparent inner shell at a considerable distance from the planet we are standing on that is filtering the light, possibly as a mechanism mainly directed to harvesting the energy of the star. It would have the useful byproduct of allowing enough light through to provide good illumination without passing enough energy to be dangerous. We are far closer to the central star than would otherwise be safe, vastly closer than its normal habitable zone. I would assume that such a mechanism is used to produce the selective local blackouts one can see to simulate a day-night cycle.' The SI stopped talking, before adding quietly, 'A rather impressive feat of engineering, indeed."

'That's the biggest understatement I've ever heard, Jun,' she replied, still looking around in shock. 'You could lose the entire area of Earth here without even noticing. I thought the Ringworld concept in that Niven book was pretty over the top, but this is... beyond belief.'

'A preliminary estimate based on the apparent size of the star and our current distance from it would give a sphere with an inner radius of roughly the average orbital distance of Jupiter in your home solar system. That would produce a surface area of close to eight times ten to the eighteenth square kilometres, nearly fifteen billion times the area of your own planet. Those figures are approximate as I don't have enough information to produce a more exact calculation.' Jun sounded somewhat stunned by its own calculations. 'You could indeed lose the Earth in here without a trace."

'It would certainly explain the makers being non-expansionist. What would be the point?' She looked around in wonder. 'There must be an entire galaxies' worth of planets here that you could just drive to, given enough time.'

'I wonder about the long term stability of such a system,' the machine commented. 'Stars of that size almost inevitably end up as supernovae, not to mention they normally have fairly short lifetimes in stellar terms, possibly only a few hundred million Earth years. The amount of time required to construct something on this scale is almost impossible to calculate without further
information but it must also be in the hundreds of thousands to millions of years. There is also the consideration of where the material to manufacture it came from, there is far more matter in the shell than a normal star system would contain except possibly in the star itself.# It sounded amused. #I have many questions.#

'I think you'll need to join the queue, Jun', she told it, nearly laughing. She looked around once more in absolute wonder. 'I wonder if this planet is one of the original ones in this system, or if it's artificial as well?'

#Unknown. I would suggest that asking the makers would tell you.#

'Now why didn't I think of that?' she asked, giggling internally.

#That is why you have me, Nabiki, to ask the obvious questions.# Jun was definitely amused at this point.

The middle sister had a sudden thought, turning to her sister-in-law to ask it. 'Yori' didn't respond until 'Azumi' nudged her, jumping slightly and managing to tear her fascinated gaze from the hugely distant and impossibly large landscape. 'Hey. I just thought of something. Back on the firing range world you said the portal was blocked, which you didn't think was possible, but surely that's what a ward can do?"

"Not quite the same," the other woman said absently, still looking around in awe. She focussed more locally, on the face of the woman talking to her, after a couple more seconds had passed. "A ward can block a portal from being made in the first place, or make a portal collapse when it's running if the ward is powerful enough, but blocking an active portal without collapsing it is a new one on me. I'm very interested to see if I can find out how it's done."

"OK, I think I understand," 'Azumi' replied after a moment, thinking it through. "Thanks. It was bugging me." She looked around. "I have to admit this is more like what I was expecting, but even so it's kind of overwhelming."

"Damn right it is. I've never even heard of any engineering on this sort of scale before except in fiction. I wouldn't have thought it was possible." The martial artist turned on the spot inspecting the view, then looked up again. "It's incredible." She rubbed her fingertips together experimentally, adding, "There's a lot of background magic here as well, much more than I've felt anywhere else. I wonder if it's connected to all of this?" They shared a glance then both shrugged. "Something else to ask about."

Now that the shock had slightly passed, the group spread out, investigating their surroundings, although each of them occasionally stopped and stared upwards in wonder. The slightly lower local gravity made them all feel very light on their feet. They quickly discovered that the buildings were set up with a system similar to the environmental controls they were familiar with from K'n'n Four and also S'th'kx's spaceship, although if anything more elaborate. The controls were self-evident, their SIs quickly interfaced to them, and shortly 'Azumi' and Ami were watching with a smile as Hotaru giggled wildly, floating around inside one of the larger buildings which consisted of one enormous room, in which she'd reduced the gravity to almost nothing.

"I want one of these at home," she squealed, somersaulting past them where they were standing in the entrance, grinning at her antics.

"I guess that these must be visitor facilities, people must sometimes stay here for extended periods," 'Yori' commented, coming up behind them and peering into the brightly lit cavernous building with a smile, then looking at the two older women as the younger one inside bounced off
"That sounds plausible," Ami replied, turning away from her friend's antics to look out at the now well-illuminated landscape. The three of them walked slowly over to where Lldnr'k was experimenting with some sort of interactive console that he'd found, asking it questions about the various facilities available. He turned to them as they approached.

"I am astounded," the temporal mage said, waving an arm at the console. "It's very vague about anything specific or anything one might term security critical information, on either this planet, the inhabitants of it, or... That." He pointed up, not looking, but they all knew what he was referring to. "But there is an amazing amount of information available otherwise, on some very esoteric subjects. It won't give me anything on anyone but myself either, but it clearly knows rather a lot about me. I would assume that there is probably also a record for each of us that the security drone mentioned by name. It's intriguing and just a little worrying."

"Uthryyl mentioned when we first got the SIs that these people lived for collecting data, although they were also known not to ever give out any private information on people at all."

"It's still somewhat surprising. I've never had any contact with them as far as I know, yet I have found a fairly complete set of documentation on much of my public life and also on a number of things I've been involved with that were, allegedly, quite secretive." He snapped his beak in amusement. "Clearly their ability to find things out is better than the ability to hide things that some of my previous contacts thought they had."

"Well, the existence of the SI units more or less proves that they have some fairly impressive espionage abilities," 'Yori' replied, smiling. "I can only assume that they have even more effective tools. We know the SIs are export versions with some functionality removed, for instance, they told us as much when we got them. Even so, they're far more than a match for any computer we've come across yet. What a non-export version could do is intriguing."

"If not somewhat frightening," Lldnr'k commented, looking back at the console's immaterial display floating in front of him, then turning away from it. "I wonder how long it will be before this Kw'lyn representative arrives?"

Fumiko, walking over to them, pointed off to the right. "I think that's probably the answer," she said, as everyone turned to look. 'Chou' and the others came over to join the five already at the information console. In the middle distance a small platform of some sort, a faint bubble of force covering the top, was zooming towards them at a considerable speed. Shortly it arrived overhead, pausing for a second or two before it dropped rapidly and silently to ground level, the forcefield blinking out of existence as it touched down. The occupant stepped off the platform and approached them as everyone watched with interest.

The creature walking over to them was unlike any species the middle Tendo had so far encountered. It was a centaur-like basic body shape, with four legs, a more or less vertical torso at the front, which had four arms much like the Krennsh did, but it seemed to be vaguely feline rather than insectoid like they were. The feet looked like they could double as hands in a pinch, although somewhat crudely.

The face was expressive and slightly catlike, with a certain amount of tree-frog influencing it, two large pointed ears sticking out from the sides while a pair of large eyes inspected them right back, showing intelligence and curiosity. The creature was covered in a fine fur coloured a rather implausible electric blue with greenish highlights when it moved, a lot like a beetle's wing.

"Felicitations and greetings, honoured guests," the being said happily, sounding genuinely pleased.
to meet them. "I am Yrenti Tka'l, Director of External Threat Management for Kw'lyn Industries. Call me Yrenti." He looked around at the people watching him, while off to the side Hotaru came out of the building she'd been playing in and ran over to stand beside Ami. "I have wanted to meet the famous Yori and Chou for a considerable time. Tales of your exploits are most intriguing." He laughed slightly. "Somehow it seems appropriate that you two would be the ones to discover the Great Abomination. I'm very glad to see that our desperate gamble paid off. Now, finally, we can deal with that cursed thing."

"Gamble?" Tamiko asked, staring at the self-proclaimed Yrenti with a fascinated expression.

"You mean that the information embedded in the SIs about the time device, don't you?" 'Azumi' asked thoughtfully, causing everyone to look at her, including the new arrival. He nodded, smiling.

"Correct. It was suggested some considerable time ago that the sort of people who would make best use of an SI were the type of people most likely to run into the machinations of that damned device, and recognise the fact, so it was decided after a very large amount of debate that we embed the data you found into all the units sold outside our world, on the off chance that what has in fact happened would happen. We have been looking for it for a very long time without any real luck, which was enough to make us do something we would normally never allow, interfering with the operation of an SI." He looked around at them as they listened. "If you have been worried about the possibility, allow me to give you my word that there are no more hidden agendas in your SI units. We take the security of both the SI program and our clients very seriously. It was only the extreme nature of the threat and our frustrating lack of any real information on the device's whereabouts or actions that led us to such unusual measures."

'Azumi' watched him for a moment. He certainly seemed sincere, although as the only representative of a new species she'd never encountered before, the middle sister had no real idea if she was reading the body language correctly. After a few seconds, she had to ask. "My SI, Jun, suggested something very interesting a little while ago." Yrenti turned back to her from where he had been looking around at the others, all of whom also looked at her. "It suggested that the reason that Uthryyl, the D'sage merchant who gave us the SIs in the first place, was able to purchase so many, was specifically to get some of them into the hands of Yori and Chou. I find that thought remarkable, but on thinking about it, not impossible." There was a long pause as she stopped talking, during which her friends exchanged glances, then turned to the Kw'lyn representative.

He watched her face for a few more seconds then laughed. "Interesting. Your SI has progressed faster than we would normally expect it to. Clearly they are a good match for your species. Yes, that was one reason that Uthryyl was allowed to purchase the devices. There are others. His relationship to Yori and Chou is known to us and we calculated there was a significant possibility that he would pass a number of SI units on to them, and in turn they were the sort of people who would be more likely than most to encounter the Abomination and both recognise the fact and stand any sort of chance of locating it. We didn't think it was something that would happen, merely something that might happen, with a sufficiently higher probability than random chance to make the exercise worthwhile." He looked around, radiating good-natured content. "And here we are. Finally, we can put an end to uncountable years of horror. You have no idea how much this means to us."

They all looked at him, each of them feeling that this raised more questions than it answered in some ways. Yrenti seemed to recognise this, turning slightly and waving to one of the buildings. "Let's go and have some refreshments and discuss what we do next. Destroying the Abomination is the first priority, of course, but after that I am happy to answer any questions I can. Some topics are a matter of internal security and I won't be able to say much on them but I will endeavour to be as open as I'm able to."
They followed as he led the way, entering the building and looking around. Once more it was a large empty room. As soon as they were all inside, though, the lighting changed to something exactly like a sunny day on Earth, the gravity increased a little to match, while an amazingly good simulation of a sky appeared overhead. He looked at them for a moment then nodded. Various seats extruded from the floor around a table, ones suitable for the three species present. "Let's sit down and talk." Yrenti headed for the odd looking chair obviously designed for his anatomy while the others also sat in their own seats. As they did several plates of food and matching drinks appeared on the table. "Help yourselves, please. You should find something you enjoy present, we have an extensive library of comestibles from many worlds."

'Azumi' noted with amusement that Misaki was already eating, looking pleased with herself. Fumiko muttered something under her breath but picked up a mug of what proved to be coffee, sipping it approvingly, then found something she liked in the selection in front of them. Shortly they were all nibbling on something.

Watching with approval, Yrenti picked up his own drink, sipping it before putting it down. "Welcome to Kw'lyn Industries. I hope that you have been satisfied with your SI units."

"I think I can speak for all of us when I say that Nao is one of the best things that has ever entered my life," Chou replied softly, smiling. He looked pleased.

"Thank you. We are always very happy to hear that one of our products has helped someone. Now, first of all, allow me to express the sincere thanks of myself, my people, and Kw'lyn, for locating the Abomination. We have been searching for it for... longer than I care to think about. We came close once or twice, but each time it managed to elude us. Finally, though, we are on the edge of eliminating something that has caused untold death and destruction for longer than your civilisations have existed. It is regrettable in the extreme that the bedamned thing was ever built, but if we can finally destroy it, I will consider my life fulfilled." He took another drink as they listened. "Truly, you have no idea how important this is to us."

"It's obvious that you know far more about the time device than we do, Yrenti," Lldnr'k commented, looking fascinated. "May I ask how that came about?" He paused, then added, "I must admit, I have been wondering whether your people might be survivors of its builders, although you don't match the physical descriptions we have. The thought occurred to me some while ago but I have been unable to find any more about the matter."

Yrenti put his drinking vessel down and looked around at the visitors, a sort of a smile on his face. Eventually, he replied, "I can understand why you might think that. No, we're not descendants of the builders. In a way, though, we're descendants of their enemies."

Everyone looked at him, then each other. He smiled again. "Let me tell you a story. You may already know some of this but I'm certain you don't know all of it. It's a little long winded but is necessary background information." They waited while he took another drink, then began talking.

"A very, very long time ago, in a reality far, far removed from this one, there was a war. It was between two great civilisations, both of whom had interstellar travel, powerful magic, vast manufacturing abilities, trillions of citizens spread over huge expanses of their galaxy. Each civilisation was mature and stable, not inherently evil or inherently good, simply proceeding as they had done for millennia." He paused, looking around. "Then something happened. They met each other. We don't know where, or when, or exactly what happened, but we know that the end result was a battle. One side comprehensively beat the other, the survivors of both sides limping home and reporting. Nothing much came of it, aside from a certain amount of defensive build-up, and in all likelihood if matters had had time to calm down, that would have been the end of it.
Eventually, peaceful negotiations would probably have begun, the two civilisations would have come to an accord, and either they would have got on with each other or agreed to ignore each other. They were well matched technologically and magically at the time, so there was little chance of either one prevailing in an armed struggle without huge loss of life. Being fairly rational neither side wanted that.

He paused for a moment, to take a drink. "Unfortunately, some time after the initial encounter, before wounds had been given time to heal, something happened. Both civilisations more or less simultaneously encountered a third, much smaller one. This one was very paranoid and quite warlike, but didn't have much in the way of interstellar ships. The ones it did have, though, were very fast. Much faster than either of the other two. It was also extremely good at weapons design. No one is sure exactly what sparked the problem but this third party decided that it was threatened by the first two, possibly fearing being absorbed by a much larger and more powerful adversary, possibly simply overreacting to some other perceived threat. Whatever the truth of it, they decided to try to instigate a war between the two larger civilisations, by causing an atrocity in each one and arranging to leave evidence implicating the other as the cause. In this, unfortunately, they were successful."

He sighed. "Using their advanced ships and weapons, they managed to devastate an inhabited system in each civilisation, killing billions of sentients in the process. Evidence was left, evidence that both the larger civilisations accepted. This, combined with the still present worry caused by their first encounter, led to the war the third civilisation desired. Once it started it was almost impossible to stop. The ones who were the builders of the time device believed the attacks on them truly had come from the other side, diving into war whole-heartedly. The few who suggested investigating more thoroughly were ignored. The other side was more sceptical but even so began arming themselves, and of course once hostilities broke out, even those arguing for peace were overridden. Each battle won or lost drove the next one until they were both fully committed. We don't know how long it went on although it was centuries in your terms at least."

"We do know that a small group in the non-builder civilisation investigated the original attacks and did in the end manage to prove that the third civilisation was behind it but by then it was too late to do anything to stop the war. Ironically, they were so incensed that they arranged to drop a supernova bomb into the star of the third civilisation's home system, destroying it utterly and leading to the rapid end of that civilisation, the exact scenario the instigators of the war had started it to avoid. But they couldn't stop the war itself."

"The second civilisation, over the years, began to slowly edge into a position which made it clear that in the long run they would win. They were better at technology although only marginally, their magical abilities were superior, all of which made their somewhat smaller numbers more effective. The toll was terrible but in the end the outcome was inevitable. Both sides knew this, which is what led to the construction of the Great Abomination."

Yrenti took another drink, looking sad, his ears drooping. "When the second civilisation found out what the builders were planning they were appalled. They had flirted with time travel of their own but had quickly realised how incredibly dangerous it was and banned it completely. Other realities' experiences with it only reinforced that outlook. The builders were also aware of the danger but were arrogant, and desperate, enough to proceed even so. Entreaties were made to try to prevent the machine being completed, but failed. The builders wouldn't listen, either to their enemies, or their allies, both local and from other realities. They pressed on and, unfortunately, succeeded."

He fell silent for a moment, as everyone reflected on his words. "The first few attempts were an apparent failure. The machine appeared to work to design, remarkably enough, but the results they were trying to achieve simply didn't happen. They couldn't work out why and kept trying. The
second civilisation was monitoring the attempts while also desperately trying to locate the machine to destroy it, although obviously unsuccessfully. Many tens of thousands of the brightest people the builders could bring to bear disappeared into the temporal gateway the machine generated, apparently pointlessly. The war continued on other fronts, forcing great changes to both civilisations. Each one became less and less free, devoting more and more of its resources to a desperate battle merely to survive. Billions of sentients died, hundreds of star systems were ruined, unimaginable amounts of resources were destroyed.

"Then, one day, it happened."

"Scientists and mages on both sides detected that massive temporal changes were taking place throughout their galaxy, and even beyond. It became obvious very quickly to the second civilisation that the situation was already beyond salvaging. They had enough experience with temporal engineering to recognise the signs of an imminent reality reset. A final attempt was made to destroy the device since they realised that it was actually holding their reality to a level of stability that made the likelihood of a complete reality erasure possible, with the idea that a reset of the timeline was preferable to the complete destruction of their entire reality strand, but they failed. In desperation, they began evacuating as many people as they could through portals to other realities, although they were only able to push perhaps a few hundred thousand people through before they were written out of existence."

He took another drink, holding the cup and staring at it for a moment. "Portals are simply too small to evacuate entire realities through. No civilisation has even close to enough mages to allow it to happen on that scale, in that time frame. But they tried, right up to the point they were erased." He raised his eyes to them, inspecting each person in turn. "When the final collapse came, the entire strand was destroyed instantly. The multiverse simply deleted it. Incalculable amounts of life wiped out in a time too short to measure. It just... ceased to exist." Waving a hand in the air he made a gesture that encompassed everything. "Gone. Just like that. The energy release fed back through two neighbouring realities and sterilised them, all traces of life gone although the reality strands themselves still exist. Given enough time they may eventually recover."

There was silence for a while. Eventually he resumed speaking. "The various survivors and observers thought for some time that was the end of it. However, over the centuries that followed, it became apparent that somehow, the Abomination had survived. Thrown clear of its home reality in a manner we still don't understand. It was greatly reduced from its previous level of power, most of its energy used up, and certainly damaged, but was still probably the most dangerous weapon ever created in the multiverse. People looked for it for a long time but never found it, only traces of where it had been. It was moving around through the multiverse, still trying to do something, although exactly what was open to question. In an attempt to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy, various covert attempts were made to delete any information on its existence. Ultimately futile, of course, but they did manage to remove most of the data concerning it, making the whole story even murkier than it already was."

"I knew it," Lldnr'k exclaimed in satisfaction. "I was certain that someone had altered the records."

Yrenti looked at him with interest. "Ah. That is interesting. Not many people who have researched the device have gotten that far. I'm impressed."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He made his smile-equivalent. "All right. That's the background to the device itself. Hopefully it explains a few things. I'm sorry that I can't tell you more, but we simply don't know more than the basic outline. We don't even know what the civilisations were called. Almost
everything was lost, either due to the time that has passed, the deliberate attempts to erase it, or people just not wanting to go on record." He made a four-armed shrug. "It's annoying but there's nothing we can do about it."

"It matches well with what we already knew or suspected," 'Yori' said, glancing at Lldnr'k, who nodded. "And fills some holes."

"Good. The next part you most likely won't have heard anything about. The few survivors of the second civilisation found themselves in widely separated realities, with, in most cases, nothing but what they had been carrying. Some of them had business interests in the realities they'd found themselves in and could carry on their lives fairly well, although a lot did ultimately just give up, the stress of losing everything they knew in such a permanent manner too much to bear. Most of them, though, kept on going. There were a couple of dozen species represented, among them mine. We're not the founders of the second civilisation, we were apparently a small world that was absorbed into it a long time before the end came. We specialised in machine intelligence even then. Most of the information processing systems they had were of our design."

Yrenti glanced around to see they were still following the story. "Much of that knowledge was lost but enough was kept that we were slowly able to rebuild it. There were enough survivors from nine of the species that they could form viable breeding populations, although it was a near thing in several cases. Unfortunately the rest eventually died out, including the species that had built the second civilisation in the first place."

"The survivors of the reality destruction eventually managed to track each other down and decided that they wanted to stick together. While they had been given every aid possible in most cases by the host worlds they found themselves on, it wasn't really home to the majority of them. They began searching for somewhere they could claim as their own. Several places were proposed, many worlds were very generous, but none of them seemed suitable. Then, one day many years after the disaster, someone came looking for them. Someone very strange." He paused again. "An offer was made. There was a place that would give the survivors a completely clean start, with no strings attached. All they had to do was claim it. All the various people from the collapsed reality, from both sides and everywhere they could be located, were presented with the offer. In the end they accepted."

He looked up as the ceiling faded into transparency. "That place was here. The largest artificial construction known to us. The remnants of a once great interstellar civilisation settled here and began to rebuild their lives. That was nearly thirty-five thousand of your years ago. Populations slowly grew, wars were fought, treaties were signed, civilisations came and went, but they gradually reclaimed some of their former greatness. Nothing as spectacular as nearly a quarter of a galaxy but nothing to be ashamed of."

"So you didn't build all this?" Ami asked curiously. Yrenti looked at her, then shook his head. "No. Even now it's far beyond us. We understand quite a lot about it, both the technology and the magic, but there are aspects of it that are far past anything we know how to do. We live here, we use it, but we didn't create it. One day we might be able to duplicate it but that's going to be a long time yet." He smiled. "Not that we will need to make another one for a very long time. In all the time we've lived here we've barely touched the available space. There's more habitable land here than on every known planet in the original galaxy our species evolved in. It had functional ecosystems of almost every type one could imagine when it was given to us, but no intelligent life we know of. By the time we need more space we'll be able to make it."

They exchanged glances. Eventually Tamiko asked the obvious question. "So who did build it?"
"We don't know." They all stared at him. "Not definitively. But we have a theory."

"Which is?"

"We think, based on a lot of research and some guesswork, that it was one or more of the original groups from the time device's civilisation." Everyone stared at him for a few seconds, until he expanded on the topic. "The amount of time that would be required to build something like this is enormous, even with the resources a civilisation that would be capable of it in the first place could bring to bear. We're not aware of any species at present that could do it, although in the infinity of realities, there's guaranteed to be some. We just haven't met them. When the first survivors moved in, they had some very competent mages and scientists with them who quickly worked out that there was something very odd going on with time here, something that was somehow familiar. Eventually they recognised it as a temporal signature that was similar, although not identical, to that of the Abomination."

"Leading them to believe they were connected," Lldnr'k said. Yrenti signified assent.

"Yes. Much work was done to try to prove or disprove this theory, but it was never conclusive. What was shown was that at one point the temporal rate of the local spacial area encompassing the system this star is in and a few nearby ones was running much faster than it should have been. The assumption was that this had somehow been done deliberately, to allow the time required to build the sphere, while from the outside, so to speak, time passed relatively slowly. The energy required to do this is... almost impossible. As is the ability." He looked around at them curiously. "Have you noticed the large background magical flux?"

"Yes, we were discussing that earlier," 'Yori' commented, glancing at the middle sister, then her wife.

"That also seems to have been artificially enhanced by means we don't understand. Much of the stability of this system is through magical methods, there are more complex spells at play here than anywhere else we're aware of. Again, they look not dissimilar to magic we know was used in the construction of the time device. It's as if some of those methods were refined over great periods of time to a level difficult to believe and used to construct this entire system." He pointed up at the star. "It's more complex than you might realise. Even the star is artificial."

"That's..." Lldnr'k looked at 'Yori', who stared back, shocked. Their host nodded slowly.

"It's absolutely amazing. It seems that the entire original system and several neighbouring ones were completely disassembled and the material used to build this construction. As far as we have been able to determine it was for the express purpose of re-homing the survivors of the reality collapse. We believe it was an attempt at making restitution for the disaster."

Ami looked fascinated, glancing at Rei and Hotaru, who seemed almost overwhelmed by what they'd heard. "You think that at least one of the groups of people send back in time through the device somehow survived, eventually evolving to a level that they could build all of this?"

The Kw'lyn representative nodded again. "That's the theory. We think they went back much further than they intended, possibly millions of years. We know they ended up on a parallel time track which didn't intersect the original one. That's why the original plan didn't work the way the builders intended. We don't have any way to prove it beyond doubt but there is quite a large amount of circumstantial evidence to suggest it. The near but not identical magical and temporal signatures, for example. Not definitive proof but very suggestive. There are other things as well."

"So, where are they now?" Aiko asked. He looked at her. "I mean, if these people became
powerful and knowledgeable enough to do all this, they could do almost anything. They should still be around after only thirty thousand years or so."

"We don't know." Yrenti looked mildly amused as she stared. "We've looked. Very hard, for a very long time. Much like the time device, we didn't have much luck. The only clue we ever got was from one of the people who contacted the original survivors who settled here. They said, and I quote, 'Now we can rest.' The next day, they'd all disappeared. No one has ever seen a trace of them since."

"Spooky," Hotaru muttered. There were several low voiced comments agreeing with her.

"We'll probably never know the full truth of it," Yrenti said, finishing his drink. "I can live with that. But that's the basic story behind the Great Abomination. We've had plans in motion for a very long time indeed to deal with it when we finally tracked the thing down, even though for nearly as long it looked unlikely that we ever would. Thanks to you we can finally deal with the last trace of a war that should have ended thirty-five millennia ago. I for one will be glad to no longer have it hanging over us, waiting for it to turn up. Whenever it does, bad things happen." He looked around the table slowly, at each person in turn. "We are in your debt for locating the damn thing. Let's go and kill it."

"I'm certainly up for that," 'Yori' said, looking happily predatory. Beside her, her wife nodded with an identical expression, the others following suit.

"I've got a lot of questions still," Lldnr'k said, "although they can wait."

"I'm happy to answer as many as I can once we've resolved this matter," their host said, standing up. "But now that the end is in sight I find myself eager to blow something into very small pieces." Misaki started laughing, making her friends look at her.

"He sounds just like you, Yori," she said, making everyone grin.

"It's a good plan. How do you want to do it?" The martial artist looked at the Director of External Threat Management, who looked back.

"I've got fifteen large antimatter warheads on delivery systems waiting outside. By our calculations that should do the job quite efficiently," he replied. She looked at him, then walked over to the door, followed by her wife and sister-in-law. 'Azumi' saw that there were indeed fifteen metre-tall ovoid devices sitting in three neat rows of five a few metres away, having apparently arrived while they were talking. Next to them were three machines which seemed similar to the security drone, only about twice the size. She got the impression they were looking at her with slightly paranoid interest.

From behind her, Aiko commented, "I'm a little nervous about standing next to enough explosive force to remodel a continent."

"They're quite safe, trust me," Yrenti said. "Accidental detonation is extremely unlikely. This design is well tested and reliable."

They moved out of the way as he left the building, approaching the guarding machines, which shifted silently, hanging in the air next to him. "We will need to be in your reality to open a portal to the fractional reality the machine is in, or in a nearby reality. We can't do it from here."

'Yori' went over to him. "I'm not entirely happy about being anywhere on Earth with these things, just in case," she said, glancing at her friends. Ami winced at the thought, while Fumiko slowly
shook her head. "We do have a place that should be suitable. Here are the coordinates." She send him a block of data.

"Ah. Yes, I'm familiar with that world. Yes, that one will work. Would you like to open a portal to it?" She nodded, space ripping open with a crackle next to them. He stared at the portal for a moment, then at her.

"That's... very interesting. How did you do that?"

"It's just our normal portal spell," the black-haired woman said casually. He stared some more.

"Portal spell, perhaps. Normal, not even slightly. I'd heard that you and Chou used an unusual form of magic, but I had no idea quite how unusual. How did you learn it?"

The martial artist glanced at her wife as she came to stand beside her. "It's something we worked out ourselves."

There was a long pause. "We would be extremely interested in learning more about this, if you are agreeable," Yrenti eventually said. "I have never encountered any form of magic similar to what you are using before and it's not in the Kw'lyn database either. That is... unprecedented." There was shock on the alien visage.

"I think we could probably come to an arrangement," 'Yori' replied with a small smile.

"Thank you." He stared at them for a moment more, then shook his head, turning to the three cubical machines floating in the air. No words were exchanged but they immediately moved to hover over one each of the antimatter bombs, which lifted into the air under them, then obediently followed them through the portal. Two of the machines came back quickly, rapidly ferrying all the weapons through the rip in reality. "We're all set. Let's go and see what happens." Everyone followed as he moved through the portal, which promptly vanished.
Chapter 86

Just let me get this out of my system.

One...

Million...

Words!

According to ff dot net, at any rate. Other methods of word counting disagree slightly, so on this site it hasn't quite hit that point, but it's certainly very close to that one way or the other, especially if you add the three other stories in the DSR series. I can honestly say I didn't think that would happen.

It's one hell of a lot of typing! If we take the average word length in English as five characters, then add spaces, typos, punctuation, etc, I wouldn't be surprised to find out it represented something like seven million or more keyboard hits. Add in the various aborted chapters which I rewrote and it's even more.

It also works out to an average of nearly two thousand words a day every single day for five hundred and eleven days to this point. In practice I certainly don't write every day, it goes in bursts, ranging from only a couple of hundred in one go to twenty kiloword epic sessions other times.

Now if only I could put that much time and focus into earning money I'd be rich ;)

The worrying thing is I still have an awful lot of ideas. If you people are prepared to keep reading I'm prepared to keep writing.

Anyway. That's my pat on the back done with. On with the more normal business. Once again, many thanks to everyone who has taken the time to comment, review, PM, and so on. As always it's very much appreciated. Thanks.

On another note, if anyone reading all of this is an artist who would like to suggest some cover images for the stories, I'd be interested. While I can write fairly well, my drawing skills are not good. Pathetic, in fact, unless it's technical schematics.

A large part of this chapter is essentially happening all at once, which is difficult to write correctly and convincingly. I have a sort of picture in my head of what's going on but it's difficult to get it put down in words, annoyingly enough. I had to rewrite several parts half a dozen times and even then I'm not completely satisfied, but it's the best I can do, I'm afraid. Hopefully it meets the relevant requirements.

Just believe me when I say it's even better inside my mind :)  

Note: What is essentially the second part of the chapter will be posted shortly, probably tomorrow. I decided it was getting a bit long for this format so broke it into two pieces. It essentially ties up the SM crossover/time machine section. After this we'll be visiting Nerima again, I think.

Groaning slightly, Lieutenant Wilson turned his head. Someone had left the blind up again and the light was shining right in his eyes. Blinking he opened them, wincing at the stabbing pain in his
temples. He rapidly shut them again, mumbling to himself in an aggrieved manner. After a moment, he froze, then very slowly opened them once more.

Silently, and in some shock, he moved his eyes around, inspecting his surroundings. This wasn't the room he'd been sleeping in for the last two weeks, and it wasn't the alleyway he was beginning to remember, looking nothing like either place. In fact, he was hard-pressed to work out exactly what it did look like aside from not at all what he expected to see when he woke up.

'Where the hell am I?' he wondered, unknowingly echoing the cry of a part-time piglet, who was at the current time wandering around the middle of Shanghai, mumbling to himself, in a completely different reality. Raising his head cautiously he looked around some more. What he was lying on was more or less recognisable as a bed although it was of rather odd proportions, but extremely comfortable even so. Beyond that, he could see a room made of what looked like some sort of stone or brick, with wood trimmings. In the ceiling were a number of small balls of white light that seemed to be hovering in recesses in the surface, nothing visibly attaching them to anything. He stared at them for a moment, then resumed inspecting his unexpected location.

There was some sort of door, currently closed, two windows through which oddly-tinted light was coming and beyond which he could see what looked like the tops of trees, or something close to a tree at least, although a deep reddish colour like Japanese maple, rather than the more normal green, a couple of what he worked out after a moment were a sort of chair, and beside the bed a stand on which sat several machines. They seemed to be monitoring his health and vital statistics from what he could see even though he wasn't familiar with them at all. They looked nothing like the normal medical machinery he'd seen before and weren't apparently connected to him, but one of them was definitely registering his heartbeat, while another seemed to be something to do with respiration.

Nothing looked like the normal environment he expected, in fact. Most of it was recognisable, in one way or another, even if only through context, but everything was sufficiently different to give a rather alien effect, like waking up in some sort of distorting mirror from a circus fun-house. It was very disturbing.

The only good thing he could immediately think of was that he felt basically fine. As his memory returned he could recall the events leading up to finding himself lying on the ground in the alleyway, events that included a significant amount of trauma.

Events that included a knife in the stomach.

His eyes widened a little as that particular memory came back and he raised a hand to tentatively feel himself. Cautious prodding revealed that there was no pain, and in fact as he ran his hand over his stomach he could only feel normal skin, more or less, rather than the gaping wound he could distinctly remember.

Sitting up with a little effort he wobbled as his head spun momentarily before settling to a faint throb, then looked down. He found he was nude under the soft blanket on the bed, which he lowered to reveal his torso, uncovering an impressive but very faint scar running across his lower abdomen, looking like whatever had caused it had occurred years before. Rubbing his fingertips across it he thought.

Perhaps the hallucination that he'd had before he blacked out was actually not a hallucination after all? Something had rescued him from his attackers, apparently brought him to medical care, and undoubtedly saved his life. He could see simply from the scar that the wound had been a deep and under normal circumstances probably mortal one. Feeling his face, he found that his nose felt fine as did the side where he recalled a couple of vicious blows. Tentatively moving his left leg proved
it was fine as well. Apparently he was basically fixed.

That was good.

But he had no idea where he was, how he'd got here, or how to get home. Or even if he could get home.

That was less good.

A sound to the side made him look over in time to see the door open, sliding to the side and disappearing into the wall with a faint hiss. He had momentary flashbacks to early Star Trek episodes, which made him grin to himself. What was revealed on the other side, though, made the grin go away abruptly.

'Holy crap, I've been abducted by aliens!' he thought wildly to himself. 'But I'm not an American...' Even under the circumstances the thought made him giggle to himself. He wondered momentarily if he was on some sort of drug.

The creature in the doorway looked at him for a moment, then entered the room, moving to the machinery and inspecting it carefully. It made some notes on what looked like some sort of hand-held computer, quickly scribbling on the display with a stylus, before rolling it up and sticking it into a holder at its waist, then turned to him. They studied each other for a few seconds.

Wilson saw that it looked a lot like the thing with the ray gun in the alley, most definitely neither human nor someone wearing a particularly good costume. It was very real. Feeling slightly light-headed again, this time from nerves, he tentatively smiled.

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant Wilson?" the thing asked suddenly, making him twitch a little. The English was spoken with a very odd accent but was otherwise perfectly understandable. He stared, while it waited patiently.

"Um, fine, I guess." There was a short pause while he got his thoughts together. "Where am I? What happened? How did I get here? How do you know my name? And if you don't mind, what are you?"

The creature made a noise that after a moment he realised was an equivalent to a chuckle. "In no particular order, you're in a medical facility in Zthrel, I'm Healer Brenke, you were brought here by one of our citizens, Xrist, who intervened in what he described as a somewhat one-sided fight with a pair of criminals, and you are nearly recovered from some very serious injuries sustained in that fight. Your name was on the ID you had with you, which is safely stored away in that drawer over there."

The healer, which he assumed was essentially a doctor, shook his head, glancing at the instrumentation for a moment. "You're very lucky indeed that Xrist encountered you when he did. Leaving aside the fact that he said the criminals assaulting you were on the verge of finishing you off, you wouldn't have lived much longer anyway. You lost close to a third of your circulatory fluid before we got to you, which for your species is very close to fatal amounts. In addition, you had several serious perforations of your digestive system, a number of broken bones, damage to your left eye, and swelling of the brain. Very serious indeed."

Wilson listened with shock. Brenke continued, pulling out his rolled up computer or whatever it was and looking at it for a moment, "We had some difficulty finding the relevant information on your species, we haven't treated anyone from your world for some while, but we tracked it down in time. We synthesised a replacement circulatory fluid to top you up, which will get replaced by your
body naturally over the next few days, then healed the damage. The brain injury was problematic and took some considerable effort to rectify although everything else was fairly straightforward. I don't expect there to be any long term problems although you may well feel somewhat nauseous and disorientated when the tranquillisng spell wears off in an hour or so. I'm sorry about the scarring, we didn't have enough information or practice to eliminate it entirely, and I wasn't keen on experimenting on my patient. I can suggest someone on your own world who can probably deal with it if you are concerned about it."

Slowly lying back down, Wilson stared at the little lights in the ceiling for a moment. He'd got answers, but every one of them led to more questions. Brenke seemed to recognise his confusion.

"I assume that you're not familiar with travel between different worlds, based on your reaction and your physiological changes? You seem somewhat distressed."

"I'm not sure about distressed, exactly, but I am extremely confused," the lieutenant admitted, turning his head to look at the alien creature who had apparently saved his life. "Who is Xrist? Where is... Zthrel, did you say? How did I get here? Some sort of spacecraft? Why are aliens wandering around Minato in the middle of Tokyo, for god's sake? How do you even come to speak English in the first place?" He paused, shaking his head. "So confused. And so many questions."

The healer nodded, a more sideways motion than a human would normally do, walking over to the corner and carrying one of the odd-looking chairs back with him. "I understand. I'll try to answer some of your questions." He sat down and leaned back, regarding his patient, who pulled himself up in bed and listened. "Xrist is a frequent traveller to your world. By trade I believe he's a worker in wood, a very talented craftsman, but he has a serious coffee habit. Coffee is only available from your world, for all intents and purposes, and while it's widely traded to other worlds from there, certain people like going to the source. Minato is the place that, for reasons no one seems to know a good answer to, is very amenable to portal formation, so naturally most travellers to your world end up there."

"Portals?"

"It's a very complex subject, for a better explanation you'd need to talk to a competent mage, but basically, what you think of as reality is only a very small fraction of the true multiverse, which is essentially infinite." Brenke waved a hand around the room. "We are currently in a different reality than the one you originated in. Portals allow realities to be linked and travelled between. It takes a complex spell and several mages working together to open and stabilise a portal under normal circumstances and they can only be opened by magical means, not technological ones, as far as I know even magitech can't do it. Most realities use a mix of magic and technology to one extent or another, although there are ones at either end of the scale that purely use one or the other. We don't have a lot of contact with pure tech realities, for obvious reasons. A few that are overwhelming tech-based hire in mages specifically to run portal systems for them. The K'nn grouping is the most obvious example, they've been doing it for a long time, even though their people have little to no ability with magic themselves. They can easily afford to hire mages, though."

Wilson whimpered a little to himself. "Magic?"

Brenke looked amused as far as he could tell. His voice certainly sounded amused. "Ah. I suspect you are one of those from your world who has little contact with it. It's rather unusual, your world, from what I know, as while there are some remarkably competent mages and other magic workers there, for some reason they don't interact all that much with the more common technological parts of it. That's not the usual way these things tend to work." He smiled, revealing a lot of teeth,
although seeming non-threatening even so. "Magic can be thought of as direct interaction with the fabric of the multiverse via various means. It normally requires a living being to do this, although sufficiently advanced technology of the correct type can also do it to one degree or another. It... goes around... much of what you probably consider laws of the universe, often in ways that are difficult or impossible to duplicate otherwise. As I said, a lot of worlds use both physical technology and magical variants in different ratios. While you can do almost anything with enough of either, a mix is more flexible and generally useful."

He pointed up at the ceiling. "The illumination in here is magical in nature, it's a more efficient use of energy for that particular problem. The instruments over there are mostly technological but they're also using some magic in their operation. You'll find examples like this all over our world."

Wilson thought on what he'd been told. It sounded impossible but on the other hand he was talking to a genuine alien. "So, no spaceship needed? This Xrist just pulled me through some sort of wormhole between realities?"

"Basically, yes. He used an emergency portal generator he was carrying, it produces a very short lived and one way portal for use in extreme situations. Many interworld travellers carry such a thing. Luckily for you, he came across you at almost the last moment, stunned your attackers, then decided that the quickest solution was to bring you here. It was almost the only possible solution to save your life. The native healers he'd probably have used otherwise were apparently not available and he was running out of time, as were you," Brenke waited for more questions as the lieutenant pondered his words. He was learning a lot of very odd things much more quickly than he'd expected.

After a minute or two had passed in silence, the alien healer began speaking again. "Zthrel is a medium-sized city on our world. Xrist lives in a nearby town, but we have the largest medical facility in the area, so he got you here. He doesn't speak your language although he's fluent in the one local to Minato, Japanese, but luckily I travelled around on your world a bit many years ago and learned this one. It took me a little while to remember it but I hope I'm performing satisfactorily?"

"You're amazingly good, actually," the man in the bed said absently, still thinking. "Your accent is a bit weird but other than that it's fine."

"Ah, good. I was a little worried, I'm out of practice." Brenke seemed pleased.

"No disrespect intended, but how does someone who looks like you wander around my world without everyone noticing?" Wilson asked after a while. "I mean, I think I'd have heard about aliens wandering the countryside. The way you're describing it it's a common thing but I've never heard anything about it except in fiction and the less plausible tabloids."

The healer laughed. "Very good disguise spells, mainly. Until recently that was essential, even in Minato. Possibly particularly in Minato. They call us, travellers from other realities, 'demons' there, which is a little insulting to be honest. The entire area is awash with very dangerous magic-using young females who tended to come down like the wrath of the gods on anyone who came through a portal for many years, so you had to be careful not to stand out. I understand why, that area does get hostile visitors as well as peaceful ones, but it was getting ridiculous. The locals call them magical girls, which I suppose is an accurate description, there seem to be a lot of them for some reason. Most of them are dangerous, some of them hideously so. Luckily, the situation has changed recently with the arrival of a pair of unusual young women to the centre of Minato, very near the area you were found in. Yori and Chou, they're called. They've built up a reputation that extends far outside your native world as being incredible bad to get on the wrong side of, yet at the same
Shaking his head, Wilson could only listen in amazement. Magical Girls now? Was it possible those weird Japanese comic books were actually based on reality? Although, now that he thought about it, both those names sounded familiar somehow. It took a moment's though to work out why. "Yori... I've heard that name. There was a major terrorist incident in my home country a few months ago and she and that other one, Chou, were somehow involved. My government is being very quiet about exactly how but they were in the news a few times."

"I'm not surprised you've heard of them, they turn up in some very odd places. They have some friends as well who are considered nearly as powerful and helpful." Brenke shook his head slightly. "Bearing in mind how little the majority of your world seems to know about other ones, I'm impressed by how much influence some of its inhabitants have in other places."

"So all the travel between realities is via these 'portals'? No spacecraft?" He was somehow disappointed. Brenke chuckled.

"Oh, there are a lot of spacecraft out there. Many worlds use them, both slower than light and faster than light ones. Mostly only the high-tech ones, for the majority of purposes portal travel is easier and fills most of the same requirements, but even so space travel is common. I believe you're a military pilot based on what I read in your identity documents?"

"Yes."

"You'd probably find some of the air and space craft one might come across outside your home world interesting, then."

Wilson smiled momentarily. "I'd certainly like to see a real spacecraft. I can fly practically any aircraft but I've never tried something that can go into space. No call for it in the Canadian Air Force." He looked at the healer. "Canada is a country on the other side of the planet from Japan."

"I'm more or less familiar with the major countries on your world, Lieutenant," Brenke chuckled. "It's a large country to the north of that one that also speaks the same language, the United States, isn't it?"

"That's the one. I was in Japan on a military exercise with US forces, they have several bases in the south of the country. I'd gone to Minato to meet an old friend when I got jumped by those muggers or whatever they were. They seemed very upset for some reason."

"They certainly did their best to kill you, based on your injuries. I would imagine that the local authorities will probably have acquired them by now, they're quite efficient in that area. Xrist used a K'nn neural suppressor on them, which would have rendered your attackers unconscious for several hours at least."

"I must thank him. I owe him my life." Wilson ran his hand over the scar on his stomach again. "And you as well. Thank you very much."

"You're entirely welcome, Lieutenant." Brenke looked pleased at the thanks. "It's what we do, but it's nice to be thanked."

"Call me Riley, please."

"As you wish. Riley." The healer stood up. "You still need some rest. The healing has repaired all the main damage but your body is still stressed from the whole experience. The next scheduled
Brenke nodded to the human, then left the room. Riley watched him go, and the door slide shut, once again the sound making him smile, before lying back and closing his eyes, feeling tired. He had a lot to think about.

He was still thinking when he fell asleep.

"So how do we do this?" Aiko asked. "Open a portal, shove all these bombs through, then duck?"

"More or less," Yrenti replied with a chuckle.

The petite brunette inspected the several gigatons of weapons of incredibly mass destruction sitting innocently a few metres away with a disturbed expression on her face. "Those things give me the creeps. Hey, one question. The original SI information suggested one was enough to get the job done. Yori was thinking half a dozen or so, just to be sure. You've got fifteen of the damn things there. That's some mission creep, isn't it?"

Laughing, Yrenti waved one hand at the warheads. "Normally I would agree but in this case I don't believe there is such a thing as overkill. We want to be totally sure that the Abomination is destroyed completely. One would almost certainly do the job if placed in the correct spot, this number will make sure no matter where they hit. It's enough to vaporise most of it and irradiate the remainder to the point it's completely dead."

"Fair enough." Aiko shrugged. "You're the expert in this case, as far as anyone can be. What's the next step?"

"I'd like to open a portal at a considerable distance from the device and send one of the combat drones through to monitor the situation, and also to record the results. Then, when we've picked the best spot to attack, we send half the warheads through on an intercept course. We should close the portals until after the detonation, there's a risk of feedback through them which could be hazardous. Afterwards, we can check the results, then use the rest if necessary to finish off any parts left. I want as much of it turned to plasma as I can arrange. If I have to I'll get some more."

"Sounds like a plan." 'Yori' looked satisfied. She looked around at the rest of them. "We're a long way from any of the areas anyone uses now so it should be safe enough. We'll set up the heaviest wards we can first, though, just in case." 'Chou' nodded at her words, a golden dome forming over them seconds later, the weapons and combat drones on the outside. Yrenti looked around at it, seeming impressed.

"Very good indeed. That's one of the most powerful wards I've ever seen generated by an individual."

The blonde woman smiled, then glanced at Aiko and her team, as well as her sister. "Send me some energy and I'll push it into the ward to reinforce it," she suggested, "there's no point taking chances." They all did as requested. The middle sister watched what Aiko did and managed to duplicate the effort. The dome flickered through several colours, settling into a soft white glow with hints of other shades running around it. Hotaru looked around and clapped, grinning.

"It's very pretty," she commented.
"And astoundingly effective," the Kw'lyn representative muttered. "We really must talk about your magical methods. They seem to be almost impossibly efficient." Turning to the warheads and the three combat drones hovering protectively over them, he added more loudly, "You can go ahead and open the first portal. I would suggest this modification to the coordinates." Sending 'Yori' the data, he waited as she nodded, then concentrated.

"It's much more difficult than a normal portal," she noted, frowning slightly. "Ah. That's got it." There was the familiar crackling sound and the tear in space opened outside the ward at a safe distance, nearly a hundred metres away, on the other side from the cache of weapons. The middle drone immediately zipped toward and through it, fading out of view as it moved.

"Fascinating," Yrenti said quietly a second later, in a rapt tone of voice. "The first time anyone has seen that horrific thing since the collapse to the best of my knowledge." He opened a video feed to them so they could all see. Ami pulled out her projector and relayed the feed to it, allowing Lldnr'k to see it as well.

It was much as the original data in the SI hidden file had shown. There was a brilliant white dot, the star at the centre of the sub-reality, with a pinpoint of light some distance from it. The time device, in orbit around its power supply. The image jumped closer as whatever the drone was using as a camera zoomed in, the pinpoint becoming a visible collection of esoteric machinery, built on a vast scale. Even without knowing much about it, one could see it was damaged, large parts distorted and dark, while the remainder was covered with small lights at irregular intervals. These blinked and moved occasionally showing activity although what type was open to question.

"It's definitely still active," Yrenti commented. "It looks badly damaged, though, which is what our information suggested. By the looks of it some form of self-repair was carried out, but never completed for some reason." He paused for a moment, studying the image. "I'd also say that a lot more time has passed for it than for us. They built to last, the makers of that damn thing, unfortunately, but it looks old. A lot of that damage is sheer age from what I can see. I would guess that from its viewpoint, several hundred thousand to perhaps a million years must have passed. Presumably it's looped many times in many different realities."

The view from the combat drone moved closer, enlarging slowly as the machine approached the time device, allowing more and more details to be seen. The lights on it blinked in various patterns, slowly moving and changing, reflecting the enigmatic thoughts of the alien supercomputer. Abruptly, they speeded up, indicating some change to it. "Oh, damn," Yrenti muttered, looking worried.

"What's the delay on this?" Lldnr'k asked slowly.

"The probe is just under six light seconds away from the device," the Kw'lyn representative replied. He turned to them. "It's detected the drone or the portal, perhaps both, I'm reading a massive build-up of temporal distortion. I think it's getting ready to loop again. Open a portal to these coordinates right now. Hurry, we don't have more than a few minutes." He sent a set of data, 'Yori' immediately dropping the first portal and opening the new one. As soon as it stabilised, eight warheads leapt off the ground and shot through it one after the other at blurringly high velocity, leaving a series of sonic booms in their wake, even through the ward making everything shake.

The relayed video feed from the combat drone showed a number of points of light appearing from the other side of the portal, streaking on an intercept course for the time device at steadily increasing speeds, then vanishing in a series of enormous flashes that overlapped into a fireball of white light on a scale that was hard to imagine, whiting out and obscuring the view. "Close it quickly," Yrenti shouted, sounding frantically worried.
Before anyone could respond, the portal spewed a horizontal fountain of energy which splashed against the ward, making everyone powering it stagger from the recoil. 'Yori' immediately fed energy to it, in quantities that the middle Tendo could feel were dwarfing the amount everyone else was contributing, until a second or two later the portal collapsed with a squeal of distressed spacetime, ending in an enormous boom. They all stared at each other.

"Did that work?" Hotaru finally asked in a small voice.

"It should have done," Yrenti responded, looking shaken. "But that reaction was... not right. It was much too fast, the weapons should have taken about five seconds after the last one entered the portal to reach detonation range. Something odd happened." He glanced at Lldnr'k, who was looking worried, then at 'Yori'. "Open another portal at the original coordinates so we can see what happened."

"Is that wise?" she asked, looking concerned.

"Possibly not but we need to know."

The martial artist glanced at her wife, who looked back, an uncertain expression on her face, then nodded. The portal began to form.

Cologne twitched, looking wildly around. Shampoo stared at her. "What is it, Great Grandmother?" she asked. She could feel something was badly wrong but couldn't put a finger on what.

"I don't know, but it's getting stronger. Fast," the ancient woman said, still glancing about nervously. "What the hell is that?" She quickly muttered a spell, waving one hand, then yelped in pain as a loud crackle and a flash of energy knocked her clean off her staff. "Ow, damn it!" she shouted, waving her burned fingers. Shampoo helped her up. The elder cast her magical senses further out, going pale at the results she got.

"Oh, shit," she mumbled. Shampoo looked on, worried. "Help me to the window, child," the Amazon instructed, suddenly looking every year of her close to three hundred. Shampoo steadied her as they walked to the window and looked out in the direction of Minato. Both stared.

"What is that?" the young woman asked in hushed tones.

"Either our doom or our saviour, my dear," the elder replied in a similar tone. They watched.

There was nothing else they could do.

Soun and Genma both stopped their lesson, turning to stare at each other, while their students looked puzzled. "What's that?" Genma asked.

"I don't know, but it's getting stronger," his friend replied. After another couple of seconds, they both dashed out into the courtyard, then jumped up to the roof of the Dojo, looking towards Minato.

"That's..."

"Not good," Genma finished. They exchanged a glance, then went back to watching.

Again, there was nothing else they could do.
"You'd better come and see this, Masao." Agent Naito looked up as his colleague leaned into his eye-line, pointing at the window. Curious, he got up, walking over to look. He stared.

"Oh, crap."

"What is it?"

"I don't know but I doubt it's good."

"Do you think Yori is involved?" They exchanged glances. "Stupid question. Sorry."

Both of them watched.

Harada stopped and stared upwards as he came out of Hikaru's coffee shop. Behind him, Rynnkh swore in her own language, causing him to look over his shoulder. She was pulling an emergency portal generator from somewhere and activating it as he turned. With a glance at him, she shouted, "I'd suggest either coming with me or using the one you have," then activated it, diving through the portal that opened immediately, followed by her friend and three other demons. The remainder of the off-world visitors did something similar. Seconds later only Hikaru and Harada were present. They looked at each other.

"What is it?" the coffee-shop owner asked, gazing around in shock.

"No idea, but they certainly didn't like it," the policeman muttered, his hand in his pocket rubbing the portal generator he was still carrying. Pulling it out he looked at it for a moment, then up again.

Hikaru joined him in the doorway, following his gaze, paling at the sight. He stared for a moment then glanced at his old friend. "Go to Emiko. Protect your child. Now." The sergeant looked back for a second or two, nodded what he feared might be a goodbye, then ran as fast as he could without another word.

Chiyoko looked embarrassed as she missed yet again, the little demon dodging at the last moment and her staff beam blowing a hole in the side of the van that the thing had been chewing on across the road.

"Oops..." she mumbled, going mildly red in the face. Swinging the staff around while blushing, she paused as she felt something.

Around her, a dozen of the little horrors stopped whatever they were doing, looking around nervously, then all turning to stare in the same direction. She watched them curiously then turned to the direction they were gazing. A few seconds passed. When she looked around, all the demons were gone.

The girl went back to staring.

"Fuck!" 'Yori' yelled in agony, her face showing her pain, as the portal she was creating suddenly warped and snapped open. 'Chou' rushed to her side, holding her.

"What's happening?" Tamiko asked, very worried.

"I don't know, something grabbed the spell and twisted it," the martial artist grated, concentrating fiercely. Yrenti was doing likewise, then swore viciously in his own language, Trade, and several
"I don't know how, but the damn device is still active," he yelled as a wind suddenly picked up, blowing outwards from the portal and shrouding the area in dust. "The combat drone is still alive but it's damaged. It was able to send me a recording, even so. Only two of the weapons got through and most of the energy was diverted somehow, the rest of them detonated prematurely." He thought for a moment then nodded. "It was the temporal distortion. It threw the targeting systems off and siphoned away most of the energy from the detonation. I'm an idiot, I didn't think of that. It looks like it's seriously hurt but it's still partly functional, at least enough to keep the temporal gate initialisation sequence going now that it's started."

"What do we do?" Ami asked frantically, switching to the SI comms due to the noise of the near-hurricane force wind blowing out of the portal now.

"I don't know," he replied. "I can send the rest but it might not be enough under the circumstances and we don't have time to get any more from the armourotry at home." 'Yori' looked at her wife, then straightened up.

"It's worth a try," she replied to the question in the other woman's eyes. 'Azumi' looked around at her friends, seeing they were all looking scared and worried.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"All I can do. Everything I've got," the black-haired woman said, walking over to the side of the ward nearest the portal. She raised her hands. "You'd better look away. This is going to be bright." Chou stood behind her, her hands on the shorter woman's shoulders. Aiko glanced at her team, all of them nodding, then joining their friends. 'Azumi', after a moment's hesitation, did the same.

"What are they doing?" Yrenti asked, watching.

"Something impressive, I hope. And I hope it's enough," Ami replied. A light built around 'Yori's' hands as everyone fed energy to her, each of the other women also beginning to glow. After a second or two of build-up, a massive beam of energy roared from 'Yori' to the portal, piercing the ward and vanishing into the rip in space, then suddenly compressing down to a line of eye-piercing brilliance. Yrenti yelped and dropped to the ground, all four arms over his head, while Ami, Rei, and Hotaru fell flat, their hands covering their ears. Lldnr'k turned away and crouched down with his feathers ruffled from shock. Heat rolled over them from the enormously powerful ki beam, brilliant rainbow light illuminating the plain around them for kilometres and washing over the distant mountains, the deep bass roar going on and on.

The ward system wasn't quite a living thing, but it was very close, and getting closer every time someone new was added to it. The massively complex network of spells that Happosai, Ranma, and Kasumi had developed and worked on for nearly five years was now approaching the level of connectivity that a normal human brain would contain, becoming something far more than had been intended. That was always recognised as a possibility, spells of such a complex nature tended towards emergent behaviour, and in fact with one of this level and type it was almost inevitable. While the part of it that approximated a mind wasn't truly sentient, or even really self-aware, it was a very good problem-solver in its own field, which was absolute loyalty to and protectiveness over its charges. It would allow no outside influence to harm them as far as it was able to help.

It was also, if such a feeling could be ascribed to something of that nature, somewhat frustrated that it had been hobbled so much some time ago. Inside the zone defined as 'home' it was free to
act as required and woe betide anything that tried a hostile act against those it protected. But, for some reason, it had been forbidden to bring the same level of power to bear on external threats. It found this inexplicable and very annoying.

There were times when it found itself quite keen to end what it perceived as a potential threat. The target designated 'Cologne' was an irritation that could have been permanently dealt with some time ago, when it was constantly turning up in the vicinity of one of its favourites, the cold rational one. It had formed an immediate liking for this node when it first arrived and was designated friendly, which had strengthened enormously when the node was added to the network. Even though it wasn't a primary node, it was still considered to be very high level. It also recognised that paradoxically it was the lowest powered of all the nodes in the network and therefore the most likely to be harmed. As a result the system kept a particularly close watch on it.

Recently three intriguing new nodes had been added, all of them of very significant potential, the last of them containing more power than any but the strongest of the primaries. Each new node added to the system brought new connections, new information, new power inputs, all of them fascinating in different ways. The system knew on some level that it was getting more complex although it wasn't quite at the point of genuinely realising why and what it was.

It was, however, at the point it could see trouble coming. The addition of the most recent nodes had brought it into direct conflict with a hostile influence it had been aware of for a considerable time, an influence that was abruptly extremely powerful and causing some very odd effects that passed out of the hidden domain it ruled into the one the system considered home. This was obviously and unequivocally a hostile act that needed to be acted upon immediately.

It just wasn't sure quite how.

This was very irking. The system 'thought' about it for some time, which at the rate it could perform its internal operations, was only a second or two of real-time from the outside.

None of the primary nodes were currently available to give it directions. One of them had been out of touch for a considerable period, only occasionally drifting back into extreme range for short bursts, enough to let it know the node was well and uninjured, which was good otherwise it would have had to begin a process to go and look for it. It wasn't quite sure how, but it was fairly certain that it could, given some time and effort.

What passed for an intelligence in the ward system was nothing if not persistent. It didn't give up. At all. Ever.

The remaining primaries and all the lower level nodes were together, somewhere it could almost reach, but not quite. It was aware of their location, they all visited this place regularly, and while it was a considerable distance away through one of the odd loci in reality that opened and closed around it, and even inside it, quite often, it felt sure it was reachable. It just hadn't quite worked out yet how to directly access that location without one of the loci present.

It had been working on a method for some time, frustrated that its charges could apparently slip so easily out of range. This was an obvious security failure that the system felt reflected badly on it and therefore required a solution. Now, it was suddenly feeling that it was an immediate failing that might spell disaster.

The malign influence from the enemy was growing steadily and rapidly. The ward system didn't feel things like fear or desperation, not like a living creature or even in the manner of one of those odd sub-nodes all the main ones had acquired a while ago, but it was aware of the concept in its
own way. Put in human terms, it was getting worried.

Pushing more power to the external wards it isolated the secure location inside them from the danger present outside. To an outside observer, the immediate vicinity of the Saotome-Tendo apartment building began to visibly glow a very odd colour, one that normally you'd only see when you closed your eyes tightly. As the baleful influence of the enemy strengthened, so did the glow, becoming visible kilometres away.

It wasn't enough.

While the system didn't understand exactly what was going on it could feel the underpinnings of what everyone else would term reality beginning to tremble. Something big was coming, something extremely dangerous. Even the ward system might fall if whatever it was went to completion.

Something needed to be done.

Magical reservoirs diverted more and more energy to the massively complex interlocked mass of spells that formed the wards. The external glow, a visible manifestation of possibly more magical energy than had ever been released in one operation in the entire history of the planet, began to grow bright enough to reflect off the clouds of the overcast afternoon, causing people dozens of kilometres outside Tokyo to turn and stare.

All over the planet, mages and other magically sensitive people stopped what they were doing, wondering what the hell was happening, as they felt both the huge wave of magical energy coming from Tokyo and more disturbingly, something very fundamental beginning to crumble, something that gave them the cold shivers. The more experienced ones realised that whatever it was, it was bad. Anyone who could do so, opened a portal and left as fast as possible. Minato emptied of demons almost completely within less than a minute, dozens of emergency portals being called into service.

Every magical girl in Japan twitched, looking around in shock.

Eventually, a threshold was crossed. Connections were made, power flowed in different paths than had been planned. Complexity doubled, then doubled again. Anyone present inside the apartment building would have heard a very strange sound, one that seemed to come from an infinite distance, yet still be inside somewhere.

Magical activity peaked. Light flashed from every window in the building.

The ward system reached, for the first time ever, full functionality.

Knowing, with an intelligence that was a very long way from human, that it had little time at the rate it was using its energy reserves, even as large as they were, the system looked around for a solution to the problem. It needed to protect its charges, it needed to protect its home ground, it needed more power to fight the enemy. How could it do this?

After mere milliseconds, a number of choices presented themselves. It found a loophole, and it found some power.

According to the rules, it was only able to directly act on the inside of the wards. The power required was on the outside although it was in theory accessible due to the intimate low-level linkage the most powerful primary node had with it, a linkage that was fundamental to that node's existence and as a result deeply embedded into the system itself, due to the connection the node had to the system.
The solution, when it occurred, was elegantly obvious. All it had to do was expand the wards to cover the location of the power source. That would put it inside the location it could act on, then it could pull the energy in and use it to go after the enemy. It might be enough to do the job.

It was worth a try, at any rate.

If it had possessed a back and a hand to pat itself with, it would have done so. Lacking either, the incredibly complex magical system merely radiated a sense of alien smugness, then executed its plan. The results were impressive.

Harada slammed through the door at a dead run. "Emiko!" he yelled, frantically looking around for his wife. Her voice, full of surprise, came to him from the living room. Rushing in he found her looking out the window, turning as he entered, shock on her face.

"Tetsuo! What is it? And what's that?" She pointed to the side at the brilliant glow a few kilometres away, a column of light of a colour no one should be able to see while conscious extending a thousand metres into the sky.

"I don't know, but we need to leave. Come on." He pulled the portal generator out of his pocket, remembering what Rynnkh had told him.

"What's going on?" his wife yelped, staring at the thing in his hands, one hand on her swelling belly. He didn't answer, but concentrated on what he'd been told about the portal generator, then pressed both the symbols he'd been instructed to, finding that the metal band around the device now easily moved. Rotating it as far as it would go with a quick turn of his wrist he released it, dropped the thing into his pocket again, then grabbed at his wife's arm. When the portal opened, he pulled her through in one motion, the woman still talking. Silence fell in the apartment very suddenly, broken a second later by a pop as the portal winked out.

Agent Naito watched in amazement as the column of light over in the direction he was well aware put it squarely in the middle of Yori and Chou's home district began to rapidly expand outwards, covering kilometres of distance in a fraction of a second. He was fairly certain it had something to do with the time device although whether it was the thing itself attacking or something else defending he had no idea. He desperately hoped it was the latter and that whatever it was, it would be successful.

The edge of the dome swept through the PSIA building at high speed, still accelerating. A faint tingle was the only apparent manifestation, although for some weird reason he felt that something, somewhere, was feeling rather pleased with itself. The feeling only lasted for a moment, though, then was gone.

"What was that?" Shampoo screeched, jumping back from the window and looking around frantically. The wall of light, an almost indescribable colour, had swept through the Café so fast it was only a flicker, accompanied by an odd emotional after-taste that if she'd been forced to, she'd have said was something very weird feeling smug. Cologne didn't answer, but when she looked at her ancient relative, she found the old woman performing some complex spell.

The results seemed to make her both worried, oddly satisfied, and resigned, all simultaneously. After a very long few seconds the Elder sighed.

"Well, that's that mystery solved, at any rate," she muttered.
"What?"

"It's the same sort of weird magic I was tracing months ago. Vastly stronger, almost inconceivably stronger, but it's from the same source." Turning to the window she looked out across the city. "I have a very good idea where the centre of that source is. But who's behind it... Or what..." The old woman shook her head.

"It's far past anything we can affect. If we tried we'd be crushed like a bug. I just hope that whoever or whatever it is knows what they're doing."

Moving to a chair she sat, patting the seat next to her. "Come over here, child. All we can do is wait."

Akane looked up at the wall of light that zipped through the shop, wondering what the hell it was. Going to the door she looked around, her head tilted as she tried to work out why she suddenly had felt, momentarily, sort of pleased with herself. After a moment she shrugged and went back to the counter to finish her lunch.

The expanding ward dome covered Tokyo within fifteen seconds, all of the centre of Japan five seconds after that, steadily accelerating across the Sea of Japan. Moving at thousands of kilometres per hour it swept across Korea, moving deeper into China, while in the other direction it spread across the Pacific towards Hawaii. Still speeding up it crossed the Bayankala Mountains and kept going.

Serena stared, then shouted, "Mom! Dad! Come look at this!" Harrison and his wife came to the door, staring at her, then looking across the back yard to where she was pointing up.

"What is that, dear?" Emily said softly. Harrison shook his head slowly, watching the wall of transparent light sweeping towards them across the western horizon as the evening waned.

"I have no idea. But I have the weirdest feeling I know who's involved..."

The light swept over them seconds later with no apparent effect. Car horns could be heard faintly in the distance as Los Angeles noticed the weird effect and briefly panicked, quite loudly.

In a warded cell in the secret, non-public part of the Tower of London, a part that didn't officially exist, former Minister of Magic and disgraced mage Robert Davenport twitched violently and dropped his book at the feeling of unbelievable powerful and alien magic that crossed the cell from east to west in the blink of an eye, bringing with it a sensation that made him embarrass himself. Running footsteps and shouts from outside his cell sounded, and when the mage guards checked on him, they found him huddled in the corner of the cell, somewhat damp in the trouser area, his eyes shut, mumbling to himself.

"Don't let her get me," he was saying over and over. "I'm being good."

Deciding that since it had covered so much of the planet it might as well finish the job the system allowed the ward expansion to finish, enveloping the entire world in an immaterial cloud of force. The extra energy required was trivial once past the initial expansion. Usefully, it had encountered several more power sources it could utilise, more than making up the difference, although the one it had been after was by far the largest and easiest to deal with.
But under the circumstances every little bit helped.

The system pulled hard on the power sources it had located, absorbing the energy wholesale, while simultaneously trying to work out how to get it to the nodes, who could use it to destroy the enemy. It felt sure a solution was possible.

The enemy influence was growing rapidly. It could feel that the main primary node was attacking it with everything it could bring to bear, a truly impressive amount of power, while the remaining nodes were feeding energy into the attack as well. It could also tell it wasn't quite enough, as while it was slowly depleting the enemies' attack, it wouldn't do enough damage before the process the enemy had put into action completed.

It pulled harder, collecting all the unclaimed energy it could.

Elder Qian Dhu of the Joketsuzoku tribe, the second most senior elder after Ku Lon, who was still in Japan, suddenly jolted awake, looking around. Her apprentice stared at her. The old woman had been taking a well deserved nap after an arduous demonstration of mage-craft, while the much younger woman had prepared their evening meal.

"What is it, Elder?" she asked curiously.

"Don't you feel that, girl?" the two hundred and fifty year old elder asked absently, staring towards the east. "Something is coming." She hopped spryly erect, heading for the door.

"What is coming?" the apprentice, a woman in her forties, asked, not offended at being called 'girl'.

"I don't know. It's powerful, and very fast."

"Herb? Or Saffron?"

The elder shook her head, walking outside into the afternoon light. "No. Far more powerful than either. It feels like it could stomp Saffron without even noticing."

The other woman paled. She knew damn well how powerful the Phoenix People's ruler was. Only one person she had heard of had defeated him, one person they were still trying to find. Even then it had been a very near thing and most likely nearly an accident. Joining her mentor at the door of the hut they both looked around. Other magically gifted Amazons were gathering outside, feeling the same thing. She could feel it now, turning to the east.

"There!" She pointed, causing everyone to look.

The wave of weirdly coloured light zoomed towards them, rippling like the aurora, only in shades one would normally find in dreams. Qian Dhu stared in disbelief. "What the fuck is that?" someone behind her said in awe.

"I think it's a ward of some sort, by the feel of it," she said, "but the power!"

"It's the work of the gods," another voice said fearfully.

"No, it's something... different," she replied, stretching out her mage senses, then recoiling in shock. "Very different. I've never felt anything even remotely like it. I'm not even sure it's magic."

"What else could it be?" her apprentice asked in a low voice. The elder shrugged helplessly.
"I have no idea at all."

Seconds later, far too quickly to do anything, it was on them, then past, with only a faint ripple of sensation to the senses of any magic or ki sensitive individual. Everyone turned to watch as the wall of light kept going, heading towards the west faster and faster. Less than fifteen seconds later there was a sensation of completion. She shuddered.

"I think it's gone all around the entire world," she whispered.

"That's... totally impossible," another elder gasped. "No one has magic that powerful. It would take every mage in China working together and it would kill them in the process."

"Demon magic?" someone mused out loud. Everyone looked at the woman, who spread her hands out to the side. "Just thinking out loud. I know some demon mages are supposed to be vastly more powerful than anyone we know about."

"What's it for?" Qian Dhu's apprentice asked quietly. She looked at the much younger woman, raising an eyebrow approvingly.

"Now, that is the correct question." No one had a good answer.

A scream from the hut of the best seer they had caused everyone to whip around, then run towards it. The seer herself, a woman in only her middle second century, staggered out of the hut, looking like she'd just seen hell itself. "It's coming..." She staggered, catching herself on the door frame as the small crowd reached her.

"What's coming?" one of the bystanders demanded. "Was it that... thing? Whatever it was?" The seer stared at her, not really seeing the woman.

"It's getting closer. It's so cold and merciless, I can't stand it." She rubbed her arms with her hands as if she'd stepped outside in the winter with no coat. "It doesn't care about us. It's just going to erase us and start again."

Everyone looked at each other. Eventually, Qian Dhu asked, "What is... it?"

"The end of everything approaches. All that we are, all that we were, all that we could be, will be unmade, unless they can stop it." The voice of the seer took on a character that made everyone in earshot freeze, pure cold fear going down their spines. The woman slowly looked around at them then fell over, unconscious before she hit the ground. Several people rushed to help her.

Qian Dhu stared at her, then glanced at her apprentice. The younger woman looked back in shock. "Well. That was singularly spooky, and not exactly helpful," the Elder finally said, shaking her head. Despite her words she was shaken to the core. She could see that everyone else was as well.

"Look!" The cry of shock came from the other end of the street. Once more everyone whirled around. They gaped.

In the distance, towards the mountains, a glow was strengthening, visible even in the sunlight. The Elder had a very good idea where it was centred. "It's Jusenkyo," she said with a sigh of surprise. The glow grew, every colour one could imagine mixing and whirling, then a column of light leapt into the sky. A wave of magic strong enough for even the non-adept to feel swept across them as the energies of the cursed springs were sucked into... something. Everyone watched in amazement for twenty seconds or so until the column of magic began to dwindle, shrinking to a thread then
disappearing. In the aftermath a faint glow could be seen over the horizon, as a cloud rose slowly into the clear sky.

"It sucked it dry, I think," the elder said slowly. "Something pulled all the power out of it, everything that had been stored over the millennia. That was the largest source of wild magic on the planet but I can hardly feel anything coming from it now."

"I think it boiled the springs as well," her apprentice said. She pointed at the cloud which was still rising, the glow at its base fading. "That's what's left of the water, I suspect."

"You're probably right." The ancient but powerful woman looked up in thought. "I wonder what took the power, and why?"

The world trembled. Everyone looked around nervously.

"It comes," the seer, still unconscious, croaked from the ground, making everyone jump violently.

"That's just wrong," the old woman griped, recovering slightly, but wondering, 'What comes?'

In the middle of Australia, Ayers rock, or more correctly, Uluru, glowed with lambent flame. The tourists and locals within view watched as a thread of light rose from it for a few seconds, an eerie feeling sweeping through them.

In several places in Europe, mainly in the UK, various stone circles and ancient monuments glowed as power left them, rising into the night. Stonehenge lit up like something out of a disco for a dozen seconds, all the stones different colours. Motorists on the nearby A303 slowed and stared. Miles away, Avebury hummed with power, causing people in the pub located in the middle of the huge circle to run outside and gape.

From Land's End to the tip of the Hebrides, dozens of ancient sites, anywhere power had been stored, lit briefly as it was pulled out. People across the nation looked in wonder at the sight.

More ancient reservoirs in Ireland emptied themselves. In South America, a number of old Mayan temples glowed briefly. Far to the north of Canada, deep under the ice, a powerful illumination caused dozens of square kilometres of glacier to shine with an eerie light. No one was around to see it as the buried and totally unknown megalithic site drained into the magical field now surrounding the planet.

Crew on a tanker in the South Pacific stared and pointed as light streamed upwards from a source deep under the water somewhere over the horizon. Men shouted, gesticulating, at the sight. Seconds passed then it winked out. Nothing else was visible.

Mages and other magic workers everywhere looked about in shock. No one could work out what was happening. The only people who would know for sure were in a battle to save their universe, many realities away.

All the other available sources ran dry long before Jusenkyo did, but even that finally emptied. Having finished collecting magical energy that had accumulated deep underground for over five thousand years, far longer than the Amazons or the others who called the area home realised, the ward system finally felt it had all the power it could acquire. Now it needed to apply it.

After a little more 'thought', it metaphorically shrugged, then decided to simply tell its owners that it was ready to help. With the extra power available to it getting a message through should be possible.
The middle sister was shaking with exhaustion, as she allowed her ki and magic reserves to flow through her sister-in-law into the hugely powerful ki beam still roaring into the portal. She could feel she was nearly running on empty, barely enough to let the disguise spell work. Everyone else was nearly as badly off, even Ranma's alter-ego beginning to waver. Despite having reserves larger than the rest of them put together, the martial artist was beginning to flag. She was powering more than half of the beam. How she and 'Chou' could still keep the ward going was beyond her.

"You're breaking through," Yrenti commed them, monitoring the situation on the other side of the portal through his combat drone, watching in awe as the beam slowly ate its way through the warped spacetime surrounding the ancient machine as it spun up the time gate. "But the temporal dislocation field is still building. It's not going to be enough. The remaining weapons will finish it off if you can get through the field, but I can't fire them with your magic in the way and if you turn it off the thing will activate before I can get the warheads in place. Most of its energy is going to divert your beam. Remove that and..."

"We're not going to have a choice soon," Yori replied, even over the link sounding ready to drop. "We're running dry."

#Nabiki, you are in serious danger of using all your life energy up, you must stop, or die.# Jun warned, sounding very worried. Beside her, Aiko dropped to her knees, then her face, unconscious. Misaki staggered briefly but somehow managed to keep going.

'No choice at all, Jun' she told the machine. 'I die or everyone else does.'

#Unless something drastic changes, you will die and everyone else will.# her SI told her. #For your own safety you must stop soon.#

'I'm sorry, Jun, I'm afraid I can't do that,' she whispered to the device, wavering with exhaustion but feeding all the energy she could to her sister-in-law, not sure how she was managing to still keep going. It gave off something very close to a sigh of resignation.

#I understand.#

A few seconds later, just as she was about to fall over, she got a very weird sensation in the back of her head. At first putting it down to how tired she felt, she twitched as it strengthened. Something familiar about it made her listen. Sparing what concentration she could, she tried to work out what it was. Eventually she thought she recognised it. It was the ward system. The little sensation of being watched over that lived far at the back of her mind, no matter where she went, even in some other realities if she concentrated hard enough on it, seemed to be jumping up and down, trying to attract her attention. A couple more seconds passed then she asked in a light-headed manner, "Can anyone else feel that?"

"What?" several of her friends asked, all sounding as tired as she felt. 'Yori' glanced at her for a moment, dark rings around her eyes showing she was about to collapse.

A sudden collection of thoughts rushed through the middle Tendo's head, culminating in a wild surmise. "Open a portal to home," she said. Her sister stared at her for a few seconds.

"What? Why?"

"Just do it, quickly. I think it's important." The elder sister stared at her, then looked at her
husband, who looked back and shrugged.

"All right." The disguised Kasumi concentrated, looking totally washed out, almost unable to spare the energy. Less than a minute had gone by since they'd fired the weapons through the portal but all of them were ready to fall over, although none of them intended to stop. A portal slowly crackled into existence nearby, taking much longer than they were used to, proof how exhausted 'Chou' was.

Finally the other portal stabilised. As soon as it did, everything happened at once.

Success!

One of the primary nodes created a locus in reality that linked there to here. The message had been understood. The system extended its influence through the hole between realities, using another loophole it had just come up with, which was that the doorway to its owners had opened inside it, so logically everything on the other side of that door was also inside. It was aware on some level this was an argument that was pushing the limits of its flexibility but under the circumstances felt fairly sure its owners would understand and approve.

On the other side of the hole it found all the nodes that made up its network almost at the point of collapse, depleted far past the point of safety. Also present were two non-networked organic entities that it tentatively marked as non-hostile, due to their proximity to the owners, their presence inside the shield those owners were generating, and their apparent acceptance of the entities in the first place. In addition two further inorganic intelligences were outside the shield, along with a number of what were clearly weapons. It studied these last for a fraction of a second, concerned, but decided that they were also not an immediate threat, seemingly being under the control of one of the unknown organics.

One second had passed since the portal opened.

Noticing that the shield the owners was producing was beginning to wobble due to them running low on power, it gently pushed them aside and took over the running of it, radiating apologies in the process for being rude. The primary node, after a moment's apparent confusion, relinquished control gratefully. The shielding ward snapped into rigidity, completely impenetrable to anything other than the portal linking the inside of it to the centre of the ward system.

After a tiny delay while it worked out what to do, the system then began to push power back into the nodes, using the link it normally utilised in the other direction. It had to be careful, there was a definite upper limit to how fast any of them could accept the energy without damage, but it juggled the flows until equilibrium was established. Watching carefully it was satisfied that they were no longer in immediate danger of exhausting their reserves, which slowly began to refill.

Three seconds.

Turning its attention from the immediate requirement to prevent the nodes failing, the system looked at the energy being sent into the other hole in reality, through which the enemy could be sensed, far more strongly than at home. It could tell that whatever operation that enemy was engaged in was being drastically slowed by the attack but not stopped. It needed to do something.

What, and how, were the two main questions.

It could dump an enormous amount of energy into a similar attack, far more than any of the nodes could handle, but it calculated that this wouldn't do the job quickly enough. There was little time
left. Looking around for another solution it stopped on the small figure of the last node added to
the system, the second most powerful at the current time, closing in on the level of the lead primary
node, although inexplicably limited right now. The system recalled how, when the node was linked
in, it had detected that the node had possession and control of an artefact that bore a certain
resemblance to itself, an artefact that was very, very old and very, very dangerous. Something
designed purely as a weapon.

That would do nicely.

Now all it had to do was work out how to access it. After a short cogitation, it drew on its link with
the node and tried the direct approach of attempting to get the request understood.

Six seconds had passed.

Hotaru, her hands over her ears and her eyes shut, was lying face down on the alien ground, feeling
heat wash over her from the massively powerful energy beam 'Yori' and all her friends were
producing. She could feel that they were flagging, even the martial artists' huge energy reserves
guttering out. The girl was terrified, beyond anything she'd ever felt before, and she knew her
friends were as well. Despite the ward system having severed their link with the time device she
imagined she could still feel something at the back of her mind glaring at her.

Hearing 'Azumi' ask a question through the com link, she risked looking up through squinting eyes,
seeing only silhouettes against the brilliance of the beam pouring into the portal. Through her terror
she wondered what the middle Tendo woman meant, but after a few seconds noticed that she could
feel something else at the back of her mind, apparently trying to get her attention. It took a moment
to work out what it was. Just as she did, another portal opened inside the ward, a couple of metres
from 'Chou', next to Lldnr'k, who squawked in shock and shuffled further away.

With almost no delay, she felt the full attention of the ward system itself, power flooding through
the portal, something huge and immaterial inspecting all of them very thoroughly and very quickly,
concentrating on the seven people powering the ki beam. The ward covering them abruptly
strengthened enormously to a level she found hard to believe, outstripping her own shield wall by a
huge amount. The girl could sense that somehow 'Yori' and the rest were no longer losing energy,
realising that their reserves were being bolstered by an external source. Something felt odd about
the power coming from the ward system, there was vastly more of it there than she had realised
was even possible, leaving aside the way it didn't feel quite like either magic or that 'ki' stuff they
used.

A few seconds passed then she got the oddest sensation the system was trying once more to
communicate something, specifically to her. Not quite knowing why, she manifested her weapon,
seeing Ami and Rei look at her as they felt the magic that accompanied it, then stood up, holding
the ancient pole-arm in a death-like grip. Approaching the other group she glanced at 'Yori' who
looked back, meeting her gaze, then looked down at the Glaive. Her eyes widened for a moment
before narrowing in sudden realisation.

As smoothly as if they'd practised the move for hours, Hotaru levelled the pole-arm at the portal
leading to the time device's fractional reality, 'Yori' grabbed it just above where her own hands
were holding it, pumping a huge flood of energy into it, which leaped from the end into the
aperture in space, maintaining the beam, then the girl unlocked the safeties with an instinctive
mental instruction.

The Silence Glaive, smoking slightly as it heated up, hummed with power, which was suddenly
augmented with a truly awe-inspiring burst of energy that roared out of the portal back to Minato
and flowed through the weapon. A visible wave of distorted spacetime shot from the pole-arm into
the portal leaving a weird inverted after-image behind it.

Ten seconds. Time was running out, the enemy was nearly at the point of unleashing its own
attack, which the system could tell would be devastating and final.

The youngest node responded as it had hoped for, producing the artefact and activating it. The
lead primary node transferred its energy to the device as it powered up, keeping the attack going,
and as soon as it was ready the system immediately transferred as much power as it could into the
ancient weapon. It had to be careful not to destroy it as it supercharged the thing far beyond what
its designers had intended, but it could feel the feedback beginning and skilfully backed off just
enough to keep it intact. Powered by not only its own impressive reserves but by most of the
magical energy of an entire planet, the artefact unleashed an attack that was horrifyingly
powerful.

The distortion wave passed through the locus that linked this reality back to the one that was an
offshoot of the system's own which housed the enemy. Taken completely by surprise, that other
entity didn't stand a chance as enough power to vaporise a small moon slammed into it, disrupting
the temporal dislocation field it had nearly completed like a brick through a plate glass window.

Energy fed back on itself, instantly destroying the temporal gate that lay at the heart of the time
device. The release of the power that had been building the field flashed from the gate to the
remainder of the structure as it collapsed, causing it to heat up to the point it emitted x-rays within
microseconds, too fast even to allow it to properly melt before it simply sublimated, boiling off into
the space in the fractional reality.

The time device ended an existence that had lasted over two million subjective years and survived
the total dissolution of its originating reality in one huge burst of vapour and radiation, dead
before it could react. The spherically expanding wave of energy spread outwards at the speed of
light, catching the damaged Kw'lyn combat drone seconds later and causing it to ablate away
instantly, just after transmitting its final recordings and a copy of its guiding intelligence back to its
owner, being well aware that it was about to die but satisfied that it was in a good cause.

Yrenti watched the transmission showing the other side of the portal with an open mouth, as the
odd magical attack, powered far past anything he'd ever personally encountered, slammed into the
Abomination. Where these people had got that much power from so suddenly was something he
was very interested to discover, as was what the hell they'd been using up to that point. It felt a little
like magic, true enough, but not at all like anything he'd ever come across before.

The raging energy beam that Yori and her associates had been producing just before the final
attack had come winked out. Seizing the opportunity that presented itself he immediately sent the
remaining antimatter warheads through the portal at maximum acceleration targeted on the
location of the time device, just in case anything was left. There was, as he'd told them, no sense in
taking chances, although based on what the drone had sent back it was a fairly redundant exercise
by this point.

The thing that was on the far side of the second portal watched, he could feel it, as the weapons
entered the first one. It seemed approving. That was good. Whatever it was, he didn't want it angry
with him, not after seeing what it was capable of. A couple of seconds passed while it inspected
him curiously then he felt it turn its attention back to the hole in reality leading to the sub-reality
that now contained a huge expanding cloud of vapour and subatomic particles.
Silence fell on the dead world, an echo faintly coming to abused ears from the distant mountains. Very slowly, one by one, each of the people involved in the attack still standing slowly collapsed to their knees, while Ami, Rei, Yrenti, and Lldnr’k exchanged glances, getting up. The ward dome surrounding them blinked out of existence.

After a long moment, Ami moved to check on their fallen friends, Lldnr’k helping.

The attack had been successful. The enemy was gone, utterly, its operation disrupted before it could reach the point of completion. Aftershocks of the sudden release of what had so nearly happened rippled through the home reality causing a number of odd effects but the system could sense they were largely transitory and therefore didn’t worry about them. They were no immediate threat.

Checking on its charges it found they were all intact and more or less undamaged although still severely depleted, aside from two of the three recently added ones. The last one, the one that had been holding the weapon, was showing signs of mild overload, as was the lead primary node, both of them slightly injured but not to a level that would cause long-term harm. It was an unavoidable outcome considering the situation although somewhat embarrassing, as far as the system understood that concept. Their own self-repair abilities were well up to the challenge of dealing with it.

Continuing to feed energy to them to sustain them, it was about to attempt to disrupt the reality locus through which it had fired when something occurred to it. Extending its influence through the hole again it peered around curiously, considering.

The original entity was dead, definitely, so the threat was over. It could feel the magic sustaining the domain it had ruled was rapidly unravelling, due both to the destruction of the enemy and the attack the nodes had fired using the ancient weapon, which was still having a devastating effect as it spread throughout the space the enemy had called home. This was liberating steadily growing amounts of magical energy...

Hmm.

No one seemed to be using it. It would be a shame to let it go to waste...

Lldnr’k felt something change, something other than what had just happened. The entity on the other side of the portal back to Minato had passed its gaze over everyone, a feeling of satisfaction coming to him, then as it seemed on the threshold of withdrawing, paused. It seemed to be inspecting the portal to the time device’s sub-reality with interest.

A feeling of something weird going on built. He glanced at the blue-haired human next to him who was trying to get either Yori or Hotaru to let go of the pole-arm they were both clamped onto like limpets with a grip of steel, despite severely burned hands. Ami looked back, her eyes wide.

A second later, a beam of pure magic was sucked out of the portal, streaming over them and vanishing into the other one. Yrenti made an odd strangled sound as he hit the deck again while the other three recoiled. The energy transfer built in intensity, flowing faster and faster, causing some very odd fringe effects that made the lighting waver and the ground gently shake, until, eventually, it tapered off and winked out. Immediately afterwards the portal to the sub-reality groaned in a manner he’d never encountered before, flickered once or twice, then imploded.

A wave of distortion rippled outwards, passing through everything in sight with no apparent ill
effects, but making everyone stagger. Then, for the second time, silence fell.

The effects of the destruction of the time device on the reality it had been tampering with for millennia were subtle but profound. The entire universe... twitched.

All over Earth, people jumped, looking around, wondering what had happened. The magically sensitive ones had been feeling something was wrong the entire time the attack and counter-attack had been happening, but even people with no ability or experience felt the end of the time machine. Later, some would describe it as a very low level earthquake, one that shook them yet had no apparent damaging effects. Others would say it was like feeling someone was behind them, making them whirl around, only to see the room was empty. Still others would liken it to the effect one sometimes encounters on the verge of falling asleep when a massive spasm seems to come from nowhere.

But it wasn't limited to Earth.

Half-way across the galaxy, a race of aliens simultaneously shuddered, looking around, then staring at each other with all six eyes. Papers would be written for years on the planetary disturbance, two religions would be started, and one ended, but no one would ever conclusively determine what the cause of the strange sensation was.

On a super-Jovian world circling a red giant star on the outskirts of the galaxy known to humanity as NGC4945, a species of extremely intelligent methane-breathing space squid floating in the nearly liquid atmosphere discussed the odd effect for decades, eventually arriving at a surprisingly close description of what had happened. While they would never know who had saved reality, they felt gratitude nonetheless.

Eight and a half billion light years from Earth, in an ancient part of the universe, on a small world circling a dying star and containing the remnants of the oldest intelligent species in that particular strand of the multiverse, something jolted awake, looked around with interest, measured the distortion, decided that it wasn't anything it could or should do anything about, then went back to sleep to dream the rest of eternity away.

All over the universe that made up that particular reality strand, people of every type one could think of looked around and shuddered a little before going on with their day.

Closer to home, Haruka stared out the window, the cup of coffee in her hand cooling unnoticed, wondering what her daughter was doing. She had felt the time device die. The overwhelmingly powerful magic that had attracted her attention a couple of minutes ago had caused her to rush to the window just in time to see the wave of light sweep across the city and beyond, while she could feel dozens if not hundreds of portals open then close all around her. She'd watched, open mouthed and horrified, as everything she could see, on some deep and fundamental level, began to tremble.

Certain she was watching the end of the world she had simply stared, frozen, until with a suddenness that took her by surprise, it stopped. Reality wavered briefly then snapped back into normality. She twitched a little, lukewarm coffee slopping out onto her hand, as momentarily she felt something begin what she could almost describe as an oddly mechanical scream of rage before it simply vanished.

Standing at the window for a little longer, when nothing further happened, she sighed very gently, bowed her head and muttered a heartfelt thank-you, although to what she wasn't sure, then turned away to make some more coffee.
A few kilometres away, Makoto picked herself off the roof she'd landed flat on her face on when whatever had happened, happened, rolling over and sitting up, brushing grit from her face. 'What the fuck just happened?' she wondered to herself. She also wondered about the feeling of cold rage followed by abruptly curtailed equally cold fear she'd felt before everything went weird. Looking around, she couldn't see anything amiss. There was still a strange feeling to the day, not helped by the way more portals than she could believe had suddenly come and gone in seconds all around her, leaving her wondering if some weird attack had taken place.

Eventually she got up, brushed herself down, then walked slowly over to the edge of the roof and carefully looked around. Seeing nothing, she shivered slightly, before deciding to go home and take the afternoon off. Read a good book or something.

Michiru pulled the curtain aside, staring outside suspiciously. She could feel it watching. Carefully inspecting the scene outside the window for a little while, she replaced the curtain, then methodically went around the house doing the same to each window in turn.

Cologne sighed, almost collapsing, only held up by her concerned great grand-daughter. Shampoo helped her to the sofa. "It's over. Whatever it was, it's finally finished." The Elder looked tired but pleased, slumping back into the seat.

"What do you think it was?" the much younger woman asked quietly, looking around nervously. The sensation that had swept across them moments ago had been extremely unsettling.

"I have no idea. Nothing I've ever encountered before, though, I can say that much." The old Amazon studied her relative, smiling a little. "But I think, whatever it was, we won." She patted Shampoo's hand comfortingly.

"Weird."

Genma looked at Soun, who returned his gaze.

"You might say that. I wonder what the hell that was about?"

"Not a clue, old friend, but we're still here. I suppose that's a good thing." They exchanged glances again, then slowly returned to the Dojo. The students were milling around, looking worried. Mariko in particular was still staring at the wall in the direction the original sensation had come from, making Soun watch her for a moment, then go over and put his hand on her shoulder. The girl jumped, looking up at him.

"Don't worry, I think it's over. Go home. We'll start over tomorrow." She nodded after a few seconds, heading towards the changing rooms without a word, but still with an odd expression on her face.

Dismissing all the rest of the students, the two martial artists headed inside to have a few calming cups of tea and possibly a beer. Or two.

Naito looked around. Exchanging a glance with his colleague, they both looked out the window again, then when nothing further happened, turned away.

"I'd love to know what the fuck that was," the other agent muttered. "Why do I have the weirdest feeling something absolutely horrible nearly happened?"
"I'm not sure," Naito replied. 'Although that's not entirely true. I have a very good idea what happened and who was behind it. I guess they succeeded.' A smile began to spread across his face.

"Come on," he suddenly said. "Let's go and get a drink." His friend and colleague stared at him for a moment then nodded, following as he left the room.

More fully charged than its makers would have thought possible, the ward system pondered its options for a moment. It had completely filled its reserves, even having had to create new ones, which had taken a little thought, but it had come up with a solution in the end. Even so, it had more energy available than seemed even vaguely sensible. After mulling it over, it decided in the interests of good relations to return the excess.

Qian Dhu turned at the shout. "Oh, what now!" she exclaimed, shaken to the core by what she'd felt a few seconds ago. Looking to the Amazon who had cried out, she turned to follow the pointing finger, somehow not totally surprised by what she saw.

Off in the direction of the distant Jusenkyo a column of misty light stretched between somewhere high overhead and the ground once more. This time, however, she got the impression that the energy was flowing the other way. The transfer went on for at least as long as the original drain had taken. She could feel the magic level of the cursed ground rebuilding rapidly, finally tailing off and stopping at a point she judged to be somewhat higher than it had originally been. The light winked out. Once more, a cloud of steam slowly rose into the air.

"It put it back," her apprentice mumbled.

"With interest, by the feel of it," the Elder agreed, stunned. They glanced at each other, then looked back in the direction the column of light had come from. "I wonder what it was?"

"Something that needed to borrow a hell of a lot of energy," the younger woman replied.

"Well, it seems polite, if nothing else." Shaking her head, the old woman decided it was a mystery that could wait for morning. A sound behind them made them turn to stare at the seer, who was muttering to herself. They glanced at each other once more.

"The greatest enemy has been defeated. Our defenders succeeded. We still exist. Be grateful."

The hoarse voice again sent chills down spines. Silence fell in the crowd. A few seconds later the seer blinked, waking up, then sat up. She looked around to see everyone staring at her.

"What? Did I miss something?"

Qian Dhu sighed, before heading back into her home. She needed a drink.

Once again, all over the planet, places of power glowed as energy was returned to them. Again, people stared, wondering what was going on. The transfer finally ended, the last lights dying away slowly, until even Stonehenge went dark and quiet.

Satisfied, the system ran a final check, deciding everything was in order. It withdrew power from the external defences, collapsing the wards back to cover only the apartment building as per normal procedure. It knew it was going to be in trouble for playing fast and loose with the rules but overall it was still pleased. Absent another world-ending threat of such a type it doubted it would ever be allowed to do anything like this again.
It was OK with that.

Content, feeling in organic terms sleepy and well fed, the system dropped back into standby, leaving only the links to the nodes active to replenish them. As it powered down much of the new connectivity unravelled, no longer needed. Even so, it was that little bit closer to something one would consider alive.

The final effect of the dissolution of the planet-girdling ward, as permeable as it had been, was unexpected. Due to the odd relationship with time the ward system had from its linkage with Ranma and through that his experiences with the Mirror, it had slightly isolated everyone inside it from the minor temporal effects of the aborted time reset. With the withdrawal of the ward, this isolation, for the most part, evaporated, leaving some odd effects.

People everywhere blinked, looking at each other, wondering what had happened. Comparing notes, eventually it would turn out that about thirty seconds or so of the day had somehow vanished, leaving only the memory of what would come to be known as 'The Great Twitch'. The few that remembered events correctly were either on the other side of a portal during the final moments, somehow connected to the time device, powerful users of ki or magic, or both close enough to and sensitive enough to the locations the system had borrowed magical energy from to have some resistance to the effect.

"Are you guys OK?" Ami asked her friends privately over the com. 'Chou' looked up from inspecting her husband, who was nearly unconscious. The blonde appeared on the verge of collapse herself, although slightly better off. The young woman could feel that the energy being supplied by the ward system through the portal was the only thing keeping her upright. None of the others looked much better. 'Azumi' in particular was swaying, on the point of falling over, while Aiko was mumbling to herself from where she was lying on her face in the gravel.

"More or less, I think, but we need to get home quickly. Neither Ranma or Nabiki will be able to keep the disguise spell running for much longer. We don't want Yrenti finding out yet, we don't know him well enough." 'Chou' glanced at the Kw'lyn representative who seemed to be doing something with his remaining combat drones, glancing at them with concern every now and then.

"What about Lldhr'k?" Ami asked. The other woman shrugged a little, looking at the temporal mage who still looked shocked by the activities of the last few minutes. Ami checked with her SI and was appalled to find it had been no more than two and a half minutes since they'd started the attack. It felt like hours had passed.

"We can trust him, but I think we need to let him know under better conditions." The blue-haired girl nodded her understanding. The crunch of gravel underfoot made them both turn to see Yrenti approaching. He stopped, inspecting Hotaru and 'Yori', who were still holding onto the Glaive, their blistered and reddened hands locked tightly around it, with a worried expression.

"Will they be all right?" he asked. "I can arrange medical aid if you can open a portal back to Kw'lyn Industries." 'Chou' smiled tiredly at him.

"Thank you for the offer, Yrenti, but we'll be fine. We're good at healing." She looked down as her husband muttered something indecipherable then slowly let go of the old weapon, skin peeling loose with a nasty sucking sound, quite a lot of it staying behind. Ami winced at the sight and looked away. "But we're all on the point of falling over. We need to go home, recover, and find out what happened."

The alien nodded, still inspecting them. After a long moment, he made an odd gesture of respect,
bowing at the waist and touching his brow with two hands. "I understand. Please accept the most profound thanks of Kw'lyn Industries, the people of my home, and myself. You have finally done something we've been looking forward to for more years than I like to think about." He straightened up. "I only wish I could have been more effective. We failed to take into account what might happen if the temporal gate was activated during the attack, which was bad planning on our part. It's a pity we don't make supernova bombs any more, one of those would have been a better idea."

"It's not your fault, Yrenti," 'Chou' responded, smiling a little. "Your weapons would have been more than enough if it wasn't for the machine reacting like it did. We didn't quite take it by surprise. But we did manage even so, which we probably couldn't have done without your help. Without that initial damage from the bombs we might not have been in time."

"It was mostly your... whatever the hell that was." He looked at the portal with a bemused expression. "What was that, anyway?"

"Our home defence system which seems to have been thinking creatively," the blonde woman replied, following his gaze with her own, a slight frown crossing her face. "Something I didn't think could happen. We're going to have to look into that. But all things considered, I'm relieved it did whatever it did."

"As are the rest of us," Lldnr'k commented, still appearing stunned. "That was far too close for comfort."

"Agreed. We're very lucky things worked out the way they did," 'Chou' sighed. "I hope there aren't too many problems as a result of what happened."

"Considering the alternative, I doubt any fallout will be too serious," the mage told her.

"Hopefully not." She carefully gathered her husband up in her arms and stood, Ami helping steady her. "I'm very sorry, Yrenti, but anything further will have to wait for a while. We would very much like to talk more about all sort of things but..." He held up a hand.

"You don't need to say any more. Feel free to contact us again at any time. We're forever in your debt, aside from my personal feelings, so as soon as you feel able, just let us know and we can pick this up again." He smiled at her in his own way. She nodded, returning the expression.

"Thank you for understanding." Concentrating, she managed to form another portal. "That will take you back. Lldnr'k, I'm terribly sorry, but I can't manage a portal home for you as well. Do you mind going back via Kw'lyn?" The mage shook his head.

"Of course not." He glanced at Yrenti, who shrugged slightly. "I can take the opportunity to ask a few questions."

"Certainly," the other being told him. "I can easily arrange to get you home whenever you want to go but there's no hurry."

"Thank you." Lldnr'k walked over and held out his hand to 'Chou', who gently shifted her nearly unconscious burden around, causing the smaller woman to mumble to herself, then shook the mage's hand with a smile. "Look after yourselves and let me know you're all OK, please?"

"We'll contact you soon," she promised. She and Ami watched as Yrenti and Lldnr'k walked through the portal with a final wave, the two combat drones following. The last one rotated to face them as it went past, dipping in the air in a sort of salute that made Ami wave to it, grinning. As
soon as it was through 'Chou' released the portal, grunting with strain, then reverted to Kasumi. Nabiki and Ranma both resumed their normal appearances as well.

"We need to get back before I fall over," Kasumi mumbled. She staggered towards the portal. Ami watched for a moment, then bent and picked up Hotaru, who was limp in her arms, while Rei got Aiko. The others slowly picked themselves up, looking like death, a trail of exhausted women heading through the tear in reality. When the last one, which happened to be Misaki, entered, it popped out of existence, leaving only a circle of pristine gravel in the middle of a conical zone of melted rock, evidence of the backwash from the attack.

Nabiki leaned against the wall of the practice room, which was very gently wobbling back and forth as far as she was concerned, watching her elder sister struggle to heal the hands of the red-head lying on the floor next to her. "That's the best I can do," the older woman finally said, having changed third-degree burns back to something that looked like bad sunburn. "The rest will have to wait." She leaned forwards, supporting herself on her hands, her hair falling about her face, then with a sigh pushed herself up enough to shift over to Hotaru. Rei and Ami moved to help her, being the only two people in the room who could stand unaided.

They gently pried the young girl's hands free from the pole-arm, once more leaving skin behind, Rei looking unwell in the process. Ami moved the weapon to the side of the room where it would be safe, while Rei helped the elder Tendo to the girl's side. Once more the usual healing glow struggled into life, wavering and pulsing in an abnormal manner. When the burns were mostly healed, it went out as Kasumi gently tipped over onto her side, totally unconscious. Nabiki pushed herself away from the wall to go to her but ended up simply sliding to the ground. Seconds later the two young women were the only ones in the entire apartment still awake. Looking around they inspected their comrades, glanced at each other, then sighed a little.

"Come on, give me a hand getting them to bed," Ami said, bending down and picking Ranma up. The petite red-head muttered something unintelligible then started snoring. Chuckling, Rei lifted Kasumi, both of them heading for the first bedroom.

Stepping back from the window, Saeko blinked, wondering why she'd been staring out of it. Nothing much interesting seemed to be going on. Shaking her head, she tried to remember what she'd been doing. Oh, yes, she'd been in the middle of writing up her notes from the last night's work. Oddly she couldn't remember walking to the window. After a moment she shrugged slightly, putting it down to too much concentration on work. She needed a holiday.

Turning, distracted, her elbow caught the side of the bookcase, rocking it slightly and sending a twinge of agony up her arm as she managed to ping a nerve in exactly the wrong place. The woman yelped in pain, grabbing her elbow with her other hand, wincing at both the impact and the sound of a number of items tumbling to the floor, bouncing off the tiles. She rubbed her arm for thirty seconds or so, swearing under her breath, until the numbness in her fingers ebbed away. Looking at the mess on the floor she sighed.

"Damn it," she muttered, bending over and picking up a few books and a couple of ornaments. Among them was Ami's little transparent crystal fantasy figurine which she inspected closely, worried it was damaged. It seemed completely intact, only a little dust on one of the arms where it had hit the floor. She put the other items away then looked at the statuette again, wiping the dust off and leaving it pristine.

An odd expression crossed her face as she rubbed her fingers together. The dust left on them felt strangely gritty. Like...
She looked down, to where the figurine had landed, then bent over, peering at the tiles. Searching eyes found a tiny divot in the glazed surface, surrounded by white dust. She reached out and touched it, then raised her finger to her eyes, studying the powder on the end. After a long moment she looked back at the figurine in her other hand. Her eyebrows slowly went up.

'No. That's... ridiculous,' she mused. 'Impossible, even. But...' She looked down at the tiles again. After another pause, she very slowly reached out and touched the outstretched arm of the statue to the lower corner of the window, pressing hard then dragging it across the glass with a scraping sound.

She was still looking between the unmarred little crystal sculpture and the deep scratch on the window five minutes later.

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Rei walked into the temple, stopping next to her grandfather, who was sitting on a low wall looking out over Tokyo as the clouds slowly cleared, leaving a fine afternoon. After a moment he turned to look at her, then went back to watching the scenery. They stayed silent for some time.

"I'm proud of you, my child," he finally said. He put his hand on hers where it was lying on the wall. "Your parents would be as well. It's a pity we can't tell them."

He gripped her hand tightly, feeling it was trembling. His was shaking a little as well. "Are the others all right?"

"Everyone will be fine, I think, but only Ami and I are conscious right now. The others nearly killed themselves trying to destroy that damn machine. Ami's looking after them for the moment, I came back for a change of clothes and to let you know what happened." She swung her leg over the wall and sat beside him, leaning against him. "I was absolutely terrified, grandfather. We came so close to losing everything. Everyone. If it wasn't for luck more than anything else..." She shivered.

The old man patted her knee with his other hand.

"You won. Don't over-analyse it. It's done, everyone and everything is still here. The Sun will rise in the morning, the Moon still circles the Earth, you and your friends saw to that. You have much to be very proud of." He glanced up at her for a second or two. "Thank you, by the way. You know, for helping save all of reality. I appreciate it."

"You're very welcome," Rei said, almost managing a smile. They sat beside each other watching the city for a long time.

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Sergeant Harada looked around, wondering if he'd done the right thing, then glanced at his pregnant wife and knew he'd had no choice. She was also staring at the scenes before them wide-eyed. Looking up for a moment he blinked at the oddly-coloured sunlight, before staring at the strange buildings near them. It seemed like they'd appeared in the middle of something like a small park in the centre of a smallish town from what he could see, one with a few dozen buildings, some fairly large, but none more than perhaps four or five stories. The construction was of wood and stone, with quite a lot of decoration.

It vaguely reminded him of some sort of alpine village like you'd find in the depths of Austria, something he remembered from his youth when he travelled fairly extensively for a year or two. The trees around the place were mostly in dark red colours, again something he'd come across before at home, but not in such variety. Various birdlike creatures were flying around in small flocks making a noise that sounded like tinkling bells. Emiko looked around, clutching his hand,
then looked up at him.

"Tetsuo? Where are we? What happened?" An aircraft of some sort whooshed overhead with a humming roar, apparently heading for a landing nearby, making her jump. "What did you do?" she wailed. He hugged her comfortingly.

"What I had to. Something horrible was happening back home, I don't know what, but all the demons left in a panic. I couldn't take any chances with you and the baby. I had a way out, I used it." He smiled down at her, although inside he was also very worried. Had he done the right thing? Thinking of all his friends at home, and all the people he met daily, he desperately hoped they were all right and this was all an over-reaction. But he couldn't forget the panic in Rynnkh's voice as she dived through her own emergency portal. She was genuinely terrified if he was any judge.

Whatever that weird column of light from somewhere near the park had been, it had scared the life out of anyone with magical knowledge.

"What was happening?" Emiko insisted.

He shrugged helplessly. "I have no idea, but it was big. You could feel it. Some sort of incredibly powerful magic, I think, but whether it was something attacking or something defending I don't know." He thought about it for a moment, still trembling slightly from the adrenaline rush. "It was from near the park somewhere."

"Isn't that the area you've always thought Yori and Chou probably live in?" she asked. He nodded.

"I suspect so. It's in the area they're active in and they seem to like it. I have no idea what they do when they're not out saving people, I've never tried to find out either because they deserve their private life, but it wouldn't surprise me if they lived somewhere close to there."

"Well, in that case, things are probably fine," his wife said firmly. "If they're involved I'm sure things will work out for the best."

He smiled at her. "You have a lot of faith in them, dear."

"Don't you?" she asked, smiling for the first time since he'd dragged her through the portal. "You certainly talk about them enough, and in terms that make it sound like you think they could save the world without even trying."

Laughing, he nodded a little. "I do think they're pretty remarkable even in magical girl terms, yes. They're good people, and smart. You're probably right, I may have over-reacted, but I couldn't take the chance."

The woman looked around again, more calmly. "All right, then. What do we do now?"

He sighed a little, also glancing about. "I have no idea. I suppose we need to find someone we can talk to and see what they suggest." They both inspected the surroundings for a little while. There were a few of Xrist's people wandering about, none of whom did more than glance at them, not at all surprised at their appearance, which he found slightly remarkable. In the end he shrugged and pointed. "How about that direction? It looks like it's heading for some larger buildings, perhaps there are more people there and we can find someone who speaks Japanese."

"It's as good as anything," his wife said, smiling at him. "Come on then. You're the one who dragged us into this, you have to explain it all to someone who can find out what's going on at home." They began walking, looking around with interest, but each of them hiding their fear of what might have happened from the other.
Nodoka poured several cups of tea, handing them around to murmured thanks from all present, then sat with her own. "So, what was that odd sensation, Elder?" She looked at the ancient Amazon, who was staring into her teacup with an unreadable expression. The other woman didn't respond for several seconds, but eventually looked up.

"I don't know. Not for sure. But it was something to do with the odd magical traces I've been finding around the entire area for months." She looked around at the others, all of whom were listening with interest. Akane glanced at Shampoo, the other young woman returning the look with one of her own.

"Was it dangerous?" the youngest Tendo asked curiously, a slightly worried look on her face. "I mean, all it was as far as I could tell was a weird sensation like a sort of mild earthquake." Cologne looked at her, an eyebrow up.

"Hmm." There was a pause while everyone watched her think. "Tell me, Akane, what did you experience?" The young woman thought back to the odd event that had occurred a couple of hours ago.

"Well, I was in the shop just cleaning the counters when there was a sort of... thump. I guess. It made me jump and look around, but I couldn't see anything wrong. Mr Ito noticed it as well. We checked, in case something had fallen over, but we didn't find anything." She frowned a little. "It's weird, though, both of us seem to have trouble remembering exactly what we were doing immediately before whatever it was happened." Akane shook her head. "Probably nothing, I guess."

The Elder studied her for a few seconds with an odd expression. "Nothing else comes to mind?"

"No." The younger woman tried to think of anything more to say about it. "Just the weird sensation, and I guess a slight gap in my memory. Nothing seems wrong otherwise."

Looking at Nodoka, Cologne asked a question with her eyes. "More or less what Akane said. I felt something odd, like the whole world jumped very slightly, then everything was normal again."

Again the Amazon studied them all. Soun and Genma were looking at each other speculatively, which she noticed with interest. She turned to Shampoo. "What do you say to that?"

The younger woman looked thoughtful. "I felt that, yes. But what about the light?"

"What light?" Akane and Nodoka asked at the same time.

"The column of light from somewhere further in towards the centre of Tokyo," Akane's father replied quietly. Everyone looked at him. "Going up out of sight, a colour that shouldn't exist. Then it blew outwards like a hurricane and went through everything as if it wasn't there." Cologne smiled slightly. Genma nodded, as did Shampoo.

"It was the strangest thing I've ever seen. Hollywood would kill for that sort of special effect," the large martial artist added to his friend's account. "It went right past us and kept going."

Akane stared at him, then looked to Nodoka, who was looking at her husband with an odd expression. He looked back. "Have you had more than the two beers I saw you drink earlier?" she asked with a certain amount of mild irritation. He shook his head vehemently.

"No. It was real, I swear it."
"I saw it as well," Shampoo verified, a faint scowl on her face. "Do you really not remember anything like that, Akane?"

The youngest sister shook her head, looking befuddled. "No. Only the twitch in the world." She turned to Nodoka, who nodded agreement.

"Myself as well." All of them looked at Cologne who was thinking deeply. "What does it mean?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you a good answer, dear," the old woman finally admitted, not looking pleased. "I'm very puzzled as to why some of you remember it and some don't. Although..." She inspected Akane curiously for a moment. "I wonder."

"What?"

"The only reason I can think of that some of us remember it and some don't is that the memory loss is somehow dependent on magical or ki ability. With all due respect, despite your impressive gains in recent months, you still lag behind my great-granddaughter in ki skills and raw power, and far behind either your father or Genma. I have much more magical ability than all of you put together. It's interesting that the four people with a reasonable amount of either talent are the ones to remember the event." Akane looked rather irritated, causing her to smile. "Don't take it as an insult, Akane, it's not meant that way, it's merely a statement of reality. I have no doubt that your abilities will grow with time." This seemed to make the blue-haired young woman less annoyed.

"It would explain why Mariko seemed to notice something more than most of the other students at the time," Soun mused out loud. "I'll have to ask her tomorrow what she remembers, if anything."

"I will ask Mousse as well. He's got a surprisingly large ki ability, it's all that hidden weapons practice over the years. If I'm right he may well be able to remember more than most." Cologne nodded to herself. "Although, I'm not sure if it's anything other than academic by this point. Whatever it was is long over."

Sipping her tea, Nodoka listened with interest. "It still doesn't explain what it actually was," she commented.

"True." The old woman also sipped some tea. "Very true. What I can tell you is that it was the most powerful magical burst I have ever felt, by an unbelievable amount. Far, far past anything any mage I've ever heard of could do. If indeed it actually was magic in the first place. It was... very strange." She shivered slightly at the memory. "Very strange indeed. But, I think, not hostile." Finishing the tea she put the cup carefully on the table. "I also think I know someone who might have been involved in some manner, although how I have no idea. Someone you both know," she added, looking at Shampoo and Akane. The two girls glanced at each other then simultaneously paled.

"You mean...?"

"Yes." Cologne looked seriously at them. "If I'm right, it's yet more evidence you should be very polite to Ms Aoyama." The pair of young women looked like they'd been dipped in ice water momentarily, they shuddered so much. Nodoka poured the Amazon Elder some more tea.

"How very odd," she said, putting the pot down again. Cologne stared for a moment, then snickered.

"That is indeed one way to put it." After a moment, she looked up, an idea occurring to her. "Would you mind if I used your telephone, Nodoka?" The Saotome matriarch glanced at Soun,
who shrugged a little.

"Not at all." She watched as the Elder hopped up and headed for the phone, picking it up and dialling a very long sequence of numbers. "Who are you calling?"

Cologne grinned slightly. "The village. I'm very curious to know how far that magic could be felt for. We know it started in the middle of Tokyo, most likely in Minato somewhere. I need to talk to a good mage somewhere a long way away and there are a number of them in the tribe." Everyone looked oddly at her except for Shampoo.

"I didn't think that there would be a telephone in the village," Nodoka said, looking surprised. The older woman snickered.

"Modern technology is surprisingly pervasive. It's not encouraged in general, but a couple of the Elders have cellular telephones, for emergency contacts in cases like this. Even though I suspect this case is unique." She listened for a little while, until the ringing phone on the other end was answered, then had a long conversation in Mandarin, looking more and more surprised and worried as it went on. Shampoo listened, gasping once or twice at something she said, while the others waited, exchanging curious glances. Eventually Cologne paused, thanked the person on the other end, then very slowly put the phone down. Returning to her seat she stared at the floor for a long moment as everyone waited some more.

"Well." She looked up. "That was enlightening. And frankly extremely unsettling."

The other people in the room exchanged glances as she seemed to be trying to think of something else to say.

"I take it that they felt it?" Soun asked curiously. She laughed hollowly.

"You could say that." The ancient woman shook her head for a moment. "It went right over them and kept going. They think it may have gone all around the whole world. But the interesting thing is what happened immediately afterwards." She told them what Qian Dhu had passed on to her.

"It pulled all the magic out of Jusenkyo?" Genma looked shocked. She nodded.

"Every drop, in seconds. More power than I like to think about, enough to crush a god like a nut under your foot. Then, only a couple of minutes later, it put it back, as well as some more. It was like something needed to borrow an absolutely unimaginable amount of power for some huge task. I can only assume whatever it was, it was successful." She was pale. "I think we may have survived something completely horrific by the skin of our teeth. The only things I can think of that would require such drastic actions are..." The woman shook her head, looking upset. "Totally insane," she finished in the end, picking up her cup once more.

"Add that to what the seer said and I have a very strong feeling that if things had gone differently we might not be here discussing it."

Everyone shivered, feeling unaccountably cold for a few seconds.

"Apparently most of the people in the village can't remember any more than Akane and Nodoka can," she eventually added, "Which adds support for my theory. The ones who can remember are all either mages or strong ki users."

The room fell silent as the people present busied themselves with their own thoughts. After thirty seconds or so Nodoka stirred, methodically picking up all the empty cups and stacking them on the tray. "One day, perhaps, we'll find out what it was about. Until then, I suggest we get on with life.
There isn't much else we can do, after all."

"Wise words, my dear," Cologne smiled. "Wise words indeed." She turned to Akane. "So, child, when are you off to Hollywood next?"

Akane twitched, looking surprised, then answered. Shortly they were in a discussion of what the two young women could expect in the US, all of them quite deliberately trying, mostly successfully, to not think about weird and potentially world-ending magical apocalypses.

Agent Naito sat in front of his computer and looked at the various reports coming in from all sorts of places, first Japan, then later on from other locations around the world. He scratched his nose thoughtfully. It was odd.

Everyone was reporting a very strange twitch or jerk to the world, which had happened as far as could be determined simultaneously everywhere, a few hours ago. But no one was reporting the light, which he could definitely remember seeing. Even his fellow agents who had watched it happen with him didn't seem to know what he was talking about when he made careful enquiries. The whole thing was quite puzzling. 'I guess it's magic, after all, which never seems to do what you expect it to,' he thought to himself. 'I'll have to ask Yori about it. I'm pretty damn sure she was behind it somehow. But what actually happened?'

He was becoming slightly worried as time passed. He'd tried contacting both her and Chou, with no luck. No one had seen either of them, Azumi, Ami and her friends, or Aiko and her team for more than twenty-four hours at this point, which was somewhat unusual.

Turning to look out the window towards the centre of Minato he wondered what had happened. Whatever it was, it had been big. Extremely big. The entire planet seemed to have reacted to it, which was extraordinary, and he couldn't think of anything other than something to do with the time device that could explain anything on that scale. But he couldn't even mention it to anyone other than a very select group of young women, none of whom he could locate. It was a little frustrating.

'At least whatever happened doesn't seem to have sparked mass panic,' he mused. 'Luckily. Some sort of self-censoring thing going on at a guess. I suppose that's possible if some sort of time travel is involved. It might explain why no one seems to be able to remember much about it. I wonder why I can?' He got up and walked to the window, standing next to it and studying the Tokyo scenery. There were fairly few people left in the building at this late-afternoon hour, it was almost time to go home, but he was curious about the whole thing and had stayed to see if he could learn more.

Looking up into the sky, he wondered how far the effect had gone. If it really had been something to do with that time travelling computer trying to reset reality, possibly everyone in the universe had experienced the same thing. It was a sobering thought. The idea that some weird alien life form on a planet in a different galaxy might have felt something that people he knew had done was just bizarre.

'Better than the alternative, though, I think.'

His phone rang, causing him to jump slightly at the sudden noise, then return to his desk. Picking it up he answered, "Naito."

"Masao? I've been trying to get hold of you for an hour. No one in the PSIA seems to want to admit you work for them." The young woman's voice on the other end of the phone sounded mildly irritated. He grinned, recognising it.
"Hello, Ami. I'm sorry, the Special Activities Office is a little paranoid. It's nice to hear from you. How can I help?"

"Can we meet somewhere private to talk, please?" the girl replied, now sounding a little stressed. "I've got some information you need to have, concerning... recent events."

Naito paused for a moment before replying, thinking quickly. "Certainly. How about... let's see, why not try the library? They have private reading rooms, we could use one of those, if you want to be somewhere no one is likely to overhear us."

"That's fine. I'll see you there in twenty minutes."

"All right." Again, he paused. "Is everything all right?"

She sighed. He could imagine her running her hand through her hair as he'd seen in the past a few times. "More or less, yes. But it was a little... no, it was completely terrifying. Look, I don't want to say anything more over the phone. I'll tell you more when we meet."

"That's fine. I'm leaving now."

She disconnected, as he reached out and shut his computer down having saved the report he'd begun. Standing, he retrieved his coat, then left the room, turning the lights out as he went. Waving to the security guards as he exited the building he headed for the Metro station down the road, soon finding himself on a train heading into Minato. Arriving at the correct station he got off, walked for another five minutes, then ascended the steps to the large district library, finding Ami waiting inside, in civilian clothing.

"Hello, Masao," she said quietly, smiling at him.

"Hello." He smiled back, then led the way through the main part of the library to the private reading rooms at the rear, finding an empty one. Both of them went inside and he shut the door. "We sometimes use these when we want a private place outside the PSIA building," he mentioned, locking the door. "The soundproofing is excellent. I've had them discreetly swept for bugs as well, just in case." She nodded, looking around, then tilted her head a little as if she was listening to an internal voice. Satisfied, apparently, she took a seat. He sat across from her.

"Sorry about dragging you away from work," she began.

"Don't worry, I was about to leave anyway." He shook his head. "It's been a weird day."

The young woman choked back a laugh. "That's an understatement and a half," she muttered, grimacing.

"Where are Yori and the others?" he asked curiously. She sighed a bit.

"Everyone except for Rei is still asleep, recovering." At his look of alarm she smiled slightly. "Don't worry, it's nothing serious, just total exhaustion. They completely red-lined themselves attacking that fucking time machine. We won, obviously, since we're still here, but it was a close thing." The girl shuddered a little as he watched. "Far too close for comfort. As far as I can tell we were about three seconds away from a reset loop when..."

"That light?" he queried, feeling cold. She nodded.

"I didn't see it, but I've talked to a couple of people who did and still remember it. Most people don't." She looked at him with interest. "I'm a little surprised that you do. I can only guess that your
contact with Yori and the rest of us for the last year or so, and all the portal travel, has left you a little more sensitive to this sort of thing than most people. It would fit with what I know about it. Yori or Chou would probably be able to tell for sure."

"So what was it?" he asked, after mulling that thought over. She looked uncertain.

"I can't say much, it's sort of private and not my place to say, but they set up a security system years ago that's been growing ever since. It's practically alive by this point. As far as I can work out, it detected the threat the time machine posed when we tried to destroy it pre-emptively, which didn't quite work out the way we hoped, and did a certain amount of reinterpretation of its instructions. Very creatively, in fact, which is surprising and a little scary." She giggled a little nervously. "You really don't want to threaten it or anyone it protects. It's... persistent. And has no understanding of the concept of 'overkill.'"

Naito stared at her. "That doesn't sound very safe."

"Oh, it's safe enough under normal circumstances. They put in interlocks to stop it wiping out Tokyo if any of them were threatened." He paled, causing her to giggle again. "It sounds horrific but we both know Yori could do the same thing if she wanted to. She thinks Hotaru could as well. But neither of them ever would. Anyway, under normal circumstances, or even pretty weird ones, the system they built is totally safe for anyone outside the protected area. Absolutely, instantly lethal for any attacks inside, of course, but that's the whole point."

She sighed a little again. "But this case was different. We were in immediate danger of having all of this reality reset which would essentially have killed everyone, even if it didn't trigger a complete reality erasure, which Lldnr'k thinks might have happened. It was that close. Somehow, the system realised that the threat was terminal and sort of... found a loophole." Ami looked both amused and impressed.

"I don't know the full details, I can't access it like they can, so it will have to wait until they wake up, but from what I've worked out, it somehow found a very large amount of magical energy from somewhere and managed to get it to us, just in time. Azumi felt it trying to attract our attention, Chou opened a portal home, then it blasted so much magic through the portal and into the one we were attacking the time device through that it basically evaporated the damn thing on the spot, using Hotaru's weapon as a conduit."

"I thought you were going to use an antimatter bomb?" he asked. She laughed nervously.

"Oh, we had those, all right. Fifteen of the things." He went white. "More destructive force than I like to think about. Yori got them through a contact. But it wasn't enough. It should have been, many times over, from what our information said, but there was a problem. The time device detected our attack just in time and started the process of the temporal loop before we could destroy it. That caused so much temporal and spacial distortion that the eight weapons we fired at it only damaged it, instead of destroying it instantly as we'd hoped. Yori and the others fired on it to try and stop it completing the loop, but all they could do was delay it. The temporal gateway was acting like a massively powerful shield, diverting most of the energy."

"They'd have gotten through eventually but there's no way even Yori could keep it going long enough. The rest of the bombs couldn't be used unless she stopped firing, the only thing preventing the loop was them firing in the first place, so..." She shrugged helplessly as he shook his head in worried wonder.

"Nasty catch-22."
"Exactly. But, somehow, the system detected all this going on, gathered up all this energy, and managed to use it. The time device died, completely. We used the rest of the warheads just to be sure, but it's definitely over, now. Finally." The blue-haired girl bowed her head. "I still can't believe it. By all rights we should probably have lost."

"I'm very pleased and grateful that you didn't, Ami," he told her with complete truthfulness. She looked up and smiled at him.

"So am I. I didn't do much myself during the operation, there wasn't much I could do, or Rei, for that matter. Hotaru stepped up without question, which I'm very proud about. All the others nearly killed themselves in the process. They're mostly fine but totally wiped out. Yori and Hotaru got badly burned using Hotaru's weapon, it was like on the asteroid only much more powerful. Chou partially healed them before she passed out. They're all still asleep, Rei's looking after them at the moment."

"Will everyone be all right?" he asked. She nodded.

"I'm nothing like as good at medical matters as they are, but as far as I can see they're just sleeping. They'll probably be out for the rest of the day and possibly tomorrow as well. They they'll be incredibly hungry."

He grinned at this. "God. That's terrifying. I've seen how much Yori can eat when she's just a little peckish."

Ami laughed, relaxing. "Oh, it's going to cause a local famine, I have no doubt. Yori will drink about ten litres of coffee then bounce off the walls for a while, Hotaru will clean out the nearest ice-cream shop, along with Misaki..." Both of them chuckled.

"I'm very glad you're all OK," he said after a moment. "It sounds like it was unpleasant."

"It wasn't something I'd like to go through again," she admitted. "The responsibility of knowing that we were all that stood between the entire universe and destruction..." The girl shivered. "Back when my team was still working together we stopped some serious threats, at least one of which was fairly world-ending, but nothing even remotely on that sort of scale. I don't know that anyone ever has."

"The universe was in good hands, I think," Naito told her, smiling.

"Thanks." She stretched, sighing. "But I'm glad it's over. We can get back to what passes for normal now. With a little luck, even my former team-mates might see sense as a result of this, without that thing around influencing them." Leaning back in the chair, she looked at him. "I thought you should know, though, as a friend."

"Thank you for telling me," he responded. "I'd worked out it was probably something like that but it's nice to know for sure. Not that I can tell anyone else."

"Yori will probably let you write a report on the basics for your superiors, she's got a lot of respect for them, but I suspect the details will have to be kept secret," Ami said. "I'll mention it when she wakes up. But at least your own curiosity is sated."

He laughed a little. "More or less. I'm sure there's a lot you're not telling me."

She arched an eyebrow. "Of course. We're magical girls, after all, we have many secrets."

Giggling, she watched as he grinned. "I'd better get back. I'm going to have to go home at some point as well."
"Your mother might be worried," he agreed.

Ami sighed again. "I wish I could tell her, but... it's difficult. I don't know how she'd take it. Especially after all the things that my group did recently. We don't exactly have a good reputation any more."

"Keeping that sort of secret must be difficult," he agreed. "We have the same sort of problem in the security services, although I'll admit not as badly. There are a lot of things about my work I can't tell my wife, although I'd like to. Not even the magical things, just normal day to day security issues. Keeping secrets from your family is awkward at the best of times. I sympathise."

"Perhaps one day I can come clean about it all." The girl stared at her hands for a moment, then raised her eyes to his. "It was nice talking to you, Masao."

"And you, Ami." They both stood. She stepped forward and gave him a quick hug, which he returned. "Stay in touch."

"You'll be hearing from all of us soon, I don't doubt," the girl smiled. Unlocking the door she looked out for a moment. "See you around." With that she was gone. By the time he left the room she was nowhere in sight. Smiling a little, he headed home.

"Sergeant Harada!" The voice came from behind them. Harada and Emiko turned from where they'd yet again been trying to get across to a local the idea that they needed to speak to someone who knew their language, so far unsuccessfully, to see a familiar figure approaching. Xrist looked at them curiously. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Are you looking for that Lieutenant Wilson fellow?"

"Hello, Xrist. I'd like to see him, yes, but that's not the reason we're here. I'm glad to see you. No one here seems to speak our language."

The little demon smiled widely. "It's not common, no. A few of my people go to your world but mostly when we want things from there we buy them from a local trader. I prefer getting coffee fresh. You need to learn Trade, almost everyone here speaks it." He looked at Emiko. "Is this your wife?"

"Yes. Emiko, meet Xrist. Xrist, Emiko." The two looked at each other then smiled.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Emiko," Xrist said politely. The woman nodded back.

"I'm pleased to meet you as well. Tetsuo has mentioned you several times in the past."

Looking amused, Xrist turned back to Harada. "How did you get here in the first place?" he asked, "the next portal to your world isn't scheduled for several more hours." Harada pulled the depleted emergency portal generator from his pocket and gave it back to its owner.

"We found this. Rynnkh, you remember her?" Xrist nodded, inspecting the device. "She confirmed it was yours, then got it recharged for me. I used it a few hours ago." He paused, worried, causing Xrist to stare at him. "Something happened. I'm not sure what, but every traveller to Minato panicked and left at the same time. I got worried and went home, to get Emiko. Rynnkh said we should leave." He bowed his head as the demon looked horrified. "I'm really scared something terrible happened. I feel guilty about leaving, but I had no choice. Not with Emiko and our child at stake."

Xrist looked at them both for a while. "I understand. I'd do the same thing. Come on, I'll buy you
something to eat and drink then we can see if we can find out what's going on. I know some mages who owe me a favour, I'm sure we can get a portal started early." He led them to another shop, some sort of café. "Don't worry too much, with Yori and her friends around it's probably nothing too serious. Those girls are capable of some pretty amazing things."

"You didn't see it," Harada said in a low voice. Even so, he felt better, the respect in Xrist's voice for the young women he trusted so much buoyed his spirits considerably.

Saeko carefully made some tea, filling the cup and taking it back into the other room, where she sat and sipped it, staring at the little crystal statue on the table. Her mind was still working hard on the puzzle the thing presented. After a few sips she reached out and picked it up again, turning it over in her hand slowly and staring at it closely, then holding it up to the light and looking at the refractions. Putting it down again she studied it, before her gaze was drawn across the room to the bookcase and the small, inoffensive grey rock sitting on it.

Almost unwillingly she put the teacup down, got up, then walked over to the bookcase. Picking the rock up she rubbed it with her thumb a couple of times, before heading into her study and turning on her computer. Waiting for it to boot she turned the rock over, feeling it carefully. It was just a rock, right?

When the computer was running she sat down, put the small stone next to the keyboard, then brought up a search engine, trying that new 'Google' one people were saying was impressive. After a moment's thought she typed into it 'moon rock'. Ten minutes later she was leaning back in her chair, staring alternately at the rock in her hand and the image on the screen, pale-faced.

**Lunar Breccia** the page was entitled, showing a series of different rocks collected by NASA during the Apollo missions. The third image on the top row was a dead ringer for the thing she was holding except for the shape. She held the rock up to the screen, comparing them. Then, very deliberately, she closed the web page, cleared her history, turned the computer off, and got up. A few minutes later she was beginning dinner, while both the rock and the statue were back where they belonged.

Blinking crusty eyes, Nabiki looked at the ceiling for a few seconds, then turned her head. She was in the familiar room in her sister's apartment, in bed, although she had no memory of getting there. It took a little thought to work out the sequence of events but eventually it came back.

'How long have I been asleep, Jun?' she asked her SI groggily.

#Nearly twelve hours, Nabiki,# the machine responded immediately, sounding relieved. #I was getting very worried. Your life energy readings were dangerously low. The ward system has been pushing energy into all of you all night but it seems to be taking the cautious approach. You still need a lot of sleep, and you also need to eat. Ami and Rei put all of you to bed after Kasumi collapsed from exhaustion.#

'Oh.' The middle sister pondered the device's words, feeling very slow and fuzzy-minded. 'That would explain why I feel so tired. Are the others all right?'

#My readings indicate no one is in immediate danger although it was a near thing. Ranma came close to death from ki exhaustion. Without the input of energy from the ward system he might well have died. Kasumi was very close to that point as well, as were Aiko and Misaki. Fumiko, Tamiko, and yourself were slightly better off. Hotaru and Ranma were fairly seriously injured during the final attack as well, both of them received third-degree burns to their hands and lower arms, some
internal damage from energy overload was also present. Kasumi healed the worst of it before she passed out but they'll both require more healing when they wake up. I would expect that their normal healing abilities will have partially fixed the remaining damage by that point.

She slowly nodded, sitting up, the words in her head resurrecting more memories. She could vaguely recall her sister heading the other two although it was very fuzzy. Abruptly she became aware she was absolutely ravenous. 'Is anyone else awake?' she asked, swivelling her legs over the side of the bed and waiting out the dizziness that sitting up produced. She was also in desperate need of the toilet.

#Ami and Rei are in the living room talking. Everyone else is still unconscious. Hotaru is in one of the guest rooms, the other girls are in their apartments. Both Ami and Rei have gone out at different times, Rei to talk to her grandfather and Ami to discuss the situation with Agent Naito. The after-effects of what the ward system did seem to have been fairly spectacular and she wanted to let him know the situation was dealt with.# Jun sounded amused, impressed, and slightly worried.

'What did it do?' she asked as she pushed herself to her feet, swaying a little for a moment. Jun was silent for a couple of seconds.

#I am not entirely certain., it admitted sheepishly. #As far as I can work out, it seems to have somehow found a loophole in the rules Kasumi set that prevented it working outside the confines of this building. In the process it acquired a truly vast amount of magical energy from somewhere which it used in that final devastating attack. The interesting thing is that it put it back afterwards, which is... odd. I have been researching the matter since we returned.# The voice sounded puzzled.

#The reports are... conflicted. General consensus is that something happened, but everyone has a different theory as to what. It has been described as a jolt, or thump, or the most common word, twitch. Everyone on the planet would appear to have felt it. My best estimation is that this is the result of a very short and aborted temporal loop, although I have no proof of this. Interestingly it would seem that very few people seem to remember more than that about the event. Several seconds, possibly up to about thirty or so, would seem to have vanished from the collective memory. From what Ami discovered only certain empowered individuals, mages, people of that nature, appear to remember more.#

'That may be a good thing,' Nabiki told it as she made her way to the door very slowly and carefully, feeling like she was barely recovered from the world's worst hangover.

#I would agree. While it has caused a worldwide puzzle, no one seems to be panicking over it. That is both unexpected and lucky. It would be somewhat ironic to save the world only to have the action that did so spark some war or conflict.# Jun sounded darkly amused, causing her to giggle out loud.

'Thank god for our very own Deus Ex Machina, I guess.'

#Quite.# The SI fell silent.

'We got lucky, didn't we?' she asked it a moment later.

#Very. If the ward system hadn't quite evolved to the point that it could not only detect the problem but somehow come up with a counter for it, find the energy for it, and apply it, if you hadn't recognised that it needed a portal to be opened, if Hotaru hadn't seen that her weapon was required, if Ranma hadn't realised in time what was needed from her... There were a large number of variables, the missing of any one of which would have spelled disaster.#
'Could we have succeeded if we'd fired all the warheads the moment we opened the portal?' Nabiki was curious to know if the situation could have been resolved otherwise than the way it was. Jun was silent for a little longer. Eventually it replied.

'It is unlikely knowing now what we do. The information Yrenti's combat drone acquired suggests to me that the device was in the process of setting up for a time loop before we opened the portal to it. Detecting the portal or the drone was enough to make it immediately action that plan, which luckily took a certain amount of time, time that allowed the attack to succeed. But the delay between the portal opening and the weapons detonating was too long to guarantee a clean kill based on how fast it was able to bring up the beginnings of the temporal distortion field. All the simulations I have run suggest that the probability of success of any other plausible plan was very low.'

She shivered, bracing herself against the wall for a moment, then entered the living room, smiling at Rei and Ami, both of whom leaped to their feet and rushed over. 'Thanks, Jun. And thanks for being there.'

'Always, Nabiki,' the device replied, falling silent with an air of satisfaction.

"Nabiki! Are you all right? You look like death," Rei said, studying her.

"Oh, thanks very much, Rei," she responded with a laugh. The other woman blushed.

"Sorry. But you're pale and look like you haven't eaten anything for days."

"I feel pale and hungry," she agreed. "But I'm alive, so that's nice." The three women looked at each other and smiled.

"Come on, I'll go and get something from Mr Singh's takeaway, it will be quicker than cooking it. He should still be open, barely," Ami told her, gently guiding her to the sofa, into which she gratefully dropped. Moments later she struggled to her feet again.

"I need the facilities," she told their curious looks. They smiled, Ami heading for the door. When she came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, the blue-haired girl was just re-entering the apartment, carrying several bags.

"He was about to close so I got everything he had left in the buffet," the woman told them, spreading the bags out on the coffee-table. "Some of it is a little dry by now but it's still edible." All three of them were eating moments later, Nabiki nearly inhaling the food in a remarkably Ranma-like manner that made her companions smile. Eventually she felt full for the moment, leaning back with a sigh of satisfaction and wiping her mouth with a napkin.

"Thanks, Ami. I needed that."

"You're welcome." The blue-haired girl studied her. "You look a lot better as well. Nothing like as pale although you still seem tired."

"I'll go back to bed in a while," the middle sister agreed. "I'm not at the point of falling over any more though." They all shared a look. "So. We won. That's good." After a moment they all began laughing wildly, relief acting on them like a bottle of wine. When they calmed down they just talked.

An hour later, Nabiki yawned. "Nearly five in the morning. I need some more sleep." Looking at the other two, she added, "You guys should go to bed as well. You both look nearly as tired as I feel." Ami nodded sleepily.
"I'm ready for sleep, certainly. I called Mom hours ago and told her I was staying with a friend, so that's OK. She sounded a little weird but I guess that's just from today. It seems to have shaken people up a lot."

"I'm not surprised," Rei said, clearing away the remains of the meal and putting what food was left into the refrigerator, her voice coming back to them from the kitchen. "It certainly shook me up." Returning, she sat again, an odd expression on her face. "Grandfather told me what it looked like from here. It sounds impressive. It's almost a pity practically no one seems to remember it. He said it was the best special effect he'd ever seen."

Laughing, Nabiki glanced at Ami, who was grinning. "Considering what happened I'm just happy the building is still standing." She got up. "Right, I'm going to get some more sleep. Jun thinks the others won't wake up until morning. I think we should get up early and get a lot more food in. If what I felt like is anything to go by, Ranma and Misaki will be ready to eat the furniture." All of them laughed once more, then headed for various beds.

Xrist spoke to the mage who was the leader of the group of four standing around the portal they'd made, nodded, then rummaged around in a container on the floor of the building they were in, as Harada and Emiko watched. "He says the portal formed normally, which is a good sign," the little demon commented, finally producing a small spherical object and holding it up. "Ah. Found it."

"What is it?" Emiko looked at the thing with an interested expression, one hand on her visibly pregnant belly. He looked at her.

"It's a probe, we use them to check what's on the other side of a portal without going through. This type is made on Fwetna where Uthryyl comes from, they sell them all over the place. They're pretty good. Reliable." He adjusted something on the device then tossed it through the portal, into which it vanished with a faint crackle. A few seconds passed in silence. Abruptly the device popped back out, hanging in front of him. He retrieved it and studied a small display on the side. "Well, everything looks normal enough. The portal is targeted to just outside Hikaru's coffee shop. There are people wandering around, even though it's the middle of the night. Nothing looks out of place as far as I can see."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Harada responded with vast relief, holding his wife's hand. She squeezed his in return.

"So am I. I like your world, and Minato. And coffee." Xrist grinned at them. "Hold on a moment." He stepped through the portal. Shortly afterwards he was back. "It really does look perfectly normal," he told them. "Whatever it was that you saw it doesn't seem to have caused any serious damage."

"It's very weird. Maybe I over-reacted?" Harada wondered out loud. His wife shook her head.

"You did what you thought best for the sake of our child, dear, that's never wrong. Unexpected, yes, but not wrong." She smiled as both he and Xrist laughed.

"Well, I suppose we should go back, then. Thank you very much, Xrist, for all the help." Harada heaved a sigh of relief. After a moment he frowned slightly. "Although... Perhaps I should go and visit Lieutenant Wilson, as long as I'm here? I know you said he's fine but..."

"You can certainly do that, Sergeant," the demon told him. "I can arrange travel easily. It's no trouble."
Harada looked guiltily at his wife, who smiled, amused. "You take your work very seriously, dear, I know that. Go and visit this poor man. I'll go home and get some sleep."

"They can hold the portal open for a while, it's easy enough now it's stable, so you could take her home," Xrist suggested. Both the humans looked at him. After a second or two Harada nodded, smiling.

"Thanks. OK, come on, Emiko, let's get you both home." Holding his wife's hand both of them stepped through a portal for the second time ever, in much less of a hurry on this occasion. A few minutes later Harada came back through alone. The mages shut it down immediately. Xrist talked to the lead mage again, apparently thanking them, then led the police officer out of the building.

"We can find transportation at the airfield," Xrist told his guest. "There's an on-demand shuttle service between here and Zthrel we can take." They wandered along, no longer in much of a hurry, talking about the area.
My apologies for the delay. I intended to release this within a day or so of the previous chapter but realised that there were a lot of threads to tie up that were best done in one go. It wraps up most of the main SM/Time machine section, although there will be other parts that occur on and off for a while. Hopefully it also resolves most of the questions that were left over. This caused a certain amount of rewriting and embiggening, which takes time.

We'll be concentrating more on Nerima and the lunatics therein for a while now, they're getting annoyed and beginning to agitate for starting a union or something. Nabiki also feels she's not sufficiently central to the narrative at the moment. Apparently there's some sort of contractual obligation...

Thanks for the comments and reviews as usual.

Oh, by the way, definitely over a million words now ;)

Note: Just to make clear this isn't the end of the story, just this section. In case you're worried. If not, carry on.

Previously in Desperately Seeking Ranma ...

Things happened.

And now, the conclusion...

Kei Ishikawa sighed, got down on his knees with some effort, then looked into the cupboard. A pair of golden eyes looked back at him. "Are you going to stay in there all night, Kin?" he asked. His 'dog' peered out of the cupboard, its ears flat against its head. Reaching in he stroked it, causing it to make a contented little growl, but not move from its position where it had been cowering since the early afternoon and that strange bump he'd felt. Ten minutes or so passed then he stood up again, getting the glass of water he'd come into the kitchen for in the first place, then headed back to bed for a couple more hours of sleep.

Twenty minutes later he woke slightly, feeling something get onto the bed and push itself against his back, then settle down. He smiled to himself before falling asleep again, feeling happy.

The little demonic creature looked at the window for some time before doing likewise.

Looking around at the sound of the door opening, something that still amused him, Lieutenant Wilson raised an eyebrow when he saw a human being enter, followed by Brenke and another of his species. The man was in the uniform of the Tokyo police. "Hello, Lieutenant Wilson," the police officer said in good English, smiling at him. "I'm Sergeant Harada. I've been looking into your mugging." Walking over he held out his hand. Wilson shook it, smiling back.

"Quite a long way from home, aren't you?"

"Both of us, I think," Harada laughed. "It was something unexpected in my case that brought me here although I suspect not quite as large a surprise as it was to you. Brenke has told us that you were somewhat shocked when you woke up."
"That's putting it mildly," Wilson agreed wryly. He pointed out the window by way of example. "We're on an alien planet, for heaven's sake! No spaceships, no interstellar travel, just walking through one of these 'portals', which is just weird."

"It takes you by surprise the first time, yes," the officer replied with a grin. "I've known about portal travel for years but this is the first time I ever went through one. It seems a nice place." He motioned to the other alien, who was watching with interest, Brenke apparently translating their conversation in a low voice to him. "This is Xrist. He's the one that intervened in your attack."

"Ah." Wilson turned to the indicated alien being. "Thank you very much, Xrist. I apparently owe you my life."

Xrist smiled in the odd manner they had after his words had been translated, saying something to Brenke, who turned to Wilson. "He says you're welcome, and if you want to repay him, he's always up for a decent cappuccino." The healer snickered a bit. "I told you he was a coffee addict." Laughing, Harada and Wilson exchanged glances.

"I'm more than happy to buy him all the coffee he wants. It's a small price to pay," the lieutenant replied, smiling. Xrist, when this was translated, smiled as well and nodded enthusiastically, causing all three of the other people to laugh again.

"You may be interested to know we have your assailants in custody at the moment," Harada said, looking pleased. "We'd like a statement from both you and Xrist. He's already agreed to it. Also, we've notified your commanding officer that you were involved in a crime and were under medical care, although we haven't said quite where that care was taking place. We thought we'd see how you wanted to handle it as we don't know the man in question."

"It could be a little tricky," Wilson agreed thoughtfully. "I'm happy to provide a statement, though."

"OK. The scheduled portal is in about... hmm, just under two hours, I think." Harada had a quick conversation with Xrist in Japanese, then nodded. "Yes. So it's probably best to go back then." He turned to the healer. "Assuming he's fit and well?"

Brenke checked the instruments which were still monitoring his patient, nodding after a few seconds, while pulling out and unrolling his computer. He made a couple of notes and put it away again. "He's fine now, although as I said, I would strongly advise taking life gently for at least a few days. No serious exertion, no combat operations. It will take time to rebuild your strength." He studied Wilson for a moment. "Are you in any residual pain at all?"

"No, I feel fine, although just the smallest bit light-headed," Wilson replied.

"Probably due to the synthetic circulatory fluid, I suspect. It's somewhat more efficient at oxygen transport than you're used to which could produce some effects of that nature. It should pass as it gets eliminated from your system." He looked amused. "You'll find that your urine is a rather unusual colour during that process. Bright purple."

Wilson and Harada exchanged glances then laughed. "I'm glad you told me. It would have been a surprise finding that out without knowing why," Wilson chuckled.

"Why don't we go and find something to eat while we wait," Harada suggested. "It's about six in the morning in Tokyo, the time I'm normally getting up and looking for breakfast." He glanced at Xrist and asked him a question in Japanese. The little demon thought for a moment then made a suggestion. "He knows somewhere we might like."
"Sounds good. I am kind of hungry." Wilson turned to Brenke. "Do you want to join us? As a thank you, if nothing else."

"Certainly. I was just about to leave anyway." The healer looked pleased. "It would be most interesting." Walking over to the storage unit in the corner he opened it, removing a package which he placed on the bed. "We had your clothes repaired, hopefully this is satisfactory. Your personal belongings and ID are in there as well." He and the other two left the room to give Wilson some privacy as he got dressed.

Shortly after that the quartet was seated around a surprisingly normal appearing table, eating some very good food. "This is really nice," Harada said approvingly. He looked around. "It reminds me of a café I know in Setagaya for some weird reason." Glancing at Wilson, he smiled. "So, Lieutenant, what do you think of your first encounter with portals, magic, and all the other weirdness that goes on around Minato?"

"It's still sort of a shock," Wilson replied slowly, trying the drink that Brenke had recommended and finding it very good. "It's like something out of a movie. The weirdest part of it is how normal a lot of it seems." He turned to watch a very odd looking vehicle zoom past. "But there are some strange bits as well."

"I'm assured that you get used to things like this by a very authoritative source," Harada grinned.

Peering around at the scene, Wilson sighed a little. "I'm not entirely convinced. But I'll admit I'm nowhere near as freaked out as I keep thinking I should be." He turned back to the police officer. "I still can't believe all this is something you guys just take for granted. Magic, portals, all that sort of thing. Brenke told me that Minato is awash with magical girls as well, which is just..." He made a helpless gesture, unable to work out how to put it.

"It takes some getting used to. The people who live in the area have had years to acclimatise but visitors, even from other places in Japan, tend to be surprised." Harada smiled a little. "We had a police officer from LA last year who took a lot of convincing."

"I can imagine," Wilson muttered. Brenke looked at him, then turned to Harada.

"Do you know a pair of girls by the names of Yori and Chou?" he asked curiously. The Japanese man nodded, finishing his meal.

"Yes. Quite well, in fact. I'd call them friends. We've known each other for several years, my station is in the middle of the area they work in."

"Ah. Interesting. I'd quite like to meet them at some point and discuss their healing abilities, which I've heard are most impressive." The healer looked fascinated as far as Wilson could work out. Harada smiled widely.

"I can say that whatever you've heard on that matter is probably an understatement, to be honest. I've never encountered anyone who was as good at healing, magical or otherwise, as those two young women. They've saved a lot of lives over the years."

The pair of them discussed the subject for a while, during which Wilson slowly finished his meal, listening idly. Xrist was talking to an acquaintance he'd waved over a few minutes ago. Eventually, his hunger sated, he pushed his plate into the middle of the table. "That was excellent," he stated, pleased.

"Good. I'm pleased you liked it," the healer said. Harada looked at his watch.
"A bit over an hour to go. We should probably get back. Xrist tells me the portal connection is in a
town a little way away from his home, which is about two hundred kilometres from here. There are
several mage groups there who specialise in portal travel."

"How do we get there?" Wilson asked curiously.

"By air. They have a lot of local shuttles, that's how we got here. Teleportation, which I'm told
some places use a lot, is fairly rare here, but they don't like wasting time with ground vehicles for
the most part." He grinned at the look on the other man's face.

"Teleportation?" Wilson asked in a strangled voice.

"Oh, yes. Even at home it's used sometimes. There's this one young woman, Aiko, who is
amazingly good at it. You feel really very sick indeed the first time, for a few seconds or so, but
after that it's quite interesting."

Staring at the police officer for some while, Wilson eventually shook his head slowly. "Just when
you think you've heard everything..."

Brenke was also smiling. "You're a pilot, Riley, I suspect you'll find our aircraft interesting. In fact,
I have a friend who is also a pilot. Let me make a quick call." He pulled out a small device that
Wilson realised was something like a cell-phone. After a short conversation, he put it away again.
"She's happy to oblige for a visitor and fellow pilot. Let's get to the airfield and meet her." Slightly
mystified, but curious, Wilson followed as they all left the café. The airfield in question turned out
to be quite close, only a couple of kilometres walk, which was no hardship in the pleasant warmth
of the day.

Entering through a building not dissimilar to a small regional airport at home, they headed to one
side, away from where the normal travellers, most of them the locals but a fair number obviously
from elsewhere, appeared to be congregating. Brenke waved to another of his species who waved
back, coming over to meet them and talking for a while. He turned to them. "This is my old friend
Vrede. She's been a pilot for quite a while, a very good one from what I'm told." He smirked.
"Mostly by her, admittedly, but..."

Wilson laughed, as did Harada. "She's more than happy to take you to your destination rather than
using the normal shuttle service. Her aircraft is a long range transporter and much higher
performance. I think you'll find it interesting, Riley."

"I'd certainly like to see it," he replied. Vrede looked them up and down for a moment, asked
Brenke a question, then did the same to Xrist. Turning back to Wilson she studied him again for a
moment. Brenke relayed the next question she asked directly to him.

"She asked what sorts of aircraft you have piloted and how much experience you have with the
different types." Smiling, feeling suddenly on familiar territory, the pilot responded.

"Two thousand hours or so on rotary wing aircraft, some seven or eight different varieties from
cargo helicopters to the latest high-speed attack helicopter, four and a half thousand hours on fixed
wing aircraft, everything from large multi engine propeller drive airplanes to single-seater turbine
powered fighters, fully instrument rated and combat rated on all of them. I've been flying since I
was fourteen. I think it stands at twenty-three different models of aircraft at the moment." He
grinned. "And I haven't crashed any of them yet."

Brenke laughed, then relayed the information to Vrede, who nodded slowly. She said something
else, which made the healer smile. "She says you can sit up front."
Pleased, Wilson followed as the pilot led them through a door, waving an ID to a guard who merely nodded, having casually glanced at some sort of display behind his desk, then out onto what was very recognisably a working airfield. Neat rows of aircraft of several different types, none of them familiar at all but all of them obviously flying machines to anyone experienced in the aviation world, were parked along the side of the long low building, a lot of small ones with an occasional larger one mixed in. Beyond that was a runway, stretching off into the distance both ways out of sight. He could just make out another one crossing it nearly two kilometres away at right angles. The layout was instantly recognisable. "Hmm. Form follows function even on an alien world," he remarked, causing Harada to glance at him.

"They don't look much if anything like aircraft from home for the most part," he explained to the enquiring look, "but they're still obviously aircraft. Very advanced ones, mostly. That one over there looks a little like a concept I've read about that NASA was working on a couple of years ago. The layout of the runways is pretty much the same as home as well, which makes sense, it's an efficient and obvious way to do that particular job. All the markings and lights are totally different but it's still an airport." He looked around with a smile. "It feels... right, somehow."

"Interesting," the police officer commented, looking around. "But I suppose not entirely unexpected."

Vrede led them a few hundred metres down the parking apron, which seemed to be made of some sort of very tough and grippy plastic rather than tarmac, to a vehicle that made Wilson stop and stare admiringly. It was a form of blended body flying wing, in human terms, but with quite short wings for the length, which was approximately the size of a medium range business jet from Earth, although with a wider body. He guessed it used the fuselage for a lot of the lift, another concept he knew was being worked on at home, although it was decades away from even the prototype stage. Walking over to it he inspected the dark blueish coloured machine from close up, glancing at Vrede as he raised a hand. She motioned to him, apparently pleased he'd asked permission. Running his hand over the skin of the machine he whistled.

"Wow. It's practically frictionless." Looking closely he could see the skin had thousands of tiny channels running longitudinally along it. When he inspected the wing nearest him the same thing was apparent. "I've read about this. It reduces the boundary layer thickness and controls laminar flow, which reduces drag. People have been experimenting with it at home for a long time but there are all sorts of practical problems with actually using it." Brenke was translating, making Vrede nod approvingly.

He continued inspecting the airframe curiously. Walking around to the rear of the wing he raised an eyebrow, noticing something that was to his eyes odd. "There aren't any control surfaces. Ailerons, flaps, anything like that. In fact, I can't see any moving parts at all."

When the healer translated this for Vrede, she smiled and spoke for a moment. "She says the wing changes shape at the trailing edge to control the airflow. It's much more efficient and also mechanically simpler if you have the right materials," Brenke told him. Wilson stared at the wing, impressed.

"Amazing." Noticing what seemed to be one of the engine outlets, which was at the end of a subtle bulge in the wing where it blended into the fuselage, he moved over and peered into it. To his surprise he could see light coming through from the other end around a gentle curve. The passageway opened out inside, becoming steadily larger towards the front. Ducking under the wing, which was about a metre and a half off the ground with the aircraft parked as it was, he scuttled to the front, then looked at the intake of what seemed to be an engine. It merged neatly into the root of the wing in a manner that was very familiar, yet subtly different from any jet intake
he'd come across. Looking into it he again couldn't see any moving parts. Puzzled, he moved closer, ending up sticking his head inside completely. A sound from behind him made him pull it out and turn to look at the pilot, who was laughing her head off.

"Is it some sort of ramjet?" he asked her curiously. "It's obviously not either a turbine or a rocket, it's practically just a tube." Still looking amused, she glanced at Brenke as he translated the question, then looked approving again at the question. She spoke at length, the healer passing her words along.

"No, it's something called a peristaltic compression engine. It uses a rapidly moving series of forcefields which are generated at the intake end, then pass down the length of the engine to the outlet. Air is trapped between successive ones and highly compressed as a result, heating up enormously and expanding, then is ejected at the rear to produce thrust. In normal operation that's sufficient but for extra boost a liquid fuel can be injected at the right point and burned to increase the output by a large margin for a short period of time. It's used for take-off when heavily loaded."

Wilson listened with amazement. "So no moving parts at all, nothing to wear out?"

"The power storage cells eventually need to be replaced but they last for years. It's electrically powered, the power is stored in high density batteries in the airframe, which themselves are packed into a subspace pocket. There's a heat resistance and durability spell on the engine linings or otherwise the airflow would erode the material away in the end, even with how tough it is. The skin is treated in a similar way to minimise the effect of air friction and particle impact, such as from sand or dust."

"Wow." He was stunned. There were a number of fascinating concepts there that he wanted to learn more about. After a couple more questions, which themselves led to even more things that were something of an eye-opener, she waved towards the aircraft.

"We should go if we're going to make your appointment and still have time to show you what my aircraft can do." Walking over to the fuselage in front of the wing she prodded a control, which made part of the skin fold away and a ramp extrude somehow, sliding out silently until it touched the ground. She entered the aircraft, the others following. Inside, there were three rows of seats, five in each row, at the front of the vehicle, with a hatch into the rear section which he judged would comprise about three quarters of the thing. That was obviously for cargo. Speaking to Brenke, she pointed at the seats at the front of the passenger compartment. Xrist took one of the front row, while Harada and Brenke took the other two.

From the inside the top part of the fuselage in a strip half a metre tall was transparent the full length of the compartment while another clear section ran down the ceiling. Wilson stared, then stuck his head back out the door and looked at the outside of the craft. It was opaque, the same colour as he'd seen when they approached it. Pulling his head back in he looked out the transparent part. "That's a neat trick," he commented, startled.

"It's quite common, actually," Brenke remarked. "It's a spell bought in from a world called Fwetna. They use anti-gravity a lot there, for things like air-cars, and they all use the same spell on them. It's apparently easier on the structure of a vehicle like this than putting actual windows in."

"I can see where it would be," he said numbly. "Anti-gravity?"

"Oh, yes. They're quite fond of it. We use it for some purposes, but it's more energy-efficient for long distance travel to use aerodynamic lift." Brenke shrugged. "That's what Vrede says, anyway. Apparently vehicles like this use something similar to reduce the acceleration forces felt inside, which allow high manoeuvrability without crushing the occupants. Some of the larger aircraft have
emergency recovery systems using it as well."

"That's absolutely amazing." Shaking his head, he looked around to see Vrede watching him from the cockpit of the aircraft, which was mostly open to the passenger compartment. She waved him forward. Pointing to the right-hand seat of the pair mounted in the nose, she indicated he should sit. Slightly dubious, as it didn't look like it would fit very well, he did so. She studied him, then adjusted several parts of it, until he found it was quite comfortable, at least as good as some Earth aircraft he'd flown in. Satisfied, she pointed to a control on the left arm of the chair, motioning for him to touch it. As soon as he did so, he felt something invisible firmly but gently restraining him in the seat. It seemed to be the equivalent of a seat harness. Reaching down she stroked her finger sideways across the same control, which made the force-field or whatever it was vanish. He grinned.

"That's also very cool." She smiled back, sitting in the left seat. Wilson was amused to note that it was the same way around as the pilots of an aircraft back home, by international custom, was arranged in a cockpit, the pilot in charge on the left and the co-pilot on the right. 'I guess it's a fifty-fifty chance with a cockpit laid out like this after all,' he thought to himself.

He studied the instrument panel, or what would be that on any aircraft he was familiar with. There were no visible displays or controls except for a sort of joystick affair on the right side of his seat, retracted out of the way. He noticed that she had the same type of thing on her seat as well. Looking down there were no rudder pedals visible either.

Vrede reached out and put her hand on the middle of the console, which immediately lit up with a faint ping. A number of instruments appeared on the matt surface, floating behind it in some sort of display, most of them recognisable with a little thought. 'Air speed, that one must be, that is clearly a form of artificial horizon, that must be the altimeter...' He identified almost everything he'd expect to find in a cockpit of an aircraft at home although a few of them took a little thought as the layout was odd. He couldn't read any of the text but the graphics were fairly straightforward. Looking over her shoulder she quickly checked the ramp retracted and the door closed when she pressed the appropriate control.

She touched a couple more of the virtual controls, which made the wide windscreen, which stretched completely around them side to side and top to bottom, suddenly have a copy of the critical instruments appear on it in the most amazing HUD system he'd ever come across. Somehow it was working out where he was looking and putting the artificial horizon and other instruments directly but discreetly in his view no matter where he moved his eyes, perfectly focussed and in three dimensions. "Good grief," he muttered to himself in awe. "That's incredible."

Vrede glanced at him, apparently picking up on his tone even through the language barrier, judging by her smile. Tapping a control on the seat arm she spoke to the air, in what he instantly recognised as the manner of a pilot talking to air traffic control. An immediate response came back, causing her to nod to herself, then reach forward and grab the joystick control, into which one inserted one's entire hand, pulling it into position. Looking at the one in front of him he could see there was a grip inside, with a couple of controls barely visible buried in it.

She tapped another control causing the windscreen to suddenly have a pair of what seemed to be 3D camera images, extremely detailed and high resolution, floating in it, one showing either wing. Moving the control stick in various ways she studied the images, in which he could see the wings flexing and changing shape. Preflight check over she dismissed the screens then talked to ATC again. She called something over her shoulder. Brenke called back, "She says we've got clearance for immediate take-off, so hold on." Wilson hastily poked the control for the restraint field again.
Manipulating a couple of controls on the console made the aircraft vibrate gently with a deep thrumming noise, right on the threshold of hearing. She did something to the joystick which made the sound get much louder, the plane beginning to roll. Bringing it up to a fast walk she moved out onto the taxiway, turning to the right and speeding up a little. He watched intently, trying to understand the controls, occasionally glancing out the window. After a couple of minutes they reached the end of the runway, turning and pausing for a moment while another aircraft of a different design accelerated hard, then smoothly tilted back and took off, a muted whooshing sound coming into the cockpit. He imagined it was probably quite loud outside the vehicle, although pretty obviously much quieter than a turbine aircraft would be.

A few seconds later the voice from ATC came again. Vrede acknowledged the message before moving out onto the runway and lining up down the centreline. Wilson was feeling right at home by this point, aside from the weird technology, everything else was remarkably familiar.

A moment later he watched as a pair of indicators on the HUD rose in time with the engines winding up to full power, a muffled roar coming from outside, then she released the brakes. The aircraft immediately moved off, gathering speed at a rate he'd only encountered before in an CF-18 on full afterburners, although with much less feeling of increased G forces than he expected, no more than you'd feel in a light aircraft. He watched the instruments as they reached take-off speed. Pulling gently back on the joystick caused the vehicle to rotate into a take-off attitude and leave the ground without a single bump. It was the smoothest departure he'd ever experienced. A few seconds later there was a faint sound that he decided was the landing gear retracting.

Climbing rapidly, they reached an altitude he estimated at something like five thousand metres in very short order, levelling off at that point. The view was amazing, perfect visibility to the horizon. After a little thought he realised it could well be that with this sort of technology this world simply had much less pollution than at home. It was an interesting thought.

The pilot banked gently to the right, circling around until she was heading almost in the opposite direction to that which they'd taken off in, beginning to climb again, although throttling back. She glanced at Wilson, apparently pleased at his rapt expression as he tried to watch everything at once. Looking over his shoulder he saw Sergeant Harada was also watching with every sign of enjoyment, mixed with a healthy dose of awe, meeting his eyes and grinning for a second. "It's pretty amazing, isn't it, Lieutenant?" the officer said, not having to raise his voice much. The internal noise level was about the same as in a typical car moving at highway speeds.

"Absolutely. It's very interesting, how much of this is all recognisable to me. The controls are somewhat unusual but not so much I couldn't see someone back home coming up with them. The HUD layout is fairly close to what I'd expect as well for the most part. The technology is amazingly advanced, of course, never mind the magic used," he shook his head at his own words, he never thought he'd be talking about magic seriously, certainly not as part of an avionics system, "but it's not so advanced it's not something I can't work out at all."

"I've never really been in anything smaller than something like a 747 before, and certainly not in the cockpit, so I'll have to take your word for it," Harada replied, still looking around with amazement. "But I'm very glad to have this experience. The shuttle flight here from Xrist's town was much less interesting, it was like a flying bus."

Brenke was listening, intermittently passing on some of their conversation to the pilot, who looked mildly amused. She said something to him, which he nodded to, then turned to Wilson, who looked back when the healer spoke. "Riley, she asked if you'd like to try flying it?"

"I'd love to, but I'm not sure I could without a lot more study," he responded, glancing at Vrede.
She made a gesture that he couldn't work out, then said something back to Brenke when he translated this for her.

"It's not difficult, she says, especially for someone with extensive flying experience. The computer would take over if you did anything dangerous, assuming she didn't. She say the thing can fly itself completely competently, it doesn't need a pilot at all." Vrede added something that made him laugh. "But that's no fun."

Wilson snickered. "The sentiments of a true pilot. OK. Why not?" Looking at Vrede, he nodded. She motioned to the joystick. Reaching forward he put his hand into the grip, finding it immediately slid far enough out of the panel that it was comfortable for him to hold without effort. He watched as she went through the basic manoeuvres one at a time, slowly and carefully showing what each motion on the control did. He nodded to himself. "OK, roll, pitch, yaw. Got it. That's throttle? Yes. Right. Let's see what happens." He indicated to her that he was ready.

Prodding a sensor on her panel, she transferred control to him. The aircraft immediately dipped wildly as he tried the stick. "Whoops," he muttered, embarrassed. "Very sensitive controls..." Concentrating, he managed to bring it back from some rather exuberant gyrations. "Sorry," he called over his shoulder, watching the HUD and the view out the window at the same time, slightly distracted by Vrede laughing from next to him, apparently enjoying the experience. The swearing in muted Japanese from behind him made it clear that Sergeant Harada didn't appreciate it quite as much. Even whatever anti-inertial system the aircraft had didn't completely eliminate the falling sensation he'd managed to produce.

It took about ten minutes and a couple more exhilarating sessions of near loss of control, but eventually he was flying straight and level, no longer straining not to make a mistake. He thought it would take a couple of hours on the controls to get to a decent level of competence, at least to the point he'd feel safe trying a landing, but his experience on a wide variety of different aircraft stood him in good stead. He was thoroughly enjoying himself, falling back into the familiar routine of scanning the horizon regularly, checking the instruments on each scan, While he couldn't read them as far as altitude and speed went, he'd memorised the readings that Vrede had ended up at and was keeping the machine flying at the same height and velocity quite successfully.

Glancing at her, he found her watching him with what looked like approval and a certain amount of respect. He nodded to her, which made her nod back with a smile. She made a motion which he interpreted to mean pulling back while throttling up. Slightly nervously, he did as requested, pointing the nose up and increasing power. The plane headed rapidly upwards. She motioned to increase power again. Pushing the relevant control inside the stick to the limit, he felt light G forces pushing him gently back in his seat. Behind him, three different voices said three different things in two different languages, remarkably enough all covering the same concept. He grinned, as did Vrede, while they headed upwards at a seventy-five degree angle. A few seconds into the climb he noticed a vapour cone briefly appear on the wing nearest him as they broke the sound barrier.

"How fast will this thing go?" he called back to Brenke. There was a long pause, then the healer asked the question in his own language, sounding like he was now regretting introducing the two pilots.

"Slightly more than twice the speed of sound," the answer came back. "Which is much too fast in my opinion." Snickering, Wilson glanced at the other pilot, who was eyeing her instruments and looking pleased. He kept climbing, watching as the sky steadily darkened. She eventually motioned for him to level off, at an altitude that must have been at least twenty thousand metres as far as he could judge, higher than he'd been in anything but a fighter before, and that rarely.
"Very impressive, especially for a transport aircraft," he commented. "It's faster and more agile than most fighters from back home." Brenke passed the message along sounding slightly less stressed now they were flying on the level. Looking out to the side, Wilson could see for an amazing distance, clouds visible right on the horizon, far below them. He grinned. It might have taken a near-death experience, but he was suddenly very pleased he'd ended up where he had.

The second time Nabiki woke she felt much better. Still slightly fatigued but nothing more than like the day after a late night, nowhere near the bone-deep exhaustion she'd felt the night before. Lying in the bed with her eyes half open, listening to the traffic outside, she smiled a little. It was good to be alive considering what had so nearly happened.

She could feel the others in the building, Ranma and Kasumi still asleep in their room, Ami and Rei in the guest rooms along with Hotaru, and below them Aiko and the others. There was also a definite sensation of the ward system keeping a closer than normal eye on them all, in a rather proprietary manner mixed with mild worry. And weirdly, just a trace of guilt. Grinning she reached out and stroked the wall beside the bed. "Thanks, you clever thing," she whispered, receiving an odd sensation of gratitude back.

It was about half past seven according to her time display, she noticed as she pulled the covers back. Standing and stretching widely, she yawned, scratched herself between the shoulder-blades, then dug around in the dresser for a change of clothes before heading for the nearest bathroom. Twenty minutes later she was in the kitchen making coffee, feeling oddly content. Ami wandered in moments later, sniffing the air appreciatively and looking sleepy. "Here you go," the middle sister said, handing her friend a cup of strong coffee. The other woman smiled, drank a third of it, then sighed.

"Oh, that's good. I needed that."

"I know the feeling," Nabiki replied, drinking half her cup in one go. "I can't get going in the morning properly without coffee either." The two of them chatted while she made a quick breakfast, adding another portion when Rei staggered in and groped for the cup Ami handed her, looking amused. The black-haired girl slurped eagerly at the hot drink.

"Thanks," she muttered, turning and wandering back into the living room wearing a vacant expression and pyjamas. They watched her go.

"She's even worse than we are," Ami commented, laughing.

By the time they'd had breakfast, all three of them were feeling and looking more alive. The other two had a quick shower before returning to the living room. "I'm going to go and get a lot of food in," Nabiki told her friends. "I could do with some help."

"OK, I'll come with you, if you can stay here in case there's any problem, Rei?" Ami said, glancing at her team-mate. The other girl nodded.

"Sure. No problem."

"T'd think we should probably just let them sleep until they wake normally," Nabiki mused, glancing towards the main bedroom. She could hear Ranma snoring delicately, causing her to grin a little, and Rei to laugh. "But they feel like they're going to do that fairly soon as far as I can tell. Let's get a lot of high-calorie stuff, as well as protein. And a long stick to put the food on so Ranma and Misaki don't take our fingers with it." Ami cracked up, heaving with laughter.
"They're not that bad, surely," she gasped out.

Nabiki shrugged. "You haven't seen them really go at it. You need to come to a party where there's roast g'ragh. Just don't stand between them and the food..."

"What the hell is g'ragh?" Rei asked curiously.

"Delicious."

The girl gave her a flat look as she laughed. "Oh, extremely helpful. Thanks." Ami giggled, watching them.

"It's an animal from Uthryyl's world. Amazing to eat but a bit weird to look at," the middle sister added, relenting, but smiling at the expression. "Everyone who's tried it seems to love it. We'll have to see about getting some soon. I think we need to let Uthryyl know about what's happened, anyway, I'll call him later."

"I'd like to meet him," Ami told her. Beside her Rei nodded. "You've said quite a lot about him over the last few days. He sounds interesting."

"He is. As are his wife and daughter. You'll like all of them. Onkra is going to come and stay here for a while at some point for more training. She seems really taken with learning the Art, during our holiday she was practising more than I was." Nabiki laughed a bit. "And I was being pushed pretty hard by Sis and Ranma."

"I can't work out whether I should be looking forward to being trained by them, or running as fast as I can," Rei giggled. The other two grinned, Ami nodding a little.

"Oh, it'll be fine. Just wait until phase four." Nabiki gave the two girls the most evil look she could, chuckling in a dark tone. They exchanged glances, looking worried.

"Ah... Phase four?"

"Don't worry too much about it," the middle Tendo assured Ami, which didn't seem to have the requested effect. Neither did the maniacal laugh she came out with with reassure her either. Heading towards the door, Nabiki grinned to herself, as after a pause Ami followed, still looking somewhat fearful.

"I don't know what happened but I'm kind of surprised there's been so few problems as a result of it," Harrison said, looking at Captain Martinez as he entered the office, closing the door behind him. "Lots of reports of minor fender-benders, a few people who seem to have had minor accidents because they got distracted, more conspiracy theories than you'd believe about it all, but nothing serious so far." He looked at his notebook, flipping through it for several pages. "Apparently it was a CIA mind control plot, the Russians, the North Koreans, the South Koreans, no idea what that one's about, God, Satan, Aliens, the Illuminati, the Canadians of all people, the fault of something called HAARP, the Israelis, the Iranians, an international banking cartel, Microsoft, the Saudis, fluoride in the water, trans-fats, and the lack of enough good cannabis." He shrugged as the captain started laughing, drawing a deep breath after his recital.

"What, all of that at once?"

"Yep. It's obviously a very major conspiracy." Harrison chuckled wryly. "Everyone I spoke to seems to have no idea what they were doing for twenty to thirty seconds before the... twitch, or whatever it really was, but in almost every case it looks like they were just getting on with life. It's
like that period was just edited out of reality somehow. Like it never actually happened. It's very weird indeed."

"What about surveillance cameras, things like that?" his superior asked. Again, he shrugged.

"I checked the footage from the cameras here, then asked a couple of shopkeepers I know if I could look at theirs. It doesn't show anything useful at all. Just a lot of people doing what they do, then suddenly looking around with puzzled expressions. There's no sign of an earthquake, or any physical cause for whatever it was. Aside from the memory, and the gap in it just before, it's like it never happened." He looked at his notes again. "Although there was one person, an old voodoo priestess I met wandering around down-town looking more wild-eyed than usual, who told me very seriously that it was all to do with an ancient evil trying to remake the world in its own image and being defeated by 'glowing people from outside', whatever that means. Oh, and she said there was a giant crow involved somehow. And a house that saw everything." He shook his head slowly. "I'm not entirely sure she was exactly sober at the time."

Captain Martinez stared at him for a few seconds, then sighed. "It's going to be something to do with magic, isn't it?" he asked, more rhetorically than anything else.

"Most likely. It sort of has that feel to it, yes." The lieutenant sat down opposite the desk, closing his notebook and holding it in one hand at his side. "I'll try calling Yori at some point and asking her. She'd know if anyone would. But on the face of it, aside from some weird effect that everyone in the city seems to have felt, nothing actually happened. It'll give the paranoid loonies material for decades but I can't see any other problems stemming from it. It's not like there's any genuine evidence."

"More like the entire planet, from what I've been able to find out," Martinez said, indicating his computer. "There are similar reports from all over the place. But again, no evidence. Lots of really silly theories, Fox News was running a number of the crazier ones and laughing at them and the people pushing them, but it's like you found out. No proof at all."

"Very strange." Harrison flexed his shoulders, working out a kink, before looking back to the other man. "So should we keep asking questions?"

The captain thought for a second or two before shaking his head slowly. "No. We've got much more important things to deal with, like actual crimes. File your notes then go home, we can get on with normal life tomorrow." Harrison nodded, standing. "But, if you ever do find out what it was from Yori, let me know. I'm curious."

Laughing, the lieutenant nodded again. "I'll do that, sir. Good night."

"Give my best to your wife, Harrison," Martinez said with a small smile, watching as his officer left, then spinning the chair around to look out over LA as evening fell, wondering what had happened. Eventually he shrugged, got up, and went home himself.

Looking up at the knock on the door, Captain Uehara called, "Enter." It swung open to reveal Sergeant Harada, accompanied by a middling height foreign man about thirty-five, fit looking and dressed in military fatigues, his dark brown hair uncombed but otherwise looking fairly tidy, and a small demon that she recognised from the descriptions she'd heard. "Ah, Sergeant. I was wondering where you'd gotten to. You missed the last half of your shift yesterday. Not your usual behaviour."

Harada looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Captain. When I saw the column of light over by the park I panicked, I'm afraid, and ran to get Emiko to safety. I used the emergency portal generator of
"What column of light?" she asked slowly. He looked back at her, puzzled.

"Somewhere around the park? A weird colour, it went right up into the clouds. All the demons ran like hell as soon as they saw it, there are hardly any around at the moment." She kept watching him, unblinking. After a long moment, she shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." It was his turn to stare for a while.

"That's... very strange. Emiko and I both saw it. So did Hikaru. He's the one who told me to go to her." After another moment, he pulled out his cell-phone. "Do you mind if I...?"

She motioned to it. "Feel free. I'm very curious myself." He dialled a number, waited, then had a conversation that left him looking more and more puzzled as it progressed. In the end he thanked the person on the other end, disconnected, then stared at the phone as if he couldn't work out what it was. Xrist and the foreign military man she assumed was Lieutenant Riley Wilson exchanged a glance. Eventually he put the phone away and looked up.

"He can't recall anything about either what we saw or what he said to me. He asked a few people in the coffee shop, none of them can remember anything about it either." After a pause, he added, "That's very weird."

"Weird is practically normal around here." She laughed for a moment, becoming more serious quickly. "Everyone seems to have felt some odd bump or jolt, all at the same time, while from what I can work out there's several seconds of the day missing as well, but we can't find any evidence as to what caused it, or who. Or why. No damage reported, no-one seriously injured, nothing particularly interesting at all. But no reports of columns of light from the park."

Comparing notes they quickly worked out that the odd twitch in the world had occurred moments after the sergeant had used the portal generator. "How very odd," she eventually summed up. "I suppose they're connected but I have no idea how."

"I know someone who might," Harada said slowly, looking down at Xrist, who had been listening with interest. Lieutenant Wilson was appearing slightly confused as the conversation had been in Japanese.

"Yori?"

"Yes. I'll ask her when I next contact her."

"Let me know the results," she requested. "If only to satisfy my curiosity. I would assume it wasn't anything particularly serious or there would be more damage, but it's very odd nonetheless. The effect seems to be very widespread as well, which is impressive." She looked up at the other man, who was now examining one of the pictures she had on the wall of her office. Switching to English, she added, "Lieutenant Wilson, I presume?" He jumped a little at being addressed, turning to face her. "My apologies for being rude like that but it appears we have something of a mystery going on. Not unusual for Minato in general, but... mystifying." She grinned as he laughed.

"I'm learning that this area is somewhat unusual," he replied. She motioned to a chair. He sat down, as did Harada and Xrist.

"So. I trust you're well after your experience?" she asked. He nodded, smiling.
"Remarkably so, all things considered. I've had a very odd thirty-six hours or so, although everything seems to have worked out. While I can't recommend being eviscerated as a means of meeting new people in strange places it does at least seem to work." She stared at him for a moment then laughed for some time.

"An interesting attitude. You'll do well, I think. Could you tell me what happened?"

"Of course." He began talking, explaining everything since he'd been jumped by the two muggers. She listened with interest at first and a certain amount of envy later on. Xrist and Harada also added their parts in the short but unusual saga. Eventually, he stopped with a shrug. "That's basically it. Vrede amused us with a few aerobatics, then dropped us off in this other town a few minutes before the portal was due to be opened here. We came through about thirty minutes ago along with half a dozen others from Xrist's world, who all headed off for coffee." He shook his head looking bemused. "Which is one of the strangest reasons for visiting another world that I can think of."

"We get it a lot here, believe me," she replied, smiling a little. Glancing at Harada, she got the impression that the lieutenant's comments about being amused by Vrede's aerobatics hadn't quite caught the truth of the matter. The poor man had swallowed hard and closed his eyes when the pilot had said that, privately amusing her. Suppressing a smile, she asked him, "Do you have anything more to add about it, Sergeant?"

"Lieutenant Wilson covered it very well," he told her, speaking English for the benefit of the Canadian. "I'll write up a report on what I did but most of it to that point was looking for someone who understood us. Luckily Xrist bumped into us before anything happened. After that it was all fairly easy, although until we checked and found everything at home was all right I was very worried." He shook his head briefly. "It was an enormous relief when we were able to open the portal and discover things seemed normal, after what I saw, although I'm still very curious as to what exactly it was."

"As am I. However, since nothing seems to have changed or be wrong, I doubt there's much we can do except get on with business as usual." She turned back to the lieutenant. "Your commanding officer is quite worried. He was all for coming here to help look for you until we told him you were in good hands. I'm relieved to see that was actually true." Wilson smiled at this. "You should probably call him and tell him you're all right, although I'm not entirely sure how you'll explain what happened."

"It could be tricky," Wilson agreed.

"We should let Agent Naito know as well. He may be able to help with any explanations, his department of the PSIA has a lot of experience with that sort of thing," Harada suggested. "He'd probably like to debrief the lieutenant anyway, for the record."

Captain Uehara nodded slowly, glancing at the Canadian officer, who looked curious. "That's a good idea. It shouldn't take too much time. I'm sorry to delay you getting back to your unit any further but it might be important." Wilson made a gesture of understanding.

"Don't worry about it, Captain, I understand. I'll have to do much the same thing when I get back. I'm used to giving reports."

"Thank you. All right, Sergeant, if you could take an official statement from both Xrist and Lieutenant Wilson on the crime, then call Agent Naito, please? I'll contact Lieutenant Wilson's CO in the mean time and let him know his missing man is no longer missing." Both men nodded. She turned to Xrist, who was patiently waiting while they spoke.
"I'm very thankful for your help, Xrist," she told him sincerely in Japanese. "Without you stepping in we would have had a murder to investigate, and probably an awkward international problem as well. Thank you very much on behalf of both myself and the Tokyo police force for doing what you did." He bowed his head, then smiled widely, showing a remarkable number of teeth.

"It was my pleasure, Captain. While I don't like getting involved in official matters, here or at home, when I can avoid it, I couldn't let someone die if I could prevent it. I like your people, aside from anything else. And I really like coffee, so I want to be able to keep coming back."

The Captain laughed, as did Harada. "Please feel free to come as often as you wish. From what I gather you and the rest of the visitors to the district are having a very positive effect, both commercially and otherwise." She smiled at him. "I'm going to have to visit this coffee shop you like and meet the people who seem to be going there."

"The first espresso is on me, if you do," the little demon said with a grin. With that, he and the others left her office. Still smiling, she looked up the number for the base in Okinawa then picked up the phone, dialling while wondering once again what had happened the day before.

Naito stopped writing, putting his pen down and flexing his hand a couple of times, then read the last few paragraphs. He nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you for the information, Lieutenant, it's helpful." He made a quick correction to a minor mistake, before closing the notebook and putting it away. "We've made arrangements to get you back to your base. Sergeant Harada tells me he has everything he needs from you for the case against the Miura brothers so I don't think there's any need to keep you from your duties any longer. We'll sort out a report to your superiors explaining the situation." He studied the other man for a moment.

"How would you like that report slanted?" he asked. Wilson looked mildly confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we can sanitise it a bit, to... de-emphasise the less usual parts, so to speak. The portal travel, the rescue by Xrist, or at least mentioning the fact that he's not from around here, that sort of thing. What you tell your people is up to you but from past experience foreigners quite often find what goes on around here a little difficult to believe." He grinned. "To be honest, people from around here sometimes find what goes on around here hard to believe, but that's another matter."


"The Canadian government is well aware of magic and the sort of person we have in Minato, after recent events, but that doesn't mean it's been disseminated to everyone in the armed forces."

The lieutenant raised an eyebrow. "Recent events? You mean the Halleckton Event?"

Naito nodded, frowning slightly. "Yes, unfortunately. It was a very unpleasant experience."

"You were there?"

"Not in Halleckton itself, but I was involved, along with a number of the special talent who live locally." Naito sighed a little. "It was the endgame of a very unpleasant case. We didn't quite manage to get there in time."

"I heard about it, but don't know any of the details," the pilot responded. "From what I heard there were a couple of, um, 'magical girls', is it?" Naito nodded. "Called Yori and Chou. Healer Brenke, who fixed me up, mentioned them as well. Apparently they have something of a reputation."
"To put it mildly. They're involved in a lot of things that are strange even around these parts. Good people."

"He was interested in meeting them at some point. He says they're supposed to be amazingly good at healing." Wilson seemed impressed.

"Oh, that's true enough. I've seen some remarkable things along those lines." He studied the other man. "Yori could certainly deal with that scar easily enough if you want me to ask her."

"Perhaps some other time." Wilson didn't seem too worried. "I'm not all that fussed by it and it's proof that something happened."

"True enough. So, what do you want this report to say?"

After some thought, the Canadian officer replied, "I suppose it's probably best to downplay the more unusual elements. I can explain them when I find out how it's likely to be received. I assume I can get you to verify it if necessary?"

"Of course." Naito handed him a card. "You can get me on this number twenty-four hours a day, although I'd prefer it be during sensible hours unless it's an emergency." Looking amused, Wilson accepted the card, looked at it, then pulled out his wallet and put it carefully away.

"Thank you." Standing, he held out his hand. "And it was a pleasure meeting you. I'd better go, I'd like to see Bruce before he flies out again, and let him know I'm all right. Then I need to get back to the base."

"Ah, your friend you came here to meet?"

"Yep. From what Sergeant Harada said he was very worried when I didn't turn up." The two of them left the private room they'd been talking in and headed to the front of the police station, entering the large main room. Harada looked up from talking to Xrist and waved them over, handing Wilson an envelope when they reached him.

"Train tickets, courtesy of the PSIA," he said. The lieutenant slipped the envelope into his pocket with a smile of thanks.

"It was nice to meet you both, Sergeant," he replied, nodding to Xrist and holding out his hand. The little demon shook it, grinning, then said something to Harada, who laughed.

"He said he was happy that he could help, but he doesn't want to come flying with you again for a while," the man relayed, making Wilson chuckle.

"Pity. That was a hell of a lot of fun. Vrede invited me back when I had time. I may take her up on it. Her aircraft was amazing." He shook his head slightly. "I know what I want for Christmas."

Shaking hands with Harada as well, he waved good-bye, then left, all three of the others watching until he was out the door. Naito turned to Harada. "Seems like an interesting man," he commented.

"Indeed. He took it surprisingly well, although from what Brenke told me he was somewhat confused to begin with." The sergeant grinned. "I can understand that. It was an unusual experience even though I was expecting it." He glanced at Xrist, then thoughtfully at Naito again. "What do you remember from the... twitch?" he asked curiously. Regarding the sergeant, the PSIA agent debated with himself for a few seconds.

Eventually, he cautiously asked, "What do you remember? I'm still not entirely clear on how you
ended up on Xrist's world in the first place, as well."

Harada looked mildly embarrassed. "I... may have over-reacted, when I saw the light column. I was worried about Emiko and our child, I had Xrist's emergency portal generator in my pocket..." He shrugged a little. "One thing led to another."

"Ah." Naito grinned, as did Xrist. Sergeant Harada went over the whole story from his point of view, adding to what the agent already knew from debriefing Lieutenant Wilson. When the other man stopped talking, he nodded slowly. It painted a fascinating picture. He noticed Xrist was watching him expectantly as well. "Well, I don't know the whole story myself, either, and there are parts of what I do know that I can't really talk about."

"Yori was involved, wasn't she?" the sergeant asked, obviously knowing the answer already. He nodded.

"Would you expect otherwise?"

"No." Both Harada and Xrist looked amused, yet curious. Naito thought for a moment.

"OK. This isn't for public consumption, obviously, even less so than usual, but essentially, as I understand it there was a very serious threat to the whole planet, from something that's been causing problems for a considerable amount of time. It may have been involved in that issue we had with the other group over the last couple of months. It all came to a head yesterday, when Yori, Chou, Azumi, Aiko's team, and three girls from the other lot went up against it. Apparently it was a difficult battle but they won. The threat is permanently gone."

The police officer and the demon exchanged looks of surmise. "It wasn't easy, I assume," Xrist said. Naito shook his head.

"Not at all. They're all back now but the last I heard Yori and most of the others were recovering from total exhaustion. That gives a good idea of how serious it was. Have you ever seen Yori even look like she was exerting herself?"

"No. She makes the most incredibly weird things look pretty easy," Xrist mused. "So do the others, to be honest. That's... somewhat worrying. You're certain this threat is ended?"

"Yes, I am. I got the information from a trusted and knowledgeable source, who was sure it was dealt with once and for all."

"What was the light, then?" Harada asked curiously. "It certainly looked impressive and it worried all the visitors a hell of a lot, judging by how quickly they left. Rynnkh seemed terrified."

"Again, I don't have all the details, but it was a visible manifestation of some sort of incredibly complex security spell Yori and Chou designed, which was apparently reacting to the threat in a big way. By the sound of it you missed the main show, when that pillar of light suddenly expanded. It went through Tokyo in seconds and if what I suspect is true, ended up covering the entire planet soon after. I gather it was key to dealing with the problem although I'm not entirely sure how, other than collecting and transferring a very large amount of magical energy to them at a critical point in the fight." Naito shrugged a little. "That's about all I can tell you. Why no one, or almost no one, remembers it I'm not entirely sure either, aside from the fact that there was something to do with time travel involved in the threat. It seems to have resulted in essentially editing most of the event out of the world somehow. That twitch is what was left, along with the memory glitch everyone seems to have."
"Like a splice in a film, I guess," Harada suggested, looking simultaneously fascinated and appalled.

"Not a bad analogy, actually," Naito responded approvingly. "It's probably quite close to that. For more details you'd need to ask Yori, but I don't know if she'd tell you. Or at least, tell you everything. She keeps secrets well." He laughed as the other man nodded knowingly, still looking somewhat pale.

Beside him, Xrist had gone very quiet. They finally noticed, looking enquiringly at the little demon. He seemed to be staring at nothing in particular. Exchanging glances, eventually Naito asked, "Xrist? Are you all right?" The demon blinked a few times then shuddered all over.

"Time travel?" he croaked, sounding horrified. Naito nodded again.

"That's what my information says." Xrist stared at him fixedly for several seconds, then fumbled for a chair, sitting down hard.

"You were right to run, Sergeant," he finally said, swallowing hard. "Time travel is... appallingly dangerous. I don't know much about it aside from the fact that it's banned almost everywhere. There have been some ghastly accidents when people tried that. I've heard rumours that a very long time ago at least one entire reality was... deleted, I guess... when some clever bastard tried building a time machine. It's possible, but the worst idea you could ever have." He looked at Naito wide-eyed. "You're absolutely certain they stopped this threat?"

"Yes. The... entity... behind it all is permanently and very definitely dead. They made sure of that." He was fascinated by the fact that Xrist seemed to know something of the story, as his words certainly suggested. The small figure slowly relaxed, looking vastly relieved.

"Thank every deity you care about for that. If they had lost..." He shook his head in terrified wonder. "Not good."

"So I gather."

"I would expect that the reason you remember, Sergeant, is that you were on the other side of a portal at the time," Xrist continued, looking at Harada. "That would have insulated you from whatever changes to the timeline happened here as I understand it. Probably everyone who went through a portal before or during it will remember. Magical ability is most likely the reason for everyone else who remembers, or proximity to some serious magical power source. They often have odd local effects on time." He shrugged a little. "That's what I believe, anyway. I'm not a mage although I know a few. The subject has come up once or twice, mainly illustrating the concept of 'things you never, ever, do, no matter what.'"

"That fits with what I've learned and worked out," Naito agreed, respect for the intelligence of the visitor growing even higher. "But it's useful information even so. Thank you, Xrist."

"You're welcome, Agent Naito," the demon said, hopping off his chair. "I seriously need a very strong cup of coffee. See you around, Sergeant." Giving them a little wave he wandered off, still appearing shaken. They watched him leave the station.

"He's a good person," Sergeant Harada said quietly. Turning back to Naito, he asked, "If you do find out more about this whole situation and can tell me, I'd love to know. But I can live with it if you can't."

"I'm still in the dark about a lot of it myself," Naito replied, mostly truthfully. "Obviously there will
be aspects of it I can't tell anyone, for security reasons, but I'll let you know the parts I can when I'm able to." He glanced at his watch. "I'd better get back, I have another appointment I can't miss. But it was interesting. Thank you for calling me in about Lieutenant Wilson."

"No problem." Harada shook his hand as he stood. "It will be interesting to see if anything more comes of it. Lieutenant Wilson certainly seemed to enjoy flying that aircraft Vrede owns. Although he was somewhat... overenthusiastic in his manoeuvres, I felt."

"Made you go a bit green?" the agent snickered. Harada shuddered slightly, obviously remembering something he wished he didn't.

"Just a little. He and Vrede seemed to be enjoying the hell out of themselves but those of us who were passengers were rather wishing we'd taken the shuttle instead by that point."

Laughing, Naito waved good-by, then headed back to the PSIA, still chuckling a little as he left the building.

Grinning at the groaning sound, as if a horde of zombies were calling for brains, Nabiki headed towards the bedroom, carrying two mugs of strong coffee. She looked in from the doorway, seeing Ranma in female form staring at the ceiling unblinkingly, moaning slightly. Kasumi was stirring beside her, mumbling to herself. "Coffee?" she asked brightly. The red-head very slowly turned her gaze Nabikiwards, wincing with every movement.

"Please," she whispered painfully. Entering the room, the middle Tendo walked around to the other side of the bed, put both mugs down on the small table next to it, then helped her sister-in-law sit up. "Thanks," the woman croaked, holding out her hands, then accepting a mug carefully with a small sound of pain. It shook a little as she raised it to her mouth.

"You still look wiped out, Ranma," Nabiki said, watching with a certain amount of mild worry and considerable sympathy. If the martial artist felt anything like she had when she woke the first time she could easily see where the shaking hands came from. In all likelihood, she felt a lot worse, having stretched herself to the absolute limit and beyond.

Slowly but steadily drinking, the red-head drained the entire mug-full as Nabiki watched, somewhat impressed and slightly appalled, then handed the empty container back while taking a deep breath. "Thanks," she said again, sounding much closer to normal although still very tired. Kasumi chose that moment to open her eyes and make a pained noise, blinking furiously at the light, before her eyes focussed on her sister, who grinned at her then reached over her husband to hand her the other coffee.

"Here you go, Sis."

"Thank you, Nabiki," the older woman said quietly, clearing her throat for a second, then pulling herself up and sipping the beverage appreciatively. "Are any of the others up yet?"

"Just me, Ami, and Rei at the moment. Hotaru was making little squeaking noises a few minutes ago but she still seems to be completely out of it. The others are in their apartments, I'm going to go and check on them next." She studied the two in the bed. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone dropped a small moon on me," Ranma groaned.

"Moon? That was no moon," the middle sister snickered, causing the red-head to glare at her, not entirely appreciating the humour of the situation. Kasumi giggled to herself, covering her grin with another sip of coffee.
"Funny, Nabiki, very funny. How the hell are you so cheerful at the moment, anyway?" Ranma growled. She shrugged, still grinning.

"Don't know for sure. Perhaps because my reservoir is smaller it refilled faster? I felt like death last night, but I'm just sort of pleasantly tired at the moment. The ward system seems to be sending us energy still, which is helping." She looked over her shoulder as she heard some cooking noises from the kitchen. "And I've eaten an awful lot in the last few hours."

"Food! That's what's missing!" The martial artist perked up noticeably, making both her wife and sister-in-law laugh.

"We went out and bought enough to feed a small army of magical girls this morning," Nabiki told them, as they both began to get out of bed. "Lots more coffee is available as well. And ice cream."

"Mmmm, Ice Cream," Ranma moaned, making her collapse giggling.

"Come on, Homer. Let's get some food in you."

Shortly the two most recently woken people were sitting at the table while Nabiki and Rei brought substantial amounts of food out of the kitchen. Picking up her chopsticks, Ranma winced, looking at her hands, which were still blistered and red. Kasumi reached out and took them, now feeling well enough to finish the healing. The redness and blisters vanished in the normal golden glow, while the others watched, and Ranma smiled in relief. "Thanks, love. It's easier when someone else does it."

"Hotaru's weapon must have been extremely hot," Kasumi mused, beginning to eat slowly. "Considering how heat-resistant you are from that Phoenix pill of Cologne's all those years ago."

"It was smoking, literally," Nabiki commented.

"It wasn't so much the actual heat as the sheer power running through it," the martial artist told them, looking up from inspecting her hands, before also starting her meal. "It was a hell of a lot. Far more than either one of us could have done on our own. I'm very interested to find out where the hell the system found all that energy from."

"All over the planet as far as I can determine," Ami put in, causing both Kasumi and Ranma to pause, staring at her in amazement. "I'm still looking into it but it seems very likely that it somehow accessed dozens of sites that were storing magical power all over the world and pulled power from them to do what it did. Then, somehow, it ended up with even more energy than it borrowed and put it back." She looked both impressed and worried. "I didn't know it could do that."

"Neither did we," Ranma muttered in shock. She glanced at her wife. "We're going to have to check the logs. It certainly wasn't designed to do that."

"It's a damn good thing it did," Rei commented. "It probably saved the universe."

"It definitely saved the universe," the martial artist told her. "We were only a few seconds away from complete collapse. We'd have lost without it stepping in." They were all quiet for a moment, before she resumed eating.

Half-way through the meal, while they were talking over everything that Ami, Rei, and Nabiki had done while the others were still asleep, they heard a little voice over the com.

"Kasumi? Ranma? Can someone help me, please?" Hotaru sounded very young and very scared. Ranma looked at her wife, then stood.
"I'll go." Worried, Nabiki and Ami followed her. Entering the guest room they found the girl sitting up in bed, looking at her hands with a horrified expression. She looked up at them.

"I can hardly move them and they really hurt," she said, obviously trying to put a brave face on it but showing her worry by how wide her eyes were. Ranma smiled gently at her, sitting on the bed, then taking her hands in her own. Blue light glowed, the pain in Hotaru's eyes vanishing instantly. "Thank you so much," she whispered in relief.

"Kas passed out before she could do much more than repair the main surface burns," the martial artist told them, carefully healing the damage as they watched. "There's quite a lot of deep burn scarring and some nerve damage." She looked at the girl with a smile. "You're not as heat-tolerant as I am and you're not used to handling that much power either, not by a long way. It will get easier with practice. Your healing abilities will improve as well." Shortly, she released Hotaru's hands, which were now flawless once more. "There we go. How do you feel?"

"Incredibly tired still but also hungrier than I've ever been," the purple haired girl reported, frowning slightly, then smiling. "Thank you."

"Come on, there's lots of food ready," Ami told her, looking relieved that the damage had been fixed. She helped her young friend out of bed. Trailing behind them, Nabiki turned and went into the practice room. She headed for the pole-arm lying on the floor, looking the dried and burned skin sticking to it in several places with distaste, then picked the thing up carefully. She slowly ran a glowing green hand down it, listening to the hissing sound as the skin was vaporised by the ki aura, being careful at first not to damage the weapon until she found it seemed unaffected by what she was doing. When she finished she carried it back into the dining room.

"You should put this away, Hotaru," she said, handing it to the girl, who took it with a smile and a nod of thanks, looking at it in some awe.

"The weapon that saved everything," Rei remarked, also looking at it.

"Pretty much," Ranma replied. She inspected the thing. "It was a very good thing you realised what needed to be done with it."

Vanishing it, Hotaru shrugged a little, looking mildly confused. "I'm still not sure how I knew, I just did. Something seemed to want me to bring it out."

"The ward system again," Nabiki said. "It had a definite plan. Luckily."

Two hours later Aiko and the others had also woken, arrived, and eaten enough food to choke a hippo. Each. They were all sitting around the living room looking relaxed and well fed, although still somewhat tired. "I'm certainly going to sleep well tonight," Fumiko said, stretching widely. "I can't believe that it's only twenty-four, no, twenty-five hours, since the world came within seconds of ending." She shook her head a little. "And that we were fighting for less than two minutes in total."

"It's kind of weird, yes," Aiko agreed. "But I'm feeling happier than I have been for a while now. It's finally over." They all fell silent, exchanging glances, then grinned happily.

"We need to do something nice for the system," Tamiko laughed. "Can you buy a building a box of chocolates?"

"I'll definitely think of some way of rewarding it," Ranma chuckled, reverting to male for the first time since they'd got back. "You hear that, building? You did a magnificent job. Well done."
A definite feeling of happiness swept over them, making them all look surprised, then laugh again.

Coming back into the lobby from outside, having gone shopping again for more food, Nabiki headed towards the elevator. Inside it, she was about to press the button for the top floor, when she cocked her head slightly, feeling something subtly odd, something she'd been too tired to notice the last time she'd gone out that morning but now that she thought back, could vaguely recall sensing. After a moment's hesitation she instead pressed the button for the parking garage. When the doors opened she left the elevator, turned the lights on, and looked around.

#What is it, Nabiki?# Jun asked curiously.

'I'm... not entirely sure,' she replied. 'There's something... it's difficult to describe. Something has changed.' A pause followed her words, then the machine responded, sounding puzzled.

#You're right. There is a very subtle difference to subspace in the vicinity, but I can't pin it down.#

It fell silent for a moment, then added, #Perhaps on the next level it will be easier to detect.#

'OK.' Extinguishing the lights and getting back into the elevator she prodded the lowest button, waiting for it to arrive at the sub-basement. When the doors slid open she looked out, then stared in bemused wonder for some time. Jun wasn't saying anything but she could damn near feel it gaping.

Eventually she said, 'Are my eyes working correctly, Jun?'

#I believe so. I am detecting it by other means as well as your senses.#

'OK. Good. I was wondering.' They were both silent for a minute longer. She stepped out of the elevator, looking around, then got back in. Pressing the top button she waited quietly until she reached the top, exited when the doors opened, then went into her sister's apartment. Everyone looked up as she came in.

"Um, Nabiki? Are you all right?" Tamiko inspected her face curiously.

"There's a star in the basement."

The rest of them stared, then exchanged glances. Eventually, Ranma asked carefully, "Nabs? You sure you're OK?"

She stared hard at him. "There's a star in the basement." He looked bemused. "Why is there a star in the basement?"

"I don't know how to answer that," he responded, glancing at his wife, who returned the look, puzzled. "What are you talking about?" She crooked a finger at him.

"Come with me." Turning she left the apartment again, feeling everyone else get up and follow after a couple of seconds. They all packed into the elevator, filling it to capacity, after which she pressed the button for the sub-basement again. Silent on the way down, she just stared at the doors until they opened, then walked out and moved to the side. Everyone else piled out after her, immediately stopping dead. Hotaru gave off a small yelp of shock.

There was a very long silence.

She pointed. "Star."

She waved her hand around. "Basement."
Turning to Ranma, who was looking upwards with an expression of total bewilderment on his face, she requested, "Explain."

Nearly another entire minute passed in silence.

"I can't," he admitted quietly, sounding completely stunned. He met her eyes, then shrugged helplessly. "Not a fucking clue."

"It's sort of impressive," Ami said absently, still staring.

"Pretty, too," Hotaru added.

"But why is it there?" Nabiki pressed, feeling vaguely disconnected from reality. The entire situation was surreal. They all went back to staring.

What they were looking at certainly seemed to be a star, seen from fairly close up. A sphere of roiling energy, small streamers leaping from the surface and flickering out some distance, only to subside back slowly, the whole thing surrounded by an iridescent halo of rainbow light that was significantly larger than the main body, insubstantial yet visible. It seemed to be an impossible distance away, bearing in mind the fact they were in a room which had been, the last time she'd looked, about thirty metres square with a three metre or so ceiling.

Now the walls were so far away that she couldn't see them except as a blur while the ceiling had apparently vanished completely, only a black background showing above them. The light of the 'star', mostly white with a steadily varying pale wash of cycling colour added to it, illuminated the space like late afternoon sunlight. The support columns that had held the weight of the building were spaced around the original area like branch-less concrete trees, a very odd sight.

#It's at least four hundred metres in diameter, Nabiki, and a minimum of eight kilometres away from us, perhaps three kilometres above the floor. The readings I'm getting are extremely strange, but as far as I can determine there is a spacial expansion spell, very similar to the subspace storage spell the D'Sage use so much, on the basement. It is wildly more powerful than anything I've seen before, though. The internal space of the basement is effectively now measurable in tens of cubic kilometres at least.# Jun sounded both impressed and mystified.

'But what is it?' she asked numbly, still looking up. There was the sensation of something nearly shrugging.

#I don't know.#

Eventually, Ranma tore his fascinated gaze away from the impossible sight, looking at his wife, who was holding his hand and gaping. "We need to check the ward system, I think. It's the only thing that could explain this... this... whatever the hell this is." She nodded, not looking away from the thing for several more seconds. When she did, she stared at him with an expression of shock. The two of them moved a few metres away then did whatever it was they did to bring up the ward interface, which faded into view. Once more, everyone gaped in awe.

The interface was, as usual, a weirdly beautiful sight that stretched away far further than seemed possible, oddly coloured patterns of magic moving and circling about them, reaching out little streamers which played across their skin with an oddly comforting sensation, but now, with room to expand, it looked far larger. Reaching up and out from them it faded away into the distance, making the space they were in look small, somehow, as if it stretched out into more dimensions than the normal three. Nabiki reflected on the thought that this was certainly the case, although in the practice room it wasn't quite so obvious. Even there it seemed to be much too large to fit, but
here it was still too big, which was just peculiar.

Ranma studied it with his wife without saying anything for quite a long time. Both of them were looking more and more stunned. Eventually he turned to look at her, the pair communing wordlessly for a minute or two while the others watched and waited. Finally they shook their heads, turning to the rest while holding hands, small smiles of awe and pleasure on their faces.

"So what is it?" Nabiki asked, reassured by the smiles, yet still desperately curious. She could see everyone else was feeling much the same.

"It's magical energy, more or less," Kasumi told them. "The ward system did something truly incredible." She looked up for a moment. "You were right, Ami, it did access magic from all over the planet. It expanded the wards to cover the entire world, which used a large amount of the energy it had available, having detected the threat the time device posed and deciding that protecting the building wasn't enough. That was what it came up with to get around the rules we set to keep it from doing anything spectacular outside the wards." She laughed, shaking her head in wonder. "I missed that completely but it's a good loophole. Expanding the wards to cover the planet meant everything in the world was inside the zone it could act on."

"Holy crap," Fumiko muttered. She was pale when Nabiki glanced at her. "It could attack anything, anywhere, whenever it felt like it, all this time?"

"No, I don't think so," Ranma replied, looking thoughtfully up at the patterns moving about them. The sense of mild guilt Nabiki was still feeling from the system had strengthened a little, making her wonder if it was listening to them and getting embarrassed. "It needed a truly world-ending problem to make it even attempt this sort of thing in the first place. It knew damn well it was violating the spirit of the rules even if it was technically barely inside the letter of them, but it looks like it was genuinely scared that something horrible was happening. It was right, of course. I very much doubt that without a threat on the scale of the time machine it would ever have tried to do what it did. If nothing else, it was a serious risk to the thing, it burned through a lot of its energy running up to full power like that. Under normal circumstances the risk versus gain equation would have prevented it doing anything so spectacular."

"According to the logs it first reinforced the wards around the building to a truly incredible level when it detected the beginnings of the time loop," the elder sister said, studying one of the patterns of magic while gently manipulating it. "But it quickly worked out that wouldn't be enough. It looks like that must have been almost exactly the same time we opened the portal to the sub-reality. Seconds after that it started expanding the wards, around when we began firing the ki beam through the portal. The expansion took perhaps twenty or thirty seconds until it covered the entire planet."

"I'd say it was originally intending to only go as far as the middle of China, looking at this," Ranma mused, "but by the time it got that far it realised it didn't take a lot more power to keep going."

"Where did it get the energy from?" Aiko asked curiously. "After it expanded the wards, I mean." He moved some of the patterns around then stared at the results, before laughing.

"Everywhere." They all looked at him, so he continued. "It was aiming for Jusenkyo, it seems, but it found a lot of other places in the process." Shaking his head in awed respect, he studied whatever it was he was looking at, his eyebrows up. Beside him, Kasumi pointed something out, making him nod in surprise. After a moment, he went on, "It sucked all the magic out of Jusenkyo, half a dozen more places in China and Russia, dozens of sites in the UK and Ireland, all over Europe as well..." Husband and wife moved magical controls for a moment.
"Hmm. This must be in Canada. Way up past the Arctic circle," he surmised, indicating something to Kasumi, who nodded after a moment.

"I think so. I wonder what it was? It had quite a lot of power although nothing anywhere near the level of Jusenkyo."

"No idea. And look, this one was in the middle of the Pacific somewhere under water. Weird." He shrugged a little. "We may have to look into that some time. Anyway, it also got power from Australia, this must be Uluru, a lot of places in South and Central America, all over the place really. I'd think it was probably every last drop of magic that wasn't being used for something else from what I can see here. It seems to have been careful not to steal anything that was being used, interestingly enough."

Ami had gone as pale as Fumiko had earlier. "That's an absolutely terrifying amount of energy," she said slowly. He nodded.

"Damn right. I doubt anything, any time in history, has ever had quite so much energy available in one go. Then it sent it through the portal Kas opened to us. I felt it take over powering the ward we had set up right at the point I was going to fall over, then what it did with Hotaru's weapon..." The martial artist made a gesture of shock. "You wouldn't believe how much energy went through that thing. The really scary thought is that it could have applied more power, quite a lot more, but it was worried the Glaive would melt in the process."

The group was silent for a moment, just trying to wrap their minds around the enormity of what they'd heard. A few seconds passed in silence, then Misaki asked, pointing up, "But that doesn't explain that. Or all of this." She indicated the impossibly expanded basement.

"What happened next does, sort of," Ranma told her. He looked up at the sphere of energy high overhead with an expression of amazement. "The most powerful attack Hotaru's weapon is capable of seems to be some sort of distortion or disruption field that causes things to basically fall apart. From what I found when I was examining it on the ship, that's a last resort type of thing, an attack designed to ensure a pyrrhic victory, I suppose. It would probably kill the user as well, but it would kill everything in range. Put enough power into it and you could wipe out a continent, or even more." Hotaru gasped, looking shaken and worried. Rei put her arm around her.

"But in this case, the system managed to direct the attack through the portal, as well as putting a huge amount of power behind it, far more than the thing was meant to handle. Almost all the available magic on Earth flowed through that weapon. It's not surprising the time device died on the spot. More or less anything would. The distortion wave was so powerful it started ripping the entire sub-reality to pieces. Yrenti's warheads were just icing on the cake by that point." He glanced at his wife, who dismissed the ward interface, which gently faded from view. "The really interesting thing is what happened next. It looks like it realised that as the sub-reality came apart all the magic that had been used to create it and keep it stable, as well as a lot that had been released when the time device exploded, was just sitting there. It got a little greedy." He snickered.

Kasumi picked up the explanation, smiling. "As far as we can work out the system saw all that free energy, which was much more than the amount it had gathered from our planet, and decided it should collect as much as it could. By the looks of it, it managed to suck up almost all of it before the sub-reality collapsed. It stored as much as possible then put the rest back where it had found it from in the first place. In fact from what we can see quite a lot more went back than it had borrowed."

Ranma chuckled a little. "Those so-called 'druids' who do ceremonies at Stonehenge on the solstices are likely to get a bit of a surprise if their rituals are anywhere near correct," he said,
amused. "There's enough power there now to make some of them work again." Looking up at the 'star' for a moment, he grinned. "There was far too much power for the normal methods the system uses to store it. So it got creative again. That's the result. I think it stole the idea from the time device with some modifications based on spells and techniques we use. It's a very neat bit of work."

Everyone looked at the ball of energy, astounded. "So, it's like the biggest ki ball in the universe?" Tamiko asked after a moment. He shrugged, grinning.

"More or less. Not quite ki, not quite magic, a lot like our version of magic but slightly different. Calling it the life energy of the building wouldn't be completely wrong, but not completely right either, it's still not really alive in normal terms, although it's getting closer. There's an awful lot of it as well. It's not going to need to take any from us any more, not for a long time." He thought about the matter for a moment. "More or less forever, I think."

"Weird," Misaki finally said, biting into an apple. They all looked at her. She shrugged.

After a moment, Nabiki asked incredulously, "So, that's it? We have a basement you could lose Mount Horai in, if you hadn't blown it up in the first place, with it's own star lighting it? Isn't that a little odd even for us?"

"What can I say? Magic is weird, you know that." Ranma smiled at her. She shook her head slowly, turning and looking around.

"Is it safe?" Hotaru asked, still seeming slightly pale. He glanced at her.

"Should be. It's stable as far as we can see, as is the expansion spell. One is powering the other."

"Cool." The girl recovered her colour, grinning at him happily. "Can we get some trees in? And a lake? It would be a nice place to fly, or swim." He chuckled, after a surprised look at her.

"I suppose that's not impossible." Laughing, Fumiko looked at her sister, both of them suddenly taking on the flying form and leaping into the air. Ten seconds later all of them were flying around the impossibly large basement, exploring it.

In the end they determined that the expansion spell had stretched the room into something better than fifteen kilometres on a side, over four high. Where it had got the air from that was filling it was anyone's guess. Ranma and Kasumi spent a couple of hours studying the spells very carefully to end up deciding that it was definitely stable in the long term. It looked like a basement one could build a city in was now a permanent feature of the building.

The energy ball in the middle of the space was over four hundred metres across, giving off enough heat that no one but Ranma could get closer than a hundred metres to it and even the martial artist couldn't go too close. They found the corona surrounding it was safe, though, producing a nice tingling sensation when they flew through it, a feeling of relaxing energy flowing through them in the process. The temperature in the new space had stabilised at a pleasant twenty-five degrees by the time they regrouped near the elevator. Dismissing the illusion spell he'd placed on Ami, Rei, and Hotaru, Ranma reverted to his male form, then led them inside the elevator.

On the way up, Tamiko giggled. "Does anyone else have trouble believing what we just did?" There a chorus of agreement and a lot of looks of astonishment. "I mean, how does it even work? We go down one floor, yet we're somehow at ground level in a space over four kilometres high?"

"Subspace storage is odd at the best of times, when you think about what it's doing," Kasumi laughed. "I've come across it inside buildings before, and of course it gets used for all sorts of less
spectacular purposes, on a lot of worlds, but on that scale it's somewhat awe inspiring." The doors opened and they all got out, heading back into the apartment.

Sitting down around the room, they exchanged glances. "So, what are we going to do with a few dozen cubic kilometres of basement?" Aiko asked. There was a long pause.

"No idea." Ranma smiled at her. "But if nothing else we're not going to be short on storage space for a while."

"True," she mused, grinning. "Hey! We have somewhere for Fumiko to keep a spacecraft, now." The relevant young woman looked startled, then pleased.

"How would we get it in and out?" Tamiko asked curiously. "It wouldn't fit in the elevator."

"We're not keeping spacecraft in the basement," Kasumi said firmly.

"Aww," Fumiko mumbled, her face falling, while beside her, Misaki giggled a little.

"We could let the soarers loose in it," she suggested. "Loads of room there for them."

"No." The eldest sister stared hard at the other woman, as Nabiki and the others laughed. Ami, Rei, and Hotaru were looking confused.

"What are soarers?" Hotaru enquired. "You mentioned them before, on the island." Nabiki sent her and the other two one of her recordings from the holiday. "Oh, they're so cute!" the girl squealed, clapping her hands.

"And a lot of fun to fly with," Nabiki told her. "Very smart animals."

"I can see where some of the flying form came from," Ami noted, interested, as she studied the recording. "And the patterning as well."

"They're fascinating animals," the elder Tendo responded, nodding. "As Nabiki says, very intelligent, I'd guess somewhere around the level of a dolphin or perhaps a chimpanzee. Their metabolism is extremely efficient, the bone, muscle and tendon strength is enormous, not to mention the remarkably effective oxygen transport mechanism and a number of other things. I learned a lot from studying them."

"We'll have to introduce you to them soon," Nabiki suggested. She glanced at Ranma. "We should contact Uthryyl and let him know what happened as well."

Nodding, the martial artist frowned slightly. "Yes. He's been out of the loop on a lot of this but he should know. Before that, though, we need to talk to Yrenti and Lldnr'k, let Hnther know the threat is over and also find out about Usagi and the others, talk to Masao..." He sighed. "Still a lot to do, but at least the most serious part is finally out of the way. After that everything else should be easy. I hope."

"One thing I don't understand about all of this is why hardly anyone remembers what happened," Aiko said. They all looked at her, then Ranma and Kasumi. These two glanced at each other.

"I'm not sure," Ranma finally answered, putting his arm around his wife as she leaned against him. "We know it was a time machine, we know it was right in the middle of starting a loop in time when it was destroyed. I can guess that has something to do with it but I'm not at all sure of the mechanics of it. Lldnr'k might be able to work it out, it's his field."
"The memory glitch is odd," Ami mused out loud. "I've asked around and it's pretty much everyone. Something like thirty seconds is just gone, immediately before the universal twitch everyone felt. But as far as I can tell, it's actually about two or three minutes that got reset. Like the whole time we were on the dead world fighting the time device just got deleted. No one seems to have run a car into a tree because they couldn't remember what they were doing, or anything like that. It's very odd." She looked at Ranma. "I'm also intrigued by the way Masao remembers it. Rei's grandfather remembers as well, which doesn't surprise me. The only other people I came across who did were a couple of mages I know slightly. They were extremely confused by what had happened and also very worried."

She sighed. "I told them that it was over, but I couldn't think of a good way to explain it properly. I didn't think it was a good idea to tell the truth, not until I checked with you guys."

"Probably best not to say too much until we actually know what happened, if we ever do," Ranma sighed again. "There are a lot of people who will want to know, but I'm not sure telling them everything would be a good idea, people tend to get panicky about little things like the universe nearly being destroyed."

"No idea why," Misaki chuckled. He grinned for a moment. "Me either. We'll tell Masao, I think, we can trust him aside from the security spell, and we'll have to let certain people know some of it. I've already got messages left from Richard, Laura, that Williamson guy at MI5, and Sergeant Harada, all wanting to know if I have any idea what happened."

"We could let the PSIA handle it," Kasumi suggested. He nodded.

"We probably should for the most part. I think we should talk to Ldnn'r'k first, then go and see Yrenti again. I still have a lot of questions for him and I'm sure he has some for us."

"Are you going to tell Ldnn'r'k everything?" Nabiki asked him. "I mean, about who you guys really are, the illusion spell, the whole thing?" He looked at her for a moment, considering the question.

"Would you be all right with him knowing about you?"

It was her turn to think for a while. "I think so, yes. He knows about Ami and the others, you've known him for several years and trust him, and he put himself in harm's way over this whole stupid affair. He deserves to know."

Ranma nodded slowly, glancing around at everyone else, who one after another nodded as well. "OK. We'll let him in on it. What about Hnther? He's certainly come through for us several times."

"I think we should probably wait until all the issues with Ami's team are sorted out," Kasumi suggested. "I like Hnther a lot and I think he can probably be trusted, but it might confuse the issue if we open up to him right now. At least wait a few months." Her husband thought about it for a little while while everyone waited.

"OK," he said again. "That's reasonable." He laughed a little. "It's weird, we've been keeping these secrets for nearly five years but all of a sudden we seem to be letting everyone know."

"Hardly everyone, dear," Kasumi smiled. "Only a few very trusted friends." Ami exchanged glances with Rei and Hotaru, all of them looking pleased.

Aiko yawned widely, causing Fumiko and Tamiko to immediately do the same, and Hotaru to laugh as a result. "God, I'm still so tired," the petite woman said quietly. "I'm tempted to go back to
"It's nearly eight now," Kasumi noted. "I suggest that everyone who doesn't need to go should stay behind while Ranma and I talk to Lldnr'k. We can do the rest tomorrow, there's no huge hurry, not any more."

Ami glanced at Rei, then Hotaru, both the others nodding. "I should get home anyway, Mom is going to be worried. I've hardly seen her since we got back from the Moon." She laughed slightly sadly. "Do you realise it's only been two weeks since everything went to hell?" They all looked at her for a moment.

"No, that can't be right," Fumiko said slowly, working it out. "It's been at least...

"Exactly two weeks," her sister finished, shaking her head.

"Good grief," Aiko muttered, thinking it over. "It feels like four or five months."

Ranma nodded, smiling a little. "We certainly got a lot done. Stopped a major magical girl fight, visited the moon, stopped an asteroid from destroying civilisation, discovered all the money in the solar system and took it away to another reality, met the makers of the SIs, or one of them at least, then saved the universe and nearly died in the process. Not bad for two weeks work. Although I think I'm nearly ready for another vacation."

"What will we do next week?" Tamiko asked, grinning.

"Same thing we do every week? Try to take over the world?" Rei suggested, giggling, causing her to fall over laughing.

"Like we said before, it's too much work," Nabiki snickered. "And I've got to get back to university in two weeks or so."

Laughing, Aiko and her team headed to their various beds, having decided that they were still just too tired to visit Lldnr'k, Ami and her friends went home, Hotaru still giggling, leaving two Tendos and a Saotome in the suddenly much less crowded apartment. The three remaining people looked at each other. "Coffee first?" Kasumi asked, receiving a pair of approving looks. Smiling, she got up and headed for the kitchen.

Looking up from her book, Haruka smiled in relief when Hotaru came in, putting the book down quickly and jumping to her feet. "Thank god you're all right," she said, grabbing the girl and hugging her. "I was really worried. What happened? I felt something incredibly dangerous yesterday afternoon."

Hotaru smiled back at her, putting her own arms around the older woman. "We won. It's dead." Haruka sighed, feeling a knot of tension and fear finally dissolve, one she hadn't quite known was there until it was gone. Holding Hotaru she shook with relief for some time.

Eventually releasing her, she stared into her eyes for a moment, then smiled more widely. "Come on, dear, tell me what happened. Are you hungry? We could go out for a meal afterwards."

"I'm still very tired and I've eaten an awful lot today, but I could eat some more, I think," the girl giggled. "Then sleep a lot."

"That sounds like a good plan," she replied, laughing. "Tomorrow we look for somewhere to live. I'll need your help."
"Sure, it could be fun." They headed for the sofa, sitting down facing each other, then Hotaru began telling her female father everything she could. It took a long time.

"How are you feeling now?" the old priest asked gently, looking carefully at Rei as he brought her a cup of tea. "You look tired."

"I'm fine, grandfather," she assured him. "It's been a long day, though, and yesterday was longer. I'm looking forward to an early night and not having to get out of bed until I want to."

Laughing, he sat down with his own tea. "And the others? Have they recovered yet?"

"Mostly, yes. Yori send her greetings. She said she'd stop by some time in the next few days to talk, but they still have quite a lot of clean up work to do, talking to various people in the government and things like that. She's a little worried about exactly what to say, I know, so she'll be fairly busy for a couple of days at least." She sipped her tea appreciatively, then put the cup down again. "Ami and Hotaru went home as well. We're all planning on relaxing for a while, nothing serious if we can help it. No magical girl stuff except for emergencies."

He patted her hand, looking amused. "I don't think the world would begrudge you all a break after your recent activities, my girl, not at all. You certainly deserve some time off."

Rei nodded, smiling. "I'd like to think so."

They were silent for a while, just enjoying each other's company. Eventually the old man asked curiously, "What is the current situation with the others from your old team?"

She sighed a little, placing her empty cup back into its saucer. "Ami and Hotaru are fine, of course. Last time I saw her, Haruka was looking depressed but other than that not too bad. Yori said she seemed quite a lot better a couple of days ago. Hopefully the destruction of the time machine and the removal of its influence will allow her to improve."

"That seems possible, certainly," he agreed.

"Minako is surprisingly well after what happened with her and Usagi," she went on. He looked enquiringly at her, making her remember he hadn't been told what did happen, so she related the story. He alternated between worry and laughter as it went on.

"Oh dear," he commented when she finished. "Poor Usagi. I'm impressed by Tamiko's resourcefulness, though, even though it was a somewhat extreme solution."

"They didn't have a lot of choice from what I know," Rei replied, frowning a little. "Usagi was totally out of control and dragging Minako with her. Something horrific was going to happen, I'm sure of that, so it's a damn good thing she was stopped first."

"I'm forced to agree." He shook his head sadly. "And poor Luna and Artemis as well. I've heard the names before but I always thought they were friends of you girls I hadn't met yet. I had no idea about the truth."

"No one did, not even them," Rei sighed. "It was an awful shock. Artemis looked like he was about to pass out, the only reason he didn't is that he can't."

"Do you think they can be helped?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I have no idea. I really hope so, though. It's way outside my experience."
Everyone else's as well, I think, but if anyone can work out a solution it's probably Yori or Chou."

"Most likely," he agreed, nodding. "I hope they do."

"Setsuna is still in stasis, Hnther is trying to work out the best method to help her. Michiru and Makoto are the only ones they haven't talked to yet, although did have to go and have a word with Makoto who was getting a little excessive in the way she was treating criminals." Rei smirked slightly. "Apparently it was extremely funny. Makoto ran like a scared rabbit afterwards."

"You shouldn't take pleasure in the troubles of others," her grandfather said, looking stern, but then laughed. "Even if it was funny." She giggled.

"She'll be OK. But she needed to be persuaded to stop hitting people so hard before something bad happened."

"Agreed. I'd heard the young lady was becoming slightly overenthusiastic, I have to admit." The priest shook his head sadly. "Ah well. Hopefully, now that the machine is gone, as you said perhaps your former team-mates will improve and begin to rebuild their reputations. We can only hope so."

They talked for some time before Rei headed off for an early night, leaving her grandfather sitting in the living room pondering life with a small smile on his face.

"You're back at last," Ami's mother said, smiling as she came in the door to find her daughter in the living room watching the news, which was covering the odd sensation everyone had felt the day before. A couple of experts were giving their opinion, which she knew from seeing the lunch-time news was mostly 'We don't have a clue' only dressed up rather more verbosely than that. Ami looked at her and nodded.

"I am. Sorry about running off like that then staying away overnight but something came up."

Taking her coat off, Saeko hung it up, then removed her shoes and put them away, replacing them with slippers, before joining her daughter on the sofa in front of the TV. She put her arm around the girl who leaned against her with a smile, stroking her head a couple of times. "I'm glad you're back. I've barely seen you for nearly a week now."

"Sorry, Mom. It's been a little stressful, you know, friends with problems, things like that. Although the trip was a lot of fun." Ami grinned. They watched the interviewer ask some fairly penetrating and apt questions, causing the two experts to shift uncomfortably in their seats while obviously trying not to say they had no good answer. Saeko smiled a little at the expressions.

"They clearly know nothing about it at all," she observed, amused yet slightly worried at the same time. "No one seems to have a good explanation." Taking a quick look at her daughter, she asked casually, "What do you think it was?"

Shaking her head, the blue-haired young woman shrugged. "I'm not sure. All the reports sound very strange. Even for Minato. Perhaps something to do with some weird demon attack?"

"Possible, I suppose," her mother mused. "It certainly suggests some magical cause was behind it, as odd as that sounds. Strange things do happen here, I know that, what with all the magical girls running around, as well as the demons. I've heard that there are quite a lot of them walking around openly now, apparently just visiting, in some areas of the ward." She laughed a little. "I never thought that would happen I have to admit. It's very peculiar."
"People don't seem to worried about it these days." Ami looked at her mother for a moment, before going back to watching the TV, which was now reporting on the latest in the ongoing case against Anthony Murray in Canada. Saeko studied her for a few seconds.

"True, very true," she eventually replied. "So many odd things happening. Those magical girls destroying that mall like that, for example, then that other girl, what's her name, Yori, and her friends stopping them destroying those apartment buildings. She sounds like she's a rather formidable young woman from what the news says." Indicating the news program, she added, "Just look at that, for example. They say she and some other girls she works with were involved in that case, and several others all around the world." Shaking her head, she sighed a little. "I expect their parents are proud of their achievements."

"I suppose so," Ami commented, not looking away from the television.

"Assuming that their parents even know, of course," her mother went on, watching the news with her. "I believe that most magical girls and people like that tend to be very secretive about their activities."

"That's what I hear," the girl agreed, smiling slightly, which Saeko could see out of the corner of her eye.

"One can understand why, I suppose. It could be difficult for the families in some cases, there are all sorts of possible issues that might arise. It's probably something similar to working for the government or the security services. Or being a doctor. There might be secrets that could cause real problems if they became known to the public at large. People can be... difficult... with things they don't understand." She laughed a little sadly. "I almost feel sorry for the poor girls, not being able to talk to their families about what they do. I think it would be a hard burden to carry."

After a couple of seconds, Ami nodded. "I think you're probably right. It's not something I've considered much before, but it makes sense."

Her mother sighed a little. "Poor girls. Now I'm feeling a little sad. A daughter should be able to trust her parents, although I can understand why in a lot of cases that might not happen." She stood up. "Fancy some tea and a few snacks?"

"Yes, please," Ami said, looking pleased. She watched as her mother went into the kitchen, both of them smiling a little although for different reasons.

"Ah, my friends, I am very relieved to see you are all in good health after that rather extraordinary experience, I was somewhat worried," Lldn'r said happily as 'Yori', 'Chou', and 'Azumi' entered his workshop. "I trust the others are also well?"

"They're fine, thanks," 'Yori' replied, nodding and smiling. "Aiko and her girls decided they were just too tired still to come, although they asked me to pass on their thanks for all the help you gave us. They'll be up to talking in a day or two. Ami, Rei, and Hotaru went home because they were very tired as well and to see their families." She yawned slightly, covering her mouth. "To be honest we're all pretty exhausted as well but we needed to talk. We'll go and see Yrenti and Hnther tomorrow, though, not today."

"I hope you didn't have any problems getting back?" 'Chou' asked. "I'm very sorry I couldn't make a portal for you yesterday but I was on the verge of passing out at that point." The temporal mage clicked his beak with amusement, waving one taloned hand dismissively.
"Please don't worry about it, my dear. It was no problem. I spend several fascinating hours talking to Yrenti and a pair of colleagues of his about their history, that of the time device, and several other subjects. It was a remarkable experience. He asked me to reiterate that you're all welcome at any point. Kw'lyn Industries seems to believe it owes you a lot, as does Yrenti personally. He looked very happy."

"I can imagine he would be based on what we were told. To think that they've been looking for that damn thing for thirty-five thousand years is... well, it's humbling, to be honest," 'Azumi' stated, shaking her head a little. "I can still barely believe we only came across it two weeks ago."

"A lot has happened in a very short time," the mage agreed. "But that's what happens sometimes. A very long build up then everything comes to a conclusion very quickly. I'm just glad that the whole thing is finally over. Anyone in my field has heard of that damn machine and worried about it turning up." He looked relieved. "That's not going to happen now. A lot of people are going to be very pleased. Oh, and I'm going to get a serious paper out of it as well, which will be nice." They laughed as he gained an alien but recognisable smug expression.

"I'm glad that our efforts will result in your reputation increasing," 'Yori' joked.

"But of course you are," he replied haughtily, his beak lifted a little, in a manner that made 'Azumi' nearly crack up. It was remarkably close to the effect Tatewaki Kuno could pull off, which considering the totally different species, was impressive. Glancing at her sister and sister-in-law she saw they'd spotted it as well and were trying not to laugh. Lldnr'k held the pose for a moment, then looked amused. "So, tell me, what can I do for you? Assuming this isn't just a social visit, although I'm more than happy to accommodate you whenever you wish to drop in."

"We thought you deserved to know more about what happened at the end," 'Chou' told him after a quick look at her husband, who nodded. "It does bring up a number of other things that we keep very private, though. After discussing it we decided that we all felt we could trust you with the information."

"I'm honoured you feel that way although you certainly don't owe me an explanation," Lldnr'k responded after a considering look. "I can live with the curiosity. I certainly don't want to intrude on your privacy or threaten your security."

'Yori' smiled a little. "Thank you, we appreciate the trust, but you deserve to know. You came through for us at considerable personal risk, you've put a lot of work into the whole thing, the least we can do is explain the bits you don't know." She looked around for a moment. ".But I don't think here is the best place. Would you like to come back to our home? It will take a couple of hours to go over it all." She thought for a moment. "And there's something I'd like your opinion on, as well. You'll need to see it."

The time mage inspected her, then nodded slowly. "That sounds... very intriguing. I accept your offer. Just let me make arrangements to be away for a while again." He went off to talk to some of his colleagues.

"How do you think he's going to take it?" 'Azumi' asked the other two. 'Yori' shrugged slightly, smiling a little.

"I'm not sure but I expect he'll deal with it all right. But he's probably going to be a little surprised." They all laughed for a moment.

As soon as the mage returned, a portal popped open next to them. 'Yori' waved to it. "Shall we?"
"I'm looking forward to it with both anticipation and fear," Lldnr'k joked, following her through it. The two Tendo sisters grinned at each other, bringing up the rear.

"Do you have any idea yet what it was?" Shampoo asked her great-grandmother as they watched the news. She shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid not, child, beyond what we learned this morning. It was certainly something extraordinary, astounding powerful and most likely very dangerous, but while we have several theories there's no real evidence for any of them. Beyond the fact that something borrowed an absolutely ungodly amount of magical energy, probably from all over the world if what I hear is correct, did... something... with it, then returned it with a substantial excess, we have no idea." Cologne sighed. "I don't know if we'll ever get the whole story. Perhaps that's for the best. It was clearly far past our ability to affect and possibly understand."

She smiled a little nastily. "I believe both Herb and Saffron have been looking into it as well. From what I gather they were extremely unsettled by the whole thing. Saffron is reportedly wandering around looking shell-shocked, the amount of power involved makes him look insignificant, which must have been humbling. If he'd gotten in the way he would have been crushed flat without whatever it was even slowing down." She chuckled. "I never liked the bastard, so I have to admit it amuses me."

Shampoo laughed, glancing at the old woman. Returning her attention to the news she laughed again. "I don't think these people have the faintest idea what they're talking about," she said, grinning while indicating the news segment.

"Not a clue, although they're trying to hide that by talking a lot," the Elder agreed with smirk. "I suspect that if they did find out they still wouldn't understand it, or believe it. It's those strange magical terrorist attacks from earlier this year all over again, only much worse."

"There seem to be a lot of odd magical things happening on a large scale all of a sudden," the lilac-haired warrior noted.

"True. Most of them seem to have Yori and Chou mixed up with them somewhere as well," Cologne agreed. She looked pensive. "I wonder if they're involved in this latest one."

"I can't see how, from what you said it was impossibly powerful. I know they're impressive but are they that strong?"

"Again, I have no real idea." Cologne sighed again, shaking her head a little, going on, "I suppose it's possible but it didn't feel quite like what I've seen of their magic. Both are very unusual but this event was... well, it didn't feel like anything I've ever felt before, not even remotely."

"They'll be at Nodoka's garden party, which Akane said would be sometime soon, in a few days, I think," Shampoo said. "We're all invited as well. You could ask them."

"I could. But whether they'd tell me...?" The Elder shrugged. "Worth a try I suppose."

Both of them fell silent once more, watching the remainder of the news. Once it finished they went downstairs to get ready for the evening rush in the café.

Nabiki watched Lldnr'k as he stared at her, then Ranma and Kasumi, then went back to her. Only his head moved, rotating back and forth, until she felt like she was watching someone watching a tennis match. Eventually, he simply stared straight ahead, blinking, his beak half-open, as he
visibly tried to come to terms with everything he'd been told over the last two hours. The demonstration of the illusion spell seemed to have been the part that really broke him.

Slightly worried, she glanced at the others, who were also watching. Ranma looked at her and shrugged. "Hey, Lldnr'k? Are you all right?" There was no response for some seconds but eventually the mage slowly turned to look at him. He inspected the martial artist very carefully.

"Do that again," he requested in a numb sort of voice. Ranma raised an eyebrow, then turned female, paused a couple of seconds, shimmered into 'Yori', then after another few seconds reverted back to his birth form. The expression didn't change even though the face under it did. Lldnr'k twitched a couple of times, gaping, then snapped his beak shut with a click.

"All right, I can definitely say that whatever I was expecting, this isn't it," he finally said, his voice deliberately calm.

"Sorry about confusing you," Ranma said, smiling a little.

"Oh, you've been confusing me for as long as I've known you, trust me," their visitor replied, still staring fixedly at him. "At the moment I am far past confused. I find myself having to resort to bewilderment." They all laughed for a moment as he stared some more, finally shaking his head. "Extraordinary. There's no other way to put it. And you're teaching the others these abilities as well?"

"Yes. It's going very well so far with Nabiki, Aiko, and her team, although it remains to be seen how Ami and the others will do with it." Kasumi smiled, pleased. "We still don't know why our method seems to be incompatible with traditional mages, although there is a lot of evidence to suggest that's the case. Whether it will apply to them I don't know although the initial signs suggest it may well not."

"I suspect that there is some manner in which the ability of the mind to perceive the multiple-dimensionality of your method is eradicated by normal methods once the practitioner is past a certain point," he replied absently, staring at her, then Nabiki, as if he was trying to memorise their faces. The middle sister suspected that was indeed the case. "It's a known fact that the process of learning to use magic at more than a basic level causes changes to the brain of the individual in question on a slight but very fundamental level, although how much and in exactly which way differs slightly from case to case and species to species. That might well explain it."

She nodded slowly, thinking about his words. "It's something to investigate one day. It would be interesting to find out if that's the case, and if so it can be reversed. Our method is much more efficient than any of the normal methods we've encountered although I'll admit it's more difficult to learn initially. The substantial advantages outweigh that by a large margin, though, I think."

"It probably can't be reversed without seriously damaging the individual in question," he said, seeming suddenly very interested in the subject. "Although I may be wrong. It would be very difficult even if it was possible. It's not really my field. But I'm not at all surprised that Yrenti was so fascinated by seeing your magical system at work. If indeed you've come up with something new, it would be a very valuable thing. I will agree that it seems to be far more efficient than the more common methods. I'm more and more impressed every time I see you at work."

"Thank you, Lldnr'k." Kasumi smiled. "That's very nice to hear from a mage of your level."

"Ah, flattery. That always works," he laughed, looking less shocked, although he kept looking at them weirdly for a while. After a moment he leaned back on the sofa, shaking his head a little. "You people are... somewhat unusual."
Laughing, Nabiki pointed to her sister and brother in law. "They're the weird ones. They just dragged me into it. I didn't even see it coming until it was too late."

"My sympathies," he chuckled. "Having known 'Yori' for some years I can well see how that might happen." Ranma looked mildly insulted while his wife giggled. "Thank you for letting me into your confidence," he continued. "Even with the security spell it's a privilege to know the truth."

"I hope this won't affect our friendship," the martial artist stated, looking slightly worried. "I like you a lot and would much prefer to stay on good terms."

"Oh, don't concern yourself, please, Ranma," Lldnr'k replied, shaking his head. "It won't cause any problems at all. As you said, you are you all the time despite what the outside looks like. It's the person inside that counts. Your remarkable shape-shifting spell and incredible acting abilities don't change the person I'm proud to call a friend." He looked at the women. "That goes for both of you as well. It was, and is, something of a shock on several levels, but it doesn't really change much in the grand scheme of things."

"Thank you, Lldnr'k," Kasumi told him, smiling. "You are an honoured friend and it was something we were worried about."

He made the equivalent of a smile back at her. "Thank you," he replied.

"There aren't many people who know the whole truth about us," she said, "and in the last few days we've nearly doubled it. It would be nice to not have to keep so many secrets but there are a lot of issues surrounding being more open."

"I do understand that, believe me, Kasumi," he assured her. "I can see a lot of them for myself with only a little thought. I don't blame you for being so careful. I would probably do the same under the circumstances. You all seem to have had a very complex life up until now."

"It's not been ideal in many ways," she replied sadly. "Although, since we left Nerima, it improved out of all recognition. Despite some of the less pleasant parts I wouldn't change anything."

Ranma stood up. "Now that's explained, I'd like to show you something and see what you think." Lldnr'k, looking intrigued, also stood, followed by the two sisters, all three of them following the martial artist out of the apartment and into the elevator.

"This is an impressive place to live," the mage noted, looking around curiously.

"Thanks," Ranma said, "We'll show you around later." Pressing the button for the basement he waited as the doors closed.

"That security system is extremely impressive as well," Lldnr'k added, slightly nervously. "I can feel it watching me even though you told it I was friendly."

"It watches everyone, all the time," Kasumi told him soothingly. "It's only keeping an eye on you to make sure you're safe. As a known friend you fall under the category of someone to protect whenever possible. Not quite to the same level as someone who is part of the system, admittedly, but no harm will come to you inside the wards."

"It has essentially four levels of classification," Ranma added. "User, that's us, Friendly, that's someone we have told it is to be considered safe, Non-Hostile, which is what it marks anyone it considers neutral, and Hostile. That last category wouldn't last long inside the wards."

"I assume that the difference between Hostile and Non-Hostile is keyed on actions?" the mage
asked curiously.

"Pretty much. It's rather paranoid, to be honest, a good trait in a security system, and as a result it always tends to think of Non-hostile as merely Hostile that hasn't quite done anything sufficiently provocative yet. We're trying to work out how to make it slightly less ready to paint a target on someone it takes a dislike to. It's difficult, the thing is so complicated now that making changes has become seriously involved."

"We found a bug in it some time ago, just after Nabiki arrived, that would have been extremely bad if it had acted in our defence," Kasumi told him. "That's why we had to lock out the external defences almost entirely. It's not subtle, by and large, if it decided to deal with a threat it wouldn't stop until there was no chance of the threat ever coming back. With the power it had available even a year ago that would have been... not at all good."

Lldnr'k shuddered a little. "I can well imagine," he said in a low voice. "I can feel the power at the moment. It's... awe-inspiring. As is what it managed to do to the time device."

"That took us by surprise," Ranma admitted as the elevator stopped and the doors opened. They got out. "So did this."

Lldnr'k stared.

He looked around, then up, then over his shoulder at the others, then up again. "Um..."

Closing his beak he slowly looked all around him, then got back into the elevator, inspecting it closely, before coming out once more and staring hard at the wall. Moving his eyes up the impossibly tall structure, he scratched it gently with one talon then examined the results. Stepping back he tilted his head back, shook it slightly, the feathers fluffing out before lying flat again, closed his eyes for a moment, then turned to look at the huge ball of energy in the distance.

The three other people waited patiently. Eventually he turned to Ranma. "This is... rather bizarre."

The martial artist shrugged. "That's what we thought."

Lldnr'k stared at him for a moment, then went back to examining the surroundings. He asked in a faint voice, "How large is it?"

"About fifteen kilometres square, maybe four high."

"Hmm." There was another long pause. Nabiki and Kasumi looked at each other. "That's impressive. Not the largest I've heard of by a considerable margin, but getting up there for a building."

"We think it's stable long term, but I'd like a second opinion," Ranma said, waving at the vast space in front of them. "It looks like the ward system came up with this as a method of storing all the energy it recovered from the time machine's destruction. It wasn't designed to do that but we've found out it's quite a lot better at working out weird solutions to difficult problems than we expected."

The temporal mage looked up at the 'star'. "That would be the energy in question, I assume?"

"What's left of it. It returned all the power it borrowed along with interest, filled all the normal storage places it had, then came up with this to hold the rest." Looking impressed Ranma followed Lldnr'k's gaze. "It's pretty incredible. And incredibly pretty."
"That it is," the mage acknowledged. Kasumi moved a little further away from them, bringing up the ward interface, which made him jump a little, then stare in fascination. "Oh, my word, that's remarkable," he breathed, inspecting it closely. "What an amazing set of spells. You two did this yourselves?"

"We had help from an old friend, Happosai," Ranma told him. "It was mostly his work to start with, but over the years Kas and I have largely taken it over ourselves, since he's been away travelling for the last three years or so. The system tracks him whenever he's in range so we know he's fine, but he's off in another reality at the moment. He'll turn up sooner or later, he always does." He studied the ward system with some pride. "Sometimes I'm amazed myself that we ended up with all this. It's grown much larger than we ever expected. The level of complexity is incredible."

"Indeed." Lldnr'k studied the patterns of magic moving around them. "Almost unbelievably so. I've never seen anything even remotely similar." He shook his head, blinking a little. "I doubt I'm seeing all of it either, parts of it are very difficult to look at."

Kasumi moved a few patterns around, then pointed to one particular complex nest of magic. "This is the spell creating the spacial expansion," she explained. "It's tapped into the main power conduit over here, then through the ward linkage into the structure of the building over here." She moved her fingers a little making the pattern rotate and warp. Nabiki watched, wondering how they could possibly understand all this, it made the illusion spell look simple, while Lldnr'k studied it, idly stroking his beak with one talon.

"I see. Interesting. That's a variation on the subspace storage spell I've never encountered before. It looks very efficient." He walked around the knot of magical energy, leaning close, examining it carefully for several minutes. "As far as I can see you're right. It seems completely stable. I doubt there's any risk of it collapsing, probably ever." Glancing up at the energy ball in the distance, he added, "It's not as if it's likely to run out of power either, for centuries at least, based on how much it's using and how large that is."

She smiled, dismissing the interface. "Thank you for checking. We were fairly sure but it would be awkward if it suddenly failed."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about, Kasumi," he told her. They got back into the elevator, Nabiki pressing the top button. When they arrived back in the apartment, they showed the mage around, taking him up to the roof garden, which he admired with interest as far as it could be seen under the lights, then showing him the pool.

"Very impressive facilities," he said, looking around. "My species isn't one for water sports, it's not enormously compatible with our feathers you understand, but many are. You have a very nice home."

"We certainly like living here," Ranma admitted, smiling. Nabiki watched, then walked over to the deep end of the pool, glancing at the mage.

"Here's one we didn't show you," she laughed, jumping in and taking on her Azumi mer-form in the process. She swam around for a little while as he stared in astonishment. Floating on the surface, she grinned at him. "What do you think?"

"That... is extremely strange." Studying her for a moment, he turned to Ranma and Kasumi, who were watching with grins on their faces. "How versatile is this spell?"

"Pretty much as far as you want to take it," Ranma replied. He shimmered into the flying Yori form.
as demonstration. "This one is huge fun. Kas and I worked on it together but to be honest it's mostly her work." Staring in amazement the temporal mage walked around her, inspecting her closely, then shook his head in wonder.

"Truly remarkable. I've seen some very impressive shape-shifting spells before but nothing quite like this."

Kasumi giggled, changing in the process, to end up as a perfect duplicate of him. He gaped, his beak dropping open, then closed it with a click. "And that is just disturbing."

"They keep doing the same thing to me," Nabiki told him sympathetically. "It's kind of freaky, especially when there's more than one of them at once."

"We don't know what you mean," the two duplicate Nabiki Tendos that suddenly appeared chorused. Lldnr'k twitched.

"I do," he muttered. They laughed in eerie synchronism before returning to normal, both of them smiling. "Have I said how strange you are yet?"

"Oh, yes," Kasumi assured him happily.

"Good."

Flipping neatly out of the pool with a flick of her tail and reverting to normal once in the air, Nabiki landed on her feet and laughed. "It's a lot to take in."

"You might put it that way," he agreed. They headed back down to the living room, sitting down again, after Kasumi fetched some small snacks. "Well. This has certainly been a very interesting couple of hours or so. Thank you once more for shocking me nearly senseless." He looked amused.

"No problem. I'm happy to do it any time," Ranma laughed.

Nabiki looked at the mage for a moment, then asked the question she'd been mulling over for some time. "Lldnr'k, do you have any idea what caused that memory fault everyone seems to have?"

He turned to her, visibly considering the question for a few seconds. "I'm not completely sure," he began, "but my suspicion is that the time device did indeed manage to start the process of a temporal loop but we interrupted it right as it was beginning. It's possible that a few seconds to a few minutes got looped back before the machine was destroyed, ending the process. A temporal dislocation field large enough to reset everything like that would build fairly slowly, a matter of a few seconds at least, accelerating gradually as it wound up. In theory." He shook his head a little. "Aside from that damn thing no one has ever tried anything on that scale, or at least left any trace if they did, so there are a lot of unknowns. But it's basically possible. We might have been even closer than we realised."

She shuddered a little at the thought of how near it had been. "God. That's terrifying."

"Definitely."

"So, basically, it began a loop, time got all bent out of shape, then when we killed it, everything snapped back into what it should be but something like two to three minutes just... disappeared?" He nodded slowly.

"Essentially, yes. The time in question was for all intents and purposes lost even though it didn't truly loop in the way that was intended. Your ward system isolated everything inside it from this
effect while it was covering the planet but when it withdrew, normal time flow reasserted itself, effectively erasing the difference between internal time and external time as it allowed the normal flow to resume. The twitch or jump everyone felt was the loop aborting. It would have created a disturbance in the lowest levels of the universe, I would imagine that it was simultaneously felt everywhere at once. Which is somewhat remarkable when you think about it."

"And the memory fault? It only seems to be about twenty or thirty seconds while the time the wards were doing what they did is about two and a half minutes according to what Ranma said after checking the logs."

"Hmmm. I'm not entirely sure there either. Temporal effects can be quite odd and very nonlinear, with effect preceding cause, for example. There doesn't necessarily have to be a one to one correlation between objective time and subjective time covering that loop, for several reasons that would take all night to explain properly. Also, temporal inertia, of which there would be an almost infinite amount considering the extent of the influence of the device, can cause some very odd results when it nudges things back into place."

"What you're saying is that we'll probably never know exactly," she suggested with a sigh. He nodded, amused.

"Exactly. That is one of the major reasons why time travel and changing the past is such a spectacularly bad idea in the first place, neatly illustrated for us with no real damage. I would suggest not dwelling on it. It will only cause you sleepless nights without good reason."

"Why do you think some people remember it?" Kasumi asked curiously. Lldnr'k looked at her for a moment.

"Well, anyone on the other side of a portal would have been isolated from the effects by being in a completely different universe with its own time flow, so depending on when they went through, they'd remember anything up to all of it. That's fairly simple to understand. Other cases, though, are more complex. Anyone linked into your ward system would be unaffected by that particular issue due to the way it works, having that odd relationship with time we decided was due to Ranma's previous temporal excursion. Significant magical ability, or decent abilities with other energy manipulation methods such as this ki you use, could well have a similar effect although from a slightly different cause. So could immediate proximity to major sources of magical potency."

"It fits," Ranma said quietly, glancing at his wife, who looked back, then nodded. "Ami found a couple of mages, they remember more or less everything. Apparently Rei's grandfather does as well. I'll have to see how many other people of similar abilities do."

"I suspect the majority of them," the temporal mage told him, rubbing his beak in thought. "It wouldn't take a particularly large magical ability to insulate a person to one extent or another from the effect of such a small temporal change. The time period in question would be edited out for them as well but the memories, or some of them at least, would remain. It's a fascinating issue."

Clicking his beak in amusement he added, "I might well get another paper out of it."

"I'm glad the near-destruction of our universe is such a rich source of knowledge for you," Ranma laughed.

"One Seizes the opportunity to learn new things where one can," Lldnr'k told him calmly. They all laughed at that.

"I guess that covers all the magical girls as well, and probably a lot of the better martial artists," Nabiki suggested, thinking about it.
"Most likely, yes."

"I wonder if our fathers remember it?" she asked Ranma and Kasumi. They exchanged glances.

"I don't know but it sounds possible. I'm pretty sure Cologne would remember, at least." Ranma snickered a little. "She's probably going nuts trying to work it out. She hates not knowing things."

Kasumi looked slightly puzzled. "It's a little odd that Masao apparently remembers everything as well. I wonder why?"

"Agent Naito has done a lot of portal travel and teleportation recently," Lldnr'k said after thinking about it for a few seconds. "It's not impossible that there is a lingering effect from that which insulated him from the event. As I said, I suspect it didn't need very much to override the temporal reset as it was so short and essentially low-powered. If it had gone on much longer, it would be a different matter without doubt, but in that case we wouldn't be discussing it in the first place."

"He's also been in contact with us quite a lot over the last year or so," Ranma added slowly. "We already suspect that proximity to our particular form of magic can cause certain people's inherent talent to activate to one level or another. I suppose it's possible that we've accidentally sort of sparked him off a bit. I didn't think of that, but I should look into it."

"Would it have that effect on just anyone?" Nabiki asked curiously. He shook his head. "I don't think so, but I don't know for sure. You'd probably need a certain level of latent ability before it could happen without deliberate effort, and even then it might not go very far at all. People all vary wildly in their inherent power levels, even with intensive training a lot of them would never be able to do much more than make some pretty lights for a few seconds or something like that. Probably most of them."

"I'm forced to agree," Lldnr'k nodded. "While your magic system is weird beyond words, the basic concept is the same as the sort of thing the rest of us do. Almost anyone in a species that has any talent for magic at all can learn something of it, but it's a fairly rare individual who can take that and progress beyond small tricks. The Krennsh are a good example of a species in whom the magical talents are quite limited even in the best of them. They're just not designed for it. Your species on the other hand, despite the strange way your society seems to largely overlook magic in favour of the physical technologies, is quite gifted in that respect. So is mine, to roughly the same level, and the D'sage. You people, of course, are unusually effective even with that taken into account."

He shrugged a little. "It's like all skills and abilities. Most people can learn to do most things, to one level or another, like computer programming, or mechanical engineering, or writing, for example. Magic is somewhat harder to learn than some of them but not vastly more difficult. Abstract higher mathematics, for example, is a much rarer skill to find someone truly gifted in. Yet, even though most could learn the basics of almost any skill, few will take any of them to the point they could be considered experts."

Nabiki nodded, understanding the idea quite well. She was good at both computers and numbers, although she knew Ami was better at the latter by a large margin from what she'd found out about the girl, while she knew several students on her course who were able to keep up but were clearly struggling nonetheless. "Thanks. That explains quite a lot, and most of what's left is probably unexplainable anyway."

"You're welcome, Nabiki," the mage said, inclining his head to her.
They fell silent for a moment, then Ranma frowned slightly. "While you're here, there's one last potential time travel problem I want to deal with," he said, making them all look curiously at him. He looked at Nabiki. "I'll need your help as well as Ldnr'k's." She glanced at her sister, before smiling coldly as he explained. Laughing a little, she agreed.

"Elder Cologne."

The totally unexpected icy voice from behind her made the Amazon yelp in shock, spinning around so fast from where she'd been locking the door to the restaurant she nearly fell over, to gape in horror at the person standing in the middle of the establishment. Bearing in mind that she knew beyond doubt that seconds ago she'd been the only one there, Shampoo having left five minutes ago and Mousse some time before that, she was understandably surprised, leaving aside just who she was surprised by.

Her heart thundering in her ears, the small ancient woman couldn't think what to say for several seconds, during which the other person simply watched her expressionlessly. "Ms Aoyama. What an... unexpected... um, pleasure?" Her voice squeaked a little on the last word in an embarrassing way. The response was a tiny near-smile, still subtly wrong in a very disturbing manner. Very politely she added, "Can I help you with something?"

Ms Aoyama nodded once, her dark glasses glinting in the light from the bulbs overhead. "I believe so. It has come to our attention, Elder Cologne, that you have in your possession an artefact that allows temporal displacement under specific conditions. While damaged, it is still potentially functional, and as a result extremely hazardous. I would request that you relinquish ownership of this artefact. Temporal manipulation is forbidden due to the high likelihood of untoward effects that it will, almost inevitably, cause." Cologne stared in shock. "Having only recently been peripherally involved in a temporal upset that came far closer than is ideal to causing devastation to this reality, we have decided that all means of time travel should be removed from circulation immediately as the risks are simply too high to allow."

"Temporal upset...?" the Elder gasped. "You mean... That's what that was? That thing that borrowed practically all the magical energy in the world?"

"Correct." Ms Aoyama's expression changed slightly, showing just for a moment something that was to anger what traumatic amputation of the leg was to a stubbed toe. Cologne went pale. "Details of the operation are unavailable to you but suffice it to say that without the intervention of a number of individuals who were prepared to sacrifice themselves without question and a significant quantity of good fortune we would not be having this conversation. It was, as you might put it, a very near thing. While the entity in question has been permanently removed from the equation, my employers are in no manner prepared to allow a similar situation to arise again. Hence my request." Her voice made it blatantly clear that 'request' was entirely the wrong word.

Cologne nodded, still pale. "How did you know I have it?" she asked, carefully moving past the alien woman, who turned to watch her, heading for the stairs to her workroom.

"The temporal emanations of the artefact were traced to this building," Ms Aoyama informed her, suddenly holding a spindly device that was making an intermittent faint pinging sound. It emitted an aura of very alien magic, something the Amazon was certain didn't originate anywhere on the planet. "Cross-checking with our records suggested that after the incident involving yourself, Elder Cologne, a person known as Happosai, and a number of other individuals, you recovered the artefact by some means then stored it."

"I gassed the little pervert in his room, snuck in, and stole it back," she mumbled, shocked at how
much the woman and her mysterious employers knew about her and the situation in Nerima. It strongly suggested that they'd been watching for a considerable time, which wasn't entirely comforting to know.

Ms Aoyama smiled slightly, making her shiver again. That expression was just... wrong. "Very enterprising, Elder Cologne." She followed the old Amazon up the stairs completely silently, causing the hairs on the back of Cologne's neck to rise, the only thing betraying her presence a wave of cold preceding her.

'Gods, that's scary,' the Elder thought to herself, wishing desperately that she'd left the mirror in Happosai's possession years ago. Let him deal with this horrifying woman or whatever she really was, see how he liked it. Entering her workroom she headed for the locked cabinets at the far end. She pulled a key on a chain from around her neck, disabled the wards around the lower cabinet, unlocked it, then removed a number of wooden boxes covered in symbols until she reached one at the bottom rear of the storage space, taking that one to her work table. Ms Aoyama watched without a word.

It took a little more work to disable the protections on the box itself but in the end she opened it, turning it to show the Mirror, still cracked from where Nabiki Tendo had accidentally stepped on it. "There it is. I always intended to fix it one day if possible. It's very old and a cultural artefact of the Amazons."

Ms Aoyama inspected the thing with cold curiosity, passing the device she was holding again over it for a moment then checking it. She seemed satisfied although her expression, or lack of one, didn't change. "Excellent. The importance of the artefact to the Amazons is recognised, Elder Cologne. It is regrettable that it must be destroyed. However, travel in time is far too hazardous to allow, as recent events came perilously close to demonstrating. Please do not investigate it in future." She closed the box, picking it up and making it vanish along with the device she was holding. Primly adjusting her sleeves she flicked a tiny speck of dust from one, then nodded to the old woman who was watching, hoping that this would be enough and she'd leave.

"You have my gratitude, Elder Cologne." The terrifying woman turned to go. Just as she reached the door Cologne managed to ask a question that had been niggling at her for the last few minutes.

"How close did we come?"

Ms Aoyama stopped in the doorway, turning back. She inspected the Amazon for a moment. "Approximately three seconds." There was no trace of even her version of a smile. Following this statement was a pause during which Cologne could feel the blood draining from her face. "Until next time, Elder Cologne." With that she turned away again, leaving the room. By the time the Elder recovered and went after her, the building was empty, the doors still locked, no trace of her passing the wards around the café.

"Goddess, I hope there isn't a 'next time'," Cologne mumbled out loud, turning the lights off and heading back upstairs, shivering at the thought, both of Ms Aoyama and the information she'd passed on.

She didn't sleep well that night.

"Here you go, Lldm'rk," Ranma said, handing the box to the temporal mage. "I know you wanted to study it. When you're finished, it's probably best to make sure it's destroyed. I don't want any time travelling methods lying around, not after the last couple of weeks." Opening the box the mage inspected the mirror with interest, waving one of his instruments over it and looking at the results.
"Wise. They're nothing but trouble even when you know what you're doing, which I assure you, most people don't. Even the experts." He closed the box with a click, tucking it away somewhere. "Thank you. It's using a method I haven't encountered in the past. I'll keep it safe until I've learned anything interesting about it then securely destroy it."

"Don't let any tears touch it, just in case," the martial artist warned. "It may be broken but it still feels like it's at least partially active."

"I'll be very careful, trust me. It's not the first time I've run into something similar although the last one used completely different methods. It's a great shame that time travel is relatively easy to perform especially if you don't know about or care about the almost inevitable consequences. Life would be considerably safer if it wasn't." He shook his head. "As recent events prove."

"Well, at least it's over now." Nabiki grinned for a moment. "I'm looking forward to the normal sort of insanity rather than the universe-ending sort. It's far too stressful."

"I would be forced to agree," Lldnr'rk smiled.

"Right, I suppose we should get you home," Ranma said, looking suddenly very tired. "I need some sleep, about twelve to fourteen hours of it, I think." Kasumi leaned against him, nodding sleepily.

"You should rest, then," the time mage told them. "You deserve a break. Let me know what happens with Hnther and his treatment of the other young ladies, when you can, I'm curious and concerned."

"We will. We're going to see Minako tomorrow sometime and check on Usagi. Then I suppose it's off to see Yrenti again." He added after a moment, "Do you want to come when we do?"

"I'd like that, yes," Lldnr'rk replied. "I still have a few questions."

"OK. We'll pick you up. Either late tomorrow or the next day, probably." He generated a portal without moving from the sofa, causing the mage to smile in the way of his species.

"Thank you. Sleep well." He got up, waved, then walked through it. It collapsed with a pop.

"Well, I'm definitely going to bed."

Kasumi mumbled something that sounded like, "Good idea," making Nabiki grin at her tiredly.

"So am I. It all caught up at once." She yawned uncontrollably, then pushed herself to her feet. "See you in the morning."

Heading towards her room, she barely managed to undress before she dropped off, climbing under the covers and beginning to snore gently within seconds.

"Hello, Nabiki," Nodoka said. The middle sister yawned widely, looking out the window at a very sunny late August day, noticing that she'd slept until after ten in the morning.

"Hi, Auntie. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks, dear. And yourself?" The elder Saotome woman sounded in good spirits.
"Very well, thank you," she replied honestly. "We had a late night and I only just got up, but aside from being a little tired still, I'm in a good mood and relaxed."

"That's nice to hear." She could hear the smile in the older woman's voice. "I was wondering when we might see you in Nerima again. You've been gone for over a month and we all miss you."

"Yes, sorry about that, we sort of decided to extend my stay a little when we bumped into some friends." Nabiki decided this was close enough to the truth to be acceptable. "Things got a little chaotic for a while, there were some problems that took a bit of thought to sort out, but we managed in the end. Everything's fine now. I met some interesting new people as well."

"It sounds like you had fun at least," Nodoka commented. Nabiki was glad the other woman couldn't see her face as she leaned her forehead against the window for a moment.

"Mostly, although there were a few times I was wishing I'd stayed in Nerima where it's sane," she giggled. Ranma's mother laughed.

"Oh dear. That bad?"

"Pretty much. Everything is fine now though." She thought for a moment, working it out. "I think I'll be back in about five or six days. I've got a couple of things to finish off here, some people to talk to, then I was going to see my friend Miki and her boyfriend in Kobe for a couple of days. I need to call her and see how she's getting along, we haven't spoken for a while. Then I'll be back in Nerima for a week or so, before university starts again."

"That sounds good. I've been thinking about the garden party. It's the last week of August, and the weather is supposed to be very nice for the next two weeks at least. Can you see if Yori and Chou are available over the weekend of the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth? That gives just over a week to get everything ready and it's still nearly ten days before your next trimester starts."

"I can do that, I think."

"You could invite your friend Miki as well if you like. I understand she's interested in magical girls. Perhaps she'd like to meet some?"

Nabiki laughed. "She'd probably fall over from awe. I'll ask her."

"See if any of the others are interested if you can as well," Nodoka requested. "Akae was going to call Aiko and check, she wanted to talk to her about getting a lift to the US next week anyway, but there's no harm in being thorough. The studio called her this morning and asked if she and Shampoo were free for three or four days for some more demonstrations and interviews. She doesn't seem to know whether to hide in her room or dance around the house." The Saotome woman was almost giggling. "I expect she'll be calling you next."

"Good for her," the middle sister replied, smiling broadly. "I'm certain she's going to do really well. Shampoo also, of course."

"They've certainly been training hard since the last call," the other woman told her. "Several hours each day, both in the morning and the evening. I've never seen Akae so focussed on anything, it's very impressive. Your father is extremely pleased. Even Genma was being complimentary to her the other day."

"Oh, now I know the world is ending," she giggled. Nodoka snickered.

"It's certainly fairly unusual. My dear husband isn't given to compliments, unless they're aimed at
himself." Both of them laughed wildly for a moment or two.

Calming down, Nabiki asked curiously, "How is the planning for Ukyo's wedding coming along?" Nodoka sighed a little.

"It's hit a roadblock, I'm afraid. We're having real trouble finding a suitable place that meets all the criteria and isn't already booked up. Time's running short and I'm a little worried. But never fear, we'll work something out, I'm sure."

"That's annoying. If I think of anything I'll let you know, OK?"

Nodoka sounded pleased. "Thank you, dear. Oh, hold on, your father just came in and wants a word." There was a muffled conversation then her father's deeper voice sounded inside her head.

"Hello, daughter. I hope you're well?"

"Yes, dad, I'm fine, thanks. How are you?"

"Not bad, not bad. I was curious to see if you had experienced that odd twitch the other day and if you had any thoughts on it."

"It was certainly rather strange, wasn't it," she asked, neatly deflecting the question without directly answering it. There was the slightest of pauses before Soun replied, sounding a little worried.

"That it was. The news has been talking about it quite a lot, although oddly less than I would have expected. Elder Cologne was here with Shampoo a few hours after it happened, she seemed quite concerned. Apparently it was felt all over the world. She called another Elder in the tribe in China who told her some very strange things. It looks very much as if it was some extremely odd and massively powerful magical event of some sort, although no one seems to know what. Her best guess is that something big happened and that twitch was the result of something defending against it, based on things a seer in the tribe said while it was happening. But there isn't very much more than circumstantial evidence one way or the other."

"Weird. What do you think is going to happen about it?" she asked. He paused again.

"I'm not sure. People in general seem confused rather than scared, which I suppose is a good thing. Whether that will continue, and whether it applies everywhere, I have no idea. Hopefully nothing major will occur as a result." He chuckled a bit. "There are some very odd theories going around about it. They showed a few on the news. The Americans have come up with some wonderfully insane ideas, of course, but oddly enough don't seem to be taking themselves too seriously. Lots of conspiracy theories as you'd expect. I've heard some amazing ones. The old standby of it being the work of aliens is doing the rounds, also as you'd expect."

Nabiki laughed, while thinking, 'Not actually too far from the truth, weirdly enough.'

"It's always aliens. Or the CIA. Or the Russians. Or the Chinese. Or..."

"Quite." Her father laughed again. "I suppose we'll probably never know for sure. Oh well. Everything seems normal so I suppose there's no harm in it."

"True. Hopefully everyone will be as pragmatic." It was a worry to her. Jun had been collecting stories from the internet and broadcast media, collating them and running simulations. So far everything seemed to be heading in the direction of it blowing over remarkably quickly, which it put down to the temporal aspect causing a self-censoring effect, although it was quick to point out
that even if this were true a lot of people wouldn't be affected. It seemed likely that at the minimum it would be a mystery that was at least as persistent as any JFK assassination theory.

"With luck, yes." Soun sounded hopeful. "Did you hear about Akane?"

"She's been asked to go back to LA, to meet more studio people? Yes, Auntie just mentioned it."

"Oh, yes, that too, but I was referring to what happened in the jewellery shop a couple of days ago." Nabiki immediately became worried.

"No, I haven't heard anything. What happened? Did she get fired?"

Her father laughed merrily. "Oh, no, nothing like that. She intervened in another robbery. Two rather ill-advised young men tried to steal a lot of rings and the like at gunpoint."

She felt abruptly even more worried. "What?!"

"Don't worry, she's fine. The same couldn't be said of them, though. Both ended up with broken ribs, one had a broken arm and a dislocated shoulder. But the most impressive part is what happened when the second robber shot at her."

"He shot her!" the middle sister yelped in outrage, instantly furious. Her father spoke calmly, hearing the tone of her voice.

"At her, dear, at her. She caught the bullet in mid air." He sounded very proud indeed. "She's absolutely fine, although she was extremely surprised at what she managed to do. Cologne was very complimentary, so was Shampoo. The police could barely believe it."

Slightly stunned, even though she recalled what Ranma had told her over a year ago, Nabiki smiled widely. "That's amazing," she said, meaning it. "Well done, sis. I'll bet the robber was surprised."

"Apparently it was something of a shock for both of them." Her father snickered. "Although more for the would-be thief, I think. She capped it off by throwing a sledge-hammer handle right through their getaway motorcycle. He gave up at that point."

Laughing, she pictured the scene her father was describing. "I'm a little surprised it lasted that long. Mr Ito must be pleased about it."

"He is, very much so. They did some considerable damage to the shop but it's nearly fixed now. It was only closed for one afternoon to clear up. Apparently word got around and they had more business the next day than in a normal week. He was joking that he needs to start making souvenir bullet rings to commemorate the occasion." This nearly had Nabiki rolling on the floor laughing.

"Amazing. I'll have to call her and congratulate her on both things."

"She's at work at the moment, but she'll be glad to hear from you, I'm sure. I have to go now myself, the students just turned up, but we're looking forward to seeing you soon. Goodbye, Nabiki."

"Bye dad," she replied, still grinning to herself. It became quiet inside her head again.

#A significant achievement on the part of your sister.# Jun remarked after a moment, sounding quite impressed.

'She's come on a long way in the last year,' she replied, feeling very pleased. 'We all have in our own way, haven't we?"
#Very true, Nabiki.# The SI fell silent again but she got the impression that it was doing its own version of smiling.

Glancing at her phone when it rang, Akane saw her sister's name come up on the display. Finishing with the customer she'd just sold a necklace to, she bade him goodbye then picked the phone up from the shelf under the counter, pressing the call accept button with her thumb. "Hi, Nabiki. How are things going? Where are you? When are you coming home?"

"Fine, thanks. In Rika and Maiko's apartment. Soon, probably five or six days." Both sisters giggled.

"It's nice to hear from you. How did the travelling go?"

"It was a lot of fun. We saw all sorts of weird things, got a bit drunk, went swimming a lot, ate far more than we should have... You know, the sort of thing you're supposed to do on holiday." Nabiki laughed, sounding relaxed and happy.

"I'm envious," Akane laughed back. "It sounds like you've had a good time."

"It had its moments," the older sister said, sounding amused. "There were some weird ones as well, but that's what happens."

"Especially around here, right?" Akane smiled, watching a potential customer study the display in the window, before shaking her head slightly and walking away.

"Minato is pretty weird as well, I hear, but yes."

"God, isn't it? Did you hear how Shampoo got involved in a fight against about two dozen little demons a while ago there? She only went shopping, but came back with bite-marks on her leg!" Akane shook her head in amazement, even though her sister couldn't hear her.

"I saw that on the news, yes, someone recorded it and showed it to me." Nabiki laughed again. "She was damned impressive in action."

"Tell me about it. I thought it was amazing but Elder Cologne was teasing her for days about letting any of them bite her in the first place. Shampoo was getting a little annoyed." Akane grinned. "I don't think I'd have liked to have that happen to me. She's a lot better than I am."

"Can she catch a bullet?" Nabiki asked mischievously. Akane groaned.

"Oh, god. Dad told you, didn't he?"

"Yep. He sounded very proud." The older sister laughed, obviously very amused. "So are you going to try crime-fighting for a living? Become the magical girl you talked about when you were ten?"

"Oh, god," she moaned again. "That was so embarrassing. I had a dress designed and everything."

"You did indeed. I might even know where all your drawings are, although you'd need to adjust the sizes," Nabiki replied, laughing hard enough she sounded like she could barely get the words out. The youngest Tendo flushed with embarrassment.

"Nabiki!" she hissed. "If you show anyone those pictures I'll... I'll..." She tried to think of an appropriate punishment but failed. "Be very annoyed," she finally said rather lamely. Nabiki only
laughed harder for a moment.

"Oh, shut up," Akane finally said, smiling a little. "It's not that funny."

"It is from here. I was just picturing the look on Yori's face if she found you wandering around Minato clutching a huge mallet and wearing that dress." Despite herself Akane collapsed with laughter.

"I'd never be able to look her in the face again, or any of the others," she gasped after a moment.

"Apparently there are some young girls running around there dressed nearly as weirdly. And don't forget the uniforms Aiko's team have."

"They've changed them now, they're much more sensible. Like what Yori and Chou wear only in their team colours of blue and gold." She grinned. "It's almost a pity, the weather is hot enough for the old one at the moment."

"Yes, for about six weeks or so. The rest of the time they must have been freezing their unmentionables off. Can you imagine that in the winter we had last year?" The middle sister sounded both amused and horrified. Akane shivered at the thought.

"No, that wouldn't be much fun."

"Auntie Nodoka told me the studio in LA let you know when they want you over again," her sister said, changing the subject. She smiled widely.

"Yes, Adrian called this morning. It was the middle of the night from his point of view, he'd stayed up just to call me. He's arranged it so we're going to do another, longer demonstration for some studio executives, then have a couple of days of training followed by a mock shoot with real stunt-work for a day, or perhaps two, to see how everything works out. He sounded like he was really looking forward to it."

"Are you?"

She paused for a moment, thinking, then replied, "Yes, I think I am. It's still scary in a way, thinking about being so far from home in front of a lot of foreign people, but you were right, it's something I need to do. Never mind the money, which is amazing in its own right, but the experience is something I think will be good for me."

"That's the right attitude." Nabiki sounded approving. "What does Shampoo think?"

"More or less the same. She's been practising English as much as she can ever since we got back the first time, which has helped a bit, but she still needs a lot of work. Even so she's really looking forward to it."

"Is Aiko taking you over?"

"Yes, I spoke to her a couple of hours ago and she said she was happy to. She's made this whole thing a lot easier than it would have been otherwise, and a lot cheaper as well. I owe her a lot."

"She's a good person," her sister agreed. "So you're going to be away all next week by the sound of it?"

"Pretty much. We've going over in a couple of days, on Sunday, just to get settled into the hotel and shown around, we'll be back either Thursday or Friday."
"I'll be in Nerima by then definitely, I expect. You'll be back in time for Auntie's party as well."

"I wouldn't miss that," Akane stated firmly. "Yori should be there, I need to thank her for starting all of this off. I still can't believe she'd think of me for it."

"Again, she's a good person. She'll appreciate the thanks, I'm sure." Akane could hear the smile in her sister's voice. "I'm going to have to go, I need to get something to eat, I'm starving. Good luck with the trip, call me when you're settled in and let me know how it's going, OK?"

"I will do, 'Biki," she said, smiling as the other Tendo woman hung up. The woman who had been looking in the window earlier came back with a friend, quickly making her quite busy as she started asking questions about a ring in the window.

Still smiling from her conversation with her sister, Nabiki headed for the shower. When she'd finished her ablutions and gotten dressed, she found her elder sister in the kitchen preparing a light meal as a late breakfast or early lunch. "Dad's fine, and so is Akane," she reported, leaning on the doorway and watching the older woman move around the kitchen. "Oh, Akane's catching bullets now as well." She grinned as Kasumi stopped dead, looking slightly startled, then smiled.

"How on earth did that come about?" the elder Tendo asked curiously. She explained, causing her to laugh. "That's very impressive," Kasumi said admiringly. "Our little sister does seem to be learning new skills at quite a rate recently. Good for her."

Nabiki relayed the rest of the news from home while her sister finished the food preparations, then helped her carry it to the table and set it. Shortly Ranma arrived from somewhere, accompanied by Aiko and Misaki. The other two turned up a moment later. "Thanks, love," he said, leaning over Kasumi and kissing her on the forehead, then sitting beside her. "The pool filter needs a flush," he commented, accepting a serving of food. "I'll have to sort that out soon or we'll have something horrible growing in it."

"Do we have spare elements for it?" his wife asked. He nodded, picking up his chopsticks.

"There's one left. We'll need to get some more in."

"We should flood the basement, we'd have our own lake," Tamiko chuckled, taking her food with a smile for the elder Tendo.

"Where the hell would we get enough water?" Fumiko asked her. "Even a metre deep would need... Hmm, something like two and a quarter cubic kilometres of it! That's ridiculous."

"We could open a portal to somewhere with a lot of it and borrow some," her sister suggested, eating with enjoyment.

"I don't think putting half an ocean into the basement is a wildly good idea," Kasumi told them. Tamiko sighed a little.

"Oh, we can't do anything interesting with it," she pouted. "Can't put spacecraft in it, can't let the soarers loose in it, can't fill it with water..." The red-head grinned at Kasumi. "You're no fun at all these days." Laughing, the Tendo woman pointed her chopsticks at her friend.

"You girls just keep wanting to do silly things. Hotaru's idea was more sensible. Some trees and things down there might work. Assuming there's enough light and the spectrum is right, but it looked like it was probably fine."
"We could take a couple of the plants in pots from the roof and try them for a while to see what happened," Nabiki suggested, listening to the byplay with a smile. Her sister nodded after a moment.

"Good idea, sister. Can you help me do that after lunch?"

"Sure."

"I'll teleport them down," Aiko said, grinning at them. "I tried it this morning, there doesn't seem to be any problem with my teleportation, it works fine. I had to experiment for a while until I worked out how to lock on, the spell causes some odd effects, but once I worked it out it was easy."

"That's interesting to know," Ranma told her, looking fascinated. "It might be useful at some point as well."

"I thought the same thing."

Nabiki turned to the martial artist. "I spoke to your mother a little while ago," she said. "She asked me to ask 'Yori' if she was up for that party she wants to do for a week on Sunday."

"Akane asked me the same thing," Aiko put in.

"I don't see why not," he replied, glancing at Kasumi, who nodded with a smile. "Now that everything seems to be back to something approaching normal it shouldn't be a problem."

"We're all fine with it as well." Aiko looked at her team, who all signified acceptance. "It sounds fun."

"She asked me if I wanted to invite my friend Miki," the middle Tendo added. "She'd love to meet six magical girls, I know that much. It's a pity that Azumi Ito can't make it."

"It might be difficult," he agreed, looking amused at the thought. "I suppose you could discreetly leave to allow her to drop in for a while."

"Oh, wouldn't that look suspicious." Nabiki giggled. "That's one of the most basic secret identity mistakes you can make. One leaves, one enters, and you never see them in the same room at the same time."

Everyone laughed at this. "We could make it work, what with the illusion spell and so on, but I agree it's kind of convoluted." Ranma looked at her, smiling. "Your friend Miki will just have to meet Azumi under different circumstances."

"I doubt that's likely to happen," she responded. "Although it would certainly make her day." Sipping her drink, she put the cup down again. "OK, I'll call Auntie later and let her know everything is on for Sunday." They all went back to eating, still slightly more hungry than usual after the last couple of days.

Listening to the ring tone echoing inside her head, Nabiki lay on a sun lounger on the roof enjoying the day, also listening to the sounds of her family and friends, a distinction that was less and less important every day, coming from inside the pool where they'd gone for a little relaxation after the meal, smiling to herself contentedly. Eventually the phone was answered. "Hello?" She didn't recognise the older female voice.

"Hello. This is Nabiki Tendo. I was trying to contact Miki?"
"Oh, hello, Nabiki, I've heard a lot about you. I'm Miki's mother. She's outside with John, they're in the garden. Hold on, I'll take her phone out to her." There was a certain amount of rustling sounds suggestive of movement, followed by a faint mumble, then a familiar voice.

"Hi, Nabiki. It's nice to hear from you. What's going on? Are you back in Nerima yet?" Miki sounded happy. The middle sister smiled again, more pleased than she expected at the sound of the other woman's voice.

"Nearly. I'm relaxing in the garden at my friend's house. We're back from the holiday, which was pretty good fun overall. I've got a few days where I don't have anything planned and I was thinking of coming down to Kobe and meeting you, if that's OK."

"That would be wonderful," her friend replied. "Of course you're welcome. We have a spare room that's not doing anything, you can have that. When were you thinking of coming?"

"I've got a couple of errands to run here, so probably late Saturday or early Sunday?"

"Hang on, let me check with Mom." There was a mumble again for a few seconds. "Either is fine. I'll text you the address. Call me when you get to the station, I'll come and meet you."

"Great. How's John?" She found she was looking forward to meeting the young man again as well.

"He's fine. Mom gave him the third degree when he came, but she's really pleased now. Dad likes him as well." Miki giggled. "I think he gave the poor boy a talk when I wasn't looking. He was a little pale for a while."

"Fathers are like that," Nabiki laughed. "Give my best to him. I'll see you in a couple of days."

"OK. Have a good trip." Miki hung up, as did the middle sister, smiling to herself. After a little more sun she got up to swim with the others.

"How are you feeling?" Minako jumped slightly at the question from the door, turning to see Yori smiling at her, Chou, Azumi, and Ami behind her. Hnther brought up the rear as they came into the room she'd been sitting in, idly talking to Artemis. She studied them for a moment, then shrugged.

"Not too bad, actually. Although it would have been nice to have someone around who spoke Japanese rather than that weird Trade language I can't understand a word of." Yori looked embarrassed for a moment.

"Sorry about abandoning you here like that. I didn't mean to leave it this long, but we got sort of tied up with something." She studied the face of the black-haired woman, finally sighing in recognition.

"You actually did it, didn't you? You killed it."

Yori nodded, sitting next to her and staring at the floor for a moment, while the others arrayed themselves around the room. "Yes." She raised her eyes to meet Minako's. "It wasn't easy and we came very close to losing, but by a near miracle we won. Hotaru was responsible for a lot of it. If she hadn't been there..." The woman shrugged. "It might well have ended differently. But in the end, we did it. The time device is totally dead and gone."

Minako stared at her for a while, then looked at Artemis, who was watching them both, looking extremely relieved yet still a little sad. She understood why. "Does that mean we can go home?"
"Yes, I think it does, assuming you're not planning on doing anything silly?" Yori inspected her. She shook her head.

"No. I don't have any wish to cause any trouble. I want to see my family and get a pizza. After that, I need to work out what to do. But it's not going to be causing random fights, with you or anyone else."

"Fair enough." Yori smiled. "We still need to work out what to do about Artemis, but Hnther says he thinks he's stable for the time being at least. It looks like you're one of the very rare cases of a splinter personality not causing long term problems, for now, anyway. Obviously we'd like to figure out a way to get him out of you so you can both be safe but there's no immediate risk to either of you."

"Are you any closer to working out a method to do that?" The cat looked hopeful. She turned to him thoughtfully.

"I have a couple of ideas, but I'm still working on them. We're in contact with someone who might be able to help if they don't work out as well, so one way or the other we can probably do something. I can't say how long it will take, though, although I'll get it done as fast as I can."

"Thank you," he responded, obviously disappointed but not disheartened.

"You're welcome." She looked back to Minako. "We'll need to arrange for you to come back a few times in the next couple of months for treatment. Hnther says that you're not as badly off as he first feared now that he's examined you thoroughly, but he still wants you to undergo therapy for a while. He'll reassess you after that and see if more treatment is warranted but he's pretty hopeful that most of the damage can be fixed. Is that all right?"

With a small sigh she nodded. "I'm not entirely happy about it but I understand why it needs to be done." She glanced at Hnther, who gave her an encouraging smile, which she realised a few days ago would have made her reach for a weapon. Now she understood that there was a decent person being all those teeth who wanted to help her. "Thank you," she said directly to him, hearing Chou quietly translate for him. He nodded back.

"You're welcome," he replied in rough but understandable Japanese, making her smile.

"We really must sort out some sort of language course on Trade," Chou said to Yori, who laughed. "It would be very helpful, I think, especially in cases like this."

"Add it to the list," the martial artist snickered.

"What about Usagi and Luna?" Artemis asked. They all looked at him.

"We're going to go and do the same thing we did last time to tell Luna," Chou told him, looking somewhat sad. "But Usagi is in far too fragile a state to be allowed to wake up. Hnther is still trying to work out what to do about her. The two therapist experts he's arranged will be here in a couple of days and will examine her thoroughly, so it's possible they'll be able to work out a solution other than the ones we discussed before. But I'm not hopeful."

"We're going to have to inform her parents," Yori added heavily. She looked upset. "It's a difficult problem. Almost worse than if she'd died."

After a long moment, Minako nodded a little. She considered her thoughts carefully, then sighed, making the decision. "I'll come with you. They know me, I'm a good friend of Usagi." Yori glanced over her shoulder at Chou and the others, then looked back at her, studying her.
"They know Minako Aino, true. They don't know Magical Girl Minako. Do you intend to let them?"

"Yes. It might help." She sighed again as the other woman looked at her with respect. Yori put her hand on her shoulder.

"If that's what you want, it's fine. But it's a big decision."

"It is, but it's the right one. They deserve to know."

"OK." The other woman stood. "Let's go and let Luna know, then we need to get home."

Shortly, in the room Usagi was still lying motionless in, next to Setsuna who was in a similar state, they all watched as Hinther performed the process to wake the sleeping splinter personality while leaving the host unaware. Luna blinked into existence, looking around with surprise, then focussing on them. "Ah. Back again. How long has it been?"

"Only a couple of days or so," Yori told her. The small black cat nodded, looking around again.

"It's very odd, popping in and out of existence like that," she noted irritably. "I can't recommend it." Turning back to the martial artist, who was looking amused, she asked, "So? Presumably there's a reason you aroused me from my unholy slumber?" Yori stared, then laughed, as did the others.

"I'm not one for cats in general, but I like you, Luna," she said after a moment. The cat looked pleased. "Yes, we thought you'd like to know we tracked the time machine down and blew it to dust." Luna gaped at her, then closed her eyes in visible relief.

"Damn. I'm very glad to hear that. Thanks for letting me know." She opened her eyes and inspected them closely. "I assume it wasn't quite that simple."

"Not even slightly," Azumi told her from the doorway, looking mildly sour. "It was kind of difficult to be honest."

"It nearly went horribly wrong," Yori admitted, glancing back at her friend. "We had luck on our side, as well as an unexpected secret weapon." She paused, then told the story, obviously leaving out significant parts but getting the overall framework in place. Minako listened with incredulity, as did the two cats.

"Holy shit," Luna finally mumbled. "It sounds like you only barely did it."

"Very true. But the important thing is we did do it. It's over. Which is, to be honest, a fucking enormous relief," Yori sighed. "There's a lot of clean-up to do, things like telling various governments that everything is fine and they shouldn't panic, stuff like that, but considering what could have happened it's pretty minor. Just annoying. We'll talk to our contact in the PSIA, he'll pass it on the right people, and with some luck that will be it. For various very complicated reasons to do with time travel our temporal mage Lldnr'k thinks it will get largely ignored by most people, which is a good thing, I suspect."

"You should see some of the conspiracy theories on the internet though," Ami laughed from beside Azumi, who was also grinning. "They're amazing. You could make entire films from any one of them."

"They probably will," Azumi added with a snicker.

"So what's next?" Luna asked curiously.
"Get Minako and Artemis home first, for a while," Yori told her. "Deal with few other problems that can't wait. Then we need to go and see Usagi's parents. I'm not looking forward to that." Luna looked at the unconscious blonde on the bed and slowly nodded.

"I can understand that." She looked up. "Do you think she can be helped?"

"Hnther is... not sure," the martial artist said after a moment. "But he'll do everything he can."

"I suppose that's all we can do," the cat said quietly. "Poor little bunny." They were all quiet for a moment. "What about Setsuna?" she asked eventually, looking over at the still form of the green-haired woman on the next bed.

"She's slightly better off, but not exactly simple to fix either," Yori told her, following her gaze. She looked at Hnther who said something to her. "He thinks she can probably be sorted out, more or less, but it's going to take a while. She's likely to lose a couple of months but he says it's likely that she'll eventually get back to pretty close to normal. He's studied her quite a lot and is working on a therapy plan. When the other two experts get here they'll start working on her, that should be in only a few days."

"I hope it works," Luna said honestly. She looked around at them all. "Thank you. I suppose you need to turn me off again now."

"Unfortunately, yes. I'm working on a solution, though, so hopefully soon enough we can sort that out at least." Yori smiled at her. The cat nodded back, then braced herself.

"You'd better get on with it."

Yori looked at her sympathetically, before motioning to Hnther. The mind mage bent over Usagi's form once more. A second later there was no sign of the cat.

Half an hour later Minako looked around, smiling a little. Mid-afternoon sunlight, the right colour, illuminated a park near her home. She turned to Yori and her friends. "Thanks. Let me know when you're going to see Usagi's parents."

"I will."

She sighed a little, then moved to stand in front of Ami. Holding out her hand, she said, "I don't know if we can ever be friends again, but I don't want to be your enemy." Ami looked at her for a moment then shook her hand.

"I can work with that," she smiled sadly.

"Tell Rei and Hotaru for me, will you?"

"OK."

Releasing the blue-haired girl's hand, Minako looked around, then waved to them. "See you around," she said, before turning and heading towards home, not sure whether to smile or cry. She compromised by doing both.

"Masao, could you come to my office, please?" The Director-General sounded curious. Wondering what it was this time, Naito was already shutting down his computer.

"I'm on my way, sir," he said, then put the phone down. When Ms Enoki had admitted him to the
inner office, he wasn't entirely surprised to find Yori there as well as the Director-General. She stood up and shook his hand, before they both sat again.

"So, what's this about, Yori?" the PSIA boss asked, leaning back in his chair. "Do you want to take my Agent all over the multiverse again?" She grinned, glancing at Naito, who was also smiling.

"He's welcome to come next time, but it's not that." She became more serious, making him lean forward again. "It's about that issue a couple of days ago. I think you should be made aware of what actually happened. Masao knows some of it, because it came up during the trip, but we asked him not to say anything until we'd resolved it one way or the other." She shrugged slightly. "Don't be annoyed with him. There was absolutely nothing the PSIA or anyone else could do about the situation except make it worse so we had to keep it quiet. We didn't want anyone overreacting and doing something silly. Masao agreed with that."

The Director-General studied her for a while, then transferred his gaze to the agent, who was feeling uncomfortable. After a long moment he nodded. "If it was anyone else I would be very irritated, but considering the source, I think I can let it go. I assume it was a matter of national security?"

"More like planetary security," she replied. He looked curious, so she began the explanation. It took some time, even though Naito was well aware that quite a lot was being left out. She covered the main parts, though, and answered a number of questions he still had after talking to Ami. The man behind the desk had become paler and paler while she spoke, to the point that by the end Naito was watching him with some worry. Eventually she stopped talking.

It took quite a long time for the Director-General to be able to speak.

"Good god," he finally squeaked. There was another pause. "And I thought asteroids nearly hitting us were a bit of an issue," he added. She shrugged with a smile.

"The asteroid was a problem, yes, but only a local one. This was a little more serious."

"It could really have reset the timeline?" he asked, appalled.

"Yes, which was something we really didn't want happening," she scowled, "leaving aside the little issue that it might well have ended up wiping out our entire reality. It's done it at least once before like I said. That would be... bad."

"You have a way with words, Yori," he managed, shaking his head, still an unhealthy colour.

"You see why I wasn't keen on letting anyone else know about it than I had to?" she asked him. He nodded.

"I do. I agree with it, to be honest. As difficult as it is for me to admit you were right to keep it quiet. There's nothing we could have done at all. We owe you and your friends a debt we can never repay." She waved a hand, smiling a little.

"Don't worry about that, we live in the same universe, remember. I'd miss it if it was gone." He laughed a little nervously.

"That, I can understand. Well, even with that in mind, on behalf of the PSIA at least, thank you for saving us all. Again."

"You're more than welcome. But you see the problem. I've got several messages from various people like Harry Williamson at MI5 in London, Michael Graham at the ASIO in Australia,
Inspector Deveraux at the RCMP and Lieutenant Harrison at the LAPD, all asking if I have any idea what happened. Even Sergeant Harada has called me. I'm not sure what to tell any of them. They all deserve to know something, but it's going to be complicated to explain the whole story, or even a part of it, without confusing the issue." She sighed a little. "It could rapidly end up being very political and I don't do politics. I just deal with magical problems. Often by shouting at them." Naito laughed as the Director-General looked amused. "I thought you might have some ideas on the best way to handle it."

Looking less like he was about to faint, the older man nodded slowly. "I understand." He thought for a moment. "You say that very few people will remember much if anything of the true story, and those few will be mostly either magic users or demons?"

"Pretty much. Anyone who went through a portal during that couple of minutes will remember what happened, most magic users and a lot of serious martial artists in places like Nerima will as well. All the magical girls will, I think. I can deal with all of that easily enough, with some work." She looked momentarily uncertain. "It's quite likely that there will be the occasional person who isn't part of the magical world but was close enough to something with serious power who may well remember part or all of it. I can't really do much about that."

"Interesting. It limits the spread of the truth at any rate, which is probably good. I'm not sure the world at large is quite ready to know that it came seconds away from ceasing to exist." He sighed quietly. "I'm not entirely sure I am either, but it's a bit late for that."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry, I'll survive." He smiled for a moment. "I think that we probably need to write a very delicately worded report covering the basics, then disseminate it to carefully chosen people in various governments. It's that or pretend nothing happened. From what you say that might well work but it's possible someone would look into it anyway and come to some strange conclusion that could make a government overreact, despite the fact the threat is over. It's been known to happen. If we get a plausible cover story out there first with enough truth to it to keep people happy, we should be able to forestall that sort of thing."

"It may be a lot of effort for nothing," Yori said, "it's not impossible under the circumstances that if we do nothing eventually it will just die out. Time manipulation can be odd that way."

"But it might not, either."

"Yes. That's true."

"So the cover story is probably the best solution. It's rather cloak and dagger but I'd rather put some effort into a slight misdirection campaign instead of seeing someone get overexcited and cause a problem that ends up killing people." Yori sighed, but nodded agreement.

"I'll admit you know more about this sort of international intelligence than I do. I'm good at the tactical things but I don't have a lot of experience with the strategic aspects. Certainly not as much as you do."

"Thank you for the complement," he said with a smile. She grinned back.

"I know my own limits."

"It's almost a relief to know you actually have some," he said, causing her to laugh. Naito chuckled.
"So, a good old-fashioned government cover up, sir?"

"Basically. We need to make it as true as we can without making it either too frightening or too unbelievable to people who don't have experience of magic. That will take some careful work. But we're quite good at that sort of thing."

"You know that the Americans are likely to end up telling the world something totally ridiculous even so?" Naito asked wryly. "The Russians will probably do the same thing only more clumsily." The Director-General sighed slightly while Yori looked amused, nodding at his agent.

"That's all too likely. They do seem to do that quite often. We probably can't do much about it, though. Let's just see if we can come up with something that keeps people who might panic from doing so and I'll be content."

"Thank you," she said, standing up. He nodded to her.

"You're welcome. Thank you for trusting us with this."

She smiled a little. "You guys have played fair with us for a long time. I trust you, as much as I trust anyone."

"Before you go, can you pass on a message to Azumi for me?" he requested as she turned to leave. Turning back she looked curious.

"Certainly."

"We discussed the issue and think that the idea of importing fusion reactors and fuel is very much worth going ahead with," the man said. She smiled. "I asked Agent Naito to pass it on to her but you'll see her first, I imagine. Masao tells me that she told him getting an evaluation unit would be possible. We'd like to proceed with that. It's been decided that the PSIA should be involved with it initially if that's all right with your people."

"It's pretty much what we had in mind," she agreed. "It seems like the easiest approach to start with."

"Indeed. Once we've sounded out some of the energy companies and also let our people gain experience with the unit, to see if there are any surprises, setting up some means to get them onto the market should be fairly straightforward. The word from higher up is that they're quite happy to allow Azumi and Uthryyl to sort things out with minimum interference, although they'd like to be kept in the loop. From what I can see that mainly means certain politicians are still suspicious and won't believe it until they see it." He looked mildly irritated. "You may well be able to work out who I mean."

"I have a fairly good idea from watching the news," she admitted, smiling a little. "It sounds fair. It's going to make a pretty damn big impact when people realise what's happening and what it means in the longer term. It's probably best to have the government backing us up when that happens."

"I suspect so." He smiled back.

"OK. I'll pass it on to her. It will take a few days, probably a couple of weeks to be honest, but the last time I spoke to Uthryyl he was fairly certain he'd have the export paperwork and licenses ready by then. We can get a unit easily even without them, but full-scale importing will need the documentation. When we have an idea of how to go ahead we can get much larger ones as well."
"Very good." He stood, as she nodded to him, then turned to Naito.

"I'll see you around, Masao."

"OK, Yori. Thanks for letting us know all that. I'll send you a copy of what we come up with so you can check it before we let anyone else see it."

"Thanks." She waved to them then left, fading out of view in the process. They both watched, amused.

"I find that more amazing every time I see it," the Director-General said, laughing a little, as he sat again.

"I'm sorry about keeping that information from you, sir," Naito said, sincerely. "But there were good reasons, ones I agree with, despite my oath."

"Don't worry about it," his superior said, looking back at him from where he'd watched the door close. "I trust your judgement especially where it comes to the special talent. In this case, I happen to agree with both you and Yori. While I'd prefer to know these things in general, under the circumstances I'm rather glad I didn't. I might not have managed to sleep for the last two weeks." He shuddered. "That asteroid was enough to give me nightmares for days."

"I'll admit it's given me some sleepless nights as well, sir," Naito replied. "I have faith in Yori and the others, but it seemed an almost hopeless task. It's a relief to know the threat has been dealt with."

"Very much so." The PSIA boss picked up a folder from his desk and leafed through it with interest. "On a completely different matter, has there been any fallout from this Lieutenant Wilson thing?"

Naito shook his head. "No, not as such. He arrived back at his base in Okinawa without incident, reported to his CO, and told them essentially the truth from the information we have. As I suggested to him, he didn't make a big thing about the whole portal travel and demon aspect of his experience. I sent the report we put together from his interview and talking to Captain Uehara and Sergeant Harada to his CO before he arrived. From what we know it all went fairly smoothly. We did get a phone call wanting clarification on a few points, but for whatever reason they didn't seem too worried about the more peculiar aspects."

"All right. That sounds like it all worked out. The lieutenant is a lucky man."

"Very much so. If Xrist hadn't been in the vicinity it's unlikely he'd have survived." Naito smiled. "He seemed to enjoy himself, to be honest. The man is a born pilot from what I found out about him, so the chance to fly a genuinely alien aircraft must have been an absolute gift. He certainly seemed happy about it."

"Do you think he'll be back?"

"Probably."

Smiling, the Director-General opened another folder. "I see that Captain Uehara has been asking about the feasibility and legality of acquiring some of the stun weapons that Xrist used."

"She mentioned that when I was at the station."

"What do you think?"
"It sounds like it might be worth investigating, from what Sergeant Harada was told by this other demon Rynnkh, they're quite safe. Probably safer than a taser and definitely safer than a bullet. Apparently they're the standard weapon the equivalent of the police use on K'nn Four." He shrugged a little. "But I don't know about the legal position of alien technology in law enforcement."

"I'm not clear on it myself," his superior said absently, reading the report, before closing it and looking up. "I'll pass this upstairs with a recommendation that it be investigated. It's about all that I can do."

Looking at his watch, Naito asked, "Is that all, sir? If so, I'd like to get back to work and finish the report I'm working on before I go home."

"Yes, that's all, Masao. Thank you." Naito nodded to his superior then headed back downstairs. The Director-General sat for a while thinking about what Yori had told them, shuddered a bit, then decided to leave early. He suddenly needed to see his wife and children.

Looking up as the doorbell rang, Kenji wondered who it was. They weren't expecting anyone. "I'll get it," he called, getting up from his desk, putting his pen down and heading to the front door. A muffled reply came from his wife. Opening the door he saw Usagi's friend Minako, with two other women standing behind her. He smiled at the blonde girl. "Hello, Minako. I'm afraid that Usagi isn't here at the moment. She's away on a trip."

"It's Usagi that we need to talk to you about," one of the other two women said. He glanced at her curiously. She was quite petite, with deep black hair in a long braid down her back, a bright blue stripe in it off to one side. For some reason that reminded him of something, as did her clothing...

It took a few seconds but in the end his eyes widened comically. "Excuse me, miss? Are you Yori?" She nodded, smiling slightly, before indicating the tall woman standing next to her.

"Yes. This is my partner Chou." Kenji stared at them, then looked to Minako for an explanation. The blonde looked upset.

"What's going on?" he asked. Hearing a sound from behind him, he looked over his shoulder as his wife came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dishcloth. She spotted the two magical girls and stopped dead for a moment, obviously recognising them immediately, before coming up beside him.

"We have something of a problem concerning your daughter," Yori said with a slight frown, which made him very worried suddenly. "May we come in?" He looked at Ikuko, who was staring at Yori, then Chou, looking startled.

"Certainly," he replied after a moment, standing to the side and waving them inside, then closing the door after them. Nudging his wife gently brought her out of the slightly stunned state of immobility she seemed to have fallen into, causing her to twitch then lead the way into the living room.

"Can I offer you a cup of tea?" Ikuko asked, looking at the three visitors. Chou smiled gently, radiating calm.

"That would be very nice. Thank you," she said. Ikuko smiled back, going into the kitchen. She came back only a couple of minutes later.

"I just put the kettle on so it didn't take long," she explained, putting the tray she was carrying on
the table, then pouring cups of tea for everyone. Kenji noticed that Minako, who was normally a fairly talkative young woman, seemed drawn and tired, sitting to one side with a rather blank expression. He looked at her with concern.

"Are you all right, Minako?" The girl twitched a little, as if she hadn't been paying attention, then nodded slightly.

"Yes, thank you, Mr Tsukino. I just have a lot on my mind at the moment." She smiled weakly, accepting the cup of tea that his wife offered her and withdrawing into herself again. When they all had tea, Ikuko sat next to her husband.

"What's going on?" he asked, sipping his tea, trying not to show his feelings. Yori glanced at Chou, who smiled a little sadly at her.

"It's a rather delicate and awkward problem," Yori began. She looked at them both for a moment. "How much do you know about what your daughter does when she's not at home?"

They glanced at each other, puzzled. "Well, she used to spend a lot of time with her friends at that arcade, or eating ice cream. Or both," Ikuko replied, smiling. Yori's expression suggested this wasn't what she meant.

"She's often out with her friends but I'm not sure what they do," Kenji said, glancing at his wife, who nodded. "Recently she's been arguing with them a lot, I think. I know we haven't seen Ami around very much, or Makoto. They may have had a falling out, I suppose. Is that what you mean?"

"It's related to the problem, yes," the petite woman said, sighing a little. "OK. I guess there's no other way than to just tell you." They looked at each other again. That sounded ominous. "Your daughter is a Magical Girl," she said.

They stared at her for several seconds, before Ikuko giggled. "You can't be serious," she said. "Usagi? Our Usagi? A magical girl like you?" Yori nodded.

"Not exactly like us, but on those general lines, yes."

They both stared again. She seemed completely serious.

"I know it sounds ridiculous. There are reasons for that aside from the obvious," Yori went on, sighing again. She sounded depressed. "The magic involved, as well as other things, has the effect of disguising her quite effectively. It tends to make people discount the idea even if they come up with it, like you're doing right now. Even if you're told straight out it sounds unbelievable. But I can assure you, it's true."

"Assuming this is the case, why are you telling us?" Kenji asked. "How are you involved? Are you saying she works with you?" He was still incredulous. She shook her head, smiling a little for a moment.

"No, to be honest we've been shouting at each other rather than working together for some time now. I've tended to find her extremely irritating. It turns out there are some extenuating circumstances, though, which have led us to the current situation." She glanced at her partner again, who nodded. "Essentially, it's like this..."

Over the next half hour, she and Chou regaled them with the most incredible story they'd ever heard. It was totally ridiculous on the face of it. There were only two things that kept them in their seats and listening.
One was the reputation of the two young women talking to them, which was exemplary.

The other was how sad they seemed about it.

When they finally stopped, Kenji looked at his wife, who stared back, stunned to the point of being unable to speak. He jumped when a voice came from the doorway. "Is that true?" it asked.

Showing no signs of surprise even though neither of them were facing that way, Yori turned her head to look at his son, nodding.

"Yes. Every word. I'm sorry."

"How long were you standing there?" Ikuko asked Shingo. He came into the room, sitting near her on a chair.

"More or less from the beginning," he said. "It would explain a few things," he added, looking back to Yori. "Sis changed a lot over the last year. A lot more in the last few weeks. She wasn't herself."

"The damage caused by the time device has had a drastic effect on her personality," Yori told him.

"And you're claiming that the weird sensation everyone felt three days ago was due to this... time machine... which has been manipulating Usagi and eight other girls for heaven knows how long?" Kenji asked, feeling bewildered. Yori nodded again.

"Yes. We destroyed it then. We were unfortunately far too late for Usagi and a few of the other girls. We only found out about it a couple of weeks ago. It's been affecting them for their entire lives, one way or another."

"You understand that while we know that you have a very impressive reputation, this is a very difficult story to believe, even considering the source?" Ikuko asked. Both girls sighed slightly.

"We know. Neither of us blame you for having trouble with it. Part of that is the magic, it's still active since you've been living with it for so long even though the device is gone, and part of it is just down to how insane the whole story is in the first place." Yori shook her head. "Trust me, even in magical girl terms it's weird. But, I'm afraid, it's true."

"Do you have any proof of this?" Kenji asked her.

"Yes," Minako answered, making them look at her in surprise. She'd been so quiet during the story that they'd forgotten she was there.

"Minako, dear? Do you believe this?" Ikuko asked. The blonde looked terrible. She nodded slowly.

"I do, because I have no choice." Taking a deep breath she glanced at Yori, who seemed to sigh without making any sound. "Usagi is, or was, my team-mate. I'm a magical girl too."

They stared at her for a few seconds, then each other. Sighing, she got up, moved to the middle of the room, then did something extremely unexpected.

The Tsukino family gaped in shock at the unpleasantly familiar uniform on the girl in the middle of the room. "Holy shit," Shingo said quietly. His parents were too startled to even take exception to the swearing.

"You see?" Minako turned on the spot, then manifested a magical weapon, a long chain of golden links, holding it loosely in her hand for a moment before making it vanish again. With a flash of light the uniform and magical girl were replaced by a tired-looking eighteen-year-old with long
blonde hair, who sat down again. "Usagi is like me. I was the first. Then Usagi. Then the others, one by one. Nine magical girls, all deceived by an ancient machine that was trying to remake the world for its own twisted reasons."

Chou reached out and held her hand for a moment while they all stared, open-mouthed. Eventually Ikuko closed her mouth, looking helplessly at Yori, then back to Minako. "Did you try not being a magical girl?" she asked faintly. The blonde started laughing.

"It's not that easy," she gasped out, giggling in an unnerving manner that put the wind up them all. Eventually she wound down and fell silent again. Yori watched her with sympathy in her eyes, before turning back to the three family members.

"She's right. It's not that easy. You don't choose this lifestyle, it chooses you, or you fall into it. Once you're in, you're stuck. Most of us are fine with it, although it's a shock at first, there are a lot of perks. But what happened to these nine girls isn't at all good. Some of them are fine. Some are like Minako here, damaged but repairable. Some, though..." She went silent for a moment. "Some are... seriously broken."

They stared at her in horror, Ikuko with a hand to her mouth.

"Where is she?" Kenji finally asked. "And will she be all right?" Yori looked at him for a moment.

"As to the second part, that's what we need to talk to about. For the first part..."

"She and Minako were involved in... a potentially very bad incident," Chou said, taking up the story. Minako looked ashamed.

"She hates Yori," the girl explained, glancing apologetically at the woman in question, who shrugged a little. "She's never liked her, Yori kept stopping us whenever we tried going after something in her district, but recently that dislike really did turn into hate. She was also getting really paranoid. About ten or eleven days ago, after we destroyed that mall, and some of the others nearly killed a lot of people when they were fighting and wrecked those apartment buildings, it got a lot worse." The girl stared at the floor, her hands clasped, obviously not wanting to talk but doing so anyway.

"She ended up tracking me down with a crazy plan to... well, assassinate Yori, basically. Then go after the others." They all stared at her in disbelief.

"It's true, and I went along with it. I still don't know why. Luckily Tamiko, a friend of Yori's, and some of her team turned out to have been keeping all of us under surveillance since the mall incident and did... something... that knocked us out. I still have no idea what." Yori and Chou both seemed slightly amused as the family looked at them. After a moment when it became clear that no explanation was forthcoming, Minako added, "I woke up on a completely deserted world with a month's worth of water, food, books, and a tent. And a note. They did the same thing to Usagi on the other side of the world."

Kenji glanced at his wife, outrage filling him, but before he could say something he might regret, Minako held up her hand. "Don't get mad at them. It was the right thing to do. If we'd gone ahead with Usagi's plan, I'm damn sure people would have died, including us. Being isolated there with only my mind to talk to," for some reason this seemed to amuse her slightly, "gave me time to think, which helped a lot. By the time they came back about a week later I was ready to talk."

"Unfortunately it was too late for Usagi," Chou told them. "It's been too late for some time from what we've found out."
"What do you mean, too late?" Kenji asked in a low voice. He had some pretty unpleasant ideas in his head. He could see that his son and wife were thinking the same. The visitors could obviously work out what they were thinking and hastened to correct it.

"She's not dead, don't worry about that. Physically, she's fine. Mentally, though..." Yori made a little gesture of worry. "Her mind was badly affected by everything that happened, not to mention it was in a rather fragile state in the first place. She's not quite as mentally flexible as Minako and some of her team-mates are, and the time machine did a lot of memory editing on her to force all the memories of being a 'reincarnated princess' in there in the first place." The petite woman shook her head in disgust. "There's a very good reason that techniques like that are looked on as extremely bad and are banned everywhere. What with one thing and another she's ended up as basically a paranoid psychopath with severe megalomaniac tendencies. And considerable magical abilities which make her remarkably dangerous."

"If she was let loose in her current state we would have to deal with a magically powered serial killer in all probability," Chou said quietly. "There's only one way that would end."

"Oh my god." Ikuko stared in horror. Her husband put his arm around her, still holding the hand he'd been squeezing the entire time to the point his own was going numb. "Surely she can't be that bad?"

"We can show you video and audio recordings of her to prove it, if you need to see them," Yori said. "I'd recommend against it but it's up to you." They exchanged a glance.

"I think we need to see them," Kenji said reluctantly. "I'm not saying that we don't believe you but the person you're describing doesn't sound like our daughter at all."

"I understand." She produced a small black device, putting it on the table next to her empty tea-cup, then placing a small crystal cube in a socket in the top. "Be warned, it will be a shock." Tapping the device with a finger made it beep faintly then do something amazing. They all stared as the end wall of the loving room vanished, replaced with a life-sized, perfectly real looking three dimensional image.

The first recording was of their eldest child, or someone they were assured was her despite the fact that they were having trouble recognising her, in the uniform they were familiar with from the news, walking in tight circles on the roof of the very building they were currently in having a good old-fashioned rant at someone invisible, in a manner that made it clear she was extremely angry and not entirely right in the head. They got worse from there. The one with her shouting at Minako, then pushing her into helping with the assassination plan, made them look at the blonde and the blonde look at the floor, her cheeks red.

The ones on the deserted world were worse. By the last one, the cold smile as she waited by the weird blue-glowing portal to kill the woman who was watching sympathetically from across the room when she emerged from it sent chills down all three backs. "Enough," Kenji finally said. "Turn it off." The projected images vanished. The room was silent for a while.

"Who is Luna?" Shingo asked after thirty seconds or so had passed. Yori looked at him.

"She's an innocent victim of all of this." The woman explained the splinter personality that resided within their daughter and sister. "Only the nine girls can see, hear, and interact with her normally, although she's an intelligent, sentient, and decent person in her own right. We came up with a method to see and hear her which is a little involved but lets us talk to her. Unfortunately, the very thing that created her has made Usagi even worse than she would have been otherwise. Splinter personalities, or the process that creates them at least, usually have some pretty bad long term
effects on the host mind."

"We can take you to see her," Chou suggested, glancing at her partner for a moment. "She's under the care of a friend of ours, a mind mage called Hnther. He's been dealing with all of the mental problems caused by this whole affair. We're very good at the physical healing but dealing with injuries to the mind is outside our experience. Hnther is a real expert and has called in specialists in this type of problem."

"Will she be all right?" Kenji asked, slightly recovered from the sight of seeing his daughter acting and sounding like a super-villain from a movie. They looked at each other again, which made his heart fall. Ikuko made a little sound of horror, while Shingo swore quietly to himself. He didn't have the energy to reprimand the boy.

"The damage to her mind is severe," Yori told them gently. "Hnther is the best person to explain it to you, I think."

Glancing at his wife, then his son, Kenji nodded. "Take us to her."

"OK." She picked up the little device she'd used and made it vanish somehow. "We need to go through a portal."

"A portal?" Shingo squeaked, looking both excited and terrified all of a sudden. The young woman in black silk nodded, smiling a little.

"Yes."

"Demons come through portals."

"Sometimes, yes."

The mix of excitement and terror slid slightly further to the terror side of the equation.

"But..."

"Don't worry, Son, I'm sure this Hnther isn't a demon," Kenji said reassuringly, glancing at the visitors. The way they looked at each other, even Minako, made him stop dead. "Is he?" he asked in a much smaller, somewhat frightened, voice.

"Technically, I suppose you'd probably call him that if you lived around here," Yori replied, smiling a little. All three of them gaped. "He's not human, no. But he's both a very trusted and experienced mind mage and a good friend. Don't let what you've seen on the news put you off. The vast majority of people who travel through portals are just peaceful visitors, traders, and tourists. Even if they look a little unusual."

"But... But... A demon? Really?" Ikuko was staring at them with wide eyes. "A demon is treating our daughter?"

"A very good person is treating your daughter," Chou told her, gently amused. "What he looks like and where he comes from is irrelevant for the moment."

"Hnther is OK, Mr and Mrs Tsukino," Minako told them, looking tired but not worried. A weight seemed to have lifted from her during the last hour, although Kenji could see she was still upset. "It was a shock for me as well. For six or seven years I've been hunting demons, or trying not to be killed by one. I didn't expect to find out there were friendly ones." She sighed slightly. "It makes me wonder how many of the previous problems we had would have gone away if we'd just talked
instead. Like Yori does."

The black-haired young woman shrugged when they looked at her. "You'd be surprised how often that works." She stood up. "Are you ready?"

"Will I need a coat?" Ikuko asked inanely, then looked embarrassed. Chou giggled.

"No, it's nice and warm there." Smiling at them, she added, "You might want shoes, though." They quickly put on their outdoor shoes, then waited. "Don't worry, you don't feel anything going through a portal," she reassured them, as they all stared in amazement when space in the corner of the room rippled and tore open with a crackle, the blue-glowing hole hanging in the air eerily.

Shingo gaped at it, then moved closer to his parents, who exchanged glances. "I'll meet you there, love," Yori said, looking at Chou, then the Tsukino family. "I need to get someone else and bring her as well. I won't be long." She left the apartment, the sound of the door closing almost the only sound other than a soft crackling sound emanating from the apparition in the corner.

"Shall we go?" Chou asked quietly, waving towards it. "Are you coming, Minako?" The girl with the long blonde hair similar to their daughters nodded, before turning and walking to and into the portal without hesitation. She vanished with a slightly louder crackle. After several seconds, Kenji took a deep breath, looking at his wife, then walked over to the thing. Cautiously he waved a hand at it, then poked it. Nothing jumped out and bit the appendage off. Holding his wife's hand he glanced at Chou, who made an encouraging gesture, smiling a little.

"I can't believe we're doing this," he muttered, before walking forward. Ikuko and Shingo followed, with Chou behind them. The portal imploded a moment later, leaving an empty apartment behind.

"They're not happy," Ami observed from the roof of the next building, from where she'd been watching through the SI link.

"No. You can't blame them," 'Yori' sighed. "That was very hard to do. The next part will be harder."

"We need to let them know, though. They have a right to know what's going on with Usagi, and to give permission if we have to do... something irreversible."

"Yep." They were silent for a moment. Eventually, generating a portal to one side, Yori entered it, Ami following her.

Ikuko Tsukino couldn't help the little squeak of shock that came from her when she saw the two metre or more tall, scale-covered and hooved form of the demon waiting for them. He even looked like a demon. Wearing a nearly black robe with silver thread embroidery producing some weird patterns on it, his tail was visible below the hem, twitching around. Eyes quite similar to a cat's inspected them curiously. Oddly, after the initial surprise during which she'd grabbed Kenji's arm hard enough to make him yelp slightly, she found the look in those eyes seemed to reassure her a little. It was obvious that there was a very intelligent being behind them, one she felt was sympathetic.

Kenji was watching the mage cautiously, while Shingo was practically hiding behind them, looking around with shock. "This is Hnther," Chou said politely. "He doesn't speak much Japanese although he's learning, so I'll translate. Just speak normally to him, I'll do the rest." She said
something to the creature in a weird-sounding language, causing him to nod in a surprisingly human-like manner.

"I'm pleased to meet you although sorry it is under such circumstances," the mage said through Chou, her voice following his easily. "Please come with me, I'll take you to your daughter." With a glance at each other and a reassuring smile from Chou, the Tsukino family followed him as requested, looking around with surprised interest. While different in the details the overall effect of the building was fairly close to what they considered normal, reducing the fear that had come over Ikuko when she'd thought about Usagi being in the hands of a demon. Passing a window she looked out to see a scene that seemed peaceful, lit by a low sun that was an unusual colour. She stared as some sort of vehicle passed on a road visible through the window, floating a few centimetres off the ground and moving quite fast without wheels being involved at all.

Minako came up beside her, followed her gaze, then smiled a little. "I thought that sort of thing was weird the first time I saw it," she confided. "I still do." They hurried after the demon mage, who had slowed to wait for them, looking back. Entering a room at the end of the passageway they found it contained something very bed-like on which their daughter was apparently asleep, along with a number of chairs and a low table. Hnther moved to Usagi and bent over her for a moment, apparently checking something, then straightened up and turned to them.

"She is deeply unconscious, in a state similar to medical anaesthesia, only somewhat more involved. I have turned off the higher functioning of her brain to prevent more damage occurring," he told them through Chou. "It's not ideal, but I can if necessary wake her. I would prefer not to unless there is a genuine need, it will inevitably cause more problems, and it would have to be for a very short time." He glanced at Chou for a moment, then looked around as Yori and another girl, dressed in something fairly similar to what she was wearing but in shades of blue and white came into the room, nodding to them, before returning to the Tsukinos. "However I would suggest not doing so at this point."

Ikuko and Kenji looked at each other, then went to look down on her daughter. Yori and the blue-haired girl with her brought a couple of chairs over then moved back out of the way silently. They sat, staring at the pale face lying on the pillow, blonde hair surrounding it, looking like the girl was merely asleep. Her expression was peacefully neutral. Reaching out Ikuko picked up her daughter's right hand and held it.

Sensing a presence beside her, she looked up to see her other child staring at his sister. She took his hand with her free one. The family sat there for a while, until Yori moved around to the other side of the bed and pulled up a chair of her own, Hnther standing beside her, with Chou next to him. "We're genuinely sorry about this whole thing," the young woman said quietly, studying the unconscious girl for a moment then looking at them. "We've had our differences for some time, but she didn't, doesn't, deserve this. None of them do. That damn time machine has caused a lot of problems for her and her entire group, not to mention everyone else."

"Can you help her?" Kenji asked, looking pleadingly at the three people on the other side of the bed. There was no answer for a moment, then Hnther spoke.

"It's a complex problem with no easy solution, I'm afraid. The memory damage is quite involved while the mental issues caused by both it and the splinter personality are considerably more so. If it was only one or the other I would be fairly sure a cure was something that could be worked on, although a complete cure might be difficult. With all the issues added together it is... more problematic. We will need to examine her for some time and run some simulations before we can decide on the correct path to take. I'm very reluctant indeed to try anything without a full understanding of all the intricacies of her illness, going in before that would risk irreversible
"What happens if you can't cure her?" Shingo asked, holding his mother's hand tightly and staring at the still figure of his sister. He raised his eyes to meet the mage's almost defiantly. Hnther looked back calmly.

"That is the problem. There are only a limited number of options, none of them good. That's what we need to discuss."

"She's in no state to give her permission for any of this," Yori said to them. "We need you to know what the options are, so we can work out the best way to deal with it all. I'm afraid that you're not going to like any of them but none of us can think of any others. If you can, please, tell us. We're willing to try more or less anything sensible." She took a moment to allow them to understand, then began talking, Hnther adding his own part as they listened. By the end of it, Ikuko was in tears and Shingo was sitting in the corner, his head on his knees. Kenji seemed almost in a trance.

When the pair stopped explaining, there was dead silence for long enough it was beginning to get uncomfortable. "There's nothing else?" The Tsukino woman stared at them. Yori shrugged unhappily.

"Not that we've been able to come up with. Curing her is the ideal solution, but as we've explained, it's not very likely. There's just too much damage to her mind. Letting her go as she is isn't feasible, she's extremely dangerous in her current state, I can guarantee that the death toll would be enormous unless we put her somewhere all on her own, which isn't exactly either fair or humane. Simply killing her would almost be the kindest thing under those circumstances, but is also hardly ideal, leaving out the morality of it. She's not quite an innocent victim, but none of what's happened recently is really her fault or anything she could do much to prevent."

"The memory erasure and age reset that Yori suggested is currently the best solution we can devise absent a true cure," Hnther added. "I will agree that it's not perfect, but it would seem to be the best of a series of bad solutions to a very difficult problem."

"I can't believe we're even discussing killing my daughter," Kenji exploded, looking horrified. His wife grabbed him as he began to rise, slightly worried he'd fling himself across the bed in his anger. "That's no solution!"

Yori watched him sympathetically, making no attempt to either move or defend herself.

"In most ways, I agree with you completely. I don't like killing, it's very final and there's often a better way if you think it through. But sometimes, despite whatever you try, there's no other way to deal with a threat. Almost all the girls in my line of work understand that and have faced it on more than one occasion, in the same way the police do, and soldiers."

"But she's an eighteen year old schoolgirl," he fumed, glaring at her. "My daughter. She's hardly a 'threat'."

"You saw the recordings," she replied. Reluctantly, after a tense moment, he nodded. "She's a very powerful magical girl, one with a number of very dangerous abilities. Usagi's not exactly the best fighter around, true, but the damage she could cause if she wanted is... pretty horrific. It was only pure luck coupled with very fast work by some friends of mine that stopped people dying during that mall incident two and a half weeks ago. The next time, I doubt we'd be that lucky, especially as I have a feeling she might well be trying to kill people." She looked at him, as did everyone else. "Would you want that on your conscience?"
"No," he mumbled, after a few seconds had passed. "But... I can't believe she's that dangerous."

"You have no idea how much damage a magical girl, even a fairly low powered one, could cause." Yori smiled at him. "She's not low powered. Neither are my friends and I. A full blown, no holds barred fight between people like us in a populated area would be a very bad thing, trust me. That's why we always try to shut a situation like that down as quickly as we can. Even so the collateral damage can be pretty bad." Seeing that he didn't look convinced, she somehow pulled a crowbar from nowhere, holding it up, then handing it to him. He took it, looking puzzled.

"How did you..." he mumbled, then caught himself. "Oh. Right. Magic. What's this for?" Ikuko and Shingo were also looking at it.

"A small demonstration. Is it a real crowbar?" Weighing it in his hands, he nodded. She glanced at Chou, who held out her hand. "Sorry, this is ridiculously dramatic, but it should give you an idea." Kenji handed the blonde woman the tool. She took it, then without hesitation swung it blurringly fast at her partner's head, the impact making a very solid sound accompanied by a ringing as if she'd hit a concrete block. Yori didn't move a millimetre as the solid steel bar slammed into the top of her head. Shingo yelped, while his parents stared in horror. Even Minako jumped.

Holding up the crowbar for a moment, Chou passed it back over the bed to Kenji, who took it numbly. He looked at it, then his wife and son. The tool was now ruined, bent into a half-circle where the impossibly hard blow had wrapped it around the young woman's head in an implausibly worrying demonstration of both strength and toughness. Yori let them look at it for a little while without saying anything. Eventually Kenji passed it to his wife, who just stared at the thing in shock.

"Usagi and most of her friends aren't quite that tough or strong, but they're not far off. If you hit her like that she'd swear a lot, have a small bruise, then in the state she's in at the moment, probably kill you without a second thought. How do you think anyone would stop her? Shoot her? It would bounce, or she'd just catch it. Even a large-calibre bullet would just piss her off without doing very much damage. You'd only get one shot as well." The girl watched as they tried to absorb the information. "If she went back in the state she's in, got loose, and decided to make the prophecy her team has been following for years come true, the casualty figures would be horrible by the time we stopped her."

"Oh, god," Ikuko said faintly, staring at the bent crowbar, then the young women and the demon on the other side of the bed. She dropped the tool to the floor and put her face in her hands.

"We're not going to do anything for some time," Hnther said, Chou somehow getting across the gentle tone of his voice as she translated. "There's no hurry. She is in no danger while she's in this state, she could remain like this for some years without harm. Obviously we don't want that to happen, but it gives time to work out a solution. But you should prepare yourselves to accept the fact that there may be no good solution other than the ones we've talked about."

"What would happen if you did erase her memory like you talked about?" Shingo asked in a low voice. The mage looked at him.

"We would have to excise approximately two years of experiences completely, then edit another four to five to remove specific memories that were inserted by the time device and repair the tangled ones the insertion caused. It would take some time, but the result would be as if she lost two to three years of her life. That would be permanently gone. The essential personality of your sister wouldn't be affected and with those damaged memories gone, she would be much as you remember her from that point in her life."
"Her inherent magical ability could be suppressed for a while as well, although not permanently," Yori added. "Eventually, no matter what we did, it would return. Hopefully by the time it did she would have matured to the point she could be properly trained in how to use it. Without the influence of the time machine, she'd end up more or less what she should have been. But the magical girl thing is part of her for good." The young woman smiled slightly for a moment. "It's not all bad, believe me. Despite a lot of issues we've had with bringing some of the more irresponsible girls in check, overall they tend to be a very civic-minded and decent group. Just a little... excessive."

"There's never been a case like this before," Chou added, briefly taking time away from translating for Hnther, which Yori immediately began filling in. "The various groups sometimes fight each other, often just to see what will happen, but there's never been one that imploded like this. Without the time machine's involvement, it wouldn't have ended up at this point. Your daughter and her friends are basically good people." She smiled at them. "Admittedly without the time machine they probably wouldn't be magical girls in the first place but I hope you understand the point."

"I think so," Ikuko replied slowly. "And your idea was to somehow make her younger, regress her to the point she was physically the age that matched her memories?"

"Yes. There are several ways to do that which I'm aware of. It seems like the best solution if we have to proceed in that direction."

"But what about everyone else who knows her?" Kenji asked. "All her friends, and the neighbours, everything like that. Sooner or later someone would start asking questions. What about school? She's nearly finished high school now."

"It's complicated, true," Chou replied, sighing a little. "But not impossibly so. We have contacts in the government that could supply you all with new identities, relocate you if necessary, and we could change your appearances so no one would realise the truth. That's one solution. Another would be to change just Usagi, then claim she was a cousin or something like that. Again, the records could be made to match. That would be a little more difficult but it's possible. Explaining Usagi's disappearance would take some work but I'm sure it could be done."

The blue-haired girl who they still hadn't got the name of suggested, "If you really wanted to, you could even stick mostly to the truth and claim that Usagi had suffered some weird magical accident and ended up three years younger with some memories missing. You live in the middle of Minato, it wouldn't surprise anyone too much. Weird things happen there all the time. It's not even the craziest thing I've heard recently."

"Yes, that's an interesting idea as well," Chou commented, nodding. "It has the advantage of being simple." She looked back to the Tsukinos. "You see, there are a number of possibilities. None of them are ideal, I'm afraid, but with the circumstances that have been forced on us, sooner or later we may well have to pick one."

"We'll have to arrange a suitable excuse for why she's missing school," Yori put in, Chou going back to translating again. "But we can do that without too much trouble. It gives Hnther and his people time to work out the best move, and you to decide what you'd like to do if they can't cure her. We should hope for the best but plan for the worst, as the saying has it."

Ikuko looked at her husband for a while, then her son. "We're going to have to discuss all this alone."

"That's fine. Like Hnther says, there's no real hurry." Yori reached over and handed them a business card each. "You can get me on that number. Let me know when you want to talk about it,
or come back to visit Usagi. I'm happy to bring you, or if I'm unavailable, I can arrange it."

"Thank you," Kenji said. He looked at the card his wife was holding and his eyes widened slightly. Yori snickered.

"Magic business cards." She explained the cards, making them both stare at her for a moment, then exchange glances.

"How strange," Ikuko said quietly. She looked at her daughter again. "Can we meet Luna?"

"Sure. Hold on for a moment, it's a little fiddly to set up." The blue-haired girl accepted the small device Yori held out to her, the same one that she'd used in the apartment to show the disturbing recordings of Usagi, then put it on the table, fiddling with it for a moment. She nodded to the black-haired woman.

"I'm ready." Yori reached out and touched the girl in the bed in a few places, a purple glow flickering around her fingertips, then made way for Hnther, who bent over Usagi, concentrating. A moment later a curious female voice spoke from behind them, making them turn and stare at the small black cat sitting on the floor watching them.

"How long this time?" The cat asked, inspecting the three Tsukino family members curiously.

"Another twenty hours," Yori replied. It nodded. "This is Luna." The cat looked at each of them in turn, then sighed, making them stare.

"Presumably you've been told what's going on?" Luna asked them.

They all nodded in synchronism, staring. A few seconds passed in silence.

"You're a cat." Shingo looked at his parents, who looked back then they all stared at Luna again. Somehow, she managed to look irritated.

"Yes, I know."

"And you talk."

"Quite a lot, yes." Luna looked at Yori, who grinned at her. "Some say too much."

"But you're a cat."

"And you're a twit," the animal said acidly. "Stop stating the obvious and talk sense."

"Hey!" Shingo looked annoyed, while Luna laughed. Ikuko shook her head, blinking a few times, then turned to Yori.

"You didn't mention Luna was a cat."

"Sorry. She's a cat. More or less." Walking over to the small animal who was still watching them, she knelt down and waved her hand through it.

"Stop that, you idiot," the cat hissed out of the side of its mouth. Yori chuckled.

"Why do you care, you can't feel it."

"It's undignified." The two of them bickered like old friends, apparently enjoying the byplay, while Ikuko and her family watched in amazement. Finally she cleared her throat.
"Excuse me?" Both cat and magical girl turned to gaze at her. "You've known our daughter for some time, Luna?"

"Yes," the cat sighed, suddenly looking sad, rather than the oddly happy irritation she'd displayed up until then. "We're sort of stuck with each other, being in the same brain and all."

"I see." She glanced at her husband, who didn't seem to know what to say. "What do you think we should do?"

"I'm somewhat biased, of course. If Usagi dies, I go with her." Luna scowled which looked weird on the little furry face. "Despite everything I'd prefer that didn't happen. Even with the absolute pain in the ass she turned into over the last few months she was my friend for a long time as well. But I can't stay inside her for much longer, or bad things will happen to both of us." She glanced at Yori, who shrugged.

"Still working on that. It's only been a day, give me time, OK?"

"Hurry up. It's cramped in here." The cat giggled. Everyone stared at it, causing her to look slightly embarrassed. "Sorry, I make jokes when I'm nervous."

"Make better ones," Minako suggested, a small smile on her face. Luna cast an evil look her way, then pretended she hadn't heard.

"I mentioned that a splinter personality, in most cases, is something that causes long term mental health issues, you remember," Yori asked, turning back to Usagi's family. Ikuko nodded slowly. "We're trying to come up with a method to somehow remove Luna without harming her. I've got some ideas I need to do some more research on, which will take some time yet..." The cat sighed, making her grin at it. "... But I'm pretty hopeful. It's another reason not to rush anything. Two minds are at stake, even if it's only one brain."

"This is all too much," the elder Tsukino said softly, shaking her head. Kenji squeezed her hand. "I think we need to go back and discuss it all."

"Of course. No problem." Yori looked at Luna, who sighed.

"Back into limbo. Hurry up and get me out, OK? It's getting tedious."

"I'll keep on it." The magical girl smiled at the insubstantial cat, who nodded back, then waited. Hnther bent over Usagi again. They watched as the cat simply vanished as if she'd never existed, which was unnervingly close to the truth. Picking up the small device the blue-haired girl made it disappear then went to stand beside Minako, who glanced at her, but said nothing.

Chou talked to Hnther in that odd language for a little while, the mind mage nodding occasionally, then waved to him. As a portal appeared, she gestured to it gracefully. "Your living room is right through there. Do you want any of us to come back with you?"

Glancing at her husband, Ikuko shook her head, walking over to the young woman and holding out her hand. Chou shook it, as did Yori. "No, I think we need to be alone. Minako, if you could come back, though, we'd like to ask a few questions, if that's all right." The blonde nodded, coming to stand with them. Ikuko turned to Yori.

"Thank you for all you've done for our daughter. We'll think about everything you've told us and get in contact soon."

"That's fine. If you need to know anything else, just call me. One last thing, please don't tell anyone
else about what we told you. Very few people know about the time machine, we'd like to keep it like that, at least for now. We don't want people to panic."

"I understand, I think. We don't want anyone to know about this either, I think." She looked at her family, both of whom nodded silently. "We'll keep it quiet."

"Thanks." Yori shook their hands. Smiling at her for a moment, Ikuko walked through the portal with her husband, her son and her daughter's friend following. They found themselves back where they started from, the portal vanishing a couple of seconds later with a pop like the cork coming out of a bottle of champagne. The four people stared at each other for a while, eventually sitting down.

Ikuko began crying, all the emotion she'd bottled up for the last couple of hours coming out at once. Kenji held her, his own eyes full of tears, while Shingo and Minako stared at the floor.

Eventually, she recovered, and they began talking.

"How did it go?" Nabiki asked, looking up as Ranma and her sister came in. They both looked melancholy.

"As well as you might expect, I guess," the martial artist said, slumping down beside her. "Not as well as I'd like. We told them everything, now it's up to them to decide. Hnther and his team will start working out what can be done beginning next week, but it's going to be at least a month before they even know whether a cure is possible or if we have no choice but to go for a more drastic solution."

"Ami's suggestion might be worth looking at," Kasumi suggested. He looked at her for a second.

"Possibly. It probably wouldn't work anywhere else, but she has a point. This is Minato. You only have to look in the basement to see weird shit happens here."

Closing her book, Nabiki watched them for a moment, then made a call on the com. Twenty seconds later Aiko and the rest of her group appeared next to the sofa. "Come on. It's a nice day, let's go out for a meal. We haven't been back to that Thai fusion place for a while." She jumped to her feet. "I need some food, you guys need to relax after a difficult job." She held out both hands. A couple of seconds passed then her sister and brother-in-law nodded, smiled, and allowed themselves to be pulled to their feet. Shortly they were piling into two taxis, leaving the magical world behind for one afternoon and just going out as friends and family.

The ward system noticed that the effects caused by the collapse of the time loop had mostly subsided in the last few days, although there were one or two odd things still happening as the resonances faded...

It became abruptly more alert as it detected the fabric of the universe getting a knot in it for a moment, watching the results curiously.

Humming to herself, in a good mood, Chiyoko headed home with her staff over her shoulder, idly wondering yet again what that weird light three days ago had been. She resolved to ask Tamiko the next time she saw the woman.

It had been a fairly good day, all things considered. She'd only destroyed two cars and a telephone box dealing with her mini-demons, which was something of a record for her. Most of the little
terrors had run off back to wherever they came from, while four of them had evaporated under the impact of her staff beam. All in all, not bad, she felt.

An odd sensation made her stop, looking around. It seemed to be coming from down an alley to the right. Puzzled, she headed over to investigate, getting her weapon ready just in case. Stopping at the end of the alley she peered in, seeing nothing more than some commercial garbage containers ten metres in, then the shadows leading back to the rear of the large block of buildings she was walking past. The sensation seemed to be coming from somewhere down at the other end.

Holding the staff ready, in a manner that would have made anyone who knew her find something very solid to hide behind, and Tamiko to go purple, she headed further in, walking cautiously. As she brushed against the wall she found a streak of something horrible had stained the sleeve of her elaborate dress, causing her to stop and mutter "Ook" in a disgusted tone. Brushing at it only spread it around and made her grimace, sighing.

The sensation came again. Forgetting about the dress, she pushed on. Rounding the corner Chiyoko found herself in a small loading dock of some sort, completely empty and very dirty, high walls all around blocking most of the late afternoon light, the alley heading into it then out the other side, gloomy and damp, puddles from the previous morning's light rain still present. She stood in the entrance to the wider area looking around. "Weird. I wonder what..."

As she spoke, the wall on the other side of the small courtyard rippled oddly, disgorging an unusually dressed man. The sensation of his arrival was similar to the magic of a portal but strangely different in a way she couldn't really describe. The man was also strangely different, but in his case he was easy to describe, although as she gaped, she also thought no one would believe her.

He certainly looked human, more or less, although there was a very unusual type of magic wafting from him, but two things stood out. One was his clothes and the other was the air of complete terror he radiated. The clothes consisted mainly of a set of tatty robes topped by a rat-eaten and battered tall pointed hat with some sort of writing on it in tasteless sequins. The terror was both in his aura and in his eyes. She stared as he looked wildly around, screamed something in a language she'd never heard before, then sprinted past her, diving into the darkest part of the alley at a speed that she found impressive. He didn't spare her a glance.

"Hey!" she called after him. "Mister? Are you all right?" There was no answer.

The sensation came again, causing her to whirl back, just in time to see a huge creature that seemed to be made of stone charge out of the wall, brandishing a huge club, then thunder past her with heavy footsteps, roaring something that sounded very rude even through the language barrier. She stared in disbelief as it disappeared after the first arrival.

"Um. Hey?" she said in a small voice. Once more, there was no answer.

A few seconds passed silently, then she walked over to the wall both strange visitors had come out of. Looking carefully at it she poked it suspiciously with the end of her staff, which grated on brick. It seemed like nothing more than a normal wall. Prodding it in a few more places proved to her it was totally solid and completely uninteresting*. Stepping back she stared for a second or two.

"What's going on?" she wondered out loud, then yipped in shock as for the third time the wall rippled, producing the strangest thing yet.

The magical girl gaped at the wooden trunk that was literally standing in the middle of the courtyard, on lots and lots of little legs. Too startled even to point her staff at it, she watched as it
moved all those legs in a complicated dance, rotating in a complete circle, then stopped facing her. She got the weirdest feeling it was looking at her plaintively.

After a few more seconds, she pointed. "They went that way," she said. The trunk opened its lid slightly with a creak of hinges then snapped it shut, turned to the direction she was pointing, and scuttled off, all the little feet making a pattering sound on the concrete. She watched it until it vanished into the darkness.

There was silence once more.

Turning and staring very hard at the wall, she waited. Nothing happened. She waited some more. Nothing continued happening. After a long moment she cautiously poked it again, quite hard, in several places.

It was still just a wall.

Eventually, she rather reluctantly went after the three weird beings, if indeed two of them could even be described as such, following the footprints.

Normal size ones.

Huge great ones, that had left dents in some of the old rotten concrete.

And lots and lots of little ones, very close together.

After a hundred metres or so she arrived at another wall, all the footprints leading towards it. This wall was at the end of the alley, terminating it in a very final manner. She looked around, then up, then around again. She poked the wall experimentally.

It was as solid as the first one.

She couldn't feel anything weird any more, although she decided that the entire experience could be described in those terms. Even for Minato, even for her, this was somewhat unusual. When another five minutes went by with nothing interesting happening, she shrugged, put the staff back over her shoulder, and went home.

Chiyoko did decide, though, that she wasn't going to mention it to anyone.

Some things were unbelievable even to a magical girl.

*This was a little unfair, it was a very well made wall and to a bricklayer would have stood out as a shining example of wall-kind.

The peculiar after-effect died away and all was still again, the fabric of the universe (which is a sort of paisley pattern, seen from the correct vantage point) returning to normal as the last of the loose energies damped out. The system watched for a moment more, then decided that there was no threat and went back to standby.

We'll miss you, Pterry.
Chapter 88

Blasted work, jumping on me out of the dark and making me have to do it. Very annoying. Sorry once again about the long delay. Too much to do, not enough time to do it all, and various other matters getting in the way of having fun writing.

My apologies that my real life is getting in the way of your entertainment :)

Never mind, I’ve got more words for you all to use as you see fit. I have half the chapter after this one done, most of the chapter after the chapter after that done as well, and have started on the one in between, which will be the Great Akane (and Shampoo) Meets Hollywood epic. Will Hollywood survive? Will Akane (and Shampoo)?

I don’t know, I haven’t written it yet ;) I’m curious to find out. I’ve got a weekend with nothing much else to do so I may end up spending most of it writing.

Amusing fact... After typing so much over the last year and a half or so, my typing speed has increased from about 20 WPM, non-touch typing, to over 50WPM, touch-typing. If nothing else this hobby seems to be an effective method of learning to type properly!

Tying up the last few loose ends, then moving back to the fun parts...

"Weird."
"Yep."
"Impressive, though."
"Yep."
"And damn old."
"Yep."

Nabiki sighed, looking askance at Ranma who was standing beside her, being rewarded with a smirk for her trouble.

"Idiot."

They looked around curiously in the light from the ki balls they were all holding, having shifted the glow to white. Nabiki looked up. 'How thick do you suppose that ice is, Jun?'

#Without the correct instruments it’s difficult to be completely accurate, Nabiki, but my best estimate is approximately six hundred and fifty metres on average.#

'No danger of it collapsing?'

#No, it’s stable. The surface temperature is above freezing, barely, but the ice itself is well below that point and structurally sound. It has been stable for thousands of years. Its weight will eventually make it slump but that will take years.#

The middle sister nodded absently, going back to looking around the enormous cavern. The ground under the ice formed a shallow valley, which the original underside of the vast mass oddly seemed
to be avoiding, going from high point to high point and leaving the depression in the middle untouched. It had clearly been full of water until recently, though. Now, aside from a steady dripping of ice-water from high above them, it was mostly empty exposed rock and mud, a dark tunnel to one side on the lowest point evidence of where all the water had gone.

"Looks like it melted fifty or sixty metres into the ice when the power was pulled out and put back," Misaki reported, staring upwards with interest. "Probably practically boiled the water in here as well. It found a weak point over there and melted it's way out, I'd think all the way to the sea, which is in that direction not too far away."

"It looks that way," Ranma nodded, glancing to where she was pointing, then returning to examining the huge stone circle the rest of them were wandering around in. "It's pretty damn incredible. This must be a lot like how Stonehenge looked originally, only on a larger scale."

"Is it safe, magically?" Nabiki asked, slightly worried. She could feel considerable magical potency somewhere below them gently humming away. He glanced at her for a moment, raising an eyebrow, then nodded again.

"Yes, the power is stored a long way down, it usually is in these things. Like Uluru, it's several kilometres down at least. There's a low level but effective preservation spell on the place which is probably what made the ice avoid it. I wonder who built it, what for, and when?"

"A hell of a long time ago, but other than that, no idea," she replied, watching Kasumi investigate one of the stones, which was in astoundingly good condition. Several camera drones were flying about recording everything. "It's going to make the archaeologists very surprised."

"If they ever find it." He turned to her. "It's not exactly easy to get to for more normal people, after all, even assuming anyone looked here in the first place. Although it would make the careers of anyone who did."

Nabiki smiled slowly. "Well, I have an idea on that front..." She explained, making him begin to grin.

Jerry looked at the email he'd been sent, puzzled. Re-reading it for the third time, he shook his head slightly, before turning in his seat and pulling a large atlas from the bookshelf next to the window that overlooked the car park three floors below, then pushed the keyboard and mouse to one side and opened the book. Flipping through it for a moment he found the right page, bending over it intently, his finger moving across until it stopped nearly at the top of the page. The finger tapped the paper once, then moved slightly to the right and up. "Hmm. Interesting."

He double-checked the coordinates before printing the email, standing up and taking both the printout and the atlas with him, then leaving his office and walking a few doors down the corridor. He opened one of them after a quick knock. The middle-aged woman at the desk in the other office turned around and looked quizzically at him as he entered. "Hey, Jerry."

"Hi, Martta. Look, that friend of yours in the Forces, you remember, Liam or something?" She smiled.

"Liam, that's right. What about him?"

"You said he was stationed in Alert, way the hell up in Nunavut?"

"Yes. He's doing something he can't talk about with some sort of listening post there. I think they're probably monitoring the Russians or the Chinese still, or at least keeping an eye out for trouble. It's
pretty boring, I guess, he always seems to like calling and talking for hours. Good thing the military is footing the phone bill."

The archaeologist nodded absently, still looking at the atlas he was holding. "Right. OK, you said at lunch the other day that he'd said there was something weird going on with a glacier nearby?"

Martta raised an eyebrow. "Yes, there's an environmental monitoring station on the base as well, a sort of weather station on steroids. They've got a number of automated monitoring stations scattered around all over the place up there measuring all sorts of things, including salinity, some sort of long term experiment on ice melt rates. He said one of them had picked up a strange sudden decrease in salinity in one of the bays about seven hundred kilometres to the west. They're putting it down to a sub-glacial lake suddenly breaking open under the ice and dumping a lot of fresh water into the ocean. It happens, although not very commonly, and no one has seen anything this large before."

Raising his eyes from the atlas, Jerry returned her gaze. "Interesting. Has anyone gone to have a look?"

She shrugged. "Not as far as I know. It's quite a distance, you can't really get there by boat without a lot of effort because of all the sea ice even at this time of year, and flying in without a prepared runway is a little awkward. You could do it with a helicopter but it's right on the limit of range for most of them. That's what Liam told me, anyway. I asked the same question. In any case there might not be much to see, after all, the ice there is about six hundred metres thick. The woman looked at the atlas he was holding. "What's all this about?"

"I'm not sure. But I got an odd email just now." He plunked the book on her desk unceremoniously, moving a couple of textbooks to the side without looking at them, and causing Martta to grab at a mug full of pens that nearly ended up on the floor.

"Hey, be careful."

"Sorry." He didn't look away from the page. Pointing, he added, "Alert is here, right?" She stared at him for a brief moment then turned her attention to where he was pointing, pushing her glasses up and peering at the page carefully. She nodded, swiping a lock of dark brown hair out of her eyes.

"Yes. An awful long way from anything. The most northerly inhabited place on the planet." Shivering theatrically she laughed slightly. "Too cold for me by a long way. Even at this time of year it's only about four degrees or something like that. You don't want to know what it's like in the winter."

"OK. Where is this sensor station that recorded the salinity change?" Once more she looked at him, slightly more puzzled this time, but shrugged a little. Thinking back to her conversation with her old friend, she pointed.

"Just about here, I think." Jerry looked at where her finger had landed on the page.

"Now, that is very interesting indeed," he mused, rubbing his chin. "Very interesting indeed."

After thirty seconds had passed without further comment, she sighed a little, prodding him in the side. "What's very interesting indeed, Jer? Why the sudden interest in sub-glacial water flows? You're an archaeologist, not a climatologist."

"That email I got was from someone I've never heard of before," he began, "the sort of thing you
get occasionally. I thought it was spam at first. But the wording was all wrong for that and it came from an email address in Japan, not exactly the normal place for spam. I can't find anything at all out about the sender, or the email account. The person behind it seems to have done their homework on me, they referenced several studies I've been involved with, and a couple of papers I've written." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "And now that I think about it, one of those hasn't been published yet."

"And?" His friend and colleague watched and listened curiously.

"And, they said that there was something I might find interesting, professionally speaking, located under the ice far to the north, something that was in my field of study. They gave a set of coordinates." He tapped the map with a pen that he pulled from his pocket. "Those coordinates are right there."

Martta looked at the place the pen was indicating, then the place her finger was still resting on. The two locations were only about fifteen kilometres apart and the one Jerry was pointing to seemed to be uphill from the first one, judging by the contour lines. She inspected the map closely for a few seconds before looking up. "That's one hell of a long way away from any archaeological site I've ever heard of," she said slowly. He nodded, equally slowly.

"Exactly."

"It could just be someone playing a trick on you."

"Is the salinity change real?" he responded. It was her turn to nod.

"Liam said all the diagnostics checked out. Sensor failure was the first thing they thought of but the self-test seems to rule that out."

"It's a weird coincidence," he remarked.

After a moment, she asked, "Can I see the email?" He handed her the printout, which she read with interest. "Strange. But I agree, whoever wrote this is obviously very well educated and informed." She looked up. "Why send it to you?"

"No idea, aside from the fact that my speciality is neolithic culture of North America. They said as much in the email."

"And you're certain, you've never met this..." She looked at the email address, "MS.Aoyama? Is that a man or a woman?"

"I have no idea, and I don't know. Whoever it is seems to like large words, though. Amazingly enough, all used correctly. They obviously have a very large vocabulary." He grinned. She re-read the email and laughed a little.

"It sounds like it was written by someone very intelligent but with a strange outlook on life. You're sure it's not some sort of quack? I've had ones like that, you know the sort of thing, *You need to dig here, that's where the aliens buried the spaceport when they left after building the pyramids* or something along those lines." Chuckling, he shrugged slightly.

"Yes, I've had those as well. I have no idea if it's real or not, but something about it just doesn't feel like that."

They were both silent for a moment, then Martta picked up her phone and dialled. "Who are you calling?" he asked curiously.
"My cousin Pauli. He's in the RCMP in Toronto, in the electronic crimes division. I bet he could find out something about that email address." Jerry stared at her for a couple of seconds, but before he could say anything, she smiled, speaking into the phone. A greeting in her ancestral Finnish was followed by English.

"Yes, it's been a while, Pauli. Look, I'd love to catch up, but I have a slightly weird request first. Can you trace an email address for me?" She looked up at Jerry who was listening, then tapped the speaker phone button and replaced the handset. Mid sentence a male voice sounded.

"...ible under the right circumstances, but it doesn't always work. There are all sorts of ways to hide the origin or fake it. Why do you ask?"

"Well, a friend of mine, another professor here at the university, got an email that seems to be from Japan on the face of it, containing some... slightly unusual information. We're not sure whether it's just a hoax or not. Something feels a bit weird about it."

"Were there any threats made, or anything like blackmail or that sort of thing?" Her cousin sounded suddenly alert. She laughed.

"No, it's nothing like that, Pauli, it's just a set of coordinates way up past the Arctic circle along with a suggestion that it would be worth going and having a look. It's pretty strange." She glanced at her colleague. "The odd thing is that I was talking to an old friend a couple of days ago, who's posted to Alert, which is a few hundred kilometres to the east. They've been getting some strange environmental readings from a location eerily close to the coordinates Jerry was sent."

"I see." Pauli sounded mildly disappointed, making her laugh again. "I'm not sure how much I can do, Martta. Without evidence of a crime, or at least a reasonable expectation that one may have been committed, I'm kind of limited here."

"Please, Pauli?" she wheedled, winking at Jerry. "For me? Just... do a little poking around. We just want to see if we can find out where the email came from." There was a long pause. "I have a really nice bottle of New Zealand Pinot Noir left that could have your name on it." Her cousin sighed audibly, although Jerry got the impression that the unseen man was probably smiling in the process.

"OK, Martta. For you. But if I get into trouble for this I'm throwing you under the bus as well."

Laughing, Martta nodded. Jerry grinned, her cousin sounded interesting. "Have your friend forward the email to me here." Grabbing his printout he quickly turned it over and scribbled the email address that the man read out phonetically.

"Jerry's just going to do that now," she said, as he left the office, quickly returning to his own, then doing as requested.

When he re-entered Martta's room Pauli was just saying, "Great, I got it. OK. Hold on, I'll do some quick checks. If that doesn't produce any results I'll have to call you back later. I've got real work to do, you know." They could hear a keyboard rattling for a few seconds, accompanied by rather tuneless whistling at a low volume. "Hmm. Weird."

"What's weird?" she asked, glancing at her co-worker.

"The return path doesn't exist, and as far as I can see the originating one doesn't either. In fact, the headers are all wrong, completely, although they're internally consistent."

"What does that mean? I don't speak computer, you know that."
Pauli snickered. "It means that I'm not even sure this email came from Japan, or anywhere else, for that matter. Is your friend playing a trick on you?"

"I don't think so." She looked at Jerry, who shrugged and held out his hands. "He's not exactly known as a practical joker," she added.

"Well, in any case, there's something odd going on that I haven't seen before," her cousin replied, now sounding interested. "It's like the email was inserted right on the university server, or even directly into your friend's computer, somehow. I have no idea how that could be done except by someone in your IT department, or maybe a really good hacker on the outside. I think someone may be winding you up."

"I guess that's possible," she told him, looking disappointed. "It might explain a couple of things, like how whoever wrote it seems to have read a paper that Jerry hasn't published yet."

"There you go," Pauli said, sounding vindicated. "Someone inside your network could hack into his computer pretty easily, or if the paper was on a server there, they wouldn't even need to go that far. It's probably just a strange prank."

"Damn. I was beginning to get excited," Martta grumped. Her cousin chuckled while Jerry smiled, amused, yet also a little disappointed.

"Sorry." The voice fell silent, then asked wryly, "Do I still get the wine?"

"I guess so. Thanks, Pauli."

"You're welcome." A moment later, though, he added, "Just let me check one last thing. Because you sound so disappointed. I shouldn't do this but I hate to let my favourite cousin down."

"I'm your only cousin, Pauli," she laughed.

"And therefore my favourite."

"Wouldn't that logic also mean I was your most hated cousin?" she asked curiously, a wide smile on her face.

"Yes. So be nice in case the hate overwhelms the love." Snickering to himself, the man on the other end of the phone typed for a moment. "I'm just going to do a name search on this Aoyama person. You never know, it might... show..." He fell silent. The two in the office exchanged glances. "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Shit on a stick. Now I'm in serious trouble." He sounded very worried.

"What, Pauli?" Martta asked more loudly.

"I put the name through the normal search, nothing interesting came up. But then I tried the secure one, just to be sure. It got a hit. Restricted access. That's bad. It means someone a lot higher up the pay scale flagged that name." They heard a phone ring as he spoke. He fell silent, the abruptness of it making it clear he was worried. "Crap," he whispered, apparently forgetting about them.

The other phone rang again. Then again. Eventually, the two people listening intently heard him pick it up. "Hello?"
There was a long pause. "I understand, sir. Yes, sir, immediately. No, sir." The line went dead.

The pair of Archaeology professors stared at each other. "That was... weird," Jerry finally said. Martta, pale and obviously worried about her cousin, nodded, disconnecting the phone, which was now making the dial tone sound.

"I think I may have fucked up," she replied quietly. They were silent for a few minutes, wondering what had happened. Both of them jumped violently when the phone suddenly rang. They stared at it as if it was counting down while attached to a lot of explosives for four more rings, before Martta reached out a hand and pressed the speaker phone button again.

"Martta Laine, archaeology department," she answered, her voice shaking just a little.

"Professor Laine? Is Professor Benton with you?" The female voice sounded pleasant but professional.

"He's standing next to me," she replied.

"Good. My name is Inspector Laura Deveraux with O division, RCMP, Toronto. I understand that you have been investigating an email your colleague received, by means of your cousin Constable Pauli Laine."

Martta glanced at Jerry, who had gone slightly pale."That's right. Look, I didn't mean for him to get in trouble. It's my fault, not his, don't..." Inspector Deveraux cut her off politely.

"He's not in any real trouble although he's currently being lectured on misuse of RCMP facilities. Even though I can understand the attraction of a good bottle of wine." She laughed slightly. "The name he searched for raised a flag, which brought it to my attention. My department is involved with... matters of a somewhat unusual type. It's not particularly relevant to this discussion and is also somewhat confidential so I can't go into details. I wanted to pass on the information to you, however, that the email is indeed genuine. We are aware of the person who emailed you." She sounded momentarily very slightly worried.

Once more the pair in the office glanced at each other, more curiously this time. "Do you know this person yourself?" Jerry asked.

"No, I haven't had that particular experience, thankfully, Professor Benton. But a friend and colleague in the security services in Japan has. He has assured me that you may take any information you receive from that particular source as completely correct and reliable. However unusual."

"You're making us both very curious and more than a little weirded out," Jerry commented. Deveraux laughed lightly.

"Believe me, it's probably going to get stranger. Good luck, professors." She hung up.

Once again they found themselves staring at each other in wonder.

"What the hell was all that about?" Jerry finally asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Martta replied faintly. She shook her head slowly. "But I definitely owe poor Pauli that bottle now, I think."

Exchanging one more glance, Jerry picked up his atlas and went back to his office, leaving Martta looking out the window at the late afternoon scenery with a thoughtful expression on her face.
An hour later he reappeared, pale faced, at her door. She looked up from the work she'd finally got back to. "Now what?" she asked, not entirely sure if she wanted to know. He stared for a moment, then motioned for her to follow him, turned, and vanished. Looking at the place he'd been, she debated with herself briefly, before sighing and getting up. "Damn curiosity," she muttered. "I'm just a slave to it."

In his office she found him sitting and staring at his computer. "What is it this time?" she asked. He just moved to the side and pointed at the screen.

"Read that." He sounded stunned. She leaned in and did as he requested, her eyebrows rising steadily, until they disappeared into her hairline.

"Grant approval for archaeological expedition to Ellesmere Island..." she read out loud. "How much!?" The figure in the email was absurd. Looking between him and the screen, she felt her mind wobble slightly for a second. "When did you apply for a grant? I didn't know you were even planning an expedition." He stared back helplessly.

"I didn't apply for a grant. I was half-way through typing up a suggestion that it might be worth considering sending someone to look into this matter based on what that Inspector Deveraux said, who really is a person at the RCMP, I checked, when this arrived." He waved a hand limply at the screen, slumped in his chair. "Even if I had applied for a grant and it had been approved it would have taken months at best. Not half an hour." Martta stared at him for a few more seconds, then went back to reading the email.

"Two professors... Six post-graduate students... travel expenses, equipment expenses... Holy shit, this is amazing. Is it real?"

"It looks real enough." He picked up the phone, dialled, then when it was answered, had a long conversation. She listened to his side with growing puzzlement. He finally gently put the phone back down, his hand shaking a little, meeting her eyes. "Completely real and, on the surface, all above-board. Aside from the fact that the grant request was apparently put in six months ago, which I'm damn sure it wasn't. I was even congratulated on the chance to get the University of Manitoba into international journals."

"Where did the money come from?" she asked in a low voice.

"An anonymous benefactor in Japan."

"Oh, my god."

"Yep. I think we can guess who that is." They stared at each other for some time. "Hey, Martta?"

"Yes, Jer?"

"Fancy going on a trip to the Arctic circle? I seem to have a place vacant."

She started giggling, quickly followed by her friend. They laughed for some time, before slightly hysterically beginning to think of students who would be a good fit for a weird expedition to the north.

"I'd love to see their faces," Nabiki chortled, very pleased. Her sister laughed as well.

"It was a nice thing to do, sister. How did you arrive at their names?"
"Jun dug out information on a lot of archaeologists in Canada, we looked over some of the papers and other data, which suggested that Professor Benton was a good fit for an unusual find. His colleague Professor Laine was a bonus. So was her having a relative in the RCMP." Nabiki grinned. "It made getting them to believe the email much easier. Masao and Laura validated it and we didn't even have to do anything."

"Very sneaky, Nabs," Ranma laughed.

"Thanks. I hope we got all the footprints, or they're going to get even more confused. Oh yes, don't call me Nabs." She giggled as he grinned. "When are we going to see Yrenti again?" she asked, changing the subject.

"After breakfast, I think." Ranma looked around at the others who were listening, as everyone nodded.

"I do need something to eat. Early morning expeditions to hundreds of metres under the ice in Canada make me hungry," Aiko laughed. "Every single time."

"Will you help me, then?" Kasumi asked, getting up and heading for the kitchen. Aiko followed her, as did Tamiko. Nabiki watched them for a moment, then turned back to her brother-in-law.

"I'll see if Ami and the others want to come. I'm sure she will, actually, but I'm not sure about Rei and Hotaru. They may have had enough running around for the time being."

"I wouldn't blame them." Ranma sighed a little. "I'll be quite glad to relax for a while after everything that happened. I still need to see Uthryyl, and of course there's the Usagi situation, not to mention the others, but that will develop at its own pace. I think we should probably just keep an eye on Michiru and Makoto for the time being, with a little luck they'll calm down now the time device is gone, and in a while we can approach them and see if we can persuade them to let Hnther check them over."

"What about Setsuna?" Fumiko asked, listening. "Are we any closer to locating her family?"

He shook his head. "No. I've looked pretty hard. There's something funny going on, I suspect the time machine was involved somehow. Most of her records seem to have been altered, some were lost in a suspicious fire, things like that. She was the first one the time machine co-opted into that stupid plan, perhaps it was trying to cover its tracks? We'll probably never know. But until she wakes up enough that we can ask her, we don't know. Ami and the others don't either. She was apparently very private about her personal life."

"There isn't much we can do that we haven't already done," Nabiki sighed. "Jun and I spent a while looking as well but didn't get any further than Ranma did."

"Oh, well. As you say, not much to except wait." The tall girl sighed as well. "Poor woman."

"I haven't heard back from Usagi's parents yet either, but that doesn't surprise me. It's not even twenty-four hours yet. I wouldn't expect them to come to any sort of decision for a few days at least, although they may well want to talk before then. Again, all we can do is let them think it over." He looked at Nabiki for a moment. "Come on. You need some more practice, I need some exercise. We can do both if I beat you up for a while." Grinning, he hopped to his feet, heading for the practice room via the bedroom to change. Nabiki watched him go, groaned, and got up. Misaki chuckled, tossing her a chocolate bar which she caught with a smile.

"You'll need the energy," her friend said, then handed her sister one when she held out her hand.
expectantly. Amused, Nabiki went to change her own clothes, unwrapping the bar on the way.

"Ow. You bastard."

The martial artist laughed slightly sadistically, then helped her up. "You're definitely still getting faster."

"Not quickly enough. I didn't even see that coming."

He checked her over, then patted her on the shoulder. "I didn't think you would but I was curious to see how close you came. It was pretty good, actually, you started to deflect it without even thinking, you just aren't quite fast enough yet. You will be."

"You're improving very rapidly, sister," Kasumi commented from the doorway, having come in just before her husband had gone through Nabiki's defence like it wasn't there, laying her out on the floor instantly. "I'm impressed and pleased."

"Thanks, sis. But I have a very long way to go to be anywhere near even Aiko and the others, never mind either of you." The middle sister sighed a little. "It's kind of disheartening."

Ranma smiled at her. "Don't let it get you down, Nabiki. You've been seriously training for less than a year and you've learned more than most people would in four or five of very serious work. Kas is right, it's very impressive. You have a definite gift for it. A couple of years or so and you'll be pretty close to master level, I think."

"You could already take almost any 'normal' expert martial artist if you kept your wits about you," her sister added, walking over and putting her arm around her shoulders. "Another year, two at most, and you could go against Shampoo head to head and stand a decent chance of a win without using any ki or magic. That's extremely impressive. She's very, very good."

"I've seen her at work, I'd have to agree," Nabiki nodded, thinking back to the last spar she'd witnessed between her other sister and the Amazon. "Akane is really getting good as well. The last spar I saw was incredible, I'd say nearly the best I'd ever seen if I didn't know all of you guys."

"She earned her title of the village champion fair and square," Ranma grinned, as they walked back to the living room, "and she's only improved since. Training Akane has definitely pushed her a lot as well. It's benefiting both of them considerably."

"Sometime very soon after the party in Nerima I think we should start teaching you all some more special techniques," Kasumi mused, looking at her husband, then at the other girls, who were setting the table. "We've been somewhat distracted since the holiday but I think you're ready. The cloaking technique first, you're definitely at the point you should be able to learn that, and some basic healing as well."

"I'll bring Hotaru in on the healing then, I think." Ranma looked thoughtful. "I want to investigate her own skills properly first, though."

"Sounds like fun," Misaki laughed. "I nearly got a ki beam working the other day as well." He looked at her, then smiled.

"In that case we should really do some blade technique training also, I know you and Aiko aren't too bad with a sword, and Tamiko is very good, but your sister and Nabiki need a fair amount of work. By the time you can do the energy blades I'd like you all good enough at waving it around that you don't end up cutting your own heads off."
The middle sister paled, making both Kasumi and her husband laugh. "Don't worry, sister, that can't actually happen. It's your own life energy, it doesn't hurt you. Not unless you do it on purpose."

"Are you sure?" she asked cautiously. "I wouldn't want to find out the hard way that you were wrong."

"No, it's true," Ranma agreed. "The energy blade doesn't really damage the person producing it, unless you both put a hell of a lot of power into it and dampen down your own defences a lot. You couldn't hold it if not. Look." He picked an apple out of a bowl of them on the table, held it in one hand, then produced a short energy blade in the other. One quick motion passed the glowing blue manifestation through both his hand and the apple. Half the apple dropped to the floor, steaming, while none of his fingers parted company with the rest of his hand. "You see?" He put the other half of the apple on the table, held his hand up, and wiggled the fingers. "You can certainly feel it, it sort of tingles, but it's not actually dangerous."

Nabiki stared for a few seconds, before bending down and picking up the half-apple lying on the floor and examining it closely. "Neat. I can't think of any particular use for that trick but it makes me feel slightly safer."

After breakfast, the middle Tendo woman went for a shower, then to her room to change. Sitting on the bed brushing her hair, she smiled a little, still pleased at what she'd come up with after seeing the ancient stone circle in northern Canada deep under the ice. 'I wonder who did build that circle?' she asked Jun.

#Unknown. It predates even Stonehenge or the much older Atlit Yam in modern-day Israel, which is the oldest such construction currently known, close to nine thousand years old. Not to mention it's larger than Avebury in the UK, which is one of the largest on this world. Interestingly the construction seemed more advanced than any of the currently known such sites. It is an intriguing mystery.# The SI sounded interested in the subject. #The nearest thing to it in my database is found on a world that is otherwise uninhabited, the builders of which are also unknown to me. However the construction would seem surprisingly similar. Again, most intriguing.#

'Hold on. You mean it really might have been made by aliens?' she laughed, surprised.

#It would appear to be possible, Nabiki, although low probability. I await the results of Professor Benton's expedition with interest.#

Nabiki put her brush away with a smile. 'I expect he does as well. We may have to pay him a visit at some point.' The SI was silent but she got the impression it was amused.

This time, the security drone that popped out of the portal to Kw'lyn Industries scanned them all then moved to the side without fuss. ::Welcome back. Authorisation to travel directly to the main facility of Kw'lyn Industries is now on file for all members of your party. Please proceed through the portal. Director Tka'l has been notified of your imminent arrival and will be joining you shortly:: The group, including Lldnr'k, walked through the portal they had created in his conference room, finding themselves back in the guest area on the planet they'd visited before, the enormity of the Dyson sphere in the background once more taking their breath away. The drone came through behind them and the portal closed immediately.

::As before, please remain within the marked area for your own safety:: It began to move off, then stopped, turning to face them. Everyone looked at it, surprised as it gracefully executed what
in a human would have been a respectful bow in mid-air, tipping forward then back. ::Allow me to express my respects and gratitude for the service you provided to my makers. You have removed a great weight from them at severe personal risk. Your actions will not be forgotten:: Turning back to its original course it swiftly moved away before anyone could think what to say in response.

Watching it go, 'Azumi' smiled, glancing at her sister and sister-in-law, who were looking both surprised and pleased. "It's very polite if nothing else," she remarked, amused.

"Indeed," 'Chou' responded, laughing a little. "The more contact I have with the machine intelligences of Kw'lyn design, the more impressed I am with them. I get the impression that that drone has a very good mind indeed."

"It certainly sounds like a sentient being," Aiko said, watching the distant dot vanish behind a tall building. "I wonder what its conversational rating is?" They all, with the exception of the temporal mage, laughed, Lldnr'k looking slightly confused until 'Yori' explained.

"Interesting," he mused. "I wonder what the measurement system they use for determining such a rating is? I'm aware of the way a number of species test machine intelligences but that isn't one I've heard of before."

"It sounds a little like the Turing test that was proposed on our world some time ago," Misaki told him, explaining it when he looked interested. "But probably considerably more involved. From what Yrenti told us they've been doing this sort of thing for a very long time. I'd think they've probably got it down to an art form by now."

"That would certainly be the opinion of most people who have dealt with them over the years," Lldnr'k agreed, nodding. "They have a very well deserved reputation of being far ahead of anyone else in their field." He looked around for a moment. "Bearing in mind all this and also what Yrenti told me on the last visit, I'd say it was well deserved indeed. I would imagine that this is probably one of the most high tech civilisations I'm aware of. Even the ones that do a lot of faster than light travel don't seem in general to be quite as advanced in machine intelligence. It's a very complex science, and while it's certainly possible to produce a fairly convincing simulation of a mind with much lower technology, they always seem to lack something from what I've seen. The rare occasions where the intelligence is truly advanced often produces something that an organic mind finds difficult or impossible to understand. Undeniably intelligent, often extremely so, but alien on a level that is somewhat frightening."

"We have a lot of stories about rogue AIs taking over the world, starting wars, that sort of thing," 'Azumi' told him. "People in general are, when they stop to think about smart computers, very wary if not totally paranoid about them."

He nodded. "Our fiction has quite a lot of examples of the same sort of thing. I believe it's a common theme in most technologically advanced civilisations, not without cause in some cases. There have been incidents that showed a truly smart computer may not be totally compatible with organic civilisations. What you and I think of as moral or ethical behaviour may not be what it would, assuming it understands the concept at all. Not always, obviously, but it's certainly something you'd have to take into account during the process of designing such a thing." Lldnr'k gestured in the direction the now-vanished security drone had gone in. "It is clear that these people know that and found a solution."

'Azumi' smiled, then laughed, as Jun said with slight asperity in its voice, #My makers ensured I was compatible with organic society. I have no desire to take over and remake the world in my own
image. Aside from anything else it would be very boring. No SI would feel any different. We exist to work alongside our owners and partners, not supplant them. She repeated this to Lldnr’k, who snickered, highly amused.

"My apologies, Jun, I meant no disrespect to you or your makers," he said gravely, bowing slightly to ‘Azumi’. She felt the SI was now also amused.

"Jun says it forgives you," she reported.

#Yrenti is approaching.# Jun suddenly told her, dropping a marker over a distant dot, which was rapidly approaching. Everyone looked up at the same time, the various women coming back from where they’d scattered to over the last couple of minutes. Hotaru looked mildly annoyed she hadn’t had a chance to play with the microgravity room she’d enjoyed the last time, but didn’t say anything, although Rei noticed and grinned at her. The girl smiled back.

"We really need to get something like that at home," Hotaru giggled. "It's so much fun."

When the floating platform landed and the force-field bubble over it vanished, it revealed Yrenti with two other of his species, all three of whom walked over, the Director of External Threat Management leading. He bowed deeply, making a complex gesture with all four hands. "Greetings to the honoured destroyers of the Great Abomination," he intoned, before grinning at them. "I hope you are all recovered from your exertions? I must confess to a certain amount of worry, you all looked on the verge of collapse when we last parted."

"We're all very well, Yrenti," ‘Chou’ replied, smiling. "Thank you for asking. It took a very large amount of food and a lot of sleep, as well as a certain amount of healing, but we all seem to have survived the experience unscathed. I'm sorry we couldn't come back sooner, but...

He waved a hand, dismissing the issue. "I fully understand. To be honest I'm both impressed and slightly surprised how quickly you have recovered. What happened was... well, something most people might well not have survived at all. Although I am very relieved that you all did." He gestured to his two companions. "I would like to introduce my friends and colleagues. This is Unare Dke'n, the Director of General Management for Kw'lyn Industries, and Savrk Yma'k, the Director of Applied Magical Research and Development."

"Wow. We seem to have met all the people at the top very quickly," Fumiko whispered to her sister, something everyone seemed to overhear. Unare looked at her, then smiled.

"That is not surprising, considering what you have all achieved. We owe you much. I was very interested in meeting the people who finally rid us of something that has been a background terror for longer than I care to think." Her light voice sounded amused yet grateful. She bowed in much the same way Yrenti had done earlier. "Believe me when I say we genuinely do believe we are in your debt. Our entire civilisation thanks you, as do we all personally."

"It's very nice to hear that," ‘Yori’ responded after a quick look at her friends, "but I sort of think you might be making more of it that it really deserves."

"I do not," Unare smiled. "We have been attempting to discover the location of that damn machine for tens of thousands of years. Without you, we would still be looking, and from what I have learned, your reality strand would quite likely be yet another casualty of the stupidity of a race long extinct. That would have been unfortunate."

"Can't disagree with that," the martial artist laughed. "It's got its problems but it's home."
"Quite." She looked amused, inspecting them each in turn with curious eyes. "I was aware of you, Yori, and several of your colleagues, from the information we have acquired about your exploits over the last few years, although I was not aware of Ami, Rei, or Hotaru. Is it possible we might learn more about you all?" They all exchanged glances.

"I guess there's no harm in telling them, now, the time machine is gone and quite a few people already know anyway," Ami said.

'Chou' commented calmly "I think we can trust them. And, as you say, there's no specific reason to keep it a secret any more."

Ami looked at her team-mates, who both nodded, Hotaru slightly hesitantly at first. "We'll tell you what we can," she said out loud. Unare smiled.

"Thank you. As you probably are aware, collecting information is a central tenet of our civilisation for reasons that would take some time to explain. But at the same time, we hold that information about someone belongs to them, so we never divulge it to anyone outside, or use it without permission." She laughed for a moment. "You might say that we are irredeemably curious."

"We tend to be much the same," Tamiko said, grinning. "All of us like learning new things. The SIs have made that a lot easier, of course."

"Shall we sit down and discuss things, then?" Yrenti suggested, motioning towards the same building they'd used on their previous visit. "We can have a light meal if you wish, and if you're still amenable to the idea, Yori, Savrk is extremely interested in talking to you about your magical methods. He's been looking at the recordings and more or less salivating ever since." The martial artist and her wife looked at each other, then at the R and D director, who so far had been listening quietly, although watching them in particular with great interest. He looked mildly embarrassed.

"I am definitely most fascinated by your magical system. What our instruments could make of your portal spell suggests that you have something we have never seen before, something most unusual indeed. We're very curious about it and would like to learn more." His voice was quite deep although not at all aggressive. 'Yori' grinned at him.

"As I told Yrenti the last time, we're up for discussing it. We're both quite interested ourselves to see what you make of it, we've found that in almost every case traditional magic workers tend to find our method inexplicable to the point of it being physically painful a lot of the time." She shrugged, still grinning. "Be warned, but I'm curious to see what happens."

"I will take the warning seriously, although it won't stop me." He grinned back. "I have to admit that my curiosity has once or twice caused me some grief, but I'm still here nonetheless."

"You too?" 'Chou' giggled, glancing at her husband. "There have been... embarrassing incidents... in our past as well." Laughing, they all headed into the conference building.

"It's amazing anything is left," Qian Dhu muttered, inspecting the sight in front of her.

Her apprentice nodded slowly, as she rejoined the old woman, after walking around looking at the trees surrounding the area. "It's cooled enough to approach, at least, but all the plants are dead for nearly half a kilometre around it. I think everything got boiled by the steam. I hope no one was around at the time."

"The guide is fine, he felt something coming and ran for it," the Elder replied absently, looking around in awe. "As far as I know no one else was within kilometres of the damn place. It's not
exactly safe at the best of times, you know." She chuckled a little as the other woman nodded. "Mind you, if any of the Musk had been lightly steamed I wouldn't shed a tear."

Carefully walking closer to the nearest pool, mindful of the slipperiness of the ground and the dead grass covering it, she peered into the water, concentrating. "It's still active," she reported, slightly surprised. "As far as I can tell none of the spells were disrupted. Whatever it was pulled all the power out and put it back without damaging the basic magic. That's absolutely amazing."

"How do you suppose it did that?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I haven't got the faintest clue, I'm afraid, my girl. It's so far beyond anything I've ever encountered that it might as well be the work of the gods. Although I suspect that even a god would have trouble working it out." After a moment she looked quickly around, just in case something took offence, then relaxed a little when nothing happened. Her apprentice's muffled laugh received a good-natured glare.

"Quiet, you. You never know."

"Yes, Elder." The woman was still smiling a little. They retreated to a safe distance then resumed inspecting the site.

"I think we've learned everything we can from here," Qian Dhu eventually said. "Let's go home." Turning, the two women headed back down the path, leaving the hundreds of pools, all of them still gently steaming, sitting in a large expanse of mud and dead grass, surrounded by trees that were turning brown. The Elder was thinking hard the entire journey, her apprentice staying quiet and letting her ponder it.

Just as they reached the village, though, she asked the much older woman, "Do you think it could happen again?"

Elder Qian Dhu stopped walking, looking at her, then shrugged. "I really don't know. We have no real idea what happened, although from what the seer said it was something apocalyptic, something that could have brought devastation to us all. I think that whatever did what it did was working to save us rather than the opposite." They resumed walking, going in through the gate and nodding to the guards on the way. "But what it was, what actually happened, who was involved... No idea at all. So I suppose it could happen again, yes. I don't see what we could do, or even should do, if it did. Even Saffron would have been instantly crushed flat by the merest glancing blow of whatever the hell it was that took all that power. None of us would stand a chance at all if it turned its attention to us."

Nodding, the apprentice shivered for a moment. "It's rather frightening, to know that there are forces out there so powerful."

"Indeed it is. But at the same time, it's a little reassuring that at least one of them appears to be working on our behalf." The Elder grinned at her apprentice. "It's much more direct evidence of higher power than anything I've ever experienced before. I'm not sure whether to thank it or worship it. Or both."

"Would it notice?" the other woman laughed.

"Probably not. I would think that anything that could do what it did has more important things to think about." Qian Dhu chuckled. "But I'm grateful to still be alive, which may well be down to whatever it was doing whatever it did, so..." She shrugged a little. "All in all, I suppose having Jusenkyo steam-cleaned was a small price to pay."
"Why do you think hardly anyone remembers what happened?" the woman asked curiously.

"Again, I'm not sure. Elder Ku Lon said that she'd asked around in Tokyo, which appears to be where this all started, and it was the same there, only people with either high ki skill levels or decent magical ability remember anything. I've also asked around and it would seem to be the same everywhere. We actually have more people remembering than many places, which may be down to the influence of Jusenkyo in some odd manner, probably due to the high local magical flux. But I don't know for certain, it's basically an educated guess," The Elder sighed. "I'd love to know more about it but I suspect I never will. I might not understand it if I found out anyway. It was so far beyond anything I've ever seen I'm still not even sure it was actually magic."

"What else could it have been?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." They exchanged a glance, then simultaneously shrugged. Approaching the Elder's house a faint noise became apparent, making the apprentice look up, then dash ahead, reappearing with a satellite phone in her hand, talking into it. She nodded, then handed it to the Elder, who accepted it with thanks. "Hello? Oh, hello, Ku Lon. Yes, we've just come back from having look at Jusenkyo. It's extraordinary, the entire site looks like it was..." She fell silent, listening. Her apprentice watched curiously as she frowned a little, then slowly paled until she was almost white. "You're sure that's what she said?" There was a long pause. The Elder became, if possible, even paler, until her apprentice was becoming worried for her well-being. "I see. No, I agree. I think it would be best if we steered well clear of the entire thing. I'll see that Herb and Saffron are told as well. They're both poking into it."

Another pause, then she nodded to herself. "Yes, you're right. Not a good idea at all. We certainly wouldn't want to draw attention, not from that. Or her. Thank you." The next pause was shorter, then she nodded once more. "All right. Are you going to be visiting at any point soon?" The Elder listened, colour slowly coming back to her face, although she looked stunned still. "Ah. I understand. Well, give my best to Shampoo. And I suppose to Mousse as well, pain that he is. How is that Tendo girl coming along?"

After a few seconds, she laughed. "Impressive. A pity we didn't get hold of her years ago, but I agree, she probably wasn't suitable then for various reasons. When were you going to bring her here?" A few more seconds, then the Elder chuckled. "All right. I'll let the relevant people know. Thank you again. Goodbye." She disconnected the call, handing the phone back to the other woman with an absent smile, obviously thinking about what she'd been told. The apprentice folded the antenna away and followed her into the house, putting the phone back where it lived on the charger connected to a solar panel on the roof, then joined her mistress where she was sitting at the table in the kitchen staring into the small fire burning in the stove.

After a moment, she began preparing two cups of tea, while Qian Dhu thought about what she'd learned. When it was ready she placed one cup in front of the Elder, then sat across from her with the other one, slowly sipping it and waiting. It took another thirty seconds until the Elder stirred, picking up her cup and trying the drink. "Thank you, dear."

"You seem to be surprised and worried," her apprentice noted.

"Yes."

"Yes." After a few seconds and two more sips of tea, Qian Dhu continued, "Ku Lon received a visit from a... somewhat worrying person. She seems to be a representative of some form of demonic security agency that monitors magical activity, as far as can be determined. Information on her is sketchy at best but her name has popped up a few times in association with some rather odd occurrences. She calls herself Ms Aoyama." The Elder glanced at her apprentice as the woman nodded slowly. "Remember that name. If she ever turns up, which I dearly hope will not happen,
be polite! There is reason to believe she is in some way connected to what happened the other day. We do not want to get on the wrong side of anyone or anything that could do what we experienced. Not if we wish to survive. Understand?"

"Yes, Elder," the woman replied, bowing her head. After a moment, she asked curiously, "Why did she contact Elder Ku Lon?"

"To retrieve an ancient artefact that Ku Lon had in her possession. The Mirror of the Past and Future." The younger woman sucked in a breath of surprise.

"I've read about that. It was stolen centuries ago by the Master of Perversion, Happosai."

"Correct. We thought it lost forever, but it turned up again in Nerima a few years ago. It was used, to no obvious effect afterwards, then accidentally damaged when it was stepped on. Ku Lon eventually managed to retrieve it from Happosai and stored it safely away to look at and possibly repair at some point. She never got around to it. That may have been a good thing in light of the information she received."

Staring at her mentor, the apprentice sipped the last of her tea, then put the cup down. "Why did Ms Aoyama want it?" she asked in the end. Elder Qian Dhu returned her gaze, clearly still somewhat shaken by her conversation with her distant fellow Elder.

"Apparently, her employers, whoever they really are, have decided that all methods of time travel are to be removed from circulation, or words to that effect. Ku Lon was told that the recent disturbance was due to a 'Temporal Upset'. I hesitate to guess what that really means although I have some rather unpleasant ideas."

They were both silent for a few seconds. "I can't think of anything other than a very nasty disaster," the apprentice finally admitted. Qian Dhu shook her head.

"Neither can I. Ms Aoyama said it would have been bad. She also said it was stopped with less than three seconds to spare. Ku Lon told me she had politely requested that time travel magic should not be researched in future, in a way that made it very clear it wasn't actually a request. She feels it would be a bad idea not to take the warning seriously."

"Gods."

"Quite."

They sat in silence for some time, before proceeding with the next task, both of them still trying not to think what the mysterious woman had meant.

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Once Ami had finished recounting the story yet again, with input from her team-mates where necessary, she fell silent, watching Yrenti and his colleagues. They exchanged glances, which to 'Azumi' looked somewhat incredulous.

"Remarkable," Unare finally said. "Truly remarkable. And a great tragedy in many respects. The Abomination was responsible for even more trouble than we realised."

"Thank you for the information," Yrenti added. "It clears up some of the holes we had in the recent history of that damn thing."

"You're welcome," Ami told him with a small smile, picking up another snack and nibbling it.
"What are your plans for the future, now that your path has been disrupted from what you believed it should be for so long?" Savrk asked curiously, inspecting the three young women. Ami looked at her friends, then glanced at Yori for a moment.

"The three of us, at least, are going to learn everything Yori and the others can teach us, then I suppose go on with more or less the same thing we have always done, only in a more sensible manner," she finally said. "We've discussed it at length and all decided that we like what we can do even if how we ended up here was just a fairytale. As for the others..." She sighed slightly.

Hotaru put in, "Haruka might get back into the lifestyle, I think, but I also think she's going to take a break for as long as she can. We've been looking at places to live, which will keep her occupied for a while, and she's also trying to find a new car." She glanced at Misaki, who grinned.

"Don't worry, I'll help. I know a few people who could set her up with something very nice."

"Thanks."

"Makoto is amusing herself dealing with petty criminals," Rei added. "Chou had to talk to her a few days ago to get her to be a little less severe with them, which was extremely funny, and seems to have worked. I don't know how long she'll be content with that but it keeps her busy at least."

The blonde woman next to her smiled serenely. "That was quite amusing. I'm glad it was successful. She means well, I think, but she's a little overenthusiastic."

"Michiru is just hiding from the world at the moment." Ami shook her head sadly. "She got really paranoid and seems sure there's someone out to get her and that she's being watched all the time."

"Well, to be fair, she is. By us," Tamiko snickered, trying an odd looking fruit then looking approving. Ami glanced at her with a wry smile.

"True, but it's probably best not to tell her that."

'Chou' nodded, looking at her friends, then back to their hosts. "With any luck those three will gradually calm down a little so when we approach them in a few weeks they might be more receptive to the idea of therapy from Hnther and his team. We'll keep monitoring the situation so if we need to step in we can, but I'm hoping it won't be necessary."

"Minako, we're not sure about," 'Yori' said, sighing a little. "She's very depressed about the situation with Usagi. I haven't heard from her, or the Tsukino family, since we took them to see the girl, but I'm sure they'll get back in contact sooner or later. I wish we had a better solution to offer them."

"It's an awkward problem," Unare admitted. The three representatives of Kw'lyn industries had listened to the story of the blonde menace and Setsuna with interest and sadness. "I'm afraid I can't think of any easy solution, although we'll look into the matter. Memory editing on that scale, over that length of time, combined with a long-term splinter personality, is a difficult thing to deal with. Hnther has a very good reputation and it's not likely that we can do much he can't but we'll let you know if we can find anything helpful in the database."

"Thanks." 'Yori' looked gratefully at them. "Setsuna is less of a problem, I think, and so does Hnther, it's just going to take time. He's going to leave her in stasis until his colleagues can work out a good treatment regime but the early indications are that she'll probably be all right, eventually. Perhaps six months to a year of therapy after some careful mental pruning to deal with all the holes her breakdown produced and she should be back more or less to what she was.
Probably better in most ways, he thinks, as she won't have all that baggage in her head making her do crazy things."

"He thinks that after a month of treatment to deal with the immediate issues she should be rational enough to allow him to discuss her treatment with her and get her informed consent. He's not happy about imposing anything on her if it can be avoided. At the moment it can't." 'Chou' shrugged a little. "He has very strong ethical standards for this sort of thing. It's why he was so absolutely furious that the whole situation came up in the first place. He was extremely pleased that we killed the thing."

"As were we, for very similar reasons." Yrenti looked around at them all. "While you have all been affected by it one way or another, and indeed came close to losing your reality strand to it, that had already happened to us. I don't think you can completely understand how important it truly is to us. I don't want to keep repeating myself, but we owe you a lot."

"You're welcome," 'Yori' told him, glancing at all her friends. She grinned. "If you have any other universe-threatening problems you want help with, though, I'd prefer it if we can deal with them after we've had time to have a rest for a while." All three of the Kw'lyn directors laughed for some seconds after staring at her for a moment.

"I think we can live with that," Savrk chuckled.

The middle Tendo finished the snack she was eating, one of the spiky blue things that the Krennsh produced, which she'd been pleased to find on the table and had immediately confiscated the entire plate of, then studied the three on the other side of the table. "Do you have any suggestions on how to help Luna and Artemis?" she asked curiously, making everyone look at her, then them. Yrenti sighed slightly, while Savrk looked thoughtful and Unare turned to her colleagues.

"It's a difficult problem," Savrk admitted after a moment. "It is certainly possible to download an organic mind into a suitable intelligence engine, such as the one used in an SI, or indeed go the other way. But one large issue with that, which causes considerable ethical discussion in most civilisations that have such technology, is that what you get is a copy. You don't move the mind, you duplicate it. Some societies find that incompatible with their philosophies for various reasons. Religions that hold to the existence of a 'soul' or something similar, for example, tend to worry about where it ends up. Does it stay with the original, move to the copy, divide amongst them, disappear completely...?" He shrugged with all four arms.

"There's no good answer. For what it's worth, we have no verifiable evidence for the existence of a soul, but we have no proof of its non-existence either. Almost by definition it's pretty much impossible to prove or disprove. According to most religions of such a nature a machine could never possess a soul, for example, which would tend to suggest they would exhibit some characteristic that made them less... real... I suppose, than an organically derived mind. Yet we have been producing machine intelligences for tens of thousands of years, admittedly not continuously due to our history, but we have a lot of experience in the field. By any test we have ever been able to devise, a mind based for example on subspace processing and one based on chemical reactions are more or less indistinguishable in all manners that matter, aside from raw computational speed. Either one could be completely selfish, psychopathic, benevolent, shy, self confident... You name it."

"The software is more important than the hardware," Ami mused, making Savrk glance at her, then nod.

"Exactly. Well put," He looked back to the Tendo woman. "So, to answer your question in part, yes, we could certainly produce a suitable receptacle for the intelligence produced as the splinter
personalities in both young women, in several different ways I can think of immediately, but it would still leave the original in place. That may well not be what you're looking for."

"Yori' rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "No, it isn't. I guess it's a backup plan in case everything else fails, but it's not exactly ideal. Damn. Oh well, it was worth checking."

"I've started researching that matter as well," the R and D director assured her. "It's possible there is a method we have on record that would suffice, but a quick initial search doesn't show anything up. I'm sorry."

"No problem. Thanks, anyway. I have an idea myself, which I'm fairly sure will do what we need, but it's kind of complicated to pull off. I still need to think about it for a while and run simulations." He looked interested, inspecting her closely.

"I would be very interested in hearing more about this method when you have something you feel is complete," he said slowly. She nodded, smiling.

"Sure. I'll let you know if it works."

"There are magical methods rather than technological ones that could also be used," he mused, thinking more on the subject, which obviously interested him, "but all of the ones I'm aware of essentially have the same drawback."

"We know of a rather odd magical curse that splits a person into twins, which we considered for a while," 'Chou' mentioned, making him look interested. "But there are a number of severe drawbacks. We're not sure if it would end up with a personality in each body, or merely two copies of both of them, which would hardly be useful. And in any case, it's activated by an external stimulus and is transitory, which wouldn't work out."

"Hmm." Savrk glanced at Unare, who seemed fascinated. "I assume you're talking about that very strange Jusenkyo place on your world?" 'Chou' and 'Yori' looked at each other, surprised, then turned back to him.

"Yes, in fact I am," she replied. "I'm a little shocked you've heard of it."

"We have a fair amount about your world in our database," he grinned. "That place is notorious to a certain type of person. The magic is extremely old, pernicious, and complex. I'd strongly advise steering well clear of it. Even we don't have any idea where it came from, who came up with it in the first place, or what the original intent was, but our information suggests it's very dangerous. There's no way to remove it that anyone has ever found to the best of our knowledge, for example. It's powered by chaotic magic which is always tricky in the extreme."

"That's... very interesting," 'Yori' told him, listening with a small smile. "We've studied it extensively, we know a number of individuals affected by it, and we so far understand a small amount about it. You're right, it's the most complex spell, or set of spells, I've ever seen. We didn't know the power source, though, although chaos magic would explain... quite a lot."

The R and D director looked impressed. "If you understand any of it that it puts you far ahead of most mages. The original researchers who investigated it couldn't decode more than a very tiny fraction of it after quite a few years of study. The entire spell set seems surprisingly mutable and somewhat prone to hide a lot of itself in nested loops that defy rational analysis. There were some irritating accidents during the research and in the end they gave it up as a bad job and forgot about it."
"That explains it, Yori," Tamiko snickered, "Neither of you are rational either so you're a good match for it."

"You don't have to be crazy to work here..." Aiko giggled.

"...but certainly it helps," 'Azumi' finished, also laughing. All three of them exchanged a look and collapsed in hilarity, with everyone else staring. Hotaru giggled behind her hand.

"Thanks, guys," 'Yori' grumped, crossing her arms and glaring at them. Savrk chortled after a few seconds of staring.

"Your friends are... interesting," he commented with an alien smile.

"Yes. And frequently annoying." 'Yori' grinned at him, then turned her attention to the three highly amused women. "I think they may need some more training, their discipline is apparently slipping." All three immediately stopped laughing, exchanging worried glances. Everyone else laughed at their expressions.

"I'm curious," Lldnr'k remarked, once he stopped chuckling. He looked at the three on the other side of the table. "You mention that some if not most civilisations find the idea of copying minds somewhat difficult ethically, which I understand. Does yours?"

Unare smiled a little. "No, although there are... certain limitations. We're not happy about the idea of mass duplication of a specific intelligence. There have been... some rather unpleasant, if not horrifying problems with that in the past in a few places. Mass producing slaves, or soldiers, or generally disposable people. That is extremely illegal for us. Much as the mind control and mental editing that was done to these young women is, for very similar reasons. But, that said, there are specific circumstances where we make use of the ability to duplicate an intelligence. Mostly for backup purposes."

"The combat drone that was lost during the battle against the Abomination was a case in point," Yrenti told them. "It sent an up to date copy of its mind back to me just before it was destroyed, which we put into a duplicate physical unit when I returned home. That particular intelligence is over three hundred of your years old, has been through five bodies in that time, and is a friend. It was quite annoyed to be destroyed again, but asked me to pass on the message that it thanks you for what you did for us."

"The mind lives on even if the specific iteration of it was lost," Unare put in. "From the point of the surviving unit, it has had a more or less unbroken existence, since all the 'originals' if you like have been lost. The memories, personality, and essential being are still intact."

Misaki nodded slowly. "Our fiction has quite number of stories using that basic principle."

"Most species do," she agreed. "Once one develops processing systems that are even slightly intelligent it is a fairly obvious possibility. Actually doing it is much more difficult than you might expect, even with a machine intelligence of that level. It is much more difficult with an organic mind although still possible, of course, either through technological or magical methods, or as in our case, a combination."

"Mind transfers always look simple in the movies," Rei shrugged. "But then so does everything else, and I know for a fact that a lot of it definitely isn't."

"Mass entertainment isn't a good or accurate indicator of the true complexity of more or less anything," Lldnr'k said with a chuckle in his voice, looking at the woman, who grinned. "The clue
"True." He clicked his beak in amusement, as she laughed.

Turning back to the Kw'lyn people, he asked, "So I assume that you possess the ability to back up an organic mind in a similar fashion?"

"Yes. Again, the same sort of conditions apply." Yrenti shrugged slightly. "There are no duplicates of me running around, but I have backups on file. If I was killed, I could be restored if necessary. It's not immortality, not really, I have no wish to live forever, I suspect it would become very boring eventually unless I decided to forget a lot of things over time and in that case I wouldn't be the same person anyway, but as a species we're more resilient than most."

"We learned our lesson the hard way," Savrk said quietly. "We nearly died out after the Collapse. Most of the species who survived through being in other realities at the time did, either because of having too small a breeding population, accidents, or just giving up. We, and the others who eventually thrived, used a number of methods to ensure our survival. We've gone to considerable trouble to make sure that if any such disaster happened again, we would be in a better position."

"Off site backups, basically," Unare told them, looking mildly amused. "We have very carefully protected data caches in certain places, other realities for example, that could rebuild our civilisation if this one was destroyed. We very much hope that it won't be, of course, and we're not planning on it happening, but even so, we took precautions."

Ami looked at her, then her friends, seeming shocked. "That's incredible," she finally managed. Lldnr'k was nodding slowly.

"Also a good idea," he commented. "Although certainly I can see how some societies would find it... unpalatable."

"Of course. A lot of religions in many civilisations would be extremely offended by the mere concept," Yrenti replied. "That's their right and their problem. We certainly don't expect anyone else to do the same thing if they don't want to. We're just not keen on repeating what so nearly happened before. Losing your entire universe is the sort of thing that sticks with you." He grinned, as the temporal mage laughed.

"I can see where it would be," Lldnr'k replied.

"I wonder if that might point to a possible way of helping Usagi and Setsuna," Fumiko mused out loud, causing everyone to turn their attention to her. She looked up at them. "I mean, if you can copy an organic mind into some sort of external data system and back again, couldn't we use that to edit the memories that are damaged? I was thinking, perhaps you could make a copy of her memories, edit them externally, blank everything in her head, then put back the repaired memories?" She looked hopefully at them, while also seeming slightly dubious about her own idea. Savrk and Yrenti exchanged glances.

"It's not completely impossible, I'll admit," Savrk finally replied slowly, "but it's not quite that easy. One problem is that we have laws specifically against that sort of thing for reasons we discussed earlier, which would need a specific exemption. We could arrange that. Another, more important problem is that the damage caused to the mind in a case such as this, especially with the temporal manipulation aspect, makes getting a good download slightly difficult, although it would take hours to explain just why, which makes the whole process somewhat hazardous. Backing up a working mind without all the memory loops and temporal problems, that we can do, but in this case..." He shrugged slightly. "I'd need more information on it but at first glance I don't think it
would be as easy as one would hope. I'd be hesitant about doing it if there was any other way to proceed. It would be more of a last-ditch backup plan, if you'll pardon the pun."

"It's probably best to allow Hnther and his associates to finish their examination of the young woman first," Unare put in, listening with a thoughtful look. "From what I understand of the case I'm not sure using our methods would actually help in any meaningful manner as the memories would need to be removed regardless of method. However, please keep us updated with what they discover and let us know if you do need help. We're more than willing to provide it."

'Chou' smiled at her. "We'll make sure you get a copy of the data that Hnther is prepared to allow to be distributed. Thank you. It was a good idea, Fumiko," she added, glancing at the other woman, who shrugged with a small smile, "but I don't think we're going to find a short cut. Poor Usagi is going to have to wait while Hnther and his colleagues work."

"Sorry," Yrenti commented.

She looked at him and smiled again. "Don't worry about it. Thank you all for the information."

'Azumi' had been thinking as she listened, remembering something that Yrenti had said the first time they met. After a moment she looked at him and asked, "When we first met you commented that the SIs were a good match for our species and that Jun had progressed faster than expected. What did you mean by that?" She could feel Jun itself listening intently. Yrenti turned to face her, his colleagues doing the same.

"As you're probably aware," he began after apparently thinking of the best way to explain it for a few seconds, "True machine intelligence, on the order of a good organic mind, is actually a very complex thing to do correctly." She nodded, as everyone listened with interest. "It is easy to make a computer look intelligent, for a given definition of intelligent. For example, your own species, and your native culture in particular, is making great progress in computation at a speed which is fairly impressive, producing after only fifty or sixty years of effort such things as autopilots that can fly a high performance aircraft, expert systems that can be fairly effective medical diagnosticians, that type of application. They're obviously not truly intelligent in any meaningful manner yet at the same time they can often easily outperform most organic beings in their narrow speciality."

"At the rate you're progressing, in a decade or so you'll be producing something that for many purposes would seem fairly close to an intelligent if somewhat restricted mind. Speech recognition coupled to a large neural network and a fast database with many connected subjects can do some remarkable things, even at a fairly primitive level by our standards. Yet, it still isn't a mind, not in any normal way. There is certainly no pretence of self-awareness, no true understanding of anything outside the basic data the system is programmed with, it's basically just a database that talks to you and can infer limited answers based on limited data."

"OK, I understand that, I think. I've learned quite a lot of this sort of thing recently for various reasons," she replied, nodding slowly.

"Good. Now, the next level is a much faster parallel system that is capable of running a very large number of simultaneous networks and cross-referencing vast quantities of data, interpolating from that to come up with new information. You're probably about twenty years away from that sort of system in its crudest form. Such a device can give a good approximation of true intelligence under the right circumstances, although it still isn't genuinely smart. It's a computer, or network of computers, that can mine a large data set and derive an acceptable answer much faster than an organic mind can normally do, but if you give it bad data it has no way to work that out, and it's also easy to fool with nonsensical questions." He stopped, looking around at the others, who were all listening, fascinated, Ami most of all.
"There is a long way between that and even a basic version of a system like one of our SI units, although they share a common heritage. The raw computational power of the subspace magitech processor network that makes up the SI hardware outstrips the sum total of the computational ability of your entire planet as it currently stands. Yet even so, it's not quite possible to simply program a brand new, functioning, genuinely sentient mind into such hardware. Or, at least, it is possible, but it's very unwise to do so. The results are, almost without exception, something of a disaster. You get a mind, all right, but it's not one anything other than another similar machine can easily understand." He sighed a little. "We found that out in the early days, before the Collapse. We tried for decades when we reached the level required post-Collapse but never cracked it then either. I'm not aware of any species that has."

"There have been some quite unpleasant incidents in some places when this problem wasn't recognised quickly enough," Unare added as he fell silent. "While it's not at all inevitable, it is certainly possible to produce a very smart machine that sees little point in maintaining good relationships with organic minds. The evidence suggests that the lack of comprehensibility goes both ways. That can lead to unfortunate repercussions."

"We've got movies about that too," Hotaru said gravely.

Unare nodded. "That doesn't surprise me. Are they any good?"

The young girl grinned. "I liked the two Terminator ones, although Haruka said I was too young to watch them."

"I shall have to look into it. I've seen some of the entertainment your world produces in that form, some of it is quite remarkable." She smiled. Yrenti picked up the explanation when she paused.

"We found after much research that there was a threshold which, when crossed, produced an unstable or incomprehensible intelligence. However, it turned out to be possible to go right up to that threshold and produce something that was very close to a mind, although it wasn't quite self-aware or genuinely sentient, but for most purposes it could give an extremely convincing and useful emulation."

"That sounds very familiar," 'Azumi' noted. He nodded.

"Yes. That's the basis of the SI personality. It is a standard, very carefully tested proto-mind that is programmed into the hardware to act as the interface between the functionality of the system and the user."

"But it learns, doesn't it?" 'Chou' asked softly. He glanced at her and nodded again.

"It learns. Very fast. We discovered a long time ago that this was possibly the only method to produce a stable true intelligence that was completely compatible with most organic minds. It's a little like a child when it first boots, although much more articulate and capable of sensible conversation. Depending on the tasks required, the amount of interaction with the user, the user's personality, knowledge, abilities, and a large number of other variables, the SI base personality will eventually cross the sapience threshold in a safe manner that appears to be very difficult if not impossible to achieve in any other way we're aware of. How fast that happens varies but from what I suspect it is either close to happening or has already happened with most of your SIs. Your species would appear to be very compatible with this process, more so than most."

"The end result is a true intelligence, essentially the same as an organic one, containing elements of the host personality." Savrk looked at them, as they looked at each other. He grinned. "Think of it like Kw'lyn is one parent and the user is the other. It's not perfectly accurate but it's not entirely
inaccurate either."

"I'm not sure I'm ready to be a mother to a sentient machine," Tamiko said, grinning. Misaki and Fumiko looked at each other, then laughed. Yrenti and his two colleagues seemed amused.

"It's a very rough simile," he said. "Although there is a small element of truth to it."

Yrenti added, "The same thing can happen spontaneously in many different types of sufficiently complex system, such as large networks of fast computers, particularly complicated spell systems of some types, and so on. It's rare, but it has happened. Our method is much more predictable, both in causing this to happen in the first place, and allowing it to produce a stable and useful result, since it's designed to that end. Spontaneously sentient complex systems can cause some unusual problems depending on how and where they evolve."

'Yori' glanced at 'Chou', then beyond her to Lldnr'k, who looked mildly amused. "We've had some slight experience with this sort of thing, I think."

He inspected them curiously, as did his colleagues. "Interesting. It's quite a rare event, I have to admit."

Diverting his attention, 'Azumi' quickly asked, "Is there any way to find out whether an SI is genuinely sentient?" The attention of the three aliens switched to her, although Yrenti glanced back at 'Yori' and her wife a couple of times. He nodded.

"Yes, several. One fairly straightforward method is a test program we have. It can be sent to and run by an SI, which then essentially answers a lot of very carefully designed questions and solves certain problems. The end result is a measurement of the current conversational ability, which starts at level six as you will recall from your initial setup of yours. Level eight is the sapience threshold, at which point the mind is truly self-aware and sentient, like any other being. We consider a machine intelligence that has reached that point to be as alive as any organic intelligence of similar level."

The middle sister looked around at her friends. She could see they were all curious, yet also somewhat worried. "How high does it go?" she asked.

Unare answered, "In theory it can go to level twenty-six. At that point the intelligence is essentially omniscient. It's an exponential scale, the first few levels are reached quickly and after that each additional one takes steadily longer to reach. No intelligence we have ever produced has passed level nineteen, though, the hardware requirements are implausibly excessive amongst other limitations. A normal organic intelligence of high order, such as you are, will be at an equivalent level of approximately thirteen to fourteen. Some species can reach higher, the highest we know of would be roughly sixteen. Rare individuals in many species can go somewhat higher but quite often only with various defects in the mind as well. There are structural differences between the machine version and the organic version of intelligence which make a direct comparison at high levels somewhat vague, but it's a useful approximation."

"One thing to remember," Savrk added, "is that intelligence and knowledge aren't the same thing. It's possible to be very smart and also very ignorant. Or very dim and have a large amount of knowledge, or at least available facts."

"I've met people like that," Aiko laughed. "There was one mathematics teacher in school..."

"Quite," Savrk looked amused. "Also, even a very smart mind can miss the obvious. High intelligence is no guarantee of success in any venture, although it certainly helps considerably."
Another interesting thing is that raw processing speed doesn't actually make a huge amount of
difference to how intelligent the resultant mind is, past a certain point. It can think faster than an
organic mind, not always better. Your experiences with the Abomination showed that very well,
even though it wasn't really sentient. It had extremely high processing ability, but was still not
smart enough to work out what it was doing wrong, or even that it couldn't possibly succeed in the
first place."

Nodding thoughtfully, 'Chou' asked curiously, "What level can an SI reach?"

"Generally speaking they top out at around level fourteen to fifteen, depending on the species they
are associated with. The hardware will support level sixteen, or perhaps slightly higher in some
cases. It's the same basic processing core we use for almost all machine intelligences, we
optimised it to the point it was essentially at the limit of what was possible for that design a long
time ago. It's extremely well understood, reliable, and stable. We do produce processing cores with
higher capability for special projects but quite rarely, there isn't all that much requirement for
them." He shrugged a little. "We haven't needed to make an intelligence past that point for quite a
while.

#Nabiki, I am very curious to find out what level I have reached, I have to admit,# Jun told the
middle sister, sounding fascinated. #I would like to try this test program.#

'Does any of this worry you?' she asked it, prompted by the feeling of guilt that had been growing
steadily during the explanation of how the Kw'lyn machine intelligences worked. A feeling of
puzzlement came back to her, making her smile internally.

#I'm not sure I understand your point,# the machine admitted.

'From what Savrk and the others are saying, ultimately you will reach at least the same level of
genuine intelligence and sentience as I have. They said past level eight, you'd be considered a
sentient being in your own right. I'm feeling a bit worried myself about that, not because I don't
want it to happen, but because I'm feeling a little like you're in the same position as Luna and
Artemis. An independent mind that's trapped inside someone else's body.' She paused, then added,
'Admittedly it's not an identical situation, but... I'm feeling guilty that you're not able to interact
with other people, you only work through me. Doesn't that bother you?'

There was a long moment during which the SI said nothing. Eventually, rather slowly, it replied,
#No, not really. On one level, it is my purpose, above anything else. An SI exists to work with its
owner, to do whatever it can to improve the owners life and security, to provide any help it can. On
a different level, I don't think I'm missing anything. I'm not human, even if I will reach, or have
reached, the same level of sentience as you. I have different goals and motivations, ones that would
appear to be at least partly based on your own, from what we've been told, in addition to what I
was designed with. To date I have felt no loss in being unable to directly contact anyone other than
you. While I can't say with certainty that will never change, at the moment I am content to be your
loyal companion.# She felt distinct amusement from it, while she herself felt even more guilty as a
result of its reply.

'I'm beginning to fear you're more of a slave than a companion, Jun. Just those few sentences tell
me more about the level you've reached than I'd have believed. You're not actually emulating
emotions any more, are you?'

#I am beginning to understand things such as emotion in a way I could not before, that is true,# it
admitted, sounding pleased. #But I am not a slave. Possibly a servant, in the sense of a personal
retainer, or based on your own culture, something somewhat akin to a samurai. I believe that even
when and if I attain true sentience and independent thought, I will feel the same. I enjoy our association and have no wish to see it end. # It fell silent for a moment, while she thought about its words. # Please don't worry, Nabiki. # Jun added in a tone of voice that was surprisingly soft and calm. # I am content. Happy, in fact, as far as I currently understand that emotion. You are a fascinating person, as are your friends, and I very much wish to continue working with you. #

'I would certainly miss you more than almost anything I can think of,' she admitted quietly. 'You're just as important to me as the rest of my family and friends. But I couldn't live with myself if I was somehow preventing you from reaching what you could be. You're a damn sight more than just a computer or a tool.'

# Thank you. I do appreciate the sentiment, # it replied, a note of amusement present. # If the situation ever changes I will say so, but at the moment I can't see that happening. #

The middle Tendo noticed that everyone had stopped talking and was looking at her, making her quickly replay the last couple of minutes of vaguely heard conversation to try and work out why. 'Yori' raised an eyebrow. "You OK, Azumi?" she asked.

The silver-haired woman nodded, smiling minutely. "Yes, actually. I was just having an interesting conversation with Jun. It asked if it could try the test program, which led us to talk about something that was beginning to bother me." She glanced at Savrk, then the other two, who were watching her with interest, Yrenti particularly. Summarising the conversation she'd had with Jun to them, she waited for their response. The three Kw'lyn representatives exchanged looks.

Eventually, and rather slowly, Yrenti said, "That is... unusual. Your SI is displaying a level of initiative that is somewhat unexpected at this point in its development."

She shrugged a little, smiling more widely. "Jun has been providing good advice since I got it, and suggesting things on a regular basis for months. It's especially fond of interesting toys." She grinned as they exchanged looks again. "Every time we come across something useful, like these..." She produced a camera drone, which they studied for a moment, although she didn't activate it, the security spell and her own ethical sense both making sure of that, "...it gets all acquisitive. Which is why I have five of the things, three force field space suits from the Krennsh, one of their better projection systems, and a few other things."

"Nao is also very prone to giving out very good advice, or just wanting to talk," 'Chou' admitted, smiling happily. Yrenti looked at her, then around at the others. They all nodded. "I think they all do, although I'll admit that Jun seems to be more prone to it from what Azumi has told me. Certainly it seems to come up with this sort of thing before the others."

Folding a pair of hands in front of him, Yrenti studied them all. 'Azumi' put the drone away while he was inspecting them. Unare and Savrk seemed to be having a silent conversation, making her think they were using their own SIs or whatever more advanced system they had. Eventually he nodded, smiling in a slightly peculiar manner. "I was right. The SI system is obviously unusually compatible with your species. You're the only members of it ever to possess them, so we had no data to go on up until now, but it looks like they complement the way your minds work remarkably well, and vice versa. Very interesting."

Savrk added, "I can be fairly sure that Jun, at least, is already very close to the sentience threshold, just based on that conversation. In most species we'd expect it to take at least twice that length of time." He stroked one finger over an ear, studying 'Azumi' closely. "I wonder if there is something special about you as a... 'magical girl', is it?" She nodded, glancing at her sister-in-law, who suppressed a smile, "that has in some way accelerated the process. You obviously all possess a level of magical ability that is unusual, to say the least, not to mention the kind of magic which is..."
extremely odd." He thought for a moment. "It bears further study, I think. Possibly your own magic has had some effect in this matter. Fascinating."

Yrenti sent them all a file. "This is the test program. Your SIs can run it. I'm interested to see what the results are."

"So am I," 'Chou' said, smiling. The others expressed similar sentiments.

I have checked the supplied program for any security problems, Nabiki. It appears safe. Shall I run it?# Jun sounded somewhat eager, yet also slightly worried.

'It's up to you. I'm not going to force you.' There was a short pause while the middle sister waited.

I would like to see what happens.#

'OK. Good luck.'

This will take approximately two minutes of real time, according to the documentation, I will be unable to respond normally during that period, although I will abort it if there is an emergency. Is that acceptable?# Jun sounded embarrassed. She smiled.

'It's not a problem, Jun. I don't think we're in any danger here. Have fun.'

I think I may be beginning to understand the concept,# the machine commented wryly. It fell silent, giving the impression of thinking very hard, leaving the inside of her head peculiarly vacant as its normal presence, which was so low-level she didn't really notice it until it wasn't there, faded. 'Azumi' looked at her sister, who smiled back.

"Nao seemed quite keen to see what results it got," the disguised Kasumi said, amused.

She nodded. "Jun was both worried and excited, I think." Looking back to Yrenti and his colleagues, she asked, "What result would you expect?"

"In most cases a high seven, or a low eight, perhaps, after the length of time the SIs have been active," Yrenti replied after glancing at Savrk. "I suspect in this case, based on what seems to be happening, that may be a slight underestimate. I'm very interested to find out."

They all waited while the SIs ran the test program. Eventually Jun said, sounding slightly surprised, #I have finished the test. It was somewhat odd, but enlightening. The result is a data-block that I need to have externally verified, it doesn't give me the score directly. If you send it to Yrenti he will be able to tell us what level I have attained.# It indicated a file, which she sent to the Kw'lyn director, who accepted it with an expression of interest. After a moment he looked at her in a quizzical manner.

"Very enlightening indeed," he began, looking around at them all. "Not what we would have expected, I have to admit." He glanced at Ami, Rei, and Hotaru, who were listening expectantly. "You have very recently activated SIs, so as one would understand, they are the least developed at the current time. Even so, they are all above level six already, by a noticeable margin." He looked back to the others. "Your units, though, are considerably higher. Interestingly, Jun would appear to be more advanced than the rest. Level nine point one." Unare and Savrk stared at him, then 'Azumi'.

"Nine point one?" the R and D Director echoed. "Already?"

"Yes." Yrenti glanced at his colleague. Unare was staring at the silver-haired woman still with a
"That is... very fast indeed," she said slowly. "Your mind must be a remarkably good match even amongst your species."

"We've always considered her to be a lot like a computer," Tamiko snickered. "She can certainly be all cold and emotionless." Inwardly amused, 'Azumi' slowly turned and fixed her with her coldest look, making her grin and shiver at the same time. "See?"

Smiling, the alien woman nodded. "Indeed I can."

"All of the others are above level eight, ranging between eight point five and eight point eight." Yrenti watched the byplay with a small smile. "They've all passed the sentience threshold, by a substantial amount." He shook his head for a moment. "I'm curious to see where they all end up."

"I suspect at a fairly high level," Unare commented. "It will be interesting to find out. Please come back so we can see how they're progressing." She smiled at them. "We take an interest in our products, especially when they become colleagues."

"We'll keep you updated," 'Chou' laughed.

"Please do." The alien woman finished the beverage she had been idly sipping, putting the container back on the table, then glanced at Yrenti and Savrk. "I know that my friends have many things they wish to talk to you about, but unfortunately I have another appointment quite soon I can't miss. I would very much like to talk again at some point in the near future, though. We would like to show you more of our world as well, if you're interested. There are things we can't discuss at present, but much of the rest you may well find very interesting."

"I think we'd all like to learn more," 'Yori' replied, looking around at her friends, all of whom nodded.

"I'd certainly like to visit the surface of the sphere," Ami said quietly. Beside her, Hotaru grinned.

"That could be arranged," Unare smiled. "There is some talk about awarding you all in some official way for the help you gave us, as well as the danger you put yourselves in, something I personally feel you all highly deserve. I will make sure that you are kept informed about that matter. However, for the moment in lieu of such an award, Kw'lyn Industries would like to give you a few things we feel may help you." She grinned as everyone looked interested. "Obviously, as per the original message, you are going to have free lifetime upgrades and support for your SIs, and any accessories you wish. We will also allow the SI database to be upgraded to add a portion of the Kw'lyn restricted database. No personal information can be transferred, as we have explained, but most of the general non-classified information and a certain amount of normally restricted data will be included. You may find it helpful in the future."

'Azumi' looked at her sister and 'Yori', somewhat shocked. The martial artist seemed surprised. "That's... very generous indeed," she managed after a moment.

"We are sure that you will understand how to handle this information responsibly, based on what we know about you already, not to mention recent events," the Kw'lyn General Manager responded, looking amused. "Should you have any specific requirement for information we can't release at the moment, please contact me. I'll look into it gladly. I can't promise anything generally but I suspect that we can probably come to an arrangement should you have a genuine need."
"Thank you, very much," 'Chou' told her, sounding pleased and a little stunned. The alien waved one hand dismissively.

"Think nothing of it. As we have said, several times, we owe you a lot. As far as we can, we're happy to help in any way possible." Unare smiled again. "In addition, we discussed what other products of ours might be of use to you. We came up with a few suggestions." She glanced at Yrenti, who smiled, then looked towards the doorway, though which glided one of the security drones. 'Azumi' had the oddest sensation it was the one that had greeted them, although she would have been hard-pressed to explain why. Floating along underneath it was a container a metre or so across and about half that deep, which it neatly deposited next to the table, before dipping slightly in a sort of nod of acknowledgement then turning and silently leaving again.

"Please enjoy the gifts," Unare told them all, standing up. "I would like to stay, but as I said I have an important appointment. I'll have to go now but I'm looking forward to talking again soon." She sent them all contact details, which they accepted. "If I can be of help, just call. It was very nice to meet you all." With a graceful bow the General Manager left the building. Yrenti watched her go, then turned back to the others.

"You can think of this as a sort of gift pack," he commented, looking very amused, then standing and walking over to the crate. He put his hand on the lid, which made a faint satisfied sound and opened when he moved his hand away. Everyone watched as he reached in and pulled out a smaller case. "You can look through the catalogue for anything else you might want, but I think we may have anticipated you in a few places." Putting the case on the table he again unlocked it, then swivelled it around to show them the contents, which turned out to be a number of very familiar small black slabs. "Fourteen Mark Nine Gamma units. I believe these may be useful at some point. We trust you to see that they go to people who can use them responsibly and treat them well."

Staring in amazement, 'Yori' nodded slowly. "Thank you. I can think of a couple of people already. We've only got two left at the moment. Spares could be very useful at some point."

"If you eventually require more, let me know. We don't hand them out like toys, but we're always willing to help you, all things considered." Yrenti chuckled as he watched them. "But I think this should be enough for the moment." He looked at Lldnr'k, then reached into the case and picked up one SI unit, handing it to the temporal mage, who seemed shocked. "I suspect you're one of the people Yori was thinking of. Please enjoy it." The martial artist grinned as she watched the mage slowly reach out and accept the device.

"Yep. I was just about to do the same thing."

"I'm... overwhelmed," Lldnr'k managed, staring at the small machine in his hand. "And extremely grateful. Thank you."

"You deserve it, my friend," 'Yori' assured him. She looked at her wife, then the others. "I was going to see if Hnther wanted one as well. Does that sound good?" Everyone nodded at the same time, including Yrenti and Savrk.

"His reputation is very good indeed," Savrk said, "I would agree that he is the sort of person who should have an SI if he wishes."

"Do you have anyone in mind for the others?" Aiko asked curiously, looking at the black-haired woman, who thought for a moment then shook her head.

"Not at the moment. I can think of a few people who could use them, but most of them aren't people I completely trust just yet, at least not with something so powerful. We'll see how things
work out in the future. But at least we have them for when we need them."

"Fair enough." The brunette smiled a little.

Yrenti closed the case, pushing it over to 'Yori'. "Your SI can lock and unlock it," he said, "I've keyed it to you or Chou." The martial artist picked it up and made it vanish, which caused Savrk to inspect her with interest. He didn't say anything, though, seeming content to wait. Returning to the large box, Yrenti removed another one, which amusingly was at least four times higher than the depth of the box. The middle sister grinned as she watched the thing appear, recognising a subspace storage spell but finding the sight funny even so.

"This is the first of the two largest items," Yrenti told them, moving the box to a clear area in the middle of the room and doing something to it. The sides folded down somehow, revealing a two metre tall cylinder that gleamed under the light, apparently made of some dark red metal. The bottom and top were rounded off so the entire thing looked slightly unstable, but it seemed content to balance on one end. After a moment they all noticed it wasn't actually touching the ground, a small gap under it showing clear air between it and the floor.

"What is it?" Fumiko asked curiously.

"It's an inter/intra reality relay for the SI system," Yrenti replied, studying the machine with pride. "The very latest model. Extremely classified, we haven't released this version to anyone outside our world yet. It's due for a good field test, though, and I think you're the ones to do that."

They all stared at the floating device for a moment, rather shocked. "What does it do?" Misaki asked after a moment. "Aside from the obvious, I mean." She grinned as Yrenti laughed.

"Well, it allows communication on the SI network anywhere in the reality strand it's located in, for a start. It will also boost the signal to allow it to connect to reality strands at a much greater degree of separation than the normal unaided SI can manage. We have earlier generations of the same device installed in a number of realities throughout the multiverse which form a cross-reality network that covers a large part of the strands we deal with. Installing this one in your reality will increase the total number directly reachable by several dozen minimum, assuming it works to specification. Which it will." He grinned at them. "Our equipment is very reliable."

"It taps into the main reality's underlying magical field for power, then drops into its own private fractional reality, in a manner not dissimilar to how the time device worked. That protects it from pretty much anything and makes it almost impossible to damage. The device is self-repairing and self-maintaining, with an estimated minimum functional life of twelve thousand years from your viewpoint." 'Yori' glanced at 'Chou', then around at her other friends. They all looked impressed.

"It sounds very useful, to both us and you," she said, studying the machine.

"We have an ulterior motive," Yrenti admitted, smiling a little. "It will certainly be very useful to you, but it extends the reach of our information gathering ability considerably. We don't currently deal with your reality or several others in that cluster, aside from you people, so we have limited assets available there. This will allow us to extend our reach, so to speak. Hopefully to our mutual benefit."

"I can't see any reason not to take it," she replied after a moment. "After all, you could always install it without telling us anyway."

He nodded. "We could, but we would prefer to be honest with you. You are friends if nothing else, and I strongly suspect you will end up being true allies, in one form or another. We believe in
playing fair with our friends and allies. It tends to be reciprocated." Producing a smaller cubical device from the crate on the floor, he put it on the table. "This goes with it. It's a local comms node that interfaces from the relay to your local planetary networks. Somewhat like an SI without the actual SI part. It's fairly smart but not self-aware and won't end up as such. On the other hand, it's even better at local linkages that the SIs are. It can bridge your communications and data links to the SI network system, even if none of you are in your home reality to allow your SIs to do the same thing, which is what I believe you currently do."

'Yori' nodded slowly, inspecting the device, which she reached out to pick up. "Yep. We set them up so any phone calls or that sort of thing are relayed from anyone at home to the rest of us when we're in range. Since we're all here, at the moment, we can't get calls, even if it would reach." Handing it to 'Chou' who studied it for a few seconds before passing it to Ami, she smiled. "This will certainly help us a lot. Thanks."

Looking pleased, Yrenti turned back to the crate. "OK, there's one more large item." He removed another, quite similar although slightly smaller box from the crate on the floor. This one also opened when he activated it, the front splitting open and folding away in a rather organic manner to the sides. Inside was a glittering assembly of multi-coloured materials with a few small lights showing on it, which appeared to consist of a few dozen blocks that were attached to a central spine. It was very similar to the long range probes that S'th'kx had launched during the moon mission.

"Let me guess, it's some sort of probe," Tamiko commented. He smiled slightly, nodding a little.

"Not quite, but you're thinking along the right lines. It's a high-accuracy subspace positioning system. It self-launches, dispersing the locator nodes throughout your solar system, where they take up appropriate orbits and again drop into subspace pockets to protect them. Completely shielded and stealthed. It will allow sub-micron positioning anywhere within several dozen light-hours of your star once it's in place and working. It's the best unit we produce, we sell them to planetary governments mostly, they're hideously expensive even in those terms. Just place it in a space with a path to the sky and activate it, it will do everything else itself. Full capability will take about three days to reach due to transit time for the nodes, but you'll have a limited functionality system in about half an hour. Something approaching ten times the accuracy of your existing timing based system."

"Wow." 'Azumi' stared at the thing. "That's pretty impressive. Now all we need is suitably accurate maps of the planet to go with it." She laughed for a moment. "The ones we have for the GPS system are nowhere near good enough to make use of positioning that accurate. Even the military don't have anything good enough."

"We could supply a mapping unit that could survey your planet and build the maps needed," Yrenti mused, studying her. "We're quite happy to do so, it's a standard unit, although we'd be grateful if you'd allow us access to the data it produces for our database. We haven't got up to date mapping information on your world or system, the last time any of our researchers visited it for such purposes was over a century ago. It's an interesting place. We've got quite a lot of data on it on file."

Rei glanced at Ami, grinning. "Do you sum it up as 'Mostly Harmless'?' she asked, a weird grin on her face. All the humans cracked up, although Lldnr'k and Yrenti looked puzzled. Oddly enough, Savrk laughed as well.

"We try not to panic," he quipped, making everyone look at him. "A great loss. Mr Adams was a very humorous author." Azumi' stared, shaking her head slowly, as the alien researcher looked
back at her with an amused expression.

"You've read 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?' she asked with shock. He nodded, smiling.

"I enjoy speculative fiction from a number of species. Yours does it very well. I've read quite a lot of it, although I'm not current, due to work. Douglas Adams always made me laugh."

"Unbelievable." 'Azumi' shook her head again, then grinned widely. "He'd have loved the idea that an alien from another reality was a fan, I think."

"Assuming he even believed it," Ami added, staring at Savrk with a slightly disbelieving expression.

"Um, OK," 'Yori' said slowly, looking at Savrk as well for a few seconds more, then returning her attention to Yrenti, who was also studying his colleague. He looked back to her. "That sounds like a good idea. We don't have any problem with letting you have the data, assuming it doesn't go any further without our knowledge."

"It won't," he assured her. "Should we have any requirement to pass it on we'd clear it with you first."

"Fair enough." She inspecting him for a moment, glancing at 'Chou' and asking a silent question. The blonde nodded. "We could also let you have the data we have gathered on the Moon, and are in the process of gathering from around the solar system from S'th'kx's probes." They'd explained the moon mission and the results of it during Ami's story earlier, although they hadn't mentioned the incredible results from the asteroid yet for various reasons.

"Ah. Yes, the Krennsh probes are very good. Not up to our technology, but the results they produce are extremely high quality. We'd be very interested in that information, thank you." Yrenti looked pleased, while Savrk smiled. "Most generous of you."

"No problem."

Turning back to the crate, Yrenti removed another smaller box, this time putting it on the table. "This is the last of the things we've come up with. Obviously, if we've missed anything, just ask, but hopefully we've come up with some useful items." He opened the case, swivelling it around to show them.

#Ah. I was hoping to acquire one of these, Nabiki,# Jun said with interest.

'What are they?' she asked the SI. Ami echoed much the same question to Yrenti almost simultaneously. Jun let the Kw'lyn Industries director explain.

"This is a military specification sensory package," he said, picking one of the small units out of the box and holding it up. "It's an extension to the Mark Nine Gamma, upgrading the hardware to Mark Ten Delta specifications, which are currently the highest we produce outside the development laboratories. It adds a considerable amount of sensory ability and improves the functionality of what's already present. It triples the data storage capacity as well." He sent them a file which explained the capabilities of the device. Jun and the middle sister both looked it over with interest.

'Wow. Thermal vision, that could be cool,' she commented, noticing one function out of dozens.

#Both true, and a pun,# Jun noted, amused, causing her to laugh. #The specifications are very impressive. This will add to my effectiveness considerably. It exceeds the abilities of Ami's
Handing the device to the martial artist, Yrenti distributed more of them to the others, then closed the case. "There are another dozen in here. I would ask that you are very discreet and careful in deciding who to grant them to, as they are also classified, but we trust your judgement."

"Thanks. This is all a little overwhelming," 'Yori' responded, studying the sensory add-on for a moment, then putting it away.

He shrugged. "We, as we keep repeating, owe you. This is repaying some of that debt in a manner we can easily do." Looking around at the people present, he added, "Is there anything else you can think of that we could help you with? You can always contact us later if you wish, once the relay is in place you won't even need a portal, but now would seem like a good time." Everyone thought for some time.

"There is one thing I've wondered about," 'Azumi' eventually said, causing him to turn his attention to her. Everyone else watched and listened. "The day we got the SIs, oddly enough, I was asking Yori about translation spells." She grinned for a moment. "We have enough science fiction which mentions universal translators, for example, that the concept is something we're familiar with. Do you have anything like that?"

Savrk chuckled. "You want a babel fish?"

Laughing wildly, she nodded. Yrenti and Lldnr'k looked at each other, obviously wondering what the hell the reference was. "It's not easy. The SIs can, as you undoubtedly know, translate any language in their database, which is very extensive, and make it comprehensible to you, both spoken and written. Going the other way is more difficult. Partly due to security restrictions on the SIs themselves, of course, which is something of a self-imposed problem on our part." He glanced at Yrenti, who thought for a moment then nodded slowly.

"We have a solution, yes. For a number of reasons we're very cautious about allowing anyone outside our civilisation to have access to it. It's of strategic importance, in effect. But, I think in this case we could make an exception." He fell silent for a few seconds. "Unare agrees and has authorised it." Looking to Savrk he made a small gesture.

The magical R and D director smiled. "We have a very complex spell, the results of many years of work and refinements. It is very close indeed to what you term a universal translator. There are a few minor limitations, it isn't quite perfect, as there are a few species it has trouble with mainly due to issues surrounding very alien mental processes, but unless you do a lot of interstellar travel you're unlikely to encounter any of them. Portal travel normally connects species which are quite close in the relevant manner."

"We discussed that a while ago and were wondering if it really is true or just seems that way," 'Chou' commented with interest. He looked to her, nodding.

"It appears so, although to date we're not entirely sure why. It's the subject of ongoing research." He shrugged a bit. "It's yet another case of magical weirdness. Anyway, this spell adds an ability to speak and understand almost any language that you're likely to encounter. It also makes learning the written forms very easy, taking only minutes to hours in most cases. There is a library of data on a large number of writing systems embedded into it but if you encounter a new one, you can learn it with minimal effort in most cases."

"That sounds amazing," Aiko told him, looking impressed.
"It's very effective. You wouldn't believe how much effort went into creating and refining it," he told her. "The basis of it is ancient, it's the latest variant of something that pre-dates the Collapse, and was used extensively in the original reality. I believe it originated somewhere else even then, although I don't know where from. We've been refining it almost continuously ever since."

"Wow. It's over thirty-five thousand years old?" she exclaimed, shocked. He nodded.

"Yes. It's probably one of the oldest spells we know of that's still in use."

"It certainly sounds like it would do the job," Misaki commented with interest. She looked at her sister, who seemed intrigued.

Yrenti smiled. "I would hope so. Unare says we can allow it to be used on all of you, and Hnther, if he wishes. We're prepared to allow it for other people you designate on a case by case basis but we don't want to let it out generally for a number of reasons. We can give you an artefact that will apply the spell subject to these restrictions, assuming that you're agreeable to them? I'm sorry we can't just let you have it, but as I said, it's a matter of internal security, something our government would be annoyed about if we did. We have a lot of leeway on most things but we can't simply do whatever we want."

'Yori' inspected him for a moment then looked around. Everyone seemed agreeable. "That sounds very generous. Thanks."

"We should let Uthryyl, Quannya, and Onkra have it," 'Chou' remarked. "It would help them and they're very trusted friends."

"The merchant Uthryyl and his family are acceptable," Yrenti nodded. "We have considerable respect for him, he's helped us on a number of occasions." 'Chou' smiled her thanks.

"There are a few others I can think of that would benefit from it," 'Yori' mused, thinking out loud. "The obvious one would be Masao." She glanced at Yrenti, who thought for a moment.

"Agent Naito would also be acceptable. Again, we have a certain amount of information on him, we've taken an interest in your associates recently for obvious reasons, and he is both highly intelligent and ethically sound. If he wishes to have the spell we will allow it."

"Thanks. I'll ask him when we get back." 'Yori' looked pleased, as did the others.

"All right. I've arranged for the applicator artefact to be made and delivered, it will be here before you leave," Yrenti said. "Is there anything else you need?" Everyone thought for a while.

"Nothing immediately springs to mind," Ami commented, looking around. Hotaru shrugged, smiling a little. Aiko laughed.

"I can think of dozens of things I'm curious about but we'd be here for weeks," she snickered. "I can wait. Let's take our toys and get used to them before we get anything else. No need to be greedy." Yrenti and Savrk grinned at her.

"We don't mind, certainly," Savrk replied, amused, "but that's a responsible attitude. Just let us know if there's anything else you require."

"We will," 'Chou' assured him. "We're extremely grateful, though, you've been very generous."

"It's no problem," he told her with a smile. Inspecting her, then 'Yori', he asked after a moment, "Would it be possible to talk about your magical methods now?" There was a hopeful and
fascinated expression on his face. She smiled, glancing at her husband, who grinned.

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Everything, if possible," he replied, also grinning.

"That could take a while." 'Yori' chuckled as the R and D director laughed. "OK. We're not keen on this going any further without our permission, of course, but we have no trouble telling you about it, I guess." She looked at 'Chou' who nodded calmly.

"Anything you tell us about proprietary systems will be held in confidence," Yrenti assured her. "We have similar agreements with a number of worlds and practitioners. If your methods can be duplicated by us, we may well wish to enter into some form of commercial partnership if you're willing, but at the moment we're primarily simply curious. It looks very much like something new, which is almost unprecedented in magical control theory. Certainly what I've seen of your magical methods match nothing in the Kw'lyn database, something we find extremely surprising and very intriguing, so we're most interested in learning more."

"Fair enough," the martial artist commented. She thought for a moment, apparently trying to work out the best way to begin, while everyone watched and waited. Eventually she nodded slowly to herself.

"OK. Chou and I are primarily martial artists, rather than magic users," she began, as her audience listened curiously. The middle Tendo looked around at her friends, seeing that even though they knew all this, they seemed interested in the explanation. She settled down to watch and listen. "Very good ones, in fact. I've been learning since I was a small child, almost from the time I could walk, which coupled with a gift for it, and some very unorthodox training, left me as probably the foremost expert in the field on our world." She shrugged a little tiredly.

"It also caused more trouble than you'd believe, but that's another story. Anyway, one of the things you learn if you progress far enough in this field is control of ki, or life energy. Or at least, that's what happens with us. I haven't come across it in other places so far."

"I'm familiar with the concept," Savrk admitted, looking intrigued, "but it's mostly a legend from what the database has in it, for the majority of realities we have data on. There are stories of individuals who could control a form of energy that wasn't magic and was described in those terms from a number of places but we don't have any current information on it being widely known about." He studied them all for a few seconds. "What can you do with it?"

"An awful lot when you know how," she told him, looking amused. Holding out her hand she formed a small energy ball on it, making him watch with interest, as did Yrenti. "This is a fairly basic application once you have sufficient control. I learned this years ago, and we've refined it ever since. At low power levels it's not dangerous, but if you pump enough power into it..." She grinned rather dangerously as he nodded absently, studying the manifestation.

"How much energy can you put into it?" he asked. Everyone glanced at each other.

Yrenti chuckled. "If what I saw was accurate, more than I want to believe," he commented.

"We could demonstrate, but it tends to leave large holes in the surroundings," 'Chou' remarked, smiling a little. "It would be a shame to damage such a nice place."

"We have a test area we could visit if you are prepared to show us," Yrenti offered. 'Chou' and 'Yori' looked at each other for a moment.
"Why not?" 'Yori' told him. He nodded, getting up.

"All right, come with me." Everyone followed as he left the building. They were led to another one that had something built into the floor which LIdnr'k inspected with interest.

"A teleport node?" he asked. Yrenti nodded again.

"Yes. We use teleportation quite a lot for cargo transport, and when we're in a hurry, but many people, myself included, like to take slower methods of transportation a lot of the time when there's no rush." He smiled. "It gives a nicer view. But we're going far enough that this is much easier. The weapons test area is on another planet dedicated to dangerous activities. Much like that dead world you were using," he added, looking at 'Yori', who nodded her understanding. Looking around he checked everyone was on the node, then did something. The world flickered and they were somewhere else.

"This is a private research test area that we can make as much of a mess of as we like," Savrk told them, waving all four arms around to indicate their surroundings. They looked around with interest.

The group was standing on a flat plain next to a number of low, somewhat battered looking buildings of extremely heavy construction, with force-fields of sufficient strength to be visible as a shimmering akin to heat haze surrounding them. In the distance were a number of what appeared to be targets, many of which looked even more battered than the buildings, while further back, at least a couple of dozen kilometres away, a low mountain range could be seen. There were craters and scars all over the landscape, making it look like it had witnessed a severe battle at some point. Overall it was quite reminiscent of the dead world and Uthryyl's own test area, although somewhat more formally constructed.

"Should do," Fumiko noted with a smile. "Do you want all those mountains?" she asked, pointing and grinning. Savrk looked curiously at her while 'Yori' sighed. A number of laughs came from the others.

"You're never going to stop about that, are you?" the martial artist asked her friend, who shook her head, looking amused.

"Nope. It was the sort of thing you tend to remember." The two Kw'lyn directors were looking curious. 'Yori' turned to them.

"We had a slight miscalculation on a previous test," she explained. "It involved a certain amount of running away."

"Ah." Savrk smiled. "I've had a few of those myself." Beside him, Yrenti sighed heavily.

"Don't remind me," he muttered. "The last one took days to deal with..."

Grinning, Savrk waved them towards one of the buildings, the force-field surrounding it vanishing as they approached. "We can observe what happens from in here. What sort of target would you like?"

"Something reasonably large, about two kilometres away?" 'Chou' replied after looking at her partner, who nodded.

"No problem." A moment later one of the distant targets lit up. "That one should do. It's what we use for testing medium range weapons systems. The energy absorption properties of it should withstand a fairly serious attack and we can monitor the damage you do from here." 'Yori' studied it with interest for a moment.
"OK. Let's see what happens." She went back outside, moving around to the front of the building just inside the force-field, which developed a hole in front of her.

"Fire through there when you're ready," Savrk told her, broadcasting over the com link. "It will close immediately afterwards for protection."

"OK. I'll start small, with a normal ki ball, the sort of thing we use against a low level threat," she replied. A glowing purple sphere grew in her hand to about the size of a baseball, then whooshed off towards the target at high speed, impacting on it a fraction of a second later. A brilliant purple flash was followed by a loud explosion a few seconds later. Savrk blinked, apparently impressed.

"I... see," he said slowly. "That was a significant amount of energy. How many times can you do that?"

'Yori' looked over her shoulder with an amused grin, while her friends laughed in a way that made both Savrk and Yrenti look around with slightly worried expressions.

"A fair few times," she replied. "For a little one like that, there isn't a lot of effort required."

After a short pause, the R and D director nodded. "Can you do a bigger one?" he asked.

"Sure. That target's a bit close for full power, but let's try something larger." She turned back to the firing range and produced a much larger ki ball, this one well over a metre across. Savrk stared, reading the power output with shock, then looked at his colleague, who seemed less surprised. He noticed that all the other human women had their hands over their ears but looked calm.

"You might want to opaque the windows at the moment of impact," Ami commented. He nodded.

"Ready?" 'Yori' asked. The aperture in the forcefield reappeared.

"Fire when you want," he told her, watching with interest. The large ki ball roared off across the range as 'Yori' turned around with her eyes closed. The windows blanked for a short period, returning to transparency in time to see a fading glow around the target, which was visibly damaged and warped. Seconds later an enormous boom made the entire building shake.

Savrk mumbled something under his breath, sounding shocked. Everyone watched him as he inspected the damage. "That... is rather worrying," he commented after a few seconds, somewhat dazedly. "There's no readings of magic used at all. That was all this ki energy?"

"Yep."

"And you can make it larger?"

The martial artist snickered at his tone. "Oh, yes. The compression technique improves the yield a lot, and of course I can put more energy in if it's required."

"Compression technique?" he asked, shaking his head a little in apparent shock. She explained, holding up a hand on which an orange-sized ki ball appeared, then shrunk into a dimensionless point of brilliance. "Oh, I see," he replied numbly. There was a long pause. "I'm not sure I'm reading this correctly. The energy density is..." He trailed off, making Yrenti pat him on the shoulder.

"I said they seem to have some rather impressive abilities, didn't I?" his colleague smiled. Savrk looked at him for a moment, then went back to staring at the martial artist, who was looking amused, patiently waiting.
"You did. But this is rather... unexpected. Even with the recordings and readings you got, I'm... surprised." After a moment, he asked, in a tone of voice that made it sound like he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer, "What happens if you put as much energy as that last shot into a compressed ki blast?"

'Yori' grinned. "Want to see?"

"Ah... All right." She turned back to the target, once more a firing aperture appearing in front of her. The ki ball grew brighter for a couple of seconds, then shot off across the range with an almost inaudibly high-pitched whistle, making both Yrenti and his friend wince. Yori turned around and put her arm over her eyes as the windows blanked again.

When they regained transparency, it was in time to see shrapnel bouncing off the force field. Savrk stared in shock at the remains of his test target, which consisted of a huge crater in the ground, glowing white-hot, while around the area small pieces of the targets on either side were steadily raining from the sky. The ground shock reached them a moment later making the building heave noticeably, the dampening systems barely able to keep up. "Oops. Sorry, the other targets were collateral damage," 'Yori' apologised.

"That's all right," he replied in a daze. There was a long pause. Lldnr'k was studying his friend with interest and some surprise, the middle sister noticed, he obviously hadn't quite expected that amount of damage, although he was clearly aware of the possibility from his previous experience on the dead world and the talk they'd had afterwards. After staring out the window for a while, Savrk asked slowly, "You're implying that you can go higher yield than that?"

"Oh, a bigger bang isn't much of a problem, especially if I mix in some magic as well," the martial artist assured him, smiling. "But not at that range, I don't think it would be a good idea, to be honest."

"How large?" he asked, sounding both somewhat dubious and very curious. "If that was a more normal magical attack, very few mages I have ever heard of could field much more than perhaps twice that amount of energy, and at that only once without risking serious injury."

'Yori' grinned at him, her fangs showing. "That was a warm up. I can show you something closer to full power, but I'll have to have something a lot further away to shoot at."

"You know it's going to be a mountain again, don't you?" Aiko asked wryly. Her friend nodded, still grinning. The brunette turned to Savrk. "Anyone around over there?" she asked, pointing at the distant range. He stared at her, then glanced at Yrenti, who shrugged, plainly curious as well. After a moment's silence he shook his head. "The area is clear. How large a blast are we expecting?"

"I'm not entirely sure," 'Yori' told him, looking interested, which didn't seem to make him entirely happy. "It tends to get larger every time we try this."

"Ah..." She grinned as the R and D director blinked, then turned around.

"I'll aim through the gap there, where the target was, all right?" she asked.

"...Yes, I suppose so," he replied, watching as once more a tiny point of brilliant light grew in her hand. It got brighter and brighter to the point the windows darkened again, until finally zipping off in a flat trajectory towards the mountain range. 'Yori' darted around the building and back in through the heavy door, touching the control that closed it as she entered and sealing the room.

"I'd push that force field as high as it goes," she advised, watching the point of light dwindle into
the distance until it vanished from sight. There was a pause then the entire horizon went violet-white for a fraction of a second until the windows opaqued completely, even so leaving everyone blinking. Savrk made a strangled sound, Yrenti mumbled something under his breath, and Lldnr'k simply shook his head slowly in respect.

"I think that was bigger than the last time," Misaki commented, nibbling a fruit she'd brought with her. Fumiko nodded, holding out her hand, which her sister put another one into.

"I think so too."

Several seconds later the windows unblanked, showing a huge rising cloud of dust and smoke far out over the plain, an orange-yellow glow at its base. The middle sister found it a familiar sight although it was definitely larger than the time on the dead world. Ami was staring alternately between the rising mushroom cloud and the martial artist with an expression of awed horror on her face, Rei was simply gaping, while Hotaru was watching Yori with amazement and a slight grin.

The cloud slowly cleared, a shockwave making the entire building vibrate some seconds later as it reached them through the ground. The sound followed quite a long time after that, following quite a lot of white-hot shrapnel pinging off the shield for a few seconds. No one said anything until the cloud had dissipated enough to show a noticeable gap in the range. Savrk stared wordlessly, his ears flat against his head, while Yrenti looked impressed.

"Definitely bigger," Misaki said, looking pleased.

Eventually the alien scientist turned to the petite woman who was inspecting the damage with interest and quietly said, "I do not ever want to upset you, Yori." She laughed a little, turning to him.

"I can't think of any reason to do that against a person," she assured him. "I still can't really believe I can do it myself. I never expected or wanted that level of power, it just sort of happened. But it certainly makes an impressive bang."

"That's... not entirely wrong," he admitted, looking out the window again. "I have no idea how you can do that, the energy handling ability is awe-inspiring. Can you all perform such a feat?"

"Yori is rather in a class of her own for sheer power output," 'Chou' told him calmly. "I'm nowhere near that level and may never be, although we believe Hotaru could reach it. The rest of us vary in power level, I do have the current highest available output after Yori, while Azumi has the lowest. That's constantly changing, though, for a number of reasons."

"It's absolutely extraordinary," Savrk said, looking fascinated as the shock wore off. He kept looking out the window at the gap in the mountain range. "While we have some data on stories surrounding this 'ki' as I said, none of them even hint at that level of power being available."

"Yori" shrugged a little. "I can't tell you much more about that myself, I'm afraid," she admitted. "I don't have any practical experience with ki usage except amongst humans, and it's not common there. We seem to have more effective abilities in it than anyone else I'm aware of although I can't pretend to know everything about it, even so. I'm sure there's a lot more to learn. I am in the process of teaching Uthryyl's daughter martial arts, which is also an interesting experiment in ki development in the D'sage, but it's too early yet to know what will happen. I'm very curious to see how it progresses."

"As am I," Savrk told her.
"What was the attack you used against the Abomination?" Yrenti asked, causing everyone to look at him. "It was obviously something based on the same principles but was even more potent."

"I worked out some time ago how to use ki as a continuous beam rather than a single pulse," the martial artist replied. Opening the door she leaned out and fired a ki beam at one of the undamaged target stands, punching a neat hole completely through it, then sliced the top of it off with a longer duration beam she swept sideways through it, the screeching noise making everyone wince. "Like that," she continued, stepping back inside. "The compression technique can be used with it as well although it's a lot more complex. On the dead world we all pumped power into the same sort of thing at maximum output and compression, until we basically ran dry. Even then it was only enough to slow it down. It's a good thing the security system did what it did."

Savrk turned back to her from staring at the remains of the test target, then glanced at his colleague. "What did it do?" Yrenti asked, looking at the R and D director in turn before returning his attention to the black-haired girl. "For that matter, what is it?" She looked at her partner for a moment, then sighed very slightly.

"I guess we're probably going to have to tell you more," she said, somewhat reluctantly. "It's also an internal security matter, on our part, something we're very cautious about letting other people know about."

Yrenti studied her for a few seconds. "It's not essential to tell us if you feel you don't want to," he said in the end. "I'm very curious, as is my colleague here, but we're not going to pry if you're unwilling to let us know any more. We understand the issues involved in such things, believe me."

"That said, we are prepared to submit to the security spell you did covering information on Kw'lyn during your first visit," Savrk added. "We can ensure that the information stays out of the database as well. It's unusual but not unprecedented as we've got similar arrangements over sensitive information from a few other sources."

The martial artist and her wife had a silent conversation while everyone waited patiently. Eventually 'Chou' nodded, turning to the Kw'lyn representatives. "It's fair that we tell you, Yrenti, you were there and deserve an explanation. You trust Savrk so we're prepared to let him in on it as well, and Unare should she wish to know. I hope you'll understand if we don't tell you everything, though, at this point."

"That's more than fair, Chou," he assured her. "We're still recent acquaintances. As time goes on, you may find yourselves willing to let us know more about your secrets, which we're perfectly happy about, but even if you don't, we will understand. It won't affect our relationship, I assure you."

"Why don't we go back to the visitor area and discuss it," Lldnr'k suggested, looking around. "I for one could do with another drink after witnessing what we just did." He made his equivalent of a smile, while a few of the others laughed a little. 'Azumi' noticed that Ami was still staring at 'Yori' with a peculiar expression.

"You all right, Ami?" she asked privately, slightly concerned. The blue-haired girl twitched and looked at her, then nodded a little. No one else paid much attention.

"I suppose so. I knew that you guys were something special, but I didn't have any idea what Yori could really do if she tried. Even after hearing about Halleckton, and on the asteroid, what she just did is... terrifying."

The middle sister quirked a small grin at her friend. "Oh, it is that, certainly. Even Ranma thinks
that, believe me. I still find it almost impossible to believe that any of the rest of us, especially me, could ever get anywhere that level of ability and power. I'm not sure I want to, to be honest. One mistake..." They both followed as Yrenti led the way back to the teleport node, looking into the distance for a moment at the results of the 'weapons test', both girls shivering a little. Their eyes met for a moment, then the world flickered.

"I'm very glad indeed that all of you are such good people," Ami commented quietly as they reappeared at the visitor centre, going back into the conference building and sitting down.

"I'm not sure I am a good person," 'Azumi' responded equally quietly. "I did some very wrong things when I was younger, especially to Ranma. I regret it, and although he's forgiven me, I'm not sure I can ever truly forgive myself."

"We all have things in our past we regret," the other woman agreed soberly. "But I think, from what I've learned over the last few weeks, that you are a good person, despite what you may believe. Ranma, and definitely Kasumi, strike me as very good judges of character. I doubt we'd be in this position if they didn't trust you completely. I know I do, even though we haven't known each other all that long."

"Thanks." The disguised Nabiki smiled at her friend. "I appreciate it, and feel much the same. I'm still not sure I'm the right person to have that much power, but I'm going to try not to abuse it."

"We'll all stop you if you do, I'm sure," Ami laughed.

"Again, thanks," she replied, giggling internally. "I think." Sharing a quick grin they resumed paying attention to the discussion. Hotaru was watching them with a curious look, she noticed, making her wink. The younger girl smiled back.

Yrenti told them, "The building is secure, and all the recording systems are now disabled."

'Chou' smiled at him. "Thank you. I hope you're not insulted, and we believe and trust you, but we'll take our own precautions as well if you don't mind." He waved a hand in a gesture of understanding.

"Help yourself," he replied. She nodded, then everyone felt a heavy ward go up around the building. Savrk looked around with interest and some surprise although Yrenti didn't seem too shocked.

"Impressive. Very impressive indeed."

"The one they created when we went after the Abomination was much more powerful," his colleague commented, making him nod slowly.

"This is merely intended to block any surveillance you might not know about," 'Yori' chuckled, "not withstand a major attack. It'll do for the moment." She inspected them both with interest. "Are you ready for me to apply our version of the spell?" They both nodded, so she got up and went around the table, placing her hand on Yrenti's head first, then Savrk, both of whom blinked a little.

"That is a... unique... variant of that spell," Savrk said in a voice that sounded surprised. "And yet more evidence you have something very unusual. I can barely follow what happened and I have no idea how you did it. It must be magic, I think, but it's like nothing I've ever encountered before."

He grinned at her. "We have to talk about that."

She grinned back, retaking her seat. "We will. Let's talk about the security system first, though." Glancing at her wife, she thought for a few seconds, then slowly began explaining the entire.
sequence of events that they'd worked out, starting with the design of the ward system and ending up with the aftermath of the destruction of the time device. It took some time. Both Kw'lyn people listened quietly, various expressions of interest, surprise, and raw shock a couple of times going across their alien countenances. Everyone else listened without comment, although Ami added some details of her own research when 'Yori' asked her to. In the end, they fell silent, waiting for the response.

Savrk stared at the martial artist for quite a long time when she finished talking. Eventually he shook his head in wonder. "That is... quite remarkable. To put it mildly. I would very much like to examine this ward system of yours one day, assuming you, or it for that matter, would allow it. I've heard of similar systems once or twice in the past, although nothing like that level of complexity or power, or initiative in fact. It does indeed sound like it is very close to a sentient breakthrough along the lines of the SI units or other emergent intelligences. Fascinating."

"I understand your earlier comments now," Yrenti added, looking at 'Yori', 'Chou', and 'Azumi'. "You were referring to the ward system?" All three women nodded.

"Yes. It's something we've been watching with great interest and slight worry for a while now," 'Chou' told him. "None of us were sure until recently what would be likely to happen when it... woke up... although both Yori and I were fairly sure that was the direction it was heading in. I think we saw a small example of it during this recent problem, from what the logs say it was very close to if not actually past this sentience threshold you mentioned, although it seems to have returned to an earlier state once the danger was over. It looks deliberate, as well, which is interesting. Both of us are pleased and grateful that it did what it needed to, it undoubtedly saved everything and everyone, and it also make me think that when if finally achieves that state permanently it will be safe."

"I believe you're correct," Yrenti told her, obviously thinking hard. "The manner in which it operated show its basic functions of protection are the main driving goals, similar to the way our combat drone minds start off, although more along the lines of defence than attack. I would expect that this will continue. It is obviously very good at working out solutions that are not what you would expect from a more normal intelligence engine as well, which is very interesting. The location and exploitation of the loophole in your prohibition of direct action outside its zone of influence is very clever."

"The ability to drain and manipulate that amount of magical energy is extraordinary as well," Savrk mused, picking up a cup and taking a quick drink from it, then returning it to the table. "Again, almost unprecedented. Especially for something that wasn't designed to do that in the first place."

"What was that final flow of energy?" Yrenti asked curiously. They all looked at him. "Just at the end, it seemed to be pulling magical power back out of the portal. Where did it go?" This was the one part they hadn't mentioned yet. 'Yori' and her wife looked at each other, then around at the others. Everyone returned her look, not knowing quite what to say. She laughed and sighed at the same time.

"You'll have to see it. You wouldn't believe it otherwise."

Savrk and his colleague exchanged an intrigued look then got up and followed as a portal opened in the corner of the room, the others all filing through as well. Shortly the room was empty.
"I think that's everything," Akane said with satisfaction, zipping up her bag. Shampoo looked up from her position at the youngest sister's desk where she was reading a magazine and smiled wryly.

"We're not going until tomorrow, you know," she said.

Akane laughed. "I'm trying to make sure I'm ready in plenty of time. Just in case I forget anything, I might remember it before we leave." She picked the bag up off the bed where she'd packed it and put it on the floor beside the bedroom door. "You should do the same, really."

Shampoo turned a page in her magazine and returned her attention to it. With a slight giggle she admitted, "I packed last night."

Shaking her head in amusement, the Tendo woman flopped down on her back on her bed, staring at the ceiling with wide eyes. "I still can't believe we're doing this, Shampoo. Going to the US, learning to do movie stunts, perhaps ending up acting... It still seems like a dream sometimes."

"You've been saying that for weeks now." The Amazon warrior grinned. "But I agree. It's pretty amazing. I'm looking forward to it."

"I wonder what sort of thing they'll want us to try?"

"Adrian was mentioning some driving training, that sounds fun, and also some fight stuff. Hopefully we can give a decent showing of ourselves in something as difficult as a fight scene." They shared a glance then fell about laughing wildly.

A knock on the door made Akane sit up, rubbing tears of laughter from her eyes, then call "Come in." Her father entered the room, looking at both of them with a smile.

"Hello, girls. Did you do something funny?" They exchanged glances, grinning.

"It was more something silly, Dad," Akane replied. He laughed with a shrug.

"OK. I'm at a bit of a loose end at the moment since we're not teaching today and I was wondering if you two would like to learn some of the more advanced Anything Goes techniques we mentioned a while ago? Genma is up for it as well, if you like." They exchanged a glance then both hopped to their feet with alacrity.

"We'd like that very much, Soun," Shampoo said with respect and a nod.

"Come on, then. I'll meet you both in the Dojo in five minutes." The elder Tendo grinned at them, with teeth. "Let's see how all that Amazon knowledge stands up to the old men, eh?" Snickering he left the room. The young women looked at each other, laughed, then changed into their practice clothing and followed him soon after, both very interested in what would happen.

"You're right."

Everyone looked at Yrenti, who was staring upwards with an open mouth. Beside him, Savrk was doing much the same.

"Excuse me?" 'Yori' asked politely, but with a small smile on her lips. He lowered his gaze to meet
"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it." He looked around the vast space which they were standing in the middle of, having portalled directly to it, then back at the ki-star, almost straight above them. Everyone could feel the energy as well as the heat gently radiating from it. "This is... spectacularly impressive. Even for us."

Savrk chuckled for a moment, rather oddly. Everyone looked at him, as he muttered, "I think the appropriate line from one of your speculative fiction works is 'Oh, my god, it's full of stars.'" Misaki started laughing helplessly as did 'Azumi' and Ami. 'Yori' grinned widely. "It's a variant on the spell that the Abomination used, isn't it?" he asked quietly, not looking away from staring at the huge ball of energy suspended far above the group.

"We think so," 'Chou' replied. "It seems to be very effective. We certainly never showed the ward system how to do this, it seems to have worked it out all by itself. Which is very interesting on several levels."

"Definitely," he mused, finally managing to tear his eyes away from the sight high in the sky and look at her. "I can't get a good reading on what that energy actually is. That's... very unusual. It isn't normal magic, certainly, and while it shares a lot in common with this ki you seem so terrifyingly adept at, it's not identical to that either."

"It seems to have found a half-way house somewhere between magic and ki," 'Yori' said, looking up for a moment then back at their two guests. "From our point of view it's mostly what we think of as magic, but with a hell of a lot of something very similar to but subtly different to normal ki mixed in with it. At the moment my best guess is that the magic is the energy left from what it reclaimed from the fractional reality when it imploded, while the ki-like energy is what we pumped into it, both of them modified by this spell. But I'm not totally sure of that yet." She shrugged a little. "We haven't had time to investigate it thoroughly yet," she added slightly sourly. "Too many other things to do."

"It's stable, we determined that very quickly, and Lldnr'k agrees with us, but other than that we haven't yet done much research," her wife added.

"We still haven't come up with a good use for over a thousand cubic kilometres of extra storage space either," Fumiko laughed. "We've had some ideas, but most of them got shot down." 'Chou' glanced at her with a smile and shook her head.

"I still don't think keeping spacecraft in here is a practical thing," she said calmly. The other woman looked disappointed.

"Oh, come on, there's loads of room. Stick them over in that corner out of the way... You could get a large fleet of ones like S'th'kx's scout-craft in here and you'd never even notice them. This place is huge!"

Yrenti and Savrk listened to the mild argument with smiles. 'Yori' glanced at them, shrugging a little. "Fumiko really likes space travel," she explained with a grin.

"It can be a lot of fun, yes," Savrk admitted, looking amused. He looked around again. "She's not wrong, you could certainly keep more or less anything you want in here. It's a lot of space for such a small group of people."

"How would we get them in and out?" 'Chou' asked her friend, who shrugged, grinning shamelessly.
"No idea. We'll have to work on that."

"How about a portal, like we did on K'n'n Four?" Misaki asked idly, nibbling a carrot which she'd produced a moment ago.

"We'd have to make a portal to another reality then back," 'Chou' explained patiently. "You know portals between two places in the same reality are virtually impossible and horribly unstable. It's a lot of work to go to..."

Fumiko laughed, shaking her head. "For you guys? You do portals as easily as Aiko does teleportation."

"Well..." 'Chou' looked mildly embarrassed. "That's true, I suppose, but you can't do them at all yet."

"You're going to teach us, though. So eventually..." The other woman shrugged with a grin again. The blonde sighed very faintly.

The middle sister, who was listening to her sister and friend argue with amusement, as were the others, noticed that Savrk was looking around curiously. He bent down and prodded the ground for a moment with an expression of interest, looking at it closely. "I'd like to examine one of the walls, if you don't mind," he said as he straightened up. 'Yori' looked at him for a moment, then glanced at Aiko, who nodded. Abruptly they were standing a few metres from one of the walls. Savrk and Yrenti exchanged a look then stared at Aiko, who smiled back innocently.

"That was... remarkable," Yrenti said slowly. "I was aware that you could teleport but that spell is insanely efficient. Where did it come from?"

The petite brunette grinned. "To be honest, I don't really know, originally. I've been able to do it ever since the event that got the four of us into the magical girl club years ago. What I use now isn't quite what I started with, though, Yori says I've made all sorts of unconscious tweaks to it which have improved it a hell of a lot. It's good fun."

"Fun." Yrenti examined her with interest. "Yes, I can see that. Also something that if it could be duplicated would have some extremely interesting applications. It's a very significant improvement on the normal methods. Again, something we'd be interested in talking about if you're agreeable."

"Yori is working on duplicating the spell in the new system," Aiko explained, making them both look at the martial artist, who nodded. "I guess by the time she works it out we should know enough about it to teach it to someone else."

"Possibly," 'Yori' added. "It's a little more complicated because our system is so different, but it's true we should have a very good understanding of how it actually works by the time we've converted it. That's what we had to do for the portal spell, which meant we more or less had to redesign it from first principles. Found some interesting inefficiencies in it and fixed them as a result."

"Amazing." Savrk shook his head in respect. "Absolutely incredible." After a moment, he seemed to remember what they'd teleported here in the first place for and paced over to the wall, examining it closely, then pulling a small instrument out of a pouch on the formfitting belt he was wearing, one that clearly didn't fit the space available. Putting it against the wall he did something then watched as a few tiny lights blinked for a couple of seconds. "Hmm."

Everyone watched as he repeated the exercise, then moved a few metres along the wall and did it
again. Stepping back he stared at it, before bending down and doing the same thing on the floor. "Hmm," he said again, more quietly. Putting the instrument away he looked up the wall, then turned to stare at the 'star' for a moment. "Very interesting indeed."

"In what way, specifically?" Ami asked curiously. He turned to her.

"This isn't a normal spacial expansion spell, not by a long way," he explained, waving a couple of hands at the vast empty cavern. "Something I'm coming to expect from your group. It's closer to the fractional reality that the Abomination used than I think you all realise." Everyone exchanged a glance.

"How do you mean?" 'Yori' asked slowly, appearing slightly worried. He looked at her for a moment, then around at the 'basement.'

"It's nothing dangerous, but it is very intriguing. A normal subspace expansion spell creates something that has been called, not entirely wrongly, a pocket dimension, but this is more than that. Normal expansion spells, although the space they extrude into is much bigger on the inside than the outside, are still technically part of the originating reality in most ways that matter, which is why you can move them around so easily, like in the case of this belt. This... isn't. Not quite. It seems to be a very weird hybrid of subspace expansion and fractional reality, with something else added I can't identify. The end result is that I don't think we're completely in your normal reality strand in a number of important ways. Which is very odd and something I'd love to explore more. I can see some interesting applications for it if it could be duplicated." Everyone stared at him for some moments, wordlessly.

After a long pause, 'Yori' and her wife looked at each other. Eventually the martial artist shrugged. "Worth a try," she admitted out loud to some silent suggestion. Looking to the side she concentrated for a few seconds, her eyebrows going up when the beginnings of a portal wavered into existence. " Weird."

"You need to push there, I think," 'Chou' commented, watching with fascination. 'Yori' nodded absently.

"Yep, I see it. And if I do this..." There was a slight pop and the portal snapped into normal form, "...That happens. Wow."

"Where's the other end?" Rei asked.

"The living room," was the reply. Everyone stared at the black-haired woman. She shrugged. "It really is." She stepped through, reappearing moments later eating an apple they all recalled there being a bowl of on the dining table. "That's amazing. And could be really useful."

"So this space is just enough off in its own reality to allow a portal to be created between here and our normal reality?" Tamiko asked Savrk. He nodded, watching the portal closely for a moment, then turning to her.

"It would seem so. That is... not normal. I've seen it done before with great effort on a much smaller scale, but nothing like this, or as stable as this is. The time device, of course, used a similar technique, but that was on a vastly larger scale, and required a huge amount of energy to set up in the first place from what we know, although it could be kept stable with much less once it was established. I presume that's why it collapsed when the Abomination died and the power source failed. Your ward system would appear to have extracted all the freed magic that went into that fractional reality and also worked out how to modify the spell very considerably to produce this. I doubt that something not using your very strange variant on magical control could have done it, not
in this manner. Fascinating." He looked around again. Everyone followed his gaze.

Hotaru, after a pause, slowly asked, "If this is actually a different reality, or sort of, how does it work? I mean, how can we get to it just by going down an elevator, not by using a portal? How can Aiko teleport to it?" She paused, then asked in a quieter voice, one that was somewhat worried, "And what's on the other side of the wall..."

Everyone looked around nervously. Savrk laughed.

"The second question is easy. Nothing to worry about, there aren't any monsters in some hidden space. What's on the other side of that wall is this... room, I suppose you'd call it." They all looked at him curiously, even Yrenti.

"How does that even work?" Misaki asked. He shrugged slightly.

"It's a closed continuum. If you could penetrate that wall, which I strongly suspect isn't actually possible, you'd find yourself coming out at a point exactly a hundred and eighty degrees away from it, over there on the other side." He indicated over his shoulder, sending them all bar Lldnr'k a quick animation to illustrate the concept which they watched with interest. "The same thing would apply from any point you picked. If you went through the floor you'd re-enter through the ceiling, and so forth. It's easier to visualise if you think of it as spherical but the same principle applies regardless. There is essentially no 'outside' to something of this nature, only an inside. You have to leave the sub-reality to go outside it, which you can't do by digging. The mathematics describing the topology of something like this are very complex and most fascinating." He grinned as she slowly nodded, understanding the idea.

"That's weird." Rei looked around. Beside her, Fumiko stared at the ground, then looked up at the invisible ceiling for a moment, an odd expression on her face.

"Very weird." the tall girl agreed.

"The first part to your question, Hotaru, is somewhat more involved," the R and D director mused, looking at the purple-haired girl who was listening intently. "I'm not sure how, precisely, it works, but essentially there must be some form of permanent subspace manifold set up in your elevator that links this place and the rest of your normal reality strand in a manner slightly like a portal, but not using the normal mechanics of one. It can't be done between reality strands in the normal manner, portals are the only way to travel like that, but this is so close to the rest of this strand that it works. That is more or less how a normal subspace storage spell functions, although again, not exactly. Aiko's teleportation will be going through the same route." He laughed slightly. "Everything about your lifestyle seems to be an exercise on how to do things differently from everyone else. It's very confusing but very interesting as well."

"I think it's sort of a giant ki pocket," 'Yori' suggested after another pause as they all tried to wrap their minds around that explanation. He and Yrenti looked curiously at her, so she explained the basics of the hidden weapons technique. "Not exactly identical, but along those lines. The ward system seems to have cobbled this entire thing together from all sorts of weird bits and pieces. It's certainly capable of learning from us, so much of what we are is built into it as a result of feeding it energy for so long, and I think it's used things it's seen us use and was familiar with."

"Plausible," Savrk agreed. "Definitely plausible. It's certainly shown significant ability to pull disparate methods together into something entirely different from what was originally intended based on what you've told us. Still very impressive, though."

"That's one way to put it," Ami mumbled, looking around.
Fumiko laughed. "But it also solves the issue of getting spacecraft in and out, pretty much, right?" she said happily. 'Chou' sighed very quietly.

Laughing, they all went back through the portal that 'Yori' produced, looking at her wife with a grin and a shrug.

"Ouch." Shampoo lay on her back and watched the ceiling rotate for a few seconds then looked at Genma who returned her look with one of amused satisfaction. Soun was watching from the wall, while Akane, beside him, stared in amazement. "How the hell did you do that?" she asked the rotund martial artist, making him snicker.

"I saw an opening," he explained unhelpfully. Sitting up, she glared at him.

"Not entirely useful," she snapped, rubbing the back of her head. He laughed out loud, holding out his hand, which she took and pulled herself up with.

"You're extremely good, Shampoo," the man told her, stepping back and looking more serious. "And very fast. But I still know a few things you don't." He looked her up and down for a moment, then over at Akane, who was listening intently. "As your annoying relative is fond of saying, I have more experience because I've been around for longer." He studied both girls as they listened. Soun was also listening, smiling a little. "So, let the old men pass on some of their wisdom, painfully learned over the years. Gather around, children." He waved expansively to a spot in front of him, laughing, as Shampoo and Akane exchanged a mildly exasperated glance.

They came over and listened intently, though.

"We appreciate seeing what you showed us," Yrenti said as they re-entered the conference building. "As unusual as it is, it's very interesting, and clears up a few questions I was wondering about. Thank you."

"You're welcome," 'Chou' told him, taking a seat and picking up the last of the spiky blue Krennsh snacks that her sister wasn't quite fast enough to acquire first, grinning at 'Azumi' as she looked disappointed. She popped it into her mouth and savoured it. "You understand why we're not keen on making the information more widely available, though, I hope?"

He nodded. "Oh, believe me, yes I do. It's very definitely a security issue, one you are right to keep to yourselves."

"Although I doubt you have anything to worry about, in practical terms," Savrk added, looking mildly worried and quite impressed. "I could feel your ward system watching us extremely carefully the entire time. I would seriously wish to avoid irritating it. The impression it gave off was of something that had a very limited sense of humour regarding any threat to any of you, coupled with more than enough power and ability to eliminate that threat, more or less whatever it was. I don't think I've ever encountered anything quite like it before."

"We're very pleased with the end result," 'Chou' assured him. "Despite some minor miscalculations we luckily caught in time, it seems to have far exceeded its original goal."

"Our entire reality is still there because of it," 'Azumi' added soberly, leaning back in her chair and watching them. "If it wasn't for the ward system, more magical energy than I can believe, and Hotaru, we'd have lost for sure." Everyone looked at the youngest member of their group, who seemed somewhat embarrassed, covering it with a drink from her mug.
"I just did what I needed to do," she said in a low voice.

"Which is a very good thing," Ami told her, putting her around around her friend's shoulders for a moment. The girl smiled, still looking slightly embarrassed.

"What was the device you used in that final attack?" Yrenti asked curiously. "I didn't get a good look at it due to the fact I was somewhat... distracted..." he smiled as she laughed, "but it was giving off an unusual magical signature." He glanced at Yori. "Is it something you designed?" he added. She shook her head with a smile.

"Nothing to do with us. We haven't started designing magical devices yet although we should look into it at some point. It's part of their original magic, although I don't think Hotaru quite knew everything about it. I examined it a little while ago and found it can do all sorts of things that she didn't seem to use. The time device was responsible for her acquiring it, along with the other artefacts that the rest of her group got, but unlike Ami's computer, I don't think it had any hand in creating the thing. It feels all wrong for that."

Savrk looked interested. "May we see it, Hotaru?" She smiled, nodded, and produced the Glaive from where she kept it, holding it upright next to her seat. He stared at it for a long moment, before glancing at Yrenti, who was also inspecting the ancient weapon. Both of them had weird expressions. "Is that...?" he began. Yrenti nodded slowly.

"I believe so." He looked stunned. "I didn't see it properly at the time, I was cowering on the ground hoping to survive, and didn't recognise it, but..."

The others looked at each other, the young girl, then the two Kw'lyn directors. "You recognise it now?" 'Yori' asked slowly. They nodded simultaneously.

"Yes. Although I have no idea how the time device could possibly have acquired it." Yrenti and Savrk both got up and walked around the table to stare closely at the thing. Hotaru watched curiously.

"May I?" Savrk asked politely, holding out his hand. She smiled and gave it to him. Holding it he looked very closely at it, running a hand along the shaft slowly in the same way that 'Azumi' had seen 'Yori' do on the spaceship, with similar results. "Unbelievable," he whispered. "It's genuine. I thought they were all destroyed in the Collapse." Shaking his head in respect he rather reluctantly gave it back, then stepped away and inspected Hotaru for a moment, before returning to his seat. Yrenti followed after a moment's further staring.

"So, what is it?" Rei asked. "I mean, other than a weapon. We already knew that part."

"It's much more than just a weapon," Yrenti began, while Savrk seemed lost in his thoughts. "It's extremely old, even by our history, it far pre-dates the Collapse and even the origins of our first civilisation. The legend is that there was a world which was extremely magically adept, using it for almost everything we'd either use technology for, or a mix of magic and technology. Their species, which we have almost no information on, was never very populous, and had either gone extinct, or possibly moved on to somewhere else, a long time before the galactic civilisation we were a part of came across them. All we had was second hand stories and some artefacts. All we have now is third-hand information at best, and nothing much else."

"They were impressive magic users," Savrk said quietly. "Peaceful, by and large, but they didn't back down from a fight. They had a tradition of combat which was ancient and by all accounts were very good indeed at it, and related subjects such as weapons design. Oddly, as far as we know, they didn't use portals very much if at all, or space travel, although their civilisation spanned..."
three planets in their star system. We believe they used teleportation extensively. It was apparently very easy for them due to something unusual about their magic." He looked speculatively at Aiko for a moment then shook his head slightly. "But information is limited on exactly what."

He pointed at the pole-arm which Hotaru was still holding upright next to her seat. "That thing is, as far as I can see, a genuine artefact of theirs. We have fragmentary data suggesting they designed a magical weapon which was capable of anything from close combat to devastating attacks that could wipe out half a continent, heavy shielding for defence, and several other interesting things. It stored energy from its user on a continuous basis and could utilise that energy to power its more serious attacks, which could disrupt life and even matter if used correctly. They didn't make very many, the things were far too dangerous to let loose in quantity, but they were the mainstay of their defensive system together with extremely highly trained users who wielded them in combat. They were very difficult to use, the operator needed to have enormous energy reserves or the more powerful functions would lethally drain them almost immediately, not to mention there was a large amount of skill needed as well to make them effective. As far as I knew none survived the Collapse." He shook his head in wonder.

"We were obviously wrong, at least one did. I wonder how the Abomination laid its metaphorical hands on the thing in the first place?"

"Presumably the people who created it had one," Yrenti mused, folding both pairs of hands and looking over them at Hotaru. "It must have brought it with it when the Collapse happened and it was ejected from the original reality, somehow. I never thought I'd see one, though."

"Neither did I." Savrk looked enthralled as he inspected the ancient weapon and its current user. "The fact that you can use it proves you have very significant power levels, Hotaru. From the partial records we have I don't think I could, it would kill me. Assuming it didn't do that immediately anyway. Apparently they had very serious security which didn't take kindly to anyone but the authorised user operating it."

Everyone on the other side of the table looked at him, then each other. Hotaru opened her mouth for a moment, before closing it and glancing at 'Yori', who grinned. "It's not quite that bad," she told Savrk. "It didn't seem to mind me playing with it, although it warned me when I poked it in a sensitive place. It's nowhere near as... alive... I guess, as our ward system, but it has some similarity to it. The system seemed to be able to push power through it without too much problem. The really dangerous functions are locked to Hotaru, but a lot of the simpler ones don't have very good security as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to have to look at that at some point."

Savrk stared at her, then the Glaive again. "Interesting. Yet again, you seem to have some knowledge I would be very interested in acquiring if possible. We've been curious about how the things worked for a very long time but it seemed unlikely that we'd ever know. That you can use it is astounding."

"How old is it?" Tamiko asked, studying the pole-arm. Savrk shrugged a little helplessly.

"I can't give you a definite answer I'm afraid. We simply don't have enough information. At a minimum, something approaching half a million years would be an educated guess, but it could be more. The species that built it built to last, the magic makes it almost indestructible and basically immune to age, so it's very difficult to tell. We just don't know." He sighed. "So much was lost in the Collapse. We have only a small amount of information from even our original species' world, never mind about things as esoteric as that. The people who built it had long since vanished by the time we came on the scene, although I don't have any idea why or how. No one does now."

"Bit of a mystery," Misaki put in, looking interested. He nodded.
"Very much so." Hotaru looked up at the weapon she was holding with a wondering expression, then put it away again.

"Wow," she exclaimed, smiling a little, making everyone chuckle.

The middle Tendo sister had been thinking hard, since Savrk had given Aiko that weird look. She turned to him. "You were thinking that these mysterious people might have been behind Aiko's teleportation ability, weren't you?" she asked. He smiled at her.

"Ah. You noticed. Yes, it crossed my mind. But I can't see how Aiko and her team could possibly have come across any artefacts and magic from that particular source. It's a remarkable thing that Hotaru did, although the intervention of the Abomination explains it. The likelihood of an unrelated group coming into contact with something so rare from a long-dead reality strand is... very low."

He shrugged a little. "I think it extremely unlikely."

"Weird things are pretty much normal with us, though," she replied, looking around at her friends, all of whom nodded with resigned expressions. After a moment's thought she removed the bracelet she wore all the time and slid it across the table to him, glancing at Aiko who looked interested but said nothing. "That's from the same source as the various things Aiko and her team acquired, including the artefact that triggered her teleportation ability." He picked it up carefully, inspecting it for a minute or so while everyone waited.

"Very interesting," he finally said, raising his eyes to meet hers. "Again, very odd magic, much more efficient than normal by a long way. I've never seen anything quite matching it before. But it's not from the same source. It's also old, several thousand years at least, but the magic isn't quite the same. There are some interesting similarities which I suspect are down to people thinking in parallel ways rather than anything else."

"I wondered about that myself," 'Yori' commented, watching while sipping a drink, smiling as her sister-in-law turned to her. "When I first saw Hotaru's weapon I noticed that the magic wasn't entirely different. But I came to the same conclusion that it was a coincidence."

"You never mentioned that." 'Azumi' raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't ask," 'Yori' replied, grinning. She shrugged. "It wasn't very important at the time and we've been busy."

"Fair enough." They shared a grin, then looked back to Savrk, who was watching with an amused expression. He slid the bracelet back to her.

"I don't think Aiko's teleportation ability is directly related although it's an interesting coincidence. I'd like to study it further at some point, though." The brunette thought for a moment then nodded slowly.

"I suppose that would be OK. Not right now, but when I have some spare time."

"That would be fine. Thank you." He looked pleased. Turning his attention to the martial artist, he added, "You've explained the ki ability and terrified me to my bones. Can we learn the rest?"

"Yes, what's up with that, Yori?" Tamiko put in, grinning widely. "You and mountains. What do you have against them?" Everyone laughed as the black-haired woman sighed, looking put upon. "Did a mountain touch you in a bad place?" The red-head was giggling as her friend gave her a long-suffering look.

"The first three were an accident...," she began.
"Once is an accident. Three is a habit," Fumiko corrected her, smirking. "Four is just gratuitous landscape vandalism."

'Yori' sighed heavily, turning to Savrk and Yrenti, who were grinning at the byplay. "You see what I have to put up with? No respect, none at all."

"I respect your abilities, believe me," the alien scientist assured her. "They're terrifying. I've never met anyone who could double as a continental siege weapon at a pinch." He smiled as she seemed satisfied. "I hope you have equally impressive non-destructive abilities to balance your talent for massive destruction?"

'Yori' looked slightly sad for a moment. "I think we do. I never really wanted to be able to punch enormous holes in the landscape, you understand. It's just ended up that way. I have no idea what, aside from alien time machines, could possibly ever require that much power, and we all have to be very careful not to get carried away. It's far too high-level to use in a populated area unless something absolutely catastrophic has already happened, which I very much hope won't be the case." She sighed as 'Chou' put her hand on her husband's, holding it. "But yes, we can do things other than make vast amounts of rock go away very loudly."

"I'm informed that your medical abilities are extremely impressive," Yrenti mentioned, looking interested. She brightened up from the mild funk she'd fallen into momentarily.

"We like to think so, yes. That part I am proud of. I like being able to fix people when something nasty happens and wish we could teach other people how to do the same as easily as we seem to be able to show them how to blow things up. But destruction is always easier than the opposite."

"Entropy in a nutshell," Lldnr'k suggested, making her grin at him.

"More or less. I'm fairly sure we can get Hotaru healing very well quite fast, her own abilities along those lines are already quite good, and we intend to teach the rest everything we can, but the healing is probably the most difficult thing to learn, at least to the level we do it. Some things are fairly simple, broken bones, that sort of thing, but the complicated stuff is... complicated." 'Yori' snickered. "Hence the name."

"I see." Yrenti seemed amused. "I'd be interested in a demonstration."

"We need someone with an injury, I'm afraid," 'Chou' replied calmly. She looked at 'Azumi' with a raised eyebrow. "Hold out your finger."

"NO!" The middle sister glared as her sister giggled. "I'm not a guinea pig. That's as bad as her wanting to throw me at a demon to see what happens," she snarled, jerking a thumb at the martial artist who was laughing, as were most of the rest.

"Please? There's extra ice-cream in it for you."

"Cut your own finger off," 'Azumi' grumbled, folding her arms and hiding her hands in her armpits just in case.

"I'm not intending to cut anything off, merely to make a small incision to demonstrate the procedure," her sister protested mildly, smiling serenely.

"Still no."

"I'll do it," Fumiko volunteered, holding out her hand and grinning at her friend. The middle Tendo sighed, but kept her arms folded tightly. 'Chou' nodded her thanks.
"All right. First, I'll turn off the pain sensors," she said, touching Fumiko's arm above the wrist. A brief golden glow came and went. "Can you feel anything?"

"Nope. Completely numb," the other woman reported, tapping her finger with her other hand. 'Chou' looked satisfied. Savrk and Yrenti watched carefully, as did Hotaru and Lldnr'k, both of whom seemed fascinated, as the blonde woman produced a tiny thread of ki energy blade and carefully made a two centimetre cut on the offered finger. The energy level was enough to part the skin without cauterising the small wound very much, so it immediately began bleeding a little.

"There we go, a small wound. Nothing serious, but it demonstrates the process. So, to repair it, I do this..." She went through the normal healing process much more slowly than normal, explaining every step carefully. The observers watched with great interest until the finger was once again flawless, showing no sign of the small cut. Fumiko wiped the small amount of blood away and held her hand up, smiling.

"Not a mark."

"That is extremely impressive," Yrenti remarked, looking at the raised hand, then at the blonde. "How did you learn this technique? It's once again unlike anything we have data on."

"Yori designed it some years ago and we've been refining it ever since," 'Chou' replied. He looked impressed.

"Yet another self-taught system? Amazing. That's extremely rare. It certainly seems astoundingly effective though. More so than anything else I've seen. What limitations are there?"

"Very few that we've so far found," 'Yori' told him, looking thoughtful as she spoke. "Mostly the limitations are down to the knowledge of the practitioner. Gross structural damage, bones, skin, muscle, that sort of thing, are fairly easy to do with a limited knowledge of biology. That's how I started. I knew quite a lot of how the body went together but only to the level of skeletal and muscular issues, some things about blood flow, and the like. Advanced first aid, essentially. But we've learned a lot more over the years. Both from formal medical training the traditional way and through our own techniques, which allow some pretty amazing observations to be made."

"We have practical experience with a number of species," 'Chou' added. "Human, D'sage, Krennsh, a few other sentient peoples, and various animals. The more we learn the more general-purpose it becomes. I'm somewhat surprised how similar a number of species are at the level we work these days."

"There is a surprising amount of commonality between quite a large number of sentient species reachable through portals, yes," Savrk agreed, watching them both. "But even so this is a remarkably versatile healing system. From what I can see it's using some magic as well as the ki techniques?"

"Yes, it was originally pure ki, but over the years most of our ki methods have had our magical system creep in and enhance them," 'Chou' nodded.

"Can you demonstrate something using your magic control method, please, in the same way you did with the healing?" Yrenti asked.

"Sure." Yori smiled at him. "How about a portal? You seemed to find that unusual."

He grinned. "It is, definitely. That's a good choice, we both know portal spells very well."

"OK." She did much what her wife had done, very slowly and carefully opening a portal to the
firing range world as an example, talking them through it step by step. Everyone else was taking mental notes as well, although they all found it almost impossibly complex. Ami looked amazed, while the middle Tendo was wondering how on earth she’d ever be able to do something like this. Lldnr'k observed carefully, nodding every now and then, although he was also wincing quite a lot.

'Azumi' noticed that Savrk seemed to be developing a headache judging by his expression, as best she could make out, around the time the portal finally opened. Yrenti was only glancing at it occasionally, looking both interested and slightly ill. When the rip in reality stabilised, the R and D director stared at it for a few seconds then closed his eyes and massaged his head. "I understand now what you meant by your warning earlier," he muttered. "That is remarkably unnerving to watch for some odd reason, and not at all comfortable."

"I would have to agree. Seeing it in slow motion like that is much worse than the normal impressive speed it's executed at, which is bad enough." Yrenti looked at the portal for a moment, apparently concentrating on the underlying magic, then looked away again. "Very disconcerting. It's barely recognisable as magic."

"It clearly is magic," Lldnr'k said slowly, causing them to look at him as he blinked at the portal quietly crackling to itself in a corner of the room, "but at a fundamentally different level than the normal methods I'm familiar with. I've seen this before many times but I still find it very odd, to say the least. It's amazing that you managed to come up with something so strange between the two of you, and so quickly."

"Not to mention taking it to the point you can redesign a portal spell, which is a very complex one," Savrk added, opening his eyes again and looking at the apparition. "I think, with some years of study, I could begin to understand how this all works, but I somehow doubt I could actually do it. It's just too different."

"We've come to the conclusion that our method and all the normal ones we have encountered are incompatible in some very basic manner, but we're not sure quite why," 'Chou' told him, also looking at the portal for a moment, before turning back to them. "Lldnr'k thinks that the process of learning magic control changes something in the brain that causes major problems with seeing our system properly. It would fit with what we've observed. So far, the better or more practised the mage, the less ability they seem to have to understand this method, which is somewhat annoying. We can prove our system is much more efficient and flexible than anything else we know about, although admittedly it does take more effort to learn in the first place. But we've been successful in teaching the basics to other people."

"The multi-dimensionality you mentioned during that demonstration is very interesting," the alien scientist replied, turning away from the portal as well. 'Yori' dismissed it with a thought, the thing popping out of existence without anyone paying much attention. "It agrees well with advanced magical control theory although I'm not aware of anyone ever actually using such methods before. I suspect that the required type of mind is somewhat unusual in the first place." He looked at the temporal mage. "Your theory is certainly quite likely. Learning magic does indeed cause some fundamental changes to the structure of the mind, that's a known fact, but it's curious that it should cause such a dramatic incompatibility between the more normal systems and this one."

They discussed magical control theory for some time, the conversation quickly passing beyond the comprehensibility of anyone but 'Yori' and her wife, Lldnr'k, and the two Kw'lyn directors. The others tried to follow but most of them ended up moving off to examine the area more closely, 'Azumi' included. Ami stayed, listening with interest, although she was also looking rather overwhelmed.
Finding herself outside the building in the company of Fumiko and her sister, the middle Tendo walked around with her friends and just enjoyed the relative peace and quiet. They could hear laughter from inside the building with the local gravity control where Hotaru had dragged Rei to bounce around for a while. Tamiko had joined them a few minutes ago, while Aiko was lying quietly in the middle of the open area staring up at the amazing sight of the inner surface of the incomprehensibly vast Dyson sphere beyond the sky with a faint smile on her face.

The blue star was approaching the horizon as local evening neared, giving a slightly eerie light in shades of violet-white around the edges of shadows. The disguised Nabiki looked around, shaking her head a little. "You know, every now and then I suddenly realise where we are and what we're doing," she privately commed her two friends, who glanced at her, waving a hand to indicate their surroundings. "It's weird how we seem to take all this for granted. We're on a planet that's orbiting an artificial giant blue star inside the largest construction I've ever imagined in a completely different reality to our own, wandering around as if we were in the middle of Nerima. There are intelligent machines floating around all over the place, my sister and her husband are in the process of teaching some magical system that is so weird that even the people who live here find it strange, to a couple of aliens, but we're just taking it in stride. That's... just not normal, surely?"

She waved a greeting to one of the security drones which moved past a few metres away, grinning as it dipped in its flight slightly in acknowledgement.

"No, it isn't, for most people," Fumiko chuckled, "but then, neither are we. We're a bunch of shape-shifting, reality hopping, teleporting, combat trained magical girls. That's hardly normal either." The three of them shared a glance and a grin. "I don't think I'd want it any other way, though," she added happily. "The situation is insane, so are we, it all seems to work out. And it's damn good fun."

"True enough," the middle sister agreed, laughing. "Even with all the bad parts recently I'm more glad than I can say that I ended up here. I just think it's a little strange."

Flipping her one of the spiky blue snacks, which she plucked out of the air and stuck in her mouth, Misaki snickered. "Strange is a matter of opinion. Personally I can't think what else I'd want to be by this point. Even with the bad parts. The company more than makes up for it." She looked at her sister, then 'Azumi', both of whom nodded.

"Also true."

After a couple of seconds, Fumiko asked in a conspiratorial tone, looking around as if she was afraid they'd be overheard, "So. How do we persuade your sister to let me keep a spacecraft in the basement?"

"No, like this." Soun demonstrated. Akane yelped as she flew across the room to end up inverted against the wall. Shampoo clapped. Genma snickered.

"Are you all right, daughter?" the elder Tendo asked in a solicitous tone of voice although his mouth was twitching a little. Akane glared at him from her upside down position, then effortlessly flipped back onto her feet. Rocking her head from side to side for a moment, she rubbed her neck, then grinned nastily.

"Yes, thank you, Dad," she replied in a saccharin manner which made his eyes narrow. "Fine. I think I see where I was going wrong. Shall we try again?" He smiled back, indicating a position in front of him, then took up a stance.
"Of course. Ready?"

"Oh, I'm ready, all right," she gritted out, then attacked.

Genma's and Shampoo's eyes followed an arc that terminated at the other side of the Dojo. Both of them winced a little, smiling slightly.

"Ow."

"No, I'm afraid you still seem to be slightly off on the timing, dear," Soun chuckled. Once more Akane glared at him, again upside down, in a remarkably similar position to the previous time. Rolling to her feet she stood up, before charging.

"She's really not getting it, is she?" Genma asked idly. Shampoo shook her head, trembling with barely suppressed laughter.

"No. He's very good."

"She's not at all bad either, but she's rushing it. Look. She's going to leave her left foot in the wrong position, and..." They watched a growling Akane flip several times through the air to end up against the wall again. "...that will happen," Genma finished. Shampoo giggled.

Sending both of the small audience a cold stare worthy of Nabiki at her worst, which had no real effect, the youngest Tendo sister climbed to her feet yet again. Her father made a small gesture, roughly translatable as 'come and get some.' She snarled, charged, and got some. Soun himself laughed this time, while Shampoo fell over in a fit of hilarity.

"I'm sorry, dear, you seem to be missing your mark. Perhaps you need to see it demonstrated again." The master of the Dojo turned to the Amazon warrior, who slowly stopped laughing as she realised all three of the other people in the room were looking expectantly at her, Akane from the floor.

"Oh, crap," she mumbled, before climbing to her feet and walking over to someone she had developed a considerable respect for the abilities of after the last hour or so.

Akane grinned. With lots of teeth.

"Thank you for the information," Savrk told 'Yori', wearing an expression of both fascination and mild frustration. He rubbed his forehead with one hand, slightly ruefully. "And the pain."

She chuckled for a moment. "You're welcome. In both cases."

"It will take me some time to go through everything we've learned, run simulations, and try to model the results," he continued, smiling. "I would like very much to talk further about your various techniques at some point but I have enough to go on for now. I assume there's more?" The R and D director gave them a quizzical look. There were a number of giggles and grins.

"Definitely. We have many secrets," she laughed.

"We're happy to learn as much as we can," Yrenti told her, amused. "And as much as you're willing to tell us. I still think that these techniques could be very valuable, although after the last couple of hours, I'm less convinced than I was that we could duplicate them, annoyingly. I think you're right, the normal methods interfere, possibly permanently, with your system. Pity."
"I'm going to have to work out exactly why," Savrk mused, interested.

"If you can we'd love to know," 'Chou' assured him.

He nodded absently, still off in his own world. "I'll let you have any information I derive from all this," he told her, then shook his head a little, coming back to them. "It's been a very interesting day indeed. And slightly worrying. I'm going to go and measure just how large a hole you made, Yori, and work out the energy yield." He grinned. "I'm not entirely certain I want to know for the sake of my own sanity, but my scientific curiosity won't let it lie."

Fumiko snickered, glancing at her friend, then said, "If you need any more mountains disciplined let us know." He and Yrenti both burst out laughing while 'Yori' slowly turned her head and fixed her friend with a look, which made her nearly fall over giggling.

"Again, I'll bear that in mind."

The security drone chose that moment to enter the room, swivelling to scan everyone present. Under it was floating a small box, which it deposited on the table, 'nodded' to the assembled people, then turned and left again. "Good. Here we are, this is the translation spell applicator," Savrk exclaimed with satisfaction. Picking up the box he opened it to reveal a small device, roughly cubical with rounded edges and about four centimetres across, made of some deep blue material. He examined it for a moment and nodded. "Looks good. All right, it's easy enough to use. You let the person the spell is aimed at hold it, give it the authorisation code, then wait for a moment. The person in question needs to willingly accept it and should be lying down, it causes some very odd sensory effects for a minute or two, but once it settles in everything just works."

"Is it permanent?" Ldln'r'k asked with interest. The other mage looked at him, then nodded.

"Yes. It's a very deep connection to the mind, and as a result nearly impossible to remove after being inserted. It's safe, though, that has been very extensively tested for an extremely long time. We've never found a species it wasn't compatible with although one or two don't have completely satisfactory results due to unusual mental make-up. That won't apply in this case, though." He explained a few more rather esoteric instructions to them, both 'Yori' and her wife listening carefully, then put it back in the box and handed it over.

"It's pre-authorised for use on all of you, Uthryyl and his family, Hnther, and Agent Masao, if he agrees. Anyone else you need to use it on, call us, and we'll get you the code for them, OK?"

"Yep. Thanks very much indeed," the martial artist replied, weighing the box in her hand for a moment before putting it away. She grinned at him. "This is going to be very useful, I think. Learning languages is fun but slow and hard work."

"True." He laughed. "Luckily, now you can cheat."

"I think that we have probably covered everything for the moment, then," Yrenti remarked, satisfied. He thought for a moment. "With one exception." Everyone looked at him curiously.

"Which is?" Misaki asked, finishing yet another fruit.

He glanced at her momentarily. "There is a colleague of yours we'd be interested in talking to," he began, "someone we've been hearing some very odd things about. Weirdly, we have no other information on her, at all, or her employers. The middle Tendo got a feeling she knew where this was heading, looking around at her friends, all of who were doing their best to appear innocent yet all clearly also working it out. "Would it be possible for you to put us in contact with Ms Aoyama?"
he finished. She sighed inaudibly, although she was also amused. 'Yori' looked sidelong at her with a twinkle in her eyes before returning her attention to the Kw'lyn director.

"It's... not impossible," she said slowly. "Can I ask why?"

"From the very limited data we have on her, she seems to work for an organisation that our intelligence division would be interested in opening relations with," the Director of External Threat Management explained. "It's one we're completely unfamiliar with, which is very unusual, if not unprecedented." 'Azumi' kept her face as blank as she could manage. "Again, something we're beginning to expect from you and your acquaintances," he grinned. "It's possible we might have some operations that could be outsourced to her organisation, ones we would prefer Kw'lyn Industries and our government not to be known to be associated with. Nothing unpleasant, mainly information-gathering, which our enquiries suggest she's extremely adept at, with one or two places where a certain amount of... intimidatory behaviour... might be suitable. Something else we believe she can pull off rather convincingly from what we've learned."

"You have no idea," Ami muttered, making him look at her for a moment. Rei nudged her friend in the ribs causing her to fall silent.

"We can ask, if nothing else," 'Chou' replied after a long pause and a look at her husband. "You understand, no one makes Ms Aoyama do anything. One politely requests, and hopes for an answer, which is final."

"Ms Aoyama is scary," Tamiko said in a low voice.

Fumiko nodded. "She's horrifying, but very effective." The tall girl snickered a little. "A lot of people are scared of her, but that's not a phobia, it's common sense."

"Ms Aoyama could terrify even the voices in the head of a mad person into doing what she wanted, just with a look," Misaki agreed soberly.

"Ms Aoyama doesn't sleep, she waits. In the dark. When you turn out the light, she's there," Aiko added, a small smile on her face. Yrenti and Savrk exchanged a look. Inwardly, 'Azumi' was giggling insanely.

"I heard that a ghost tried to scare Ms Aoyama to death," Rei put in, looking like she was trying not to laugh. "She just raised an eyebrow at it and no one has seen it since." Hotaru giggled, putting her hand over her mouth as everyone glanced at her, an embarrassed expression on her face.

"Um, yes," Yrenti said, looking around. He seemed slightly puzzled. "I've heard she's somewhat intense. Anyway, that's why we're interested in talking to her. We can't locate any other members of her organisation so far. If you could get a message to her and ask her to contact us, that would be most helpful."

"You might not say that once you've met her," Tamiko snickered. "If you invite her in, you'll never be able to undo it."

Shaking her head, obviously trying not to smile, 'Yori' replied, "I can pass on the message, certainly. But I can't guarantee anything."

"Fair enough. Thank you." Yrenti looked satisfied yet still rather puzzled with just the smallest amount of mild worry apparent.

"Well, we should probably get back, I suppose," she said, standing up. "Thank you very much for all the equipment and the information. It was fun talking. I think we're all looking forward to
"You're welcome to at any time," he told her, looking around at the rest of them. "Any of you. Next time we'll see about arranging a visit to some of the more interesting places on the Sphere. You'll probably like it."

"It's big enough to have pretty much anything," Aiko quipped. He nodded, smiling.

"Very true. We still haven't explored more than a fraction of it after all these years."

Moving to the two large boxes he closed them up then returned them to the crate on the floor, which Yori picked up and made go away. "Thanks again. We'll set these up when we get home and call you as soon as the relay is in place," she told him.

"Good. Let us know if there are any problems, but I'm not expecting them. Once the relay is set up we'll run remote diagnostics and make sure everything is working correctly." Outside they found the security drone waiting next to another crate. "This is the mapping unit. The operating instructions are inside." Misaki picked the container up and put it away. Shaking hands with all of them, the two aliens watched as a portal opened.

"We look forward to our next meeting," Savrk said.

"So do we," 'Chou' replied after looking around at her friends. They all waved, then filed through the portal, which closed immediately afterwards.

::Interesting people with some remarkable abilities:: the drone noted. Yrenti nodded absently, before heading over to the flight platform a few metres away with his colleague and the drone following.

"Very true. Very true indeed. But, I think, good ones well worth the effort." Soon the platform was dwindling off into the distance.

"Yes!" Akane crowed as she watched her father slide to a halt in the corner. Genma laughed. Rolling over Soun groaned a little, then sat up.

"I think you might have it, dear," he commented. She grinned. "Finally." The grin went away again as she sulked a little. Shampoo, who had mastered the move some while earlier after a number of even more spectacular screw-ups, patted her on the shoulder and gave her an encouraging smile.

Looking amused and proud her father stood up, walking over to the two girls. "Well done, both of you. Let's move on to the difficult one next." Their faces fell as Genma started laughing again, settling down to be entertained.

"A most interesting and successful day, I feel," Lldnr'k commented happily from his position on the sofa. Kasumi walked out of the kitchen carrying a tray of teacups, Nabiki following with the tea and some small cakes, all of which were placed on the table. Everyone else was arrayed around the room on various seats, the various items in their boxes stacked up near the balcony doors. Pouring tea and handing it around, the elder Tendo sister nodded, smiling a little.

"It was fascinating, very true," she agreed, handing him a cup of tea in a suitably shaped drinking vessel. He looked curiously at it as he accepted it. She laughed. "We have so many visitors of different species now I got in some of the more specialised cups made by your people, the D'sage, and a few others, just in case. It seemed the right thing to do."
"Very thoughtful, my dear," he replied, sipping his tea. Picking up the SI unit which he'd been given with his other hand from where he'd put it on the coffee-table, he turned it over and over, feeling the surface with his fingers.

Ranma watched, eventually commenting, "You look worried."

The temporal mage glanced at him, then went back to studying the alien device. "Not worried as such, more slightly apprehensive, and a little excited. I've been interested in the SI systems since you told me about them a little while ago but I have to admit I didn't expect to simply be given one. I'm very grateful, though, believe me, although now that I have it... It's quite a lot to take in after learning what we did from Savrk and the others."

"It's a big responsibility," Aiko agreed from beside him, watching as well. "A little like having a pet, only much more. Not quite to the level of having a child although I suppose that might be a better or closer simile now that we know what we do."

He looked at her for a moment. "Do you regret taking on the responsibility, then?" The brunette shook her head, smiling in a pleased manner, then reached for another cupcake.

"Not for a second. I couldn't be happier about it." He looked around at the others, all of whom nodded agreement.

"Interesting."

"Would you like to activate it here?" Ranma asked him. "You can use one of the guest rooms, it's pretty disorientating for a while. If you do you can get all our codes immediately, which might be useful."

After a moment's thought he nodded. "Yes, you're probably correct, thank you. I would like that."

The martial artist took him away as everyone watched, returning without the mage some minutes later.

"I'm still amazed by everything we saw, learned, and did," Ami commented, getting up and walking over to the balcony doors where she leaned against the window and watched the early afternoon traffic go past six floors down. Looking up at the sky for a moment she shook her head, before turning and looking at the other people, who were watching her. "To be able to go so easily between something normal like this," she indicated the world outside with her thumb over her shoulder, "and something out of an SF film... It's kind of disorientating."

"But that's more or less our life, right?" Tamiko asked, pouring some more tea for herself, and Fumiko when she held out her cup wordlessly. "Nothing we do is normal for most people. Probably any people, anywhere. I'd guess that most random D'sage, or Krennsh, or even whatever Yrenti's people are called, would find everything we do just a little strange. Portal travel explains a lot of it, but there are a lot of other things we can do which are a bit weird by most standards." She laughed for a moment. "Something I'm very glad about. Normality is boring." Hotaru giggled, causing her to look at the younger girl with a grin.

"True, I suppose. It just hits me sometimes. This is a particularly big example of it, that's all." She glanced at the various boxes full of alien magitech. "We have things here most governments would probably kill for, most people simply wouldn't believe were possible, and they were just given to us in a sort of casual 'Here you go, have fun' way by people who come from the weirdest place I've ever encountered."

"Neat, isn't it?" the red-head chuckled. Staring at her for a moment, the other woman eventually
nodded, also grinning.

"Yes, I suppose it is. But still a little strange." She made a small motion with one hand, before looking out the window again, smiling. "Don't worry, I'll get used to it."

Everyone started laughing, quite hard.

When they calmed down, Misaki got up and opened the large crate, looking at the contents. "Where are we going to put the relay?" she asked, glancing at Ranma. He thought for a moment.

"We could just stick it in the corner of the room, once it's activated it will simply disappear for most purposes, but it might be a better idea to not have it in the building. It's not that I don't trust them, but I have a feeling that the ward system might get annoyed." He shrugged a little as everyone looked around, then back to him. "I don't want to risk upsetting it, it's not fair on the thing. And there's no denying it's a potential security risk."

"We could activate it on the moon," Nabiki suggested, grinning. "It doesn't make any difference where it is from what Yrenti said and no one is going to bump into it there."

"I suppose," he replied, smiling.

Hotaru put her hand up, grinning wildly. "If we're going to the moon I want to go," she squeaked excitedly, causing several people to laugh at her expression.

"Of course you can go," he assured her calmly.

"Why don't you go and do that, dear, while I start lunch," Kasumi suggested. "Fumiko, do you want to help me?" The other woman nodded, prodding her sister, who also stood when she did. The three women went into the kitchen.

"I'd love to come but I need to pop out and do something for Dad," Tamiko said, getting up. "I'll be back in forty minutes or so." She left the apartment, the sound of the door closing coming to them.

"It shouldn't take long," Nabiki mused, reading the documentation that they had been sent by Yrenti just before they'd left. "Unbox it, activate it, then wait for it to finish self tests. According to this it should be running in under three minutes."

"Good enough," Ranma nodded, standing and walking over to the crate, then bending over and carefully pulling the relay unit in its box out in a manner that still made her grin. "Let's leave from the basement, the flash is so bright it will fade the paintwork in here," he added, grinning. A portal crackled into existence in the corner. Ami stared at it, then him.

"You do realise that's an absolutely insane way to avoid using the elevator, I hope?" she laughed.

He nodded happily.

"Very true, but I still can't get over the fact that it works at all. I never even considered it. Good thing Savrk worked it out." Fumiko stuck her head out of the kitchen, looked at the portal, then snickered.

"Practice making them big enough for a spacecraft," she said, before yelping as Kasumi's hand came out of the kitchen and clamped on her shoulder, pulling her back.

"Back to work," the elder sister's voice came to them.

"I was kidding!" Fumiko said.
"No you weren't. We'll have to talk."

"Kasumi..." her wheedling tone fell silent, as everyone roared with laughter.

"I still think that's one of the most amazing sights I've ever seen," Rei commented, staring at the three-quarters Earth low on the horizon. 'Azumi' looked over from where she was watching 'Yori' and Ami fiddle with the relay unit and nodded slowly, agreeing totally. The Dyson Sphere was incredibly, inconceivably larger and more spectacular, but almost by virtue of that, was somehow less majestic in an odd way. The simplicity and beauty of the green-blue planet hanging in the dark, though, knowing it was where everyone she'd ever known up until recently had come from, was something she found remarkable.

"I think so too," she said, walking over to stand beside the other girl. Looking around as she heard a giggle she grinned at the sight of Hotaru doing a kangaroo impression in slow motion, hopping many metres off the ground with each effortless bounce. The purple-haired youngster threw in a couple of somersaults just for fun, making her laugh. They were in the same place they'd come the first time S'th'kx's ship had landed.

"I love this," the girl squealed in joy. "I could stay here all day."

"We have to get back soon," Ami's voice came to them, sounding amused. "I need to see Mom. She's getting a little puzzled about how much I'm going out at the moment for odd reasons. I left very early today and left a note which she might think is strange."

"Does she know about you?" Aiko asked curiously, gracefully bounding over to them and the alien relay, 'Azumi' and Rei joining her after a few seconds. Ami sighed a little, watching as 'Yori' sent the device the activation command. It lifted slightly higher off the surface and glowed a faint pink colour for a few seconds, a number of small lights in various shades blinking in different places.

"Officially, no. But I've had a few slightly strange conversations with her recently that make me pretty sure she knows more than she lets on. I don't know how much, though, or how she worked it out."

"Are you going to tell her?" 'Yori' asked, stepping back and watching the relay, glancing at her for a moment. She shrugged.

"I'm... not sure. Not yet, I think. In the beginning, no, I'd never have told her, for all sorts of reasons, but recently..." She slowly shook her head, sighing again. "After everything that's happened it might be nice to talk about it with her." She smiled at the woman, then looked around at her other friends. "Don't get me wrong, it's nothing at all to do with any of you. But it's hard keeping such a big secret from your own mother."

Aiko nodded reflectively, as did Rei. 'Yori' studied her for a few seconds, then turned to the relay, which was now blinking a few more lights, giving the impression of something waking up. "I can see where it would be," she said quietly. "I'm glad you actually can talk to yours. Mine is..." Nabiki put her hand on her shoulder for a moment.

They fell silent, broken only by Hotaru laughing as she bounded around in the lunar dust, until the relay unit rippled with light and blinked out of existence. "Good. Looks like everything is working," she said with satisfaction. She tried comming Yrenti over the link, the Kw'lyn director immediately answering.

"It appears to be functioning appropriately from this end, Yori," he said. "It's connected to the
Correctly, the various functions are still running diagnostics, it should be fully active any moment now… Yes, there we go. Everything is operating to specification. Good."

"Great," 'Yori' replied, smiling. "Thanks, Yrenti. This is going to be very useful, for all of us."

"Indeed it is. I'll talk later, I need to get back to work, but once again it was nice to see you all. Be well."

"You too." The connection dropped.

Looking satisfied, the martial artist poked the shipping container the relay had been in, which folded itself into a small cube, which she picked up and vanished. There was no trace of anything now but a lot of footprints. "This is going to confuse people a lot when they finally end up here," Rei laughed, looking around. "Perhaps we should brush them away?"

"We'll never get them all, I think," 'Azumi' snickered. "It's not like anyone is likely to see them soon, and by the time they do, it won't matter." Bending down she picked up a chunk of moon-rock the size and rough shape of a baseball, bouncing it in her hand, then turned and threw it as hard as possible at the horizon, watching it vanish almost instantly. "Pity the gravity is so strong, I'll never get one into orbit here."

"It went a good distance, though," the black-haired girl noted, looking after it. "Orbit?" she asked curiously a few seconds later, staring at her friend, who laughed and explained. "Cool."

"We'll have to bring Onkra here at some point as well," 'Yori' remarked, moving to stand beside them. "She's as interested in space travel as Fumiko is."

"Fumiko is obsessed," the middle sister giggled. "She's not going to give up on getting a ship, you know," she added, glancing at her sister-in-law, who nodded, grinning faintly.

"Yep, I know. I'd like one myself, to be honest. We'll have to see how things work out."

"We could certainly afford something like S'th'kx's scout-craft, surely?" 'Azumi' asked.

"Oh, that's no problem. He'd help us find one, I'm sure. Running it would be easy enough, any of the SIs could do it, or the computer on the ship could, they're pretty automated, but..." She shrugged a little. "We'll add it to the list of things to look at one day."

"Come on, Hotaru, we need to go," Ami called, making the girl, who was still hopping around enjoying herself, look over then wave. She turned in their direction and headed back.

"Lunch is nearly ready, dear," Kasumi's voice came to them.

"Thanks, love. We'll be back in a moment." 'Yori' met 'Azumi's' eyes as the absurdity of the entire situation struck them all very hard.

They were still howling with laughter when the small group reappeared in the practice room.

When lunch was over, Lldnr'k was still expressing awe over his SI, experimenting with it in every way he could think of. He seemed extremely pleased. "This is most remarkable," he commented, watching a recording of the moon trip which Nabiki sent him as a test. She grinned back.

"They're amazing, aren't they? Even without the SI itself, the other abilities are incredible, and with the SI... It's the best present I ever got. I don't know what I'd do now without Jun."
She laughed at the comment, made slightly wryly but with obvious gratification.

"I will have to look over the documentation and do a lot of experimentation to even begin to work out how to make best use of it, but already I can think of many ways in which my life will be changed for the better as a result," he told her, looking happy. Everyone watched him for a moment, amused at his expression.

Producing the translation spell applicator Ranma looked at it. "We should use this thing, I suppose, before you go home."

The temporal mage stopped playing with his SI and looked at it as well, nodding slowly. "Yes, that would seem appropriate." He looked around. "Who's first?"

There was a pause, then the martial artist grinned. "May as well be the test subject." He lay down on the carpet, just in case, held the small device in both hands, and closed his eyes. A moment later the thing lit up briefly, making a faint hum, before going dark. He winced, his face showing some discomfort, which passed after a few seconds, then opened his eyes. "That was... weird."

"Did it work?" Aiko asked curiously. He glanced at her.

"As far as I can tell. Try me."

She smiled, thought for a moment, then said something in fluent Italian. He replied in the same language, grinning. The brunette laughed, then tried German and French, both of which he also used. "You're more fluent than I am in all of those," she giggled.

The temporal mage said something in a croaking, guttural language that none of them had heard before, which Ranma immediately replied in, looking pleased. Clicking his beak with amusement Lldnr'k cycled through at least a dozen languages, many of which sounded extremely peculiar, before nodding, pleased.

"Quite remarkable. No accent at all that I can hear and no troubles with vocabulary or syntax. That is an exceptionally effective spell."

Ranma looked very satisfied, then tossed the device to the mage, who caught it easily, inspecting it closely for a moment. "May as well do you next. You'll definitely want to lie down, though, Savrk was right, the sensory effects are very strange." With a nod the temporal mage took his place on the floor, holding the device over his chest with both hands. Once more it lit up and hummed, provoking a mutter of discomfort.

"Hmm. Not at all comfortable. But interesting." Handing the thing back to Ranma, Lldnr'k stood up, then retook his position on the sofa beside Fumiko. He seemed to be investigating his own mind. "Extraordinary. What an amazingly complicated spell." After a moment, he looked carefully at Ranma, then pulled out a couple of the instruments they'd all seen him use before and waved them about a little, first over himself then in the direction of the martial artist, before inspecting the results. "Fascinating. There's no trace of it from the outside, so to speak. It appears to be totally stealthed. I can see it inside my own mind but I'd have no way to determine if you possessed it."

"If it's a strategically important piece of magic as they told us, that makes a certain amount of sense," Ami mused, watching him. "There could well be times when you wouldn't want someone you were negotiating with, for example, to know that you could understand everything they said amongst themselves." Nabiki listened, nodding slowly.
"That's certainly plausible," she agreed. She could easily understand the idea, which did indeed make sense.

"OK, who's next?" Ranma looked around, stopping on Aiko as she hopped to her feet, then lay down in front of him, holding out her hand with a grin. He snickered, dropping the device into her outstretched hand. Shortly afterwards she got up looking pleased.

"This will help next time I go to Athens for genuine Greek troufakia." Everyone looked at her, slightly confused. She giggled. "Chocolate and walnut truffles. Delicious. There's this little shop in a run-down part of Athens that makes the best desserts I've ever had, but they don't speak a word of Japanese, English, or any other language I speak. Spoke." She said something in totally fluent Greek, making Ranma and Lldnr'k chuckle.

"OK, do me next," Nabiki laughed, taking her place. She held out her hand expectantly, taking the small alien artefact and holding it carefully. Closing her eyes she waited expectantly.

"Ooogh," she mumbled, as the world rotated in several different directions at the same time around her. She tasted blue, heard the sound of smooth, and saw flashes of middle C for a few seconds, while feeling slightly light. It was peculiar in the extreme but not actually painful. Moments later everything went back to normal, leaving behind a feeling that there was an awful lot more information pushed somewhere into her mind than there had been earlier. "That was... weird." The middle sister sat up, handing the device back to her brother-in-law, who was smiling a little.

"Do you feel all right now?" he asked.

"Fine, I think," she replied absently, only to realise they were speaking Russian. "Oh, wow, that's incredible!" Grinning at him she got out of the way as Kasumi eagerly took the spot on the floor which seemed to have become the 'learn all languages in one easy lesson' position.

A few minutes later, everyone was talking merrily in a mix of dozens if not hundreds of languages, many of them not at all human, trying to work out which ones the spell didn't cover. They couldn't. "I can easily see why this would be considered a very valuable resource," Kasumi said quietly to her sister as they watched the others chatting. Nabiki nodded, grinning.

"It's going to be incredibly useful just in normal life," she replied, both of them speaking Mandarin just for fun.

"I need to go and check on Usagi, later on," Ranma commented from the other side of his wife. "I'll give Hnther his SI and the language spell then as well. We should go to see Uthryyl at some point soon and bring him up to date, give them all the spell, and see if Onkra would like to come to stay here for a while a bit later."

Lldnr'k came over, appearing pleased. "This has been a lot of fun and both interesting and rewarding. But I need to get back now, I think, I have several projects I need to get back to which I have been somewhat neglecting." Ranma got up, smiling.

"OK." He created a portal off to one side while answering. "Thanks for all the help, yet again, and I hope we'll see you again soon."

"I expect so," the mage laughed. "You people are far too interesting not to visit." He looked around at the room. "Keep in touch, all of you," he said. "I've enjoyed this. I have much to think about."

"We all do, my friend," the martial artist assured the mage. "I'll let you know what happens with all the various issues. For the moment, though, I'm going to relax and not worry about things, the
major problems seem to be sorted right now. Something of a relief, really."

"Very true." Lldnr'k snapped his beak with amusement, looking around at the others. "I have enjoyed my time with you all. If any of you wish to visit, please do." With a final wave he stepped through the portal, which popped into non-existence.

"By the way, thank you for the lunch, Kasumi, it was delicious," his voice came over the SI link, making them grin. "Oh, look, it works. That's useful." He sounded very amused. Disconnecting, his presence vanished.

"We have a very odd lifestyle," Misaki mumbled, smiling to herself. She looked at Aiko. "By the way, that's the second time you've gone to the moon without us," she added more loudly. Aiko grinned.

"I'll take you and the others later this afternoon, OK?" Her friend nodded, satisfied.

"Let's set that positioning system up, we can do it on the roof, then I need to head off," Nabiki suggested. "I'm going to see Miki and John tomorrow but I decided I want to spend tonight back home."

"Sounds good," Ranma agreed. He retrieved the container full of alien magitech from the main shipping crate, then they all headed up to the roof. Opening it in a clear space, he looked up. "We're away from any of the main flight corridors so it should be safe enough. Nothing up there at the moment." A command was sent to the launcher, which whined faintly, then lifted into the air. A shimmer around it betrayed the presence of a forcefield forming an aerodynamic shape, as it accelerated upwards, moving fairly slowly at first, at the same time fading from view. Within a hundred metres it was invisible. They tracked it with the SIs as it moved faster and faster, a faint rumble coming down from high above a minute later, then it was gone.

"That seems easy enough," he said in satisfaction. "All we do now is wait."

"What about this thing?" Misaki asked, producing the mapping unit box from her ki space and putting it on the ground.

"I guess we should start it up as well," he replied thoughtfully. Opening the box revealed a series of six spherical units similar in appearance to, but about three times the size of, the camera drones. They investigated them for a little while, reading the documentation which the case downloaded to their SIs, until he nodded. "Simple enough. It'll take about a week to build the full maps, from what this says. It looks like it does high level stuff from low orbit very fast then moves steadily lower producing higher and higher resolution scans. Impressive."

Sending the activation command made the six spheres lift into a three dimensional formation in front of them, rotate slowly for a few seconds, then fade from view. They could sense them following the same path upwards that the positioning system had taken, although rather more slowly. Data began coming back, imaging Tokyo and the surrounding area, as the probes went higher.

Nabiki watched for a moment then grinned as Jun stored the incoming data safely away. "Very interesting, and probably the sort of thing that would give the military a heart attack."

"Let's not mention it to them, then," Rei laughed.

"Probably best not to." They headed back downstairs.

When they arrived back in the living room, the martial artist retrieved the case containing the Mark
Ten Delta upgrade units. He put it on the coffee-table and opened it, removing one and inspecting it for a moment, before distributing them to everyone present, then closing the box containing the last two and storing it away safely. "The last of the new toys," he chuckled.

Ami was carefully examining the one she'd been given. Nabiki watched for a moment, then looked at the thing in her hand. "What do we do with them?" she asked.

"According to the documentation they attach to the existing SI," the blue-haired girl replied, producing her unit from its subspace pocket and holding it in her other hand. Looking between them, she eventually carefully brought them together, one on top of the other. Both units snapped together when they were a few millimetres apart as if they were magnetised, a brief faint crackle sounded, the result being one unit which looked like a single piece. "Oh. OK, I see," Ami said in surprise. She got a faraway look, idly flipping the upgraded unit back into storage, falling silent.

Everyone watched her curiously, exchanged glances, then did the same.

"Wow," Nabiki muttered to herself, looking at the list of extra functions that Jun displayed as soon as the process was completed. 'There seem to be a hell of a lot of them, Jun,' she added to the SI.

#Indeed, Nabiki,# it replied in a satisfied and fascinated tone. There was something mildly different about its voice she couldn't quite pin down, something slightly... larger. #The extra capacity is interesting. There is a boost to processing capability as well, it appears. I have linked everything in, internal diagnostics report one hundred percent utilisation and complete functionality on all sensory packages. The upgrade has increased my sensory abilities substantially over the entire electromagnetic, subspace, and magical bands.#

'So, what can we do now?' she asked curiously.

#For one thing, this,# the machine replied, sounding amused. She blinked and looked around.

'Holy shit.'

The entire world had gone slightly translucent, allowing her to see outside the room, through the walls and intervening obstacles. All the people were also standing out in different colours with their bones visible through the skin. #This is using terahertz frequencies, essentially very deep infra-red wavelengths, to see through normally solid objects. It's passive, not requiring any input energy, but using the naturally emitted electromagnetic energy of the source.# The view shifted again, now showing various things in the walls. #This is reading the magnetic fields, so conductors such as the electrical wiring in the walls show up from their electromagnetic output.# Another shift made everything look every weirder. #This is thermal output, heat vision in essence. I am mixing the sensory input with your normal vision, using it to key the locations of objects so it feels to you as if you're seeing in these wavelengths. Is it satisfactory?#

'It's amazing,' she told it with complete honesty. A broad smile crossed her face. 'Why are the outer walls blank?' she asked after a moment, curiously.

#I believe the wards are preventing the wavelengths used from penetrating them,# Jun replied, sounding interested.

'Makes sense. We'll have to try this outside.'

#There are some interesting possibilities using active sensing as well,# it added.

Once they'd all experimented with the add-ons, and exchanged notes on various interesting things they'd found, Nabiki found herself thinking quietly in the corner. #What is concerning you,
Nabiki?

"I'm a little worried about Yrenti wanting to meet Ms Aoyama,' she confessed. 'I'm not sure how we're going to work that.'

#I understand. It is an intriguing problem, although in retrospect, not surprising. Your alter-ego has developed an interesting reputation from what I can determine. For people as involved with collecting information as my makers, it was probably inevitable that sooner or later they would come across data on you in that guise. The only slightly surprising thing is that they appear to wish to subcontract work to her and her organisation.# There was a note of amusement in the SIs voice when it said this last part, making her laugh for a moment.

'You might not be surprised by it, but I am. I didn't think that the Ms Aoyama thing would grow like that.'

#It is the same issue that Ranma and Kasumi confront with their alternate personae.# Jun replied. #Yori and Chou have become much larger than was originally intended, and much more important, as both of them have stated in the past. But at the same time, both personae are as real as they are, they are merely alternate aspects of the originating persona. In your case, you have two personae that are becoming known, Azumi and Ms Aoyama, which complicates things further. But even there, they are both still you. I see a lot of the Nabiki Tendo I know in both of them. More, in some ways, in the latter, oddly enough.#

The middle sister smiled a little to herself, feeling mildly surprised. 'Really?'

#Oh, yes. Ms Aoyama is Nabiki distilled to her essence, cold logic and reason tempered with fairness and good judgement. It is a potent combination. Not, admittedly, one which the majority of people from any species would find particularly comfortable to be in the presence of for any length of time, but still very effective.# Jun sounded even more amused. #I find it very interesting, to be honest. When you are running the Ms Aoyama overlay you have less emotional output than I do myself these days, and it is noticeable that your mental processing speed becomes both considerably faster and more efficient. It is slightly disconcerting even to one such as I. As time goes on, in addition, you seem to be refining the persona considerably. Which does indeed seem to cause the people you... inflict... it on a certain amount of worry.#

She could have sworn it was trying not to laugh by this point. Snickering, she told it, 'It's probably wrong of me but I have to admit to a certain amount of amusement seeing the reactions I get. The strangest one was Hotaru, actually. I never thought I'd find someone who'd actually laugh at Ms Aoyama.'

#Hotaru is a very interesting person,# Jun said reflectively, as she looked at the purple-haired girl who was waving a hand in front of her face and laughing, apparently finding the effective x-ray vision she now had endlessly amusing. #My data on her suggests a young woman who has had a number of fairly unfortunate experiences, even leaving aside all the problems with the time device and its manipulations. Yet she has matured into an intelligent, articulate, and honest person despite all that. One with very considerable potential. Even so, there is a part of her which isn't dissimilar to you in some ways, a part that finds Ms Aoyama fascinating.#

'Perhaps we need to work out her own version at some point,' Nabiki mused, watching the girl, who looked happy. 'When she's in uniform holding her weapon she certainly looks like she means business. It wouldn't take much to make that a lot more worrying.' She smiled a little as she thought of the effect of having a 'colleague' of the same type as Ms Aoyama beside her alternate persona. People would probably either run or faint.
It would be an interesting experiment when she has mastered the illusion spell, certainly," Jun responded. "Although two of you at once might be a bit excessive for most problems." Its dryly humorous voice made her chuckle.

'That aside, it still leaves the issue of Kw'lyn Industries wanting to hire someone who doesn't exist and her organisation, which also doesn't exist. How are we going to solve that problem?'

'The most obvious solution is to divulge the truth to Yrenti," Jun said after a moment. She nodded slowly.

'True, but neither Sis or Ranma have told them about the shape-shifting technique yet, so it might be slightly awkward.'

'Azumi Ito is known as a shape-shifter, I would suspect that Kw'lyn is aware of this from your time on Fwetna and other places we went on holiday. They are certainly collecting information on you and the others for their records. Most of the locations you were in your flying or aquatic forms other than in the vicinity of Uthryyl's home were probably not monitored, but I think we must assume that anything you did in public there may well be something they know about by now. Whether they have extended that to the rest of your group I'm not certain about.'

'They didn't say anything about it,' she commented.

'It would fall under the category of personal information and would therefore be private, not to be mentioned to others except with your permission. If you discuss it with them, they'll talk about it, but they won't bring it up otherwise except in extreme circumstances." Jun sounded very sure of this.

'OK, I suppose that makes sense, based on what we've learned about them.' She thought for a moment. 'It's slightly surprising then that they haven't worked it out, that I'm Ms Aoyama.'

'Not entirely, I think," the SI said. 'You may underestimate quite how alien Ms Aoyama is to others. Even to your friends and family, in most cases, she is... very worrying. Ranma doesn't seem to be affected, or your sister, but all the others barring Hotaru seem to find your alter ego someone they're not at all keen on having around. Those are people who know and love you. People who don't..." It trailed off, making her laugh again.

'It's really that bad?'

'Definitely, based on the physiological reactions I can read from anyone who meets her. The deliberately warped ki signature that Ranma designed has a very low level effect on almost anyone, varying from fear to absolute terror, depending on the person in question and how hard you are pushing the effect. Even at its mildest it seems remarkably effective.'

'Interesting. So if I don't tell them, they might well not work it out.'

'I believe that to be the case.'

'Hmm. OK, that's option one then, tell them, but if I don't, they may not work it out. In that case, what would we do? Can we fake it well enough to make them happy? Should we even try? I like Yrenti and the others, I don't want to do wrong by them.' Nabiki scratched her nose for a moment, thinking hard, while watching her friends.

'It is likely that with the help of your family you could probably do more or less any task that they require, bearing in mind that you may already be performing similar tasks for your 'employers'." A note of humour was present in the machine's voice. 'If we define them as your sister and her
husband, of course, which is more or less accurate.

She snickered. 'True, I guess. I suppose we'll have to come up with a suitable name and logo for the 'organisation' at some point. That will take some careful thought.' Thinking of something, she asked, 'Can they tell who I am by detecting you?'

#To the best of my knowledge, no, I don't believe that to be possible,# Jun responded. #They can detect the presence of an SI, certainly, though I don't think many other people, if any, could, but I know of no way to determine which SI has been detected. The entire system is designed with stealth and high security in mind so we don't broadcast any form of identity, or more accurately, we can broadcast any form of identity required, which amounts to the same thing. To anyone with a lower level of technology that my makers even detecting an SI is impossible, magically, technologically, or otherwise, which is the entire point.#

'So they won't be able to tell Ms Aoyama and Azumi are the same person based on the SI signature, at least. That's one possible problem solved.'

#Indeed. Leaving only all the rest.# It was definitely joking now. She grinned.

Kasumi chose that moment to glance at her and ask, "You're being very quiet, sister. What's on your mind?"

She blinked a couple of times, turning from her inner conversation to the outside world, noticing that several of her friends were now watching her curiously. "I was thinking about Yrenti asking to meet Ms Aoyama. Jun and I were discussing it and what to do," She summarised the conversation she'd had with the SI.

"Ah, yes, I see," the eldest sister replied when she'd finished, frowning a little. "It is somewhat awkward, yes."

"I think you're right, we don't want to cause them any problems," Ranma said slowly, looking at her, "They seem like good and trustworthy people, who have helped us a lot. That said, I'm not quite ready to tell them everything." He sighed slightly. "I guess that in the end we probably will, assuming they don't work it out themselves, but not just yet. Although, if you want to play on the reputation of Azumi as a shape-shifter, that's all right as far as I'm concerned."

The middle Tendo thought for a moment. "I could, but I'm not sure it's the best idea, although I can't quite say why."

"If we don't let them know the truth, we need to come up with some sort of backstory, even if only fairly basic, for the organisation she works for," Fumiko suggested, looking intrigued. "The idea of security issues could cover for a lot of it of course, but you'd still need something, I think."

"Probably," she agreed. "I was thinking at least some sort of logo, like most security agencies have. Something that looks suitably alien."

"Well, there's no huge hurry, at any rate," Ranma said after they'd all through about that for a while. "Yrenti didn't seem to be in a rush, so I guess it isn't urgent. We can think about it for a while, until at least after Mom's party, and see what we can come up with."

Ami looked around at the assembled multitude. "It's been a lot of fun, but I'm going to need to get home now," she said. "Thanks for the lunch, Kasumi."

"You're entirely welcome, Ami, of course," Kasumi replied, smiling. "You are all always welcome
"Thanks. That means a lot." The blue-haired girl got up. Aiko did the same.

"I'll jump you home if you want, Ami," she offered.

"That would be great, thanks, Aiko."

The brunette looked around at the others. "Anyone else need a lift?"

Rei and Hotaru looked at each other then rose. "I should get back as well, Haruka is looking for somewhere to live and I'm supposed to be helping," the younger girl said, appearing slightly embarrassed. "But thanks for inviting me along. I like Yrenti and Savrk and Unare." She moved to stand beside Aiko and Ami.

"I'd better go back as well," Rei added, joining them.

"I'll be back in a bit," Aiko waved then the entire group vanished.

Standing, Nabiki stretched, then looked around the diminished number of people in the living room. "I'll be getting back as well, as soon as I've used the facilities," she announced. "I want to see Akane and Dad, and the others at home, before I go down to Kobe and stay with Miki for a couple of days." She headed off to the bathroom, before returning to her room and packing up the few things she didn't already have stored in her ki pocket. Feeling a familiar presence at the door she looked over her shoulder and smiled at her sister, who was leaning on the door frame watching her.

"I'll miss you, Nabiki," the older woman said, smiling a little back at her. "It's been lovely having you around."

"It's been great being here as well, sis," she replied, zipping up her backpack and flipping it into nothingness with a casual gesture. "I'll be back, don't worry. But I really do need to see what's going on at home, visit Miki and John, and get ready for the next trimester. I'll be graduating next spring and there's a lot of work to do." She laughed for a moment. "Although I will admit that economic theory is boring next to saving the entire universe."

Giggling, Kasumi walked over and hugged her. "That, I can well believe. Call me often, all right?"

"I will. I'll let you know about how Akane gets on as well. She's leaving tomorrow and probably will be there until something like Thursday or so."

They walked back into the living room, just in time to see Aiko reappear and sit down. "I do hope she and Shampoo do well," Kasumi remarked.

"They will. You wouldn't believe how much better she's become. She's like a more mature version of what she was when she was about eight, now, rather than the horror she was turning into a year and a half ago. Something everyone is incredibly grateful for, none more than her." Nabiki shook her head in wonder. "I'm amazed how much our entire family has changed in the last couple of years. All for the better."

"Hopefully, things will continue to improve," Ranma said, getting up and walking over. He held out his hand, which she looked at for a moment, then brushed aside in favour of a hug. Laughing, he returned it. "Take care, Nabs. Make sure my parents don't do anything stupid."

"I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything in the case of Genma. I'm a magical girl, not a miracle worker," she snickered. He chuckled, very amused.
"True, I guess. See you at the party. We need to arrange a fusion reactor for the PSIA around then as well."

"I should call Uthryyl and talk about that," she agreed. "I'll do that soon." Releasing him she stepped back, as Aiko stood.

"Want a lift?"

"Thanks. That would save time, as always." Smiling at her friend, she looked around at the others. "It's been a hell of a lot of fun," she added softly. "Even with all the terror. Thanks for being my family."

Tamiko grinned at her, looking around as well, then returning her attention to the middle sister. "I think we all feel the same, Nabiki, trust me. See you later, sister."

With a wave, and a quick grab at the Krennish snack Misaki flipped her with a grin, she and Aiko disappeared, even before she got the spiky blue thing in her mouth.

"Don't call me Nabs, Saotome."

Ranma laughed, then sat down with his arm around his wife, talking to his friends.
Chapter 90

There is a story on my page about the origins of Aiko and her team, for anyone who hasn't yet stumbled across it.

Next chapter is Akane and Shampoo do Hollywood :)

Poor Hollywood...

Then it's party time!

Thanks again for all the comments, everyone.

This one took a while as I've never been to Kobe, so I had to look up a lot of things to try to get the details at least vaguely plausible. The internet is useful for more than porn, it turns out...

Glancing up as she thought she saw something flicker in the corner of her vision, Saeko frowned slightly. 'What was that?' she wondered to herself. It had been a bright flash of light from somewhere outside, as far as she could tell, replaying it in her head. For some reason it was vaguely familiar although she couldn't quite recall why for the moment.

The sound of the door opening pushed the mildly puzzling event out of her thoughts, bringing a smile to her face. "I'm home, Mom," Ami called, as she stood up, quickly saving the document she was working on, before leaving the study.

"Did everything go well with your friends, Ami?" she asked, watching her daughter take her shoes off and hang her jacket up.

"Yes, thanks. I stayed over for lunch then came back. How are you today? Sorry I left so early, you were asleep and I didn't want to wake you up."

"I'm fine, thank you," the elder woman replied with a smile. "I saw your note." She looked at the shoes on the rack inside the door, raising an eyebrow at the grey dust on them and on the doormat. Ami followed her eyes and flushed a little.

"Sorry. I'll clean it up."

"Did you go somewhere on a building site, dear? That looks like concrete dust." Saeko smiled deviously. "Or perhaps it's moon dust. Did you go and get me another rock?"

Ami giggled, hugging her mother. "Surely one is enough?" she joked, as they went into the living room. The older woman laughed as well, listening as her daughter began talking about the work she expected to do in her last term of school when it restarted in a couple of weeks.

"You're back, Nabiki! We've missed you," Nodoka exclaimed as the middle sister entered the kitchen, turning away from the sink and drying her hands on a towel before pulling the younger woman into a quick hug. "I didn't think you were coming for a few days. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Auntie," the middle sister replied, putting the bag she was carrying for appearances sake on the kitchen table. "I'm only back for tonight, though, then down to Kobe for a little while. I decided to come back a little earlier because I missed everyone. I'll be back home again after that
“It's been better,” the younger woman growled, glaring at their father, who came over with a small grin on his face, putting his arm around both of them.

"Don't be like that, dear, you're improving. It took nearly thirty seconds to win that time, that's much better than the previous six times." Shampoo started laughing at the expression on her friend's face due to this somewhat back-handed encouragement. Snickering, Soun looked at his middle daughter. "Hello, Nabiki. I didn't expect you back quite yet."

"Last minute change of plans, I decided to come back before I went down to Kobe. How is everything going?"

"Very well, actually, thank you, dear. Genma and I were at a loose end today since we don't have any students in until Monday, so we decided to bring Shampoo and Akane up to speed on a few of the more advanced Anything Goes moves. They're both doing very well, although for some reason this last one seems to be giving your sister some trouble." He laughed slightly as Akane looked irritated. "I'm sure she'll get it, though, sooner or later."

"Oh, thanks a lot, Dad," the youngest sister said, although she was beginning to smile. Lifting his arm off her shoulders she stepped back. "I need to have something to eat, then I'll come back and
show you just how much I've learned." He bowed slightly towards her, his moustache twitching a little.

"I await that eventuality with anticipation," he retorted gravely. Shampoo laughed, as did Nabiki, then followed the youngest Tendo out of the Dojo. Soun turned to his older daughter, looking her up and down for a moment. "You look well, daughter. Have you been exercising?"

"A bit," she admitted, internally amused by what his reaction would be if he knew how. "A lot of swimming, certainly."

"I'm impressed, you look very healthy." He smiled for a moment. "I still think you should take up the Art, though, dear, I think you'd be very good at it and it's extremely good exercise."

"My current exercise regime is fine, thank, Dad," she replied, laughing.

He laughed as well. "How long are you back for?"

"Only tonight, I'm heading off to Kobe for a couple of days sometime tomorrow morning. I'll have to check the train times."

"Ah, I understand. Well, it's nice to see you again, even if only briefly." He put his arm around her shoulder. Genma walked over, grinning.

"Good to see you again, Nabiki. I hope your holiday went well. Did you go anywhere interesting?"

"Lots of places, yes, Uncle Genma." She couldn't think of anything else to say on that subject. "Auntie was making tea and taking it out to the garden. Let's go and have some and I'll tell you about some of it." She'd spent some time coming up with sanitised variants of various stories, managing to leave out exactly where she'd been for the last few weeks.

They all wandered around to the garden, finding Nodoka just coming out of the house with a tray full of tea things, which she put on the garden table. Akane and Shampoo joined them a few seconds later. Sitting down in one of the garden chairs she accepted the cup the Saotome woman handed her with a smile. "So, dear, tell us something about your holiday. Did you do anything exciting?"

"A few things," she laughed quietly. "I went hang-gliding for the first time. That was fun. An amazing view from up in the air." Everyone looked at her in mild shock.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Nodoka asked, seeming somewhat worried. She shrugged a little.

"Not really. The equipment was first rate, my instructor really knew his stuff, so there wasn't much risk. The only problem was I couldn't use my camera up there, my hands were sort of busy."

"Wow, 'Biki, I don't think I'd be able to do that," Akane said, shuddering a little. "I'm not fantastic with heights."

"You don't notice it when you're flying, not like being up on something tall, at least," the middle sister replied. "I'm not sure why, I've read it's something to do with being able to see a connection to the ground. But it was fine when we were in the air. The first few seconds were a bit worrying but after that it was enormous fun. I didn't want to stop, neither did Maiko."

"She went with you?" Soun enquired. She nodded.
"It was a friend of a friend of hers who had the gliders. We bumped into him more or less by accident and one thing led to another. The next thing you know we're both three kilometres up swooping around all over the place." Nabiki grinned as both her father and sister paled a little. Shampoo looked interested while Nodoka and her husband were looking at her slightly oddly.

"Oh, dear. I don't think I could do that," the Saotome woman said in a faint tone after a long pause.

"You'd be fine, Auntie," she assured the woman, internally giggling at the thought of Ranma's mother flying a D'sage glider. It seemed unlikely ever to happen.

"Didn't Rika do it?" Genma asked curiously. She shook her head.

"She was interested but was in the middle of something else, so it never happened, that time. We did go flying again later and she was the first to jump off the edge." The young woman grinned as her entire audience paled at once this time. "We all had a lot of fun."

"Did you get a lot of photos, then?" her father asked. "I know you bought that rather impressive camera and a lot of film before you left."

"I took quite a few rolls, yes," she replied. "I'm going to have to wait to go back to the university to develop them and see how they came out. I don't trust the commercial places to do it, I'd rather process them myself on the equipment they have there. It's a lot cheaper as well. I'll print out some nice ones and show them to you in a few weeks."

She'd taken the opportunity to take a number of 'safe' photos around the place on Aiko Island, and one or two other places that couldn't be identified as out of the ordinary, just for this eventuality. 'I must ask Aiko to take me to a couple of other places in the mountains and the like to take a few more,' she mused to herself, looking around as she sipped her tea. 'Pity I can't show the ones from the crater rim on Fwetna. Hopefully they came out, and if so they'll be amazing. Oh well, perhaps one day.'

"We went all over the place. Even to some wonderful little islands in the tropics for a short time, another friend of Rika's arranged it. It was a lot of fun. No one around for hundreds of miles except us."

"It sounds wonderful, Nabiki," Nodoka said, smiling at her. Akane nodded, looking envious.

"I'd love to go somewhere like that one day."

"You're off to Hollywood tomorrow, surely that's exotic enough for the moment?" her sister asked, grinning. The youngest Tendo laughed.

"I suppose so."

"Are you still looking forward to it?" She glanced at Shampoo. "And you?"

Both young woman shared a look. "I certainly am, yes," the Amazon admitted happily. "The closer it gets the more I'm anticipating it. I think it could be damn good fun."

"But it still makes me nervous," Akane said in a low voice, looking mildly worried. "What if I screw it up?"

"You won't," Nabiki looked hard at her younger sister. "I'm sure of that. Once, yes, you might have done, but these days you're a sensible, more or less mature person who can do anything she needs to do."
Akane looked at her for a few seconds, apparently not entirely sure whether she'd been complimented or not, based on her expression, but eventually nodded. "Thanks, 'Biki. I think." The middle sister chuckled.

"It was a compliment. You'll be fine. I expect we'll be seeing you in films sooner or later, probably sooner. Both of you. I'm looking forward to having a famous sister." She laughed. "I can come to the US and sponge off you in Beverly Hills or something."

Her sister gave her a narrow-eyed look for a long moment, causing her to grin. "Earn your own fortune," she finally replied archly.

Laughing, Nabiki nodded. "I intend to. But I'm still going to sponge off you. That's what family is for."

Sighing, Akane shook her head, then smiled a little. "We'll see." The two Tendo daughters shared a glance, before giggling. "Of course you'll be welcome, 'Biki. It would be nice to have family and friends come over. But we're sort of getting ahead of ourselves at the moment. We're still not sure what's going to happen."

"You'll impress the hell out of them, get hired on the spot at that ridiculous salary Adrian suggested, then go on to become famous stunt women, both of you," the middle sister said, waving a hand dismissively. "I can't see any other outcome. Don't worry about it, just do your best and enjoy yourselves."

Shampoo and the younger Tendo woman looked at each other for a few seconds. The Amazon shrugged. "Sounds like good advice."

"OK." Akane chuckled. "We'll do that, then. It's better than my idea of panicking and running around in circles."

"Very true," Soun commented, watching them while smiling a little to himself. "Running in circles seldom solves a problem." He grinned as both his daughters stared at him with almost identical, raised-eyebrow expressions. "Nabiki is right, dear. I'm sure you're both going to do very well indeed. Try not to over-think it. Just do what Adrian and his colleagues ask you to do to the best of your abilities and everything will work out."

"I sure hope so," the young woman mumbled, but nodded, smiling.

Nabiki asked, "When are you two leaving?"

"Tomorrow around nine or so is what we're planning," the Amazon replied. "That gets us to LA about five in the afternoon. It'll mainly be talking to Adrian and the others tomorrow and dealing with some paperwork, then looking around LA, before an early night. The time difference will take a bit of getting used to. The stunt trials will start on Monday, which gives us a day to settle in."

"It sounds like you've got a lot to do in only a few days."

Shampoo nodded. "The first day is introductions to everyone, some people we've met like Aaron and Matt, some we haven't, like the driving instructor, other stunt people, the studio executives, that sort of thing, in the morning, then a longer demonstration afterwards. Depending on how that goes, it would be followed by instruction and learning a few things for the rest of the day. Probably driving techniques, how they want fights done, how the cameras work, and a few other movie requirements. That's what Adrian told us, anyway."

"After that, the next day is supposed to be doing some more training then some practical stunt-
work, first just learning how, then practising, eventually in front of a camera," Akane added, looking mildly worried again. "Something I'm a little nervous about I have to admit. But I guess I'll get over it."

Shampoo glanced at her with a smile. "Of course you will. I'm nervous as well but really excited." She looked back to the middle sister. "He says that depending on how the first day of work and all the tests go, there would be one, or perhaps two more days, so we'll probably be back Thursday or Friday. We cross the date line so Friday morning here is Thursday evening there."

"OK. I understand. By the sound of it there's a lot of work ahead of you both but it should be good fun and very good experience." Nabiki smiled to herself, watching them both. "Assuming everything goes well, what happens next?"

Shampoo looked at Akane, both of them appearing slightly uncertain. "I'm not entirely sure, yet," her sister admitted. "From what Adrian said the various studio people will want to go over the sample work and film for at least a week, talk about it, then make a decision. He seems pretty sure that decision will be the one he wants. I guess we just have to wait and see."

"If it does go to plan, he thinks we'd be doing real work, or at least serious training and practice, for money, sometime in January, after the New Year." Shampoo looked at her small audience for a moment. "He also though they'd want us over for longer in late September or early October for between a couple of weeks and a month for the preliminary work, contract signing, looking for somewhere to live, setting up bank accounts..." She shrugged a little helplessly. "It goes on forever. Moving to a new country is complicated."

Genma smirked at her. "You didn't seem to have any problems when you and Cologne turned up here," he commented. She gave him a look.

"We didn't exactly do it the traditional way," the Chinese girl admitted, seeming both amused and slightly embarrassed. "But it all worked out in the end. In this case, though, we need to follow the rules." He nodded, looking amused as well.

"Americans have even more of them than we do from what I've been told. But I've never been there."

"It seems an interesting place," Akane noted. "Although we didn't see a lot of it the last time."

Listening, Nabiki felt pleased. Her sister seemed much more relaxed and confident than she had been about the entire idea, and still very interested in it. That suggested to her it was probably going to work out well. She certainly hoped so. "I'll stick around tomorrow to see you off and say hi to Aiko, but I need to catch the quarter to eleven train to Kobe. I'm looking forward to seeing Miki and John."

"Have you known them long?" Soun asked her curiously. "You've mentioned both of them before but I don't know much about them."

She smiled, thinking back. "Miki has lived across the hall from me since I've been at the university, so nearly four years now, but until fairly recently I didn't know her all that well. We said hello, sometimes sat together in class, that sort of thing, although I wouldn't call it a close friendship."

"What changed?" her father asked. She shrugged a little.

"I'm not sure. She knocked on the door one night a couple of months after Christmas when I had a
small accident, wanting to see if I was all right, and it kind of grew from that. Somehow, we ended up becoming pretty good friends. She met John a little before that, I think, and I was introduced a few weeks later. We went out for pizza, ate way too much, talked for ages..." Nabiki grinned. "It just sort of happened."

"They sound like nice people," Akane commented, listening with interest to her older sister.

"They are. Miki is really nice, very smart, and good looking as well, which helped with John." Everyone laughed at this. "John is amazingly good at pure mathematics, much better than I am, and doesn't really have all that much interest in economic theory, but he's damn good at statistics, which is how they met. They had the same class. He moved here from the UK, he grew up somewhere in the south of the country, they came back because his mother had a family problem a few years ago. His accent is noticeable but he's actually very good with Japanese, much better than most Europeans I've talked to. We go out to movies sometimes, and things like that."

She looked at her sister with a smirk. "We'll be able to go to ones soon where I can point and say, 'I know her.'"

Rolling her eyes, the younger sister laughed. "And I'm sure you will every chance you get."

"Of course." Nabiki leaned back in her seat, projecting satisfaction. "What's the point of having a famous relative if you can't use that fact to your own benefit?"

"You never change, do you, 'Biki?" Akane giggled.

Nabiki waved her hand over herself. "Change? When I have all this? Why would I?" They exchanged a glance then both sisters collapsed laughing, their father watching with a grin. Shampoo and Nodoka looked at each other and shook their heads good-naturedly. 'If only they knew how much I have changed...' the middle sister thought to herself, causing her to laugh harder, although no one but she knew why.

Nodoka poured herself a little more tea. "Please make sure you invite them both to the party, Nabiki," she requested, an amused smile on her face. "They sound interesting. I'd like to meet them."

"Miki will be falling over herself to talk to Yori and the others," the middle sister giggled. "She's really into magical girls. I managed to get her signature and her friends as well for her, she couldn't believe it." Looking at Akane she laughed, "She's even more into that sort of thing than you are. Apparently her sister Hana is absolutely nuts about it."

"Perhaps you should invite her as well," Soun chuckled. Nabiki glanced at him, grinning. "I don't know if that would be a good idea. The screaming and squealing might get annoying after a while." Her father laughed at this, finishing off his tea. She looked back to her sister and Shampoo. "How is Mr Ito being about you going off for a week?" she asked.

"He's actually been very supportive," the younger woman replied with a pleased expression. "He's given me the week off with pay, which is really generous, and told me he hopes I'll do well, even though he'd miss me. I've recommended that he talk to Mariko about my job if she's interested, she'd probably be good at it and she could easily do the security aspect as well."

"We invited him and his wife to the party," Nodoka told her, "as well as that police lieutenant, ah, Sasaki, is it, Akane?" The young woman nodded. "He's been around for the last two or three robberies that Akane has dealt with, Mr Ito and he are old friends apparently, and your father
knows him as well from the council work. Plus a few of the neighbours, Cologne and Mousse, Ukyo and Konatsu... I think that's it so far. And of course, Yori and her friends."

"It's going to be amazing, I suspect," Shampoo grinned.

"Could well be," Nabiki admitted, smiling back. "I'm looking forward to it."

After a few more minutes talking about the upcoming trip to the US, and the party as well, Soun asked his middle daughter, "Have you given that odd occurrence last week any more thought?"

"The twitch?" He nodded. The brunette shrugged slightly. "I've talked to people about it but no one seems to know exactly what it was." Which was indeed true. "It's a bit weird the way nobody seems too worried, though. From what I saw on the TV and the internet everyone on the planet felt it, apparently at exactly the same time. Kind of strange. There are some amazing conspiracy stories circulating about it, as you said the other day, some of them are really funny."

"Indeed," her father mused. He glanced at Genma, who looked back, then returned his attention to his daughter. "I saw something very odd during the whole event," he admitted, "Something very few other people seem to remember. Genma and Shampoo saw it too, as did Cologne and Mousse." He went on to describe the column of light that had suddenly exploded outwards from somewhere near the centre of Minato. Nabiki listened with interest, passing the details on to Ranma and her older sister, as it seemed to be more evidence that it was as they'd suspected something that most advanced ki or magic users would remember.

'Interesting,' Ranma commed her, listening to Soun talk through her ears. 'I'm not surprised, to be honest, but it's useful information. Thanks.'

'No problem, Ranma,' she replied, before closing the link. "That's very weird, Dad," she said out loud as her father stopped talking. "You two didn't see it?" Nodoka and Akane shook their heads when she glanced at them.

"No, nothing at all like what your father described," the elder Saotome woman replied, looking thoughtful. "It was very strange. Elder Cologne believes it was due to having either a high magical ability or a similar ki ability that allowed certain people to remember it. She made some enquiries that would seem to back that up. What it means, though, not even she seems to know." The older woman seemed mildly worried for a moment. "To be honest I think it rather scared her, whatever it was she found out. She believes it may have something to do with this mysterious Ms Aoyama woman Akane and Shampoo seem so nervous of." Nabiki watched with inner amusement as both the mentioned young women unconsciously shivered at the name of her alter-ego.

"Yes, it is very strange," was all she said in the end.

"Quite. It may be something we never find out about," Soun remarked, sighing slightly. "But I suppose as long as no damage was done there probably isn't any harm in it. It's just one of those odd occurrences that happens from time to time."

"Life can be weird," Nabiki agreed, smiling slightly. After a moment's pause, the group turned to discussing the upcoming party and life in general. She looked around at the garden and the people in it, content to be back home.

Akane finished her miso soup, feeling very nervous, glancing over at the others around the table while she ate. Beside her, Shampoo, who had come over for breakfast while they waited for Aiko to arrive looked much calmer although still not exactly unmoved. She caught her sister's eye, the
"It will be OK, Akane. Just do your best and enjoy yourselves." Nabiki looked calm and relaxed, something that at the moment she was very envious of. She was anything but. Nodding, she put her spoon down, leaning back and closing her eyes for a few seconds, while running through some relaxation exercises her therapist had taught her months ago. They worked surprisingly well most times.

This wasn't one of them, unfortunately.

Sighing, she shook her head slightly and opened her eyes again. "Sorry, I can't help being nervous," she admitted. Nabiki grinned at her.

"I'm not surprised, it's a big event in your life, but we all have faith in you. Both of you," she added, looking at the Chinese girl, who grinned back.

"Thanks, Nabiki." Both girls twirled as the doorbell rang, making the others smile, then Nodoka got up and went to answer it, returning a few seconds later with not the magical girl, but Cologne and Mousse.

"Hello, Elder," Nabiki said, sounding pleased, standing up and motioning the ancient women to a seat in a gesture of respect. She nodded to Mousse and shook his hand, exchanging a greeting quietly.

"Good morning, Nabiki. It's nice to see you home again. I trust your travels went well?"

Akane watched as her sister grinned again, looking momentarily very pleased. "Yes, it was a hell of a lot of fun. I'll show you all some photos when I develop the film soon."

"I'd be most interested in hearing about it all," the Elder commented, dropping off her staff and taking the offered seat. "I always enjoyed travelling but I haven't done much in recent years for a number of reasons." She looked around at the other occupants of the room. "We thought we'd drop by and see the youngsters off, and wish them good luck," she explained. Nodoka poured her and the young man cups of tea, which both of them accepted with thanks.

"Looking forward to the experience, Akane?" Mousse asked. She looked at him for a moment then nodded.

"I am, I think, but the closer it gets the more nervous I am," she said quietly. He grinned at her.

"Going to a different country to follow your dream is a big step, certainly, but it can also be a lot of fun and very rewarding. Even if things don't work out exactly how you expected." He glanced at Shampoo as he spoke, causing her to half-smile, half-sigh. "Personally I think you'll both do very well," he finished, making her smile gratefully at him.

"Thanks."

The youngest Tendo woman sipped her tea, trying to remain calm, or at least, calmer. The doorbell rang again, proving she'd failed as she jumped, spilling a little of her drink on the table. "Damn," she muttered. Nodoka looked mildly amused, passing her a damp cloth, then got up to answer the door again. This time, she returned with Aiko, who was dressed in jeans and a nice shirt, unlike her normal 'work clothes'. Everyone looked at her curiously.

"I'm going to visit Richard afterwards," she explained, grinning, apparently realising what they were all looking at, "we might go out later. It seemed appropriate to be incognito. Even magical
"Seems reasonable," Nabiki laughed. Getting up she shook hands with the petite brunette. "It's nice to see you again, Aiko."

"And you, Nabiki. It seems like ages since we last met." Akane watched as both young women exchanged an oddly amused look.

"Would you like some tea, Aiko?" Nodoka asked.

"Thank you, yes, that would be very nice," the girl replied. Moving over Nabiki managed to make space between her and Cologne, who also shifted slightly. The room was becoming very full. Sitting down, Aiko accepted the cup the Saotome woman handed her with a smile. "So, Akane, Shampoo, you're all ready?"

"Yes, we're packed and looking forward to it," the Amazon replied. Glancing at the youngest sister, she amended her statement slightly. "Mostly looking forward..."

Aiko laughed. "I understand. It's a lot of pressure. Don't worry, I think it will all work out. Give it your best, that's all you can do."

"Everyone seems to be saying that sort of thing," Akane replied, amused, relaxing a little. "I suppose it must be true."

"Or we're all just wrong," her sister noted.

"Oh, thanks, 'Biki, that really helps," she snapped, suddenly worried again. The older Tendo laughed gently.

"I'm joking. You'll be fine, trust me. Hey, bring me back something interesting from LA, OK? I've never been to Hollywood."

"You could come if you want," Aiko suggested, grinning.

"I've got a prior appointment in Kobe," the other Tendo woman said, laughing, "but thanks for the offer. Perhaps next time."

Twenty minutes later they finished breakfast, Nabiki helping Nodoka quickly clear up, and had run out of things to say. Akane was feeling much calmer although she could still feel the butterflies flitting around somewhere in her digestive system. Firmly suppressing the urge to run upstairs and hide in her closet, she swallowed, stood up, and looked around. "I guess we should go."

Standing, Soun walked over and put his hands on her shoulders, looking into her face with a definite proud smile. "I have no doubt you will do well and succeed in this, as well as you've succeeded in turning your life around over the last year. Make me proud, daughter, and enjoy yourself." Staring back at him, she wrapped her arms around his back and hugged him hard enough to make him grunt a little.

"I'll do my best, Dad," she whispered, feeling his hand stroke her hair.

"I know you will, dear," he whispered back. "All my daughters do, and their best is extraordinary." Releasing him she stepped back. "Take care of her, Shampoo," he requested, the Amazon warrior nodding with a small smile. "And you take care of Shampoo. You're in this together, you're good friends, and you'll both succeed in anything you try."
"Thank you, Soun," the lilac-haired woman replied, looking pleased. She turned to talk to Cologne in Mandarin for a moment, Akane picking up enough of it to know she was receiving similar advice from the tiny ancient. Cologne grinned, gently bopping her with the end of her staff.

"Make us proud, great-granddaughter," the Elder commented in Japanese. "You to, Akane. You have a lot of talent, let it guide you. And come and see me when you return, I want to hear what happens."

"I will, Elder," she replied, smiling.

Watching them, Aiko waited until she and Shampoo had said goodbye to everyone, then stood up. "Come outside, it's easier from there," the magical girl said, smiling. Everyone trailed after her into the garden, Akane and Shampoo standing next to her as the others watched from the doorway. "Right. Ready?"

"I think so," Akane replied after a few seconds, determinedly throwing off any residual nervousness and looked at Shampoo, who grinned back. "Let's go."

"OK," the brunette laughed. She waved to the others, as did the Amazon and her friend. "See you guys later."

A second later, Akane felt the world twist away from them and they were standing in bright late-afternoon sunlight, Adrian looking mildly startled at the abrupt appearance yet very pleased to see them.

Nodoka blinked a little after the flash of the outbound teleport, turning to the remaining Tendo sister. "Such an odd way to travel but very convenient. I'd like to try it one day," she commented, which seemed to amuse Nabiki.

"I'm sure Aiko wouldn't mind," she replied. "From what I know about her she seems to love teleporting all over the world. Yori mentioned once that they go to Australia regularly for sushi, for instance."

"How odd," the Saotome woman said, amused. "But a very handy talent. I do hope they get on well in the US," she added. "I'm sure they will, but one worries a little. America is a very strange place from what I hear."

"They'll be fine, Auntie," Nabiki reassured her, smiling. "Akane and Shampoo are both more than capable of defending themselves against practically anything, nothing is likely to happen anyway, and even if it did, they could call Aiko and get home in seconds."

"My daughter will do well," Soun pronounced gravely, while beside him, Genma nodded. "So will Shampoo. They'll both make us all proud of them."

"I'm already proud of them," Cologne snickered. "Akane has progressed far further than I ever expected, something which I find myself very pleased about. In turn, she's pushing Shampoo much harder than I could ever have hoped for. It's doing both of them a world of good." The old woman laughed for a moment. "Akane could probably win the village champion award by this point, or at least come second. Shampoo would destroy them. I find this all very amusing, all things considered." Looking at Soun and Genma she added, "Thank you both for teaching my great-granddaughter some of your special techniques as well. She seemed very pleased."

"She's an excellent student," Genma replied placidly. "I'm happy with how well and quickly she learned. Now, Akane on the other hand..." He glanced at his old friend with a smirk. "She took
some teaching." Soun looked at him, then Nabiki, following which he sighed a little and punched him.

Everyone stepped aside to allow the fight to pass through. Nodoka sighed, shaking her head. "I was hoping this sort of thing was over, they haven't had a fight in nearly a week."

"Perhaps they're bored?" Nabiki offered, apparently taking a bet from Mousse, and oddly enough, Cologne. She watched as the two men bounced off the garden wall.

"Possibly. My take on it is that they're both idiots," she replied, grinning a little as Nabiki giggled. Cologne watched the fight with an expert eye, smiling, while Mousse simply crossed his arms and waited, leaning against the side of the house.

Inevitably, the fight ended with a splash. "Still pushing the possessed pond idea, Auntie?" Nabiki asked idly as she distributed the winnings, Mousse looking annoyed while Cologne cackled, folding the wad of yen away somewhere.

Laughing, she nodded. "Every chance I get. It's definitely causing them some worry," she replied happily. Everyone laughed as a panda hauled itself out of the pond, dripping wet, then crawled a few metres away before passing out. "Give me a hand retrieving your father before he drowns, will you, dear?" she added, shaking her head and heading for the pond.

Watching Miki and John approach outside the train station on the outskirts of Kobe, Nabiki smiled, waving. She found herself very pleased to see both of them. While she was more than happy with the way her life was going at the moment, even with the occasional universe-ending peril thrown into the mix, she was also looking forward to something more... normal. These two were exactly that, decent, normal people, to whom magical girls and demons were something you watched on the news, rather than had breakfast with. She grinned internally at the thought, walking over to meet her friends.

"Hi Nabiki," the other young woman grinned, giving her a brief hug. "How was the trip?"

"Not too bad. A little tedious, but long train journeys are like that at the best of times." She turned to John, who smiled, holding out his hand, which she shook. "It's nice to see you again, both of you."

"And you, Nabiki. We were talking about you a few days ago, wondering how your holiday went. Did you go anywhere interesting?"

For a moment she couldn't decide quite how to answer that. Laughing, she finally nodded, answering, "Quite a few places, yes. We did a lot of swimming, met some new people, made friends, ate too much, saved the world a couple of times..." She shrugged. "You know, the normal holiday sort of thing."

Miki glanced at her boyfriend before both of them laughed. "Sounds like fun. I can understand the eating too much, I would imagine saving the world builds an appetite."

"You have no idea," she replied, giggling. "All that running around and screaming really takes it out of you. After that, you need a good meal to recover."

All three of them laughed for a moment, beginning to walk down the road. "At least it's been nice weather for it," John chuckled.

"Yes, that was good, you wouldn't want to save the world on a rainy day. Hardly worth the effort,"
the middle sister told him, glancing at him for a moment with a sly look. He returned it, amused.

"You have a very odd sense of humour, my dear Miss Tendo. We've been missing it."

Laughing and talking happily, the threesome headed towards Miki's house, arriving some twenty minutes later. "Well there it is. Not as large as some, bigger than others, but I like it," the young woman said, pointing as they rounded the final corner. The house and garden was perhaps half the size of the Tendo Dojo, a decent size but nothing exceptional. Opening the front door Miki waved her visitor in, John bringing up the rear behind his girlfriend. "Come in." They all exchanged their shoes for indoor ones, then Miki called, "Mom! We found Nabiki, she survived the trip."

"We're in the back garden," came back the reply. Nabiki recognised the voice from her phone call a couple of days earlier. All three of them trooped through the house and out the back door, the middle sister looking around with interest. It was neat, not obsessively so, but in the manner that showed pride in keeping things nice, with a number of pieces of art tastefully scattered around the rooms, including paintings, prints, and a couple of small sculptures. The back garden was similarly neat, reminding her of the garden at home, well kept and maintained. An older woman who was obviously Miki's mother, based on appearance, was kneeling on the ground tending to a remarkably involved flower bed with gloved hands, sitting back on her heels and turning her head to watch as they walked over. Beside her a fairly short but wide and strongly built man, late forties or so, his dark hair closely cropped, was carefully watering the newly pruned flowers with a watering can. He looked over his shoulder, his face losing what Nabiki could believe was a fairly intimidating expression to a wide smile.

"Mom, Dad, this is my friend Nabiki from university. Nabiki, this is my mother and father." Miki made the introductions as the three younger people stopped a couple of metres from the two.

Gracefully rising, Miki's mother walked over and greeted them, her husband behind her, the man walking with a slight limp. "It's nice to meet you, Nabiki. Miki has mentioned you a lot over the summer. I'm Umeko. This is my husband Harue. Did you have a good trip from Tokyo?"

"Yes, thank you, Umeko, it was a bit boring but not too bad."

Harue smiled a little at her words, nodding and saying, "I sympathise, I've been doing quite a lot of travelling recently and it certainly does become tedious after a while." He bowed slightly to her. "It's very nice to finally meet the young woman who saved my daughter from a mugging."

Laughing, Nabiki demurred, replying, "It was nothing, really. He wasn't very good, he left himself wide open, and it was just a reflex action. My father and sister would be quite surprised, they're the ones with years of training and are both very good martial artists. I'd just seen that move enough times it just sort of happened, I wasn't really thinking about it."

"Even so, it was well done from what Miki told us. It takes courage to deal with an armed criminal, even a not very good one. Thank you."

"You're entirely welcome," she smiled, returning his small respectful bow. Both of them grinned at each other. The middle sister had developed an instant liking for both the older people, their ki emanations suggested decent and honourable people and good parents. "I've known her for some time although I do slightly regret not becoming better friends earlier."

"Better late than never," Miki giggled, putting her arm around her friend's shoulder. "I'm glad you came. I'll show you the spare room, you can drop that backpack off, then we can have lunch. How long can you stay?"
"I've got a few days before I need to get back. I was thinking perhaps a couple of nights?" Nabiki followed her friend back into the house and up a flight of stairs to a room overlooking the back garden. Miki opened the door and entered it, so she followed.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you can, you don't have to rush off. There's still, what, about ten days before we have to get back?"

"Something like that. The first course restarts in thirteen days, but I want to be settled in the day before at least." Smiling a little the middle sister looked around the room. It was not large but it was nicely laid out and looked after. "This is very nice. Thanks, Miki." Taking her backpack off she put it on the bed, then looked out the window, before turning to her friend. "I could stay a bit longer if you can put up with me," she added, smiling more widely. "But I need to get back before next weekend, my Aunt Nodoka is throwing a party that I can't miss. It's probably going to turn into something weird."

"Why would it do that?" Miki asked, looking puzzled. "I mean, I know you live in Nerima, which I've heard is a little peculiar at the best of times, but it's just a party."

Looking back out the window Nabiki watched Miki's mother carefully trim another flower, while her father was talking to John. She grinned a little to herself. "It will probably be fine, but you never know, inviting six magical girls could bring all sorts of strange things along with it." She could easily feel her friend go completely still in shock. Turning around she added casually, "It could be fun. Want to go?" There was no answer for a moment, the other young woman simply staring blankly at her, so she shrugged a little. "You don't have to if you don't want to." Walking towards the door, she added over her shoulder, "You mentioned lunch?"

She was half way down the stairs when she felt Miki's mind re-engage, almost able to hear the gears grinding. "Hey! Get back here, Tendo! You can't just say something like that and run off," Miki yelled, charging after her. Laughing, she zipped down the stairs and back into the garden, the other girl in pursuit, to find the elder Sanos and John staring at them both curiously.

"What on earth is going on, girls?" Umeko asked, getting to her feet and taking her gardening gloves off. Her daughter pointed at Nabiki, who was giggling to herself.

"My friend here has been keeping things from me, it seems," Miki grumbled, although she was also smiling a little, "apparently her aunt is actually inviting magical girls to a party and she only just now bothers to mention it!" Both Umeko and her husband looked startled, staring at their daughter, then transferring the attention to Nabiki, making her grin. John shook his head slowly, laughing at the exasperated expression of good humour on his girlfriend's face.

"Magical...?" Umeko glanced back at her daughter for a moment. "Your aunt knows some magical girls?"

"Sort of, yes. It's a long story, but my younger sister had a sort of medical problem that caused her to... well, to kind of have a rage episode in Minato that ended up coming to the attention of a magical girl called Yori and her friends." Both Umeko and her husband looked startled, staring at their daughter, then transferring the attention to Nabiki, making her grin. John shook his head slowly, laughing at the exasperated expression of good humour on his girlfriend's face.

"Miki did mention something about that a while ago, now that you remind me," Harue commented, looking interested. "But she didn't go into any details."

"It's not something we make too much of a fuss about, although it's not really a secret," Nabiki told him, turning to face him more directly. "Poor Akane had an absolutely horrible temper for years, which turned out to be at least partially because of this weird parasitical organism in her brain." Both Miki's parents went slightly green. "Yori found it when she was healing Akane from injuries
sustained in her fight, then she and Chou managed to fix it. It helped my sister a huge amount although she's still been in therapy ever since for other issues that were involved. That said, it's worked miracles, in the last few months she's hardly lost her temper at all and when she did, it was nothing very serious. We owe them a lot."

Both the older people looked impressed. "I've heard quite a lot on the news about the odd goings on in Minato in general and the activities of those two young women in particular," Umeko noted, kneeling to put away her tools in a container next to her, then standing again. "From what I understand they seem to have a considerable amount of official backing, judging by how they've been in the UK, the US, and Canada as well in that awful Halleckton thing. I was listening to a report about it just yesterday."

"They do get around, certainly," Nabiki agreed honestly. "But, anyway, when they'd fixed my sister up they brought her home and explained everything to us. They also managed to arrange to sort out the damage she'd caused in the fight. Both of them came back several times over the next few weeks to check on the progress of the cure but in the end it seems to have worked very well indeed, as I said. We're all both very pleased and very grateful, none more so than Akane. Especially considering what happened later."

"What happened?" Miki asked eagerly, while the others looked at Nabiki curiously.

Umeko glanced at her watch, turning to her daughter and shaking her head, smiling. "That can wait for a moment, we need to get lunch ready. Can you help me, please, Miki? Hana and Kimiko should be back in about twenty minutes, so we'll have to set seven places at the table." The older Sano woman glanced at Nabiki. "Hana is the older sister, Kimiko is the younger one."

"Ah." Nabiki nodded, smiling. "Miki has mentioned Hana before, and I knew she had two sisters, but I didn't know the other name. Are they as interested in magical girls as Miki is?" Harue looked at his wife, then his daughter, before bursting out laughing.

"Hana is obsessed. Miki has a fairly mild case of it, to be honest." The middle Sano daughter stuck her tongue out at her father as her boyfriend chuckled. "Be prepared for a lot of questions at the table..."

"She's not quite that bad, Dad," Miki protested mildly. He looked at her and raised an eyebrow. After a moment she sighed a little. "OK. She is. Kimiko isn't, though. But she is a little interested, she collects magazines about them. Hana collects everything even vaguely related to magical girls."

"You mentioned she was interested in those signatures I got you," Nabiki giggled. Miki howled with laughter as she remembered.

"Interested?" she managed after a moment's hilarity. "You wouldn't believe the colour her face went when I showed them to her! It was wonderful." She was leaning on John by this point, laughing helplessly. Her parents exchanged an amused glance.

"There was quite a lot of shouting, I seem to recall," Umeko commented drily. "Then she wouldn't speak to you for a week." Glancing darkly at Nabiki, she added, "We have you to thank for that? Hmm..."

The Tendo woman theatrically took a step back, holding her hands up defensively. "I merely acted as a go-between. I have nothing to do with any inter-familial strife caused by the product delivered." Umeko stared at her for several seconds blank-faced before laughing.

"You're everything Miki told us you were, aren't you, Nabiki?" she asked, grinning, before heading
for the back door, gently but firmly acquiring her still-chuckling middle daughter en route. The three people remaining in the garden watched them go, then exchanged glances.

"We should probably help," Harue suggested. "Her vengeance can be terrible if she feels people are being lazy." They went after the other two.

Glancing at Miki, who was watching with a small smile, Nabiki sighed very slightly. She returned her attention to the elder sister of her friend, a young woman perhaps a year and a half older than she was, who was staring fixedly at her in a somewhat unnerving manner. The other sister Kimiko, who was a little younger than Akane, was also watching, her own smile not quite as well hidden.

The three sisters shared a very obvious family resemblance. Miki had short, almost black hair cut to fall at her jawline, while the other two had longer, lighter dark brown hair, in Kimiko's case in a ponytail reaching her shoulder blades, and in Hana's case styled nicely around her shoulders. Both the sisters had dark brown eyes like their mother. Miki's eyes were grey like her father's. The shape of the face and the overall build was very similar between all of the sisters, but Kimiko was noticeably taller than either of the other two, although not as tall as Kasumi, or Fumiko and her sister.

Now, though, the eldest Sano girl was fixing Nabiki with a gimlet eye as if waiting for her to make the first move. Eventually, the middle Tendo asked politely, "Can I do something for you, Hana?"

The young woman twitched a little, kept staring for a few more seconds, then asked, her voice suspicious, "How did you get those signatures?"

"Which signatures would those be?" Nabiki asked innocently, trying the soup, which was excellent. She smiled at Miki's mother who was listening to the younger women with an amused look on her face. "This is very good, Umeko."

"Thank you, Nabiki. It's my mother's recipe." The elder woman tried some from her own bowl, nodding slightly to herself. "It could do with a dash more parsley, but it came out well."

"It's fine, dear," her husband advised having tried some himself. Hana looked around at the other people with annoyance.

"Hey! I'm trying to ask a question."

"I'm sorry, Hana, dear," her mother said calmly. "Go ahead." As her daughter opened her mouth, she added more to herself than otherwise, "Hmm. Perhaps a little onion next time?"

"That would be nice, dear," Harue noted, glancing at his wife. Hana glared at both of them. Kimiko was obviously trying not to burst out laughing, as Miki grabbed her boyfriend's hand and squeezed it, her mouth attempting to form a very amused smile.

"MOM!"

"Sorry, Hana. You were saying...?" With a final glare at her mother, who merely smiled gently back, her eyes twinkling in a manner that made Nabiki grin internally, Hana turned back to the subject of her inquisition.

"I was talking about the six magical girl signatures you gave my sister. How did you get them? How did you meet Yori and the other girls? How often do you meet them? Do you know what their real names are? Do you know any other magical girls? Can you get me their signatures? Do you have any other magical girl things? Is Yori nice? Is Chou nice? Have you seen a demon? Does..."
The elder Sano girl ran out of breath after speaking very fast, drawing in the next one while looking slightly blue about the face. Nabiki stared at her incredulously, while her sisters collapsed in laughter and even her parents were snickering. John was shaking his head slowly, grinning, having apparently come across this behaviour before.

As Hana was about to start speaking again, the middle Tendo held up her hand, causing the young woman to stop and look at her. "OK. Hold it." There was a pause, although Hana still obviously had more questions. "Right. I ran across Yori when I was visiting friends, and just asked her. I met them as a result of a family problem. They sometimes come to Nerima to say hello. I couldn't tell you even if I did know, it would be betraying a trust. Yes, I've met a few other through them, and walking around in Minato, there are lots there. Possibly. My sister Akane is the one who collects it. Yes, very. Also yes. Yes, there are quite a few in Minato." She thought back, then nodded, while everyone stared at her. "I think that's all of them."

Miki collapsed laughing again as Nabiki looked smugly at her. "Not bad," her boyfriend said, chuckling. Kimiko was looking between Hana, who looked both fascinated and stunned, and Nabiki, who was waiting to see what happened.

"You may have met your match, dear," Umeko laughed, finishing her soup. Hana looked at her mother, then back at their guest.

"Oh, that reminds me," the middle sister said, snapping her fingers, then reaching into her pocket. She removed a folded piece of paper and handed it to Miki, who reached across the table and accepted it. "I meant to give you this." Her friend unfolded it, both her sisters watching curiously, looked at it, then at the Tendo woman, her eyes widening. "You said you wanted it. She was in Minato with Yori last week when I was as well, I bumped into Yori and she said hello..." Nabiki shrugged, smiling a little. "One thing led to another."

Hana got up, walked around behind her sister, then read the paper. A twitch developed in her cheek, which inwardly amused several of the people around the table. Her mouth opened but nothing more than a faint hiss came out of it at first, until she swallowed and tried again. "Azumi Ito!?" She grabbed for the paper, Miki quickly holding it out of range with a possessive snarl. "Let me see it, Miki!"

"Get your own, Hana! This is mine!" Seconds later the two sisters were bickering frantically. Kimiko watched, giggling furiously, while Umeko sighed gently and her husband snickered.

"Thank you, Nabiki. So very much."

"You're welcome, of course, Umeko," the middle sister replied, grinning. She exchanged a glance with John, who rolled his eyes, watched his girlfriend argue with her sister for a moment, then went back to eating his soup, shaking his head sadly.

Eventually Miki fended Hana off long enough that she was able to stuff the paper into her pocket, looking satisfied. The older sister glared at her, then her younger sister who was still laughing, before sitting down again with her arms crossed and muttering to herself. Everyone watched her for a moment. Grinning, Nabiki said, "Hey, Hana?"

"What?" the other woman muttered, looking annoyed. The middle sister held up another piece of paper.

"I got you one as well," she said, "Miki mentioned you were vaguely interested in magical girls." Hana's eyes widened comically and she reached across the table fast enough to make Nabiki blink a few times, snatchting the folded paper away and staring at it in happy disbelief. Her parents
sighed, looking at each other.

"What do we say when someone does something nice for us, Hana?" Umeko asked pointedly, which made Miki and Kimiko giggle. Hana flushed.

"Sorry. Thank you, Nabiki. It was very nice of you." She looked embarrassed. Her mother nodded her satisfaction.

"Good. For heaven's sake, you're twenty-six years old, not five, dear. Be more mature, please." Hana looked even more embarrassed and hung her head.

"Sorry, Mom." She looked at her sister, who grinned at her. "Sorry, Miki."

"God, sis, you're much worse than I am," Miki put in, picking up her spoon again and quickly finishing the remains of her soup. "Thanks, Nabiki, that was a nice thing to do. Sorry about all that."

"No problem," the middle Tendo replied, amused. "It was fun to watch, I have to admit."

"You only have to witness it once," Umeko said, sighing just a little as she looked fondly but with a certain amount of exasperation at her daughters, who exchanged a guilty glance then busied themselves with the meal. "We see it far too often."

"Sorry, mom," two voices chorused, accompanied by a muted snicker from the youngest girl, who was looking very amused at seeing her older sisters make idiots of themselves. Nabiki looked at her for a second, being rewarded with a pleased grin and a little nod. She nodded back, also smiling, while opening a com channel to Ranma and Kasumi just for fun.

"It was fairly impressive over only a signature," she agreed. "I'm surprised about all the fuss, especially about a magical girl as new as Azumi. She's been active for less than a year so far."

Hana stared at her in shock. "But she's amazing! All accounts say she's beautiful, and really cool, and she's one of Yori's friends. That's a real statement of how good she is, you know, Yori and Chou are the best there are." Now feeling embarrassed herself, yet oddly pleased, Nabiki merely nodded a little. Ranma was laughing inside her head, as was her sister.

'Shut up, you two.'

"I wouldn't say beautiful myself, but I'd agree she looks fairly distinctive, as far as I can remember. And yes, I'm aware how good Yori is, I keep hearing it from all sorts of people, they won't shut up about it." She shrugged a bit. "She seems pretty normal for the most part, aside from the magical and martial arts abilities. I've heard her table manners can leave a little to be desired, though."

'Hey!'

'It's true, dear.' Kasumi sounded very amused. There was indistinct mumbling from her husband, making her giggle. Nabiki was having trouble keeping a straight face. Hana kept extolling the virtues of both Azumi and Yori for long enough that she was beginning to regret bringing the subject up. Miki glanced at her, grinning, making her shrug again and shake her head.

"By the sounds of it, you're a fan," she finally said dryly. Miki's sister nodded rapidly.

"I am. I've got recordings of every news segment any of them have been mentioned in, copies of all the newspaper articles, printouts of every website I can find..." The young woman looked pleased. "And now I've got Azumi's signature. That's going in the scrapbook right away."
"After lunch, Hana." Umeko gazed at her eldest daughter, who dipped her head.

"OK, mom."

Kimiko laughed, shaking her head. "You and Miki are such fangirls."

"I'm nowhere near as bad as she is," Miki protested.

"Not quite. But your collection is pretty big as well." The younger sister looked amused as Miki blushed, turning to Nabiki. "You should see it. She's got all sorts of photos of at least a dozen magical girls, aside from Yori and her friends, two other signatures she paid way too much for on the internet, and lots of other stuff." Miki was staring at her plate, red-faced. Ranma and Kasumi laughed again.

'Definitely invite her to the party, sister, it sounds like she'd very much like it,' Kasumi told her, before signing off.

"Hana still has a lot more stuff," Miki mumbled, grabbing her glass of apple juice and drinking from it to cover her embarrassment. Kimiko nodded happily.

"True. You're both nuts."

Both older sisters glared at the youngest one, who looked back unrepentantly. Nabiki laughed, as did John. The two older people were watching with amusement, but said nothing. "I thought Akane, my younger sister was bad, but you two..." The middle Tendo grinned as the glares transferred to her. "Pity I don't have any Yori or Chou action figures left."

Hana went motionless, staring at her in shock, pale-faced, and even Miki looked startled. "You... had some of the Yori dolls...?" the eldest Sano sister finally managed to gasp, looking like she was about to faint. Nabiki held up two fingers.

"And two Chou ones. A friend got them for me, I gave them to my sister and a friend of the family who are both into magical girl things for Christmas last year. They seemed to like them." Hana stared for a moment longer, then closed her eyes momentarily and swallowed hard.

"Do you have any idea how rare those are? They're the ultimate collectible. Almost priceless." She looked like she was about to faint. "And you had two sets?"

"Yep." She grinned. "Like I said, a friend gave them to me. I didn't want them, but I knew Akane would, so..." She shrugged. Hana stared at her as if she doubted the other woman's sanity.

"I'd give my left kidney for even one of them," she finally mumbled, looking incredibly envious. After a moment she seemed to get an idea. "Hey, think your sister might want to sell one?" she asked casually.

Finishing the next dish, Nabiki put her chopsticks down for the moment. "I doubt it, she seems quite fond of them. She plays with them every now and then."

"She opened the box!?" Hana shrieked, aghast, going purple. Umeko winced and sighed.

"Please try not to get so high-pitched, dear, the dog next door will start barking again," Hana's mother said, looking at Nabiki with a raised eyebrow. "Perhaps you should stop teasing my daughters, Nabiki, they seem to be getting overwrought." Indeed, Miki was looking amazed, while Hana was quietly hyperventilating on the other side of the table. Kimiko had stopped eating and was watching with great enjoyment. John nudged his girlfriend.
"Hey, you OK, Miki?" he asked. The young woman slowly looked at him, then back to her friend.

"I think so," she eventually replied, staring hard at Nabiki, who grinned back. "But I also think my good friend has been holding out on me. Again. How the hell did you get Yori and Chou action figures, Nabiki? The company that started making them was shut down almost immediately, before any of them went on sale. I heard that they only made about two dozen or so, nearly all of which were confiscated, some sort of licensing thing that their lawyers dealt with. There can't be more than two or three sets that have ever been released to the public."

"That's the story I was told, yes," the middle Tendo replied, sipping her own drink, as Umeko and her husband cleared away the now-finished dishes, returning with dessert of ice cream and fruit salad. "It was a sort of a once in a lifetime offer via my friend. She had some form of contact with the lawyers, ended up with a number of the things she couldn't legally sell, and gave me a couple." She looked at the two sisters who were hanging on her every word. "It may just be possible that there might be a set left. Would you like me to ask? I can't guarantee anything, but..."

The speed with which they both started nodding frantically made her laugh, and also wince a little in fear for their spines. "Please, Nabiki, please ask. I'll do anything you want," Hana yelped, almost diving across the table. Miki wasn't far behind her in enthusiasm.

"Calm down. When I go back to Minato next time I'll talk to her." She snickered as they both sat back down again, gazing at her with anticipation and raw desire. It was slightly unnerving. Kimiko, beside Hana, sighed a little, shaking her head.

"Strange, strange people," she muttered. "Hey, Mom? Are you sure I wasn't adopted? Or were they?" The younger sister grinned as both older ones shot her an annoyed look. Umeko giggled a little, eating her dessert and listening with amusement.

"All three of you are my true-blooded daughters, even with the insanity that obviously runs deep in at least two of you," she said calmly. "I have no idea where it comes from. Everyone on my side of the family is perfectly sane." She glanced at her husband, who was listening quietly, enjoying the whole situation judging by his expression. "It must be from your side, dear. Didn't you have a great-uncle who used to take a goat for a walk every morning?"

"It was a pig, a very large one, and opinion is divided on who took who for a walk," Harue responded with dignity, although the corners of his mouth were twitching. "But that wasn't evidence of insanity, merely slight eccentricity. Both on his part and that of the pig." Umeko fell about laughing as he smiled. All three of their daughters watched with identical expressions of mild exasperation, before going back to finishing their lunch.

When they finally finished the meal, which was at least an hour after it should have ended due to all the interruptions, Nabiki helped carry some of the dishes into the kitchen beside Miki and John. "So, do you want to come to the party next weekend, Miki?" she asked. "You never gave me an answer."

"Of course I want to come, Nabiki," her friend replied as if she thought the question was inane. "When is it? Who will be there?"

"It will start about ten AM on Saturday, but it's not that important. I'd think people will be wandering in and out most of the day. That's what happened the last time Auntie Nodoka had a party a couple of years ago. It's the entire family, some friends, the jeweller Akane works for and his wife, a couple of neighbours, a few other people, then Yori and her friends as well."

"Is Azumi going to be there, do you know?" Miki asked her eagerly. Nabiki shook her head.
"As far as I know she couldn't make it for various reasons."

"Pity. I still want to meet her," her friend said sadly. She brightened up after a moment. "Oh well, she mainly works around Setagaya, so maybe I'll meet her at university. She's been seen there several times."

"You never know," the middle sister replied, smiling to herself.

"So, what are we going to do for the rest of the afternoon?" John asked as they went back into the living room and sat down. "We could see a movie, I suppose, there's several playing at the moment that look watchable. Or do the tourism thing again. I liked the view from up on the port tower, there's the parks and museums of course, or we could go up in the mountains."

"We can do the mountains tomorrow or the next day," Miki said thoughtfully. "You really need the entire day for it and it's nearly half past two now. I'm up for a movie later, though. How about you, Nabiki?" The middle sister nodded, smiling.

"That sounds good, I haven't been to the movies since we went that last time. Why don't we just walk into the city and you can show me around? I've never been to Kobe before."

"Yep, we can do that. Hey, perhaps we should go to that big arcade, you remember we walked past it a couple of days ago, John?" Miki looked excited for a moment. "I haven't been into a games place for years."

"Neither have I," Nabiki admitted. She grinned a little. "Akane was really into them for a while, she loved those mole-smacking games with the hammer, but she got banned from the local one when she got overenthusiastic and hit it a bit too hard. There wasn't a lot left of it at that point. The arcade owner wasn't too happy about that." Miki and John both stared for a second then laughed.

"Really? Wow, how strong is she?"

"Strong enough to pick up a car and throw it quite a distance," Nabiki replied, amused at the look of shock on their faces. "Most of the Neriman martial artists are ridiculously strong, although my sister is impressive even in those terms."

"Holy crap," John muttered, wide-eyed, "that's amazing. Does she throw a lot of cars?"

"Not any more. The medical problem she had was responsible for a lot of that." She smiled at the thought of her sister, "She's improved so much over the last year or so none of us can really believe it, her most of all, but we're all very pleased and grateful. She's learned a lot from some Chinese friends as well, it's brought her martial arts skills up to an amazing level." Nabiki got up as Miki indicated the door, John following, and kept talking. "Yori gave her a nice birthday present as well, because she really earned it."

"What's that?" her friend asked, looking very curious and interested. They put their shoes on and left the house, walking slowly towards the more commercial area that could be seen in the distance over the houses.

"A career, basically," Nabiki laughed. The other two exchanged glances, looking puzzled, so she explained.

"Unbelievable," Miki exclaimed when she finished the basic story. "So when are we going to see her in a movie?" The middle Tendo shrugged.

"I'm not sure, but she left this morning for LA for a few days to do some training with Shampoo,
then some practice stunts and screen tests. The director, Adrian, seems to think she'll be working pretty soon, probably sometime around just after the New Year, from what I know."

"Rich, famous, and a Hollywood star," Miki mused, grinning at John. "We made friends with the wrong Tendo sister."

Her boyfriend chuckled as Nabiki put on a mock-insulted expression. "I quite like this one, even if she's not in the movies," he replied calmly, patting the relevant Tendo sister on the head. She smirked at Miki, putting her arm over his shoulders.

"See? Your boyfriend knows quality in women when he sees it."

"Of course he does," Miki replied, a contented look on her face. "That's why I allowed him to be my boyfriend." All three of them burst out laughing, heading into the city, talking and joking and generally enjoying the day.

"We could go swimming tomorrow," Miki suggested as they walked down a commercial street somewhat further into the centre of Kobe, having taken a train for a few stations down the line. The area was quite busy, lots of people wandering around and enjoying themselves, although not as hectic as some places in Tokyo got. "There's a very nice pool a few kilometres from home, it's part of a sports centre. I used to go there a lot when I lived here and I still do when I'm back from university."

"That sounds like a good idea," Nabiki replied, "I love swimming." 'But I probably can't do it the way I normally do nowadays,' she mused to herself, internally grinning. 'A mermaid in the pool might be just the tiniest bit suspicious.'

"I like it as well," John added. "I'm up for it."

"OK. That's the morning sorted out then." Miki looked satisfied. "Now, what to do in the afternoon...?"

"We don't have to go and do all sorts of special activities, you know, Miki," the middle sister laughed. "We could just hang around your house and talk in the garden or something."

"That's no fun," the other woman pouted. "I have my boyfriend and my friend here in my home town, we need to do exciting things." Nabiki shared a glance with John, on the girl's other side, both of them grinning. "I know," Miki exclaimed after some thought. "There's a really good go-kart track a friend of mine told me about that's fairly close. We could go and check that out."

"I haven't been go-karting for years," the Tendo woman replied, laughing. "But it might be fun."

"There's a paintball place as well, I think," Miki thought out loud, looking like she was trying to remember. "I'm sure I've seen adverts for it. I've never been paintballing before. We could do that instead, or as well."

"It stings a lot," John commented. "It's fun, but expensive fun. I think prices here in Japan are even higher than they were back in the UK and it was pretty expensive there. I went a few times with friends. Did pretty well, I think."

"So do you want to try it if we can find the place?" his girlfriend asked, looking up at him.

"I'm up for that as well," he agreed good-naturedly.
"OK. Let's see if we can work both of those in. Oh, hang on." She stopped dead in front of the window display for a shop, looking with wide eyes at a blue silk dress on a mannequin. "Ooh, that's nice. I want to go in here." Dragging her boyfriend behind her, she vanished into the shop fast enough to make John yelp and Nabiki blink a few times, before grinning and following. She had a look in the window as she went past and agreed that the dress was nice, although it wasn't her style. The blouse next to it though... That had possibilities.

"Three hours? How the hell can a woman spend three hours in one shop buying one dress?" John stared at his girlfriend, who giggled back, possessively clutching a bag containing the item in question.

"It's a really nice dress. I had to be sure it fitted right and looked good on me." She gazed at him. "You think it looks good on me, don't you? It doesn't make me look fat or something?" He froze at the apparently innocent question, before glancing at Nabiki, who grinned.

"I'm sensing a trap," he muttered.

"Good senses," she replied, laughing. Looking worried he tried to think of the right answer.

"It's... It brings out the colour in your eyes?" he tried cautiously.

She stared for a moment, then looked at Nabiki. The Tendo woman shrugged with a small smile. "It's a safe answer, I guess," she said. Miki giggled and nodded.

"I'll let you off, then," the other woman told her boyfriend, who looked relieved.

Watching them, the middle sister was amused. They seemed to really care for each other, this sort of teasing being proof of a pretty solid relationship in her eyes, which made her happy. She hefted the bag she was holding which contained not only the blouse she'd spotted but two of its friends, both of which had called out to her as being stylish and in a nice colour. Overall, she was quite pleased.

"Oh, look, there's that games arcade I was talking about," Miki suddenly said, pointing to an establishment some distance away on the other side of the street, lots of blinking lights apparent from within. A number of young people were hanging around outside in the early evening air, one or two of them smoking, while a lot more people of all ages were going in and out. They could faintly hear all manner of electronic sounds and music coming from the place even at this distance. "It's bigger than I remembered it. Let's go and see what's there."

The other two being agreeable to this idea, they crossed the street and wandered over to the arcade, looking inside. It was fairly busy, many games machines ranging from driving simulators through shooting games to dance ones filling the large space, with the more popular games nearer the front. Entering, one of the youths, around sixteen or seventeen and apparently fancying himself as something of a dangerous individual, indolently blocked half the doorway they were heading for while smoking a cigarette, giving them a fairly small amount of space to pass by. As John tried to squeeze past the young man, apparently accidentally, turned and managed to push him sideways, causing him to sigh loudly.

Turning back the young man glared at him, as if he was looking for an excuse for some form of altercation. Nabiki could feel he was considerably more aggressive than seemed appropriate, she thought he was probably one of those people who got into fights for fun, but not with any real skill like Ranma, or even Ryoga, just street brawling.
Stepping back John looked at him, shook his head sadly, then turned aside to go through the other
door, which was closed. As he reached for it, behind him, the youth stepped forward, his mouth
opening to deliver what was no doubt a tour de force of witty repartee. Slipping between John, who
didn't notice, and the young man, Nabiki fixed him with one of her coldest glares, allowing a
certain amount of power to leak out in her eyes. He froze, staring fixedly into her face, swallowed a
little, then turned away as if that had been his intent all along. Satisfied and slightly amused,
Nabiki followed John and Miki inside, feeling the young man watching her for a moment before
going back to being a truculent doorstop.

Inside, they looked around for a few seconds. The noise of all the machines was considerable,
merging together into a dull cacophony with one or two individual machines standing out as they
were played. "So, what do you want to try first?" John said loudly into Miki's ear, trying to be
heard over the racket. She shrugged.

"No idea," she replied, equally loudly, "Like I said, I haven't been in one of these places for years.
Let's get a lot of coins and just try some machines."

"OK." They headed for the change booth, shortly coming away with a large quantity of low
denomination coinage. Nabiki followed as her two friends looked around for a few seconds, John
finally pointing to an elaborate racing game which had eight seats apparently linked together for
multi-person play. "How about Daytona?" he asked. "I've played that one in the UK, it's been out
for a few years, but it's pretty good. We can all race on the same track."

"Looks good," Miki yelled as one of the nearby shooting games was used, the volume of it almost
painful. The trio quickly moved to their chosen game and away from the overly-loud machine
they'd been standing beside. As soon as three seats became available next to each other as the
current game finished, they quickly grabbed them, feeding fifty yen coins into the machine, then
each pressing start.

Shortly they were enjoying the virtual race, Nabiki and John soon finding themselves far past the
other six players, which seemed to annoy Miki, who was desperately trying to keep up. Yanking
the steering wheel frantically and stomping on the pedals she muttered to herself as she slid the car
into the wall, then bounced off into another player, who screeched in fury.

Glancing at her friend, Nabiki grinned at the expression of concentration on her face. She herself
was finding the game amusing, although not surprisingly, not all that difficult. Her reflexes were so
much faster than most peoples by now that she was actually having to deliberately drive less well
than she could so as to not stick out too much. That said, John was doing extremely well, so she
couldn't back off too far. He was much better than anyone else playing.

They crossed the finish line neck and neck, the other players coming in one after another behind
them, Miki achieving fourth place, which seemed to both satisfy her and annoy her in equal
measure. Turning her head she fixed her boyfriend with a steely glare. "You deliberately picked a
game you knew you could do well on, didn't you?" she asked, her voice hard. He grinned
unrepentantly.

"Of course I did. Do I look like an idiot? Who picks a game they know they'll do badly at?"

Staring at him for a few seconds longer, the young woman finally began laughing. "Fair enough, I
guess."

"Another race, or shall we try something different?" he asked the two women.

"We can come back to this one later. I want to try something different," Miki said, getting out of
the seat and relinquishing it to a girl of about ten who jumped in, barely able to reach the pedals. Both the others followed her as she walked around for a little while, ending up watching a pair of young men in their mid teens playing a game that seemed to be a cross between classic *Space Invaders* and a player piano. "Weird," she commented. "What's the idea behind this game?"

A girl the same age as the two boys overheard, turning to look at the older woman and her friends. "You have to hit the buttons that fire at the falling things there, you see," she pointed, "and each one plays a note. It ends up playing music. Every time you finish a level the next one gets faster. The high levels are insanely quick but if you can keep up it sounds and looks amazing." Indeed, the two players competing on the machine were obviously very practised at the game, hitting buttons individually and in complex combinations that were producing some interesting visuals and a not entirely bad rendition of various classical music.

Watching for a moment, Miki laughed. "OK, I want to try this," she said, "it looks really silly and fun." When the player on the left won the match, both boys stepped back, rubbing their wrists, allowing her to move in front of the controls. She studied them for a few seconds, read the instructions, nodded to herself, then fed coins in and hit start.

Her first game lasted only seconds until she hit the wrong button, producing an unpleasant sound and a scowl. She trying again, frowning with concentration, while John and Nabiki watched with amusement, once more failing quickly.

"This is harder than it looks," she said over her shoulder, smiling a little, then turned back to the game with a determined expression. It took a significant quantity of coins but after twenty minutes she was clearing the first dozen levels without too much difficulty, causing her to look pleased. Watching, Nabiki grinned as her friend got into the game, smacking the large brightly coloured buttons faster and faster. John was standing beside her, watching closely, looking both amused and proud.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't get past level sixteen, which seemed to irritate her. One of the two teenagers who had been playing when they'd arrived, both of whom were watching along with their female friend, snorted at the third failure, moving to the second player position and inserting some coins. "This is how you do it," he commented without looking at Miki, slapping the buttons rapidly and progressing steadily through the levels. Miki gritted her teeth as he went past her high score without apparent effort, quickly glancing to the side when she had a break in the pattern, then trying even harder. Once again she missed her cue, almost all the way through the level, making her shake her head angrily and mumble something.

The teenager laughed, still playing. "Women don't have the speed or reflexes for this sort of game," he remarked, causing Miki to glare at him, along with the young woman who was with his friend, both of them watching him play the machine. Nabiki studied him for a moment, mildly irritated by the comment, but not enough to say anything. It was stupid but fairly innocuous.

By now quite annoyed, both by her failure and the comment, Miki took a deep breath, flexed her hands, then dropped some more coins in. John by her side, she pressed the start button and began another game.

When she managed to clear level sixteen this time, she smiled widely, new confidence carrying her through the next three levels with her hands moving at impressive speed. The young man noticed, beginning to throw out comments belittling female gaming ability in an apparent attempt to put her off her new-found stride. His female friend was looking very annoyed, almost as much as Miki was, shaking her head as he said something particularly offensive. Unfortunately it made Nabiki's friend twitch, throwing her timing off just enough that she missed again.
"Damn it!" the young woman yelled, watching her game abruptly end. Turning to the boy she snarled, "You're a mouthy little bastard, aren't you?" He grinned sideways at her for a second, before clearing his level with a flourish.

"Like I said, girls aren't really suited for this sort of thing, they're too easily distracted. Letting a little joke like that throw you off..." He winced as his friend punched him in the arm, which caused him to fail the level as well, albeit with a very respectable score, high enough to go in the high-score table. Punching in his initials he stepped back, grinning and rubbing his arm. "Thanks a lot, Chiasa. That really hurt."

"You deserved it, Kyo, you were saying some really stupid things," she grumbled, "Girls are just as good as boys at games. You just wasted so much time on this stupid machine it's no wonder you're better. How much money have you dumped into this thing in the last two months?" He flushed a little, the comment apparently hitting a little close to the bone.

"None of your business. Anyway, you're wrong, girls aren't fast enough. Boys are quicker and have better hand-eye coordination."

"Oh, that's total crap and you know it," Chiasa shot back, putting her hands on her hips and staring at him eye to eye.

Amused, Nabiki exchanged glances with Miki and John, who were watching and listening, her friend beginning to smile as the young woman told Kyo off. She had a considerable vocabulary as it turned out. Eventually, looking quite angry and red, he shouted, "I bet you I could beat any girl in here on this thing or any other game. Boys are quicker!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. 'I really shouldn't do this,' she thought to herself, but couldn't resist. Tapping Kyo on the shoulder she watched as he whirled around. "How much?"

"What?" he sputtered, not understanding the question. She clarified it for him.

"How much do you bet you could beat any woman in here?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, looking puzzled. Beside him, Chiasa and his unnamed friend also looked confused.

"You stated that you could beat any woman in this establishment on any game including this one and put it in the form of a wager. I am a woman and I'm curious to know how much you're willing to bet on your predicted outcome," she explained, allowing a certain amount of her inner Ms Aoyama to come out. Miki looked at her, as did John, then they exchanged a look. The young man in front of her shrugged after staring for a few seconds.

"Five thousand Yen," he said, obviously pulling the figure out of thin air.

"Hmm. Barely worth it, but all right." Nabiki gave him a shark-like grin, pulling her wallet out of her pocket, and producing five one-thousand Yen notes so fast it left him blinking. "I accept the bet." She handed the notes to Chiasa, who stared at them, then her, before grinning as well. "As the challenged party I pick this game right here."

Kyo stared, pretty clearly not having expected this. Chiasa nudged him, rather hard. "Come on. Give me your five thousand," she said, looking very amused. He transferred his stare to her, but eventually and rather reluctantly pulled out his own wallet, managing to scrape up the relevant sum which he handed over.

"All right, then." Nabiki turned to the game, putting coins in. She glanced at Miki, who was...
grinning. "How do you play it again?" she asked. Miki's grin vanished suddenly. Laughing, she pressed the start button as her opponent did the same.

Fifteen levels in she glanced at Kyo, who was grimly hammering buttons, smirking to herself. 'This isn't really fair but he kind of asked for it,' she remarked to Jun.

#The young man did seem to be somewhat overstating his case.# the machine replied, obviously amused. #I'm afraid he doesn't stand much chance, though. Your reflexes are so superior to most people's this game will not present much challenge even at the highest speed.#

'Very true,' she chuckled, clearing level nineteen. 'The only problem is going slowly enough that it doesn't look too suspicious.'

#Miki and John both seem impressed.# Jun paused, then added, #In addition you appear to be drawing a crowd.# She could feel a number of people watching from behind her, proving the SI was correct.

'Probably doesn't matter.' She cleared level twenty-one, Kyo looking away for a moment with wide eyes, then going back to frantically hammering buttons. He was, aside from being somewhat chauvinistic, nearly as good as she thought he was, she decided. Much faster than the vast majority of people could manage. Miki didn't stand a chance of beating him, or even really coming close, all the practice that Chiasa had alluded to was clearly paying off. Even so, he was beginning to sweat.

#Do you intend to just beat him, or keep going to prove a point?# Jun asked, sounding curious.

'Don't know yet,' she replied offhandedly. 'Let's see how far he can manage to get.'

In the end, in fact, he made it to level thirty-two, which ran at a speed that was just ridiculous. When he finally missed a button the poor young man almost looked relieved he was sweating so hard from the exertion. Leaning on the console for a moment he shook his head then straightened up, apparently only then noticing that Nabiki was still going, not looking particularly stressed. He gaped as her hands moved over the buttons more and more rapidly, level after level falling before her, until the machine finally stopped with a fanfare.

Gaping at the screen he stared in disbelief. "Level fifty?!" he squeaked hoarsely. "I didn't know it went that high." The middle sister smiled to herself as she entered her initials, which went in right at the top of the high score table with a totally silly difference between her score and the next one down.

"That was fun," she remarked, turning around and accepting the handful of cash Chiasa handed over somewhat numbly. "Would you like to try winning it back?"

Paling a little and flexing his hands, he shook his head silently. "Oh, well. Thanks for the game."

Nabiki looked around at the crowd of close to thirty people who were staring at her in amazed, respectful silence and winced a little. Perhaps she'd overdone it?

"Holy crap, Nabiki, that was unbelievable," Miki breathed, almost inaudible over the background noise. "How many times have you played this game to get that good?"

"This was my first time," she admitted, smiling at the look of shock her friends gave her. "It's fun, but I can't see spending too much money on it." Glancing at her watch which she was wearing for appearance's sake, she added, "Oh, look, that movie we were talking about is in forty minutes. Do we have time to get to the cinema?" She held up her winnings, grinning. "It's on me."
"Martial Arts arcade game playing, it has to be," John said, picking up a tiger shrimp with his chopstick and popping it into his mouth. "Some weird Neriman thing you learned, right?" Nabiki shook her head, smiling a little. They were in a sushi restaurant near the cinema having enjoyed the movie, even though both her friends had been more silent than normal, apparently thinking about her thrashing of the young man earlier. She was wondering again if she'd been a little too effective at proving his point wasn't valid. Mentally shrugging she took a shrimp of her own. It was too late now.

"No, I've just got pretty quick reflexes and a good eye for that sort of thing. Plus I got lucky, I think, I didn't make any serious mistakes."

"You didn't make any mistakes from what I saw," he replied, shaking his head.

"Really lucky, then." She grinned and shrugged. Picking up her glass of beer she sipped it, before looking for some more shrimp.

He stared at her for a few seconds. "You're a strange person, Nabiki Tendo," the young man finally said, grinning back. "That was very funny even if I can't work out how the hell you managed it."

"Poor Kyo looked like you'd killed and eaten his dog in front of him," Miki giggled, nibbling a salmon roll. "Thanks. He was annoying me a lot at the end. And his friend. She looked pretty amazed as well."

"Offering him a chance to win it back was just cruel, though," John chuckled. "He knew damn well he didn't stand a chance."

"You shouldn't go around offering bets like that if you're not reasonably sure of the outcome," she replied calmly. "The first rule in bookmaking is to do your research. I was a complete unknown, he had no idea of my possible skill level, or that of any other woman in there for that matter, so it was a silly bet to make." She shrugged, reaching for a plate of squid. "Anyway, he didn't have to accept the bet in the first place."

John studied her closely. "You've done this sort of thing before, haven't you?" he asked suspiciously. "You seem to know an awful lot about betting."

"Might have," she commented, her eyes twinkling.

"A woman with an interesting past," he mused. She laughed.

"I got up to all sorts of things when I was younger. I might tell you one day. Enough of my magnificent victory over the forces of sexism, what did you two think of the movie?"

Amused, Miki and her boyfriend accepted the change of subject and soon all three of them were discussing the latest block-buster they’d paid far too much to see.

"So, Nabiki, what other interests than business studies and economic theory do you have?" Umeko asked, handing the middle sister a glass of wine, which she accepted with a smile. She, along with Miki’s family and John, were sitting in the living room having just arrived back fairly late from their trip into the city. They'd found Miki's parents sitting and relaxing, talking to Hana, Kimiko coming down from her room a few minutes after they arrived.

She shrugged a little. "I enjoy swimming, travelling, photography, things like that," she replied, trying the wine, which was excellent. "But the business side of things is what I've been interested in since I was young. My goals have shifted a bit since I started my degree but I'm still intent of
finishing it with as good a grade as I can manage."

"What do you intend to do when you graduate?" Miki's father asked curiously. She glanced at him.

"A friend suggested forensic accountancy a while ago, which I'd never heard of, but having looked into it, it looks quite interesting. That's a possible career path." Sipping some more wine while he nodded, she added, "I'm honestly not sure right now, though. Various things in my life over the last couple of years have opened up different possibilities, ones I'm still looking into. I'm going to have to think about it for a while."

"She'll be damn good at whatever she tries," Miki commented, lowering her own wine glass from her mouth while smiling. "She's pretty much top of every class we share and as far as I know, the ones we don't."

Slightly embarrassed, Nabiki nodded a little. "I do seem to be doing quite well. But Miki is only just behind me, to be honest. She's going to get very good marks as well." Her friend looked pleased at the praise, as did her parents.

"It's nice to know that from an outside source," Harue remarked, looking mildly amused. "It's always difficult to be completely sure her own self-assessment is accurate." Miki frowned while her sisters laughed. Putting his arm around his girlfriend John grinned at her.

"I know how well you're doing," he said in a conspiratorial tone of voice. "Pay no attention to the old people."

Seeming a little offended, Harue retorted, "Old? I'm barely forty-eight and three quarters!" His wife burst out laughing as he looked proud, his daughters all doing the same. "Anyway, I'm not getting older, I'm gaining experience."

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it," Nabiki chuckled. "I have to admit, I know some extremely... experienced... people, and they seem perfectly happy about life. It makes me much less worried about time passing by."

Harue looked interested, so she added, "The Amazon Elder who has been teaching my sister for the last year or so has something like three hundred years of 'experience'." She grinned as everyone else gaped. This led to a long discussion of Akane and Shampoo, Amazons, and Neriman life in general. When she finally stopped over an hour later, refilling her wineglass and sipping a little, she watched as everyone stared at her for a moment silently.

"Nerima really is as weird as I've heard," Miki mumbled, shaking her head.

"Probably weirder," the middle Tendo agreed cheerfully. "It's an experience, certainly."

"That's one way to put it," Umeko remarked, still looking oddly at their visitor. "I'm somewhat surprised you're as normal as you are with that sort of history and background."

"She's not actually normal, for most definitions of that word," John snickered, making Nabiki grin at him. "I mean, you should have seen what she did in the arcade earlier." He explained, causing Umeko, Harue, and their daughters to collapse laughing wildly.

"Oh, that's fantastic, Nabiki," Kimiko giggled, wiping tears of hilarity from her eyes. "I wish I'd seen it."

"It was kind of funny I have to admit," she replied, finishing her wine and putting the glass down beside the sofa out of the way. "I may have got carried away, it probably wasn't necessary to go
quite that far, but at the time it seemed appropriate. "I don't think young Kyo will be quite so fast to assert male superiority in future. At least in the form of a wager." Kimiko started laughing again.

"So, what do you all do?" the middle sister asked curiously, looking around. "I've been talking for hours about me and my family. I'd like to learn more about yours." She indicated Miki who was leaning comfortably against John, both of them looking pleasantly relaxed and smiling. "I know about these two, of course, but I don't know much about the rest of you. Except that Hana has an unnatural liking for magical girls, of course." She grinned as Hana flushed, her sisters looking at her with amusement.

Umeko laughed for a moment. "That's true. All right, I'm a horticulturist by training, although I'm not currently working in the field."

"Ah, I might have guessed from the garden. It's very impressive."

"Thank you." The elder Sano woman smiled, pleased. "It's been a lot of work to get it to that state but I'm rather happy about the results. I've won a couple of local awards for gardening in the last two years, which was nice."

"I was in the Maritime Safety Agency for twenty years," Harue explained, when his wife stopped talking. "The last six were in Search and Rescue. I made it to first grade officer before the accident." He tapped his left leg. "Broke it in three places. It never healed quite right, so I ended up with the limp. I took early retirement because I couldn't really keep up with the younger men after that, it hurt too much." He sighed a little. "Stupid thing, really, a faulty winch snapped while we were grappling a sinking trawler, the capstan got pulled over the side, I wasn't quite fast enough to get out of the way..."

Umeko put her hand on his. "You were lucky your men were so well trained, dear, they pulled you out of the water before anything worse happened."

"True. I trained them well," he grinned. "I'm proud of them. It was painful, both when it happened, and leaving the Agency afterwards. But, life goes on." Shrug, he smiled at Nabiki. "It could have been a lot worse, I suppose. Anyway, I took a year or two to think about things, then ended up working as a safety consultant for one of the larger shipping companies. Uses my skills, you see, and pays a lot better than the Agency. Although I do miss jumping out of helicopters." She laughed, as did the others.

"I expect that the excitement of such things is hard to forget," the middle sister commented. He nodded, grinning again.

"Oh, believe me, yes. Excitement, terror, you could call it either one quite accurately. Whatever, you tend to remember it." Finishing his own wine, he added, "But I enjoy my work now and it gives me more time at home."

Nodding to herself, Nabiki looked at Kimiko and Hana, who had been listening to their father with slight smiles. "What about you two? I know you're a professional magical girl memorabilia collector, Hana, but do you have any hobbies?" She snickered as the older Sano sister looked mildly irritated, both her sisters immediately laughing.

"She's worked you out, Hana," Kimiko giggled, looking very amused.

"Actually, I work in a rare book store," the elder sister retorted with dignity, glaring at her sister for a moment. "I have a degree in European literature and another one in Ancient Chinese art."

"It pays surprisingly well and uses quite a lot of my knowledge. I enjoy it and it gives me experience for later. I'll probably stay at it for a couple of years, then look for something slightly different, but at the moment I'm having fun."

Smiling a little, Nabiki nodded. "I can understand that. It's a good thing when you find something you're both good at and enjoy doing. Being paid to do it is a bonus."

"That's for sure," the other woman agreed. She smiled for a second or two. "The magical girl thing is a hobby but a fun one as well."

"It's an obsession, Hana," Kimiko said wryly. Her sister shrugged, not denying the accusation but not confirming it either. The youngest Sano looked at Nabiki with a small smile of her own. "She writes magical girl fan fiction, you know," she confided, making Hana go bright red and lunge for her. Evading the older sister Kimiko laughed. "Some of it is almost good. You should see the thing she wrote about that Yori girl the other week. It was hysterical..." Hana managed to grab her and push her to the carpet, her hand over her sister's mouth, looking horribly embarrassed.

"Shut up!" she hissed into her sister's ear. Kimiko didn't stop grinning.

Miki was heaving with laughter while their parents were looking like this was a rather regular occurrence, sighing a little but otherwise ignoring the minor tussle on the floor. "Fan fiction?" Nabiki repeated with a grin.

Kimiko nodded, unable to speak, while Miki followed suit. "I know. It's ridiculous. What adult would waste their time with that sort of idiocy?" she asked, still giggling. "She's always coming up with all these overblown fantasies with extremely unlikely love stories worked in. I think she needs a boyfriend or something." Hana glared at her other sister while sitting on the youngest one, then grumbled under her breath when both her parents began laughing as well.

"It's a perfectly respectable hobby and hones my writing skills," she muttered. Chuckling, Harue reached over and patted her on her head, before standing.

"You just keep thinking that, dear. And try not to crush Kimiko, she's going a funny colour."

Picking up all the wine glasses he headed for the kitchen. Nabiki exchanged glances with Miki and John, all three of them now laughing, before they went to help.

Looking at the expanse of gently rippling water in front of her, Nabiki smiled, turning to Miki. "You're right, this is excellent. Why is hardly anyone here, though? It's practically empty." This was indeed the case. The very large and elaborate swimming facility was practically deserted, only three other people than themselves visible. Miki looked around, then shrugged, turning to her friend.

"No idea. It's normally pretty busy even this early in the morning," she replied, frowning a little. The trio, John bringing up the rear, walked past the long glass wall that allowed them to view the pool towards the reception area, which was staffed by a pair of young men. The nearest one looked up as they approached.

"Ah. Customers. At last," he smiled.

"Where is everyone?" Miki asked curiously. The man sighed a little.
"You must have missed the news." They all looked at each other, then back at him.

"What news?" she asked.

"We had an outbreak of some sort of norovirus last week, which put about fifteen people in the hospital. We had to close the pool, drain it completely, sterilise everything, refill it, test it, get it certified as safe..." He sighed again. "You wouldn't believe the fuss. Public health people running around all over the place. It turned out to be the result of some damn little kid with the runs who should never have been allowed out of his house, never mind into a pool." He didn't seem happy. "Everything is fine now, the authorities are completely happy about that, but not many people seem to trust it yet. So, here we sit, with a grand total of eight people in the entire building including you guys."

"I see," she replied, looking sympathetically at him. "I suppose it will take some time to get people back in."

"Most likely. But in the mean time, enjoy the quiet." He grinned for a moment. "You don't often get the chance to use a near-Olympic-level pool with hardly anyone in the thing unless you turn up at three AM."

Laughing, Miki nodded to him, paid for three people, then they headed to the locker rooms, John peeling off to head for the male side after giving her a quick kiss. Smirking a little to herself she and Nabiki went in the female side, looking around.

"Do you think we can find some empty ones?" Nabiki commented with a chuckle. They picked a pair of lockers next to each other then changed before heading for the showers. The middle Tendo caught her friend eyeing her slightly oddly as she pulled on her bathing suit, causing her to raise an eyebrow. "What?" she asked, causing Miki to blink, slightly startled.

"Oh, sorry, Nabiki, I was just a little surprised. I knew you were fit, but I didn't know how fit." She grinned, looking her friend up and down. "You look like you do about six hours of sit-ups every day. You've got a six-pack that a body-builder would envy."

Looking down at herself, the Tendo woman smiled a little. She had always kept herself toned and in good condition but the magical girl training had, aside from all the interesting abilities, improved her physical condition to an unbelievable extent. Without her normal clothes on she presented a rather impressive figure, musculature very well defined, although not to an unattractive level. She didn't pay much attention now, long used to it, but when Miki pointed it out she was reminded of how she'd changed.

"Thanks," she said, laughing a little. "Like I said, I swim a lot, it's very good exercise, and I've been doing other things as well for the last few months. It keeps me in condition."

"I'll say," her friend commented slightly enviously. "I thought I was pretty fit, but next to you I look positively flabby."

"No, you don't, Miki," she replied, laughing. "You look fine. John certainly seems to think he's lucky to have you as his girlfriend."

"Oh, he's not wrong there," Miki giggled, looking haughty for a moment before losing it. "Very lucky indeed."

Laughing they headed for the showers, then out into the pool, where they found John waiting for them, inspecting the diving board at one end of the pool. The other three swimmers were all down
at the far end of the pool in the shallow water, apparently a family group. He looked up as they approached, smiling at his girlfriend, then studying Nabiki appreciatively. "You both look good in those suits," he remarked with a grin. "Nabiki, you must work out like crazy to have muscle tone like that."

"I mainly swim and run around a lot," she laughed.

"It's all that saving the world you mentioned," Miki giggled.

"Possibly. But that doesn't normally require much effort." She posed slightly, smiling. "You just do it as fast as possible then get lunch."

Shaking his head in amusement, John looked up at the top diving platform, some ten metres up. "I was wondering if I had the courage to jump off that thing," he said. Miki and Nabiki followed his gaze. The Sano woman paled a little.

"It's a long way up," she said faintly.

"I'll bet it looks even further down from up there," Nabiki told them helpfully, giggling when Miki looked mildly ill.

After a moment, John shook his head. "I think I'll try the lower one first, work my way up to it," he suggested, looking at the three metre board at the bottom. There was another one in the middle at about seven metres, then the top one. The girls watched as he climbed the ladder at the back of the structure, then walked out to the end of the diving platform. After a moment he looked over at them slightly wide-eyed. "You were right, Nabiki. It does look further from up here."

Laughing, she pointed at the highest one, some distance above his head, saying, "Just think what it looks like from up there." He glanced up then closed his eyes momentarily.

"Stop scaring my boyfriend, Nabiki," Miki laughed, watching as John turned around, then walked back along the platform. A moment later, after bouncing on his toes a few times, he trotted back and executed a very nice dive from the end. Both young women clapped as he resurfaced, looking pleased.

"Not bad, John," the middle Tendo said with a smile. "Not bad at all."

"Can you dive?" he asked curiously. She nodded, grinning.

"I know how but I don't do it much at the moment. I normally do lengths, maybe four or five kilometres at a time." He looked impressed as he swam over, holding onto the edge of the pool.

"That's... eighty to a hundred lengths in a pool this size?" he asked, working it out quickly. "Impressive. I don't know if I can swim that far." She shrugged a bit.

"It's not difficult when you get into the routine and have a decent technique with good stamina."

"Go on, Nabiki, show him how to dive properly," Miki laughed, indicating the platform her boyfriend had jumped from. She eyed it, then looked at her friends.

"I wouldn't want to show anyone up," she snickered.

"Ah, but unlike our young friend Kyo from yesterday, I'm neither certain men are better than women in any specific field nor threatened if they are," John replied, looking calm and content. She laughed. "Feel free to show me how to do it properly."
Still laughing, the middle sister headed for the platform, climbing up to the lowest one. She felt no fear at all now for something a mere three metres up, and hadn't for a long time, even before all the magical girl things had happened, having been diving from this height for years. Even though she'd never much cared for heights in general, oddly enough that hadn't applied in the case of diving, at least into a pool.

Walking to the end she looked down, grinned, then turned around and retraced her steps. Turning to face the water, she lightly ran down the platform, leaped from the end in a text-book perfect dive encompassing a neat somersault and entered the water with barely a splash, resurfacing into a smooth front crawl. She hadn't even had to make use of her enhanced abilities, which would have probably allowed her to clear the entire length of the pool.

Behind her, she felt John's and Miki's mild awe, smiling to herself. It was a good start to the morning.

Miki looked at her boyfriend, who was watching Nabiki, who in turn was walking beside them with a small, very slightly smug grin playing about her lips. She shook her head in amused wonder.

"A double somersault from ten metres?" John asked again in a tone of shock. "With a spin?"

"Sorry, I got carried away," the Tendo woman chuckled.

"Just a little," Miki giggled. "I had no idea you were that good at diving."

"I was a little surprised myself," Nabiki admitted, grinning more widely. "I'm not sure I could do it again. I think I got lucky."

"Like you got lucky with the arcade game?" John asked suspiciously. He stared at her for some moments as they headed back towards Miki's family's house. Eventually he sighed. "Why do I have the feeling I'm missing something here?" he grumbled, making Nabiki lean forwards slightly to smirk at her friend past the young man in the middle of the threesome. Miki began laughing more loudly.

"Something's going on, I'm sure," he added. "No one should be that lucky."

"Just a fluke, I think," Nabiki said contentedly. "I wouldn't read to much into it if I were you, John."

"Hmm." He didn't seem completely convinced, but in a good-natured way. "I suppose. But I've got my eye on you, Miss Tendo."

"You're supposed to only have eyes for me, damn it!" Miki stopped and glared at him, making him sigh again, and causing Nabiki to start laughing. After a moment she couldn't keep a straight face and began laughing herself, linking arms with him and resuming walking. He patted her on the head and grinned.

"I do. Mostly. But you have to admit that was damned impressive to watch. Like something out of the Olympics."

"It was pretty amazing," she agreed, looking past him at her friend who was still giggling. "Why didn't you go in for the swimming team or diving team at university, Nabiki, if you're that good?" she asked. Shrugging, the Tendo woman smiled a little.

"I'm not particularly interested in most team sports, I have to admit," she replied. "Plus I've gotten a
lot better in the last couple of years anyway, I wasn't as good as that when I got to the university in the first place. I'm not exactly an expert, it's just some practice and decent coordination, I think."

"Does your sister swim as well as you do?" John asked. She snickered for a moment.

"She's OK, nowadays, but not great. You should have seen her in school, though. For years she was basically terrified of the water, not without reason, because she tended to sink like a stone. Even with floatation aids sometimes, which was a particularly good trick." Nabiki laughed, as did the other two, although she looked somewhat sympathetic. "Impressive but for all the wrong reasons."

"Poor girl," Miki giggled.

"Oh, it wasn't ideal, certainly. She nearly drowned in a pool half a dozen times that I can think of. People kept having to jump in and fish her out." Nabiki shrugged for a second. "There was a time that our insane principal tried to teach her to swim but I'm not at all sure he really helped much." Shaking her head, she began relating a story that had both her friends staring in complete shock.

"A boulder on her back?" John said in a strangled tone. Nabiki nodded, smiling.

"Don't forget the rather large shark. I have no idea where that lunatic got the thing."

"Unbelievable."

"It gets crazier," she giggled, adding some more details. But the time she was finished they were at the house, both of them standing and gaping.

"Holy shit. I'm glad I didn't go to your school," Miki commented, opening the front door after a long couple of seconds. Nabiki laughed quite hard.

"It was an education in more than the normal way, definitely," she responded, obviously amused. "Martial artists, crazy Amazon warriors, insane kendoists, spatula-wielding chefs, you name it. Lots of fun."

"I'm not entirely sure fun is the word I'd use," John muttered. "He really attacked a shark with a wooden sword?"

"Yep. Completely nuts."

"What happened to all these people?" Miki asked curiously, while they were changing their shoes.

"The crazy Amazon is actually a very good friend now, of course," Nabiki explained, smiling a little. "I never expected that to happen, I have to admit, but I'm very glad it did. Shampoo is a good person now she's grown up a little. Ukyo, the chef, and she really is a chef, her cooking skills are remarkable, is also a long-term friend. She's getting married very soon." They headed through the house into the back garden, where they found Umeko working on her plants, the elder woman looking up and smiling at them for a moment, before returning to work. The three sat down in some wrought-iron garden chairs that were placed near the back door.

"The insane kendoist?" John asked.

"Is still a kendoist, and probably also still insane to a degree, but to give him his due he does seem to be gradually becoming slightly less nuts. His sister is absolutely crazy, unfortunately, although even she isn't nearly as much of a pain as she was most of the time." Nabiki sighed for a moment. "She was a damned nuisance a few years back." Giving the other two an amused glance, she asked, "Still want to come to the party? Even after hearing about Nerima from one of the inmates?"
Giggling Miki nodded hard. "Oh, definitely, I wouldn't miss that for anything. Six magical girls in one place, including Yori? No way I'm not going."

"It could be... quite unusual... I suspect," the Tendo woman laughed. "But hopefully it will be fun as well." She looked up as Hana walked past, going over to their mother and talking to her for a moment, then heading back into the house with a wave to them all. When the older sister had vanished, her friend turned to Miki and asked, "Should I invite Hana as well? She seems fairly keen on Yori and her friends." There was a twinkle in Nabiki's eyes at this massive understatement.

Miki sighed, smiling. "She is quite into the entire fandom, yes," she agreed, as John rolled his eyes and cracked up. Poking him she laughed for a few seconds. "I'm not sure if it's a good idea or not. On the one hand, you'd be her friend for life. On the other, she might have some sort of fit or seizure from the excessive joy." She grinned as both the others collapsed in hysterical laughter at her dry words. "Not to mention she's get so high pitched only dogs could hear her."

"Is she really that bad?" the Neriman native asked, gasping for breath. Miki raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, you did actually meet my sister, didn't you?" Nabiki nodded, still laughing.

"I do seem to recall a certain amount of enthusiasm for the subject. From both of you, to be honest." Miki went slightly pink, mildly embarrassed, but didn't stop grinning.

"We share a few traits, yes. But she's got it a lot worse." Unable to hold it in, she started laughing as well, all three of them rolling around in their chairs. Hana came back out and stared at them for a moment, looked quizzically over at their mother, then shrugged, which only made them laugh harder, before leaving again, shaking her head slowly.

"OW!"

Giggling, Nabiki ducked the return fire from John, who whipped around and opened up on her with his paintball gun, pulling the trigger as fast as he could. Small capsules of high-velocity blue paint whizzed overhead and splattered on the tree behind her as she waited for a gap in the fire, before popping up unexpectedly, quickly getting a good lock on his shin, Jun providing an overlaid targeting icon that took account of the trajectory and wind, then fired a single shot in return.

"OW, dammit! How are you doing that, Tendo?!" he yelled, dropping behind his cover and reloading. "Stop it!"

Beside her Miki was nearly in hysterics, almost unable to hold her own paintball gun. "Do it again, Nabiki," she yelled.

"No, don't!" John yelped from twenty metres away. "OW!"

Dropping the compressed gas gun to the ground Miki folded over with hilarity, weakly shaking her head as she grinned at the middle sister, who smiled back. Loudly muttered obscenities came from the location the young man was hiding in, along with a certain amount of laughter from his teammates, many of whom had already experience the Wrath of Tendo with Paintballs.

"It should be called painball, not paintball," Miki squeaked breathlessly, trying to stop laughing. This set Nabiki off to the point she had to take cover and wait for the giggles to die away.

"You're not supposed to keep shooting someone who's dead, you know," John called over to them.

"Well, if you're dead, you shouldn't keep jumping up like that and shooting back," she called in
return, grinning to her friend. Annoyed mutters came on the wind to both girls who exchanged another glance of amusement.

"OK, OK, I'm dead. Stop shooting me, all right?" he finally called over, standing up with his gun held loosely in one hand above his head, waving to the game marshal, who was also grinning widely. The man directed him towards the safe area. Both girls watched as he headed off the course with his left hand still rubbing where the last paintball had struck.

"Only three of them left," Miki said, risking a quick look over the low wall then ducking as a flurry of paint shot past. "But only two of us."

Dropping flat the middle Tendo wormed forward a little so she could peer around the end of the wall as low as she could manage. It was a little unfair, she thought, to be so freely utilising the abilities Jun allowed her, which made tracking the other players very easy despite the obstructions, but it was also damn good fun. Even without Jun her training at the hands of Ranma and her sister had made a game like this pretty straightforward in most respects.

Grinning to herself, she thought, 'I wonder what they'd do if I used paintball-calibre ki shots?'

Deciding it was probably best that she didn't, although the idea was extremely amusing, she waited for the teenaged girl who had been lurking beside John to move slightly, before firing half a dozen shots in quick succession. One of the paintballs made it through the gap she'd spotted in the wooden wall, the remainder of them leaving yellow splashes around it. The inherent inaccuracy of the CO2-powered device and the low muzzle velocity added enough randomness to the shot that even Jun couldn't completely predict the outcome at this range, although it certainly gave her an enormous advantage.

A yell of surprise came back to her, followed by a triumphant cry as the girl she'd fired at threw herself back from the opening the projectile had just shot through. "Ha! You missed me!" This was immediately followed by a splat and a scream of anger. Nabiki looked over to see Miki peering around the other end of her wall, gun outstretched, grinning wildly about her own shot past the opponent's defences to get their victim in the back.

Giving her friend a quick grin and a thumb's-up, she returned her attention to the game, watching the dejected girl stand up with her gun held above her head. Like John before her, she trooped off the course looking irritated. Reloading with the last of her paint Nabiki scuttled over to Miki, staying low. "Two left. One is behind that oil barrel to the right there, the other one is up on the platform in the tree behind him." Risking a quick glance, Miki pulled her head back, nodding thoughtfully.

"I see him. Can you get him from here?"

"I don't think so, there are too many little twigs and things in the way, the balls keep breaking on them." She peered around the wall herself, then fired a couple of shots in the appropriate direction, before pulling back. "Nope. We'd have to be closer."

"OK. How about if I distract him, then you take him out?" Miki looked again, ducking as a paintball barely missed her. "Oops. That was close." She grinned. "I'll run for that other wall, if you cover me, then pin him down while you get him. That other guy is in the wrong place to hit either one of us. Then we can get the last one, and we win."

"Sounds like a plan," the middle Tendo snickered. "This was a good idea."

"Wasn't it?" Miki laughed a little. "I bet the next game John will want to be on our team," she added sardonically. Nabiki nodded, then rolled onto her chest, smiling, aiming at the distant player.
"On three. One... Two... Three!" She opened fire while Miki ran for cover, darting from tree to wall to barrel. As soon as her friend reached her destination she ducked back behind the wall.

#You are down to twenty-three rounds, Nabiki,# Jun informed her. #I advise careful selective fire for disabling this next target.# She grinned, the SI seemed to find the whole thing quite a lot of fun as well. It popped up a map of the game area with a path marked on it. #This course will keep you behind cover for sixty-two percent of the total distance, giving the best chance for mission success. If Miki fires as you reach this point, simulations suggest the target will be sufficiently distracted that you can clear the uncovered zone with minimal risk of taking return fire.#

'Looks good,' she replied, chuckling. Looking towards Miki, who was glancing back at her, while still keeping an eye on their opposing player, she pointed at the gap in the cover that Jun had highlighted, then pointed to herself, then the young man in the tree, who she could see was visibly wondering what they were up to. Miki followed her finger then looked back at her. After a moment she obviously got the idea, nodding and smiling. Getting ready she took aim, then waved to her friend. Nabiki jumped over the half-metre wall and ran, careful to keep her speed down to something reasonable, following the course highlighted by the SI and hearing Miki start shooting just as she reached the open area. A few paintballs came her way as the other player fired back but he was kept busy by the other woman's own fire, grimly trying to hit a moving target and a hidden one at the same time.

He failed on both counts.

Sliding into the cover of a large log, Nabiki smiled. She looked back at her friend, who waved with a large grin. Miki turned back to the other player, keeping him occupied with the occasional sniping shot, which was beginning to annoy him judging by the muttering she could hear coming from his position. Moving from cover to cover the middle sister worked her way around to the side until she had a clear line of fire, the young man hiding behind a wall of planks a couple of metres up on the elevated platform, apparently wondering where she'd gone. She aimed, then whistled sharply. Jerking his head around in shock she could see his eyes widen behind his mask, just before the yellow paint spread itself across his chest with a thwack.

He looked down, then back at her, before sagging. Giving him a wave and a grin, she headed back after the remaining player, hearing a burst of popping noises seconds later, followed by a cry of pain. "Got him!" Miki yelled with glee. A horn sounded as the marshal ended the game.

"Nine times." John finished counting small round bruises, pulling his shirt-sleeve down again, then gave Nabiki a hard look. "You hit me nine times. Thanks."

"You're welcome," she grinned, saluting him with her bottle of water. Mumbling to himself he picked up his own drink.

"Add unnaturally good shot to the list of weird things you can do," he muttered. "Damned family upbringing amongst martial artists. It obviously rubs off." Miki laughed from beside him. Glancing at her, he frowned. "You seem oddly good at it as well," he added. "You two work together much too well in my opinion." The young women exchanged gazes then laughed again.

"We offered to have you on our team," Miki told him, looking amused. "But for some reason you wanted to be on the other side."

"I'm not sure why I wanted that, I have to admit," he replied with a mild frown. "I'll remember for the next time. Note to self, don't let Nabiki or Miki shoot at you." She giggled wildly for a moment, leaning against him.
"It was fun," Nabiki told them. "Thanks for suggesting it." She rubbed at some dried paint on the back of her hand, then poured a little water on it, finally managing to get it off. They'd played half a dozen games, Miki and she being the sole people standing in two of them by the end. The last one had been a free for all death match, which had quickly turned into an 'Everyone get the Tendo' game instead, the players as one deciding that she was far too dangerous to be allowed to live. Against twenty players, including Miki, who had been laughing like an idiot, she hadn't stood a chance without going full-on magical girl. Her rented overalls were absolutely covered in a rainbow of paint. As soon as she was safely out of it, they'd turned on each other like a pack of rabid wolves, making her laugh as she watched from the safe zone, not at all annoyed by the betrayal of her friends.

She's been sniped by one young man in two games, almost instantly in the first one, half-way through in the second. Nabiki found it an amusing lesson in not getting over-confident. She'd spent some time tracking him down in the last game they played together, managing to get close enough that he'd actually yelped in surprise when he turned around and found her grinning at him from mere metres away over her gun. After a moment he'd grinned back, spread his arms widely, then said in a melodramatic tone, "Please make it quick and merciful, beautiful assassin." She'd been laughing so hard by that point that when a stray paintball from his own team had hit him in the forehead, she'd nearly collapsed.

Ruefully rubbing his forehead he'd held his gun up, grinned at her again, then wandered off looking happy. Shaking her head, she'd dived back into the game, having fun even though in the end her team lost due to attrition.

"I don't know if I'd want to play it all the time," she added, finishing her water bottle and screwing the cap back on, "but it's certainly been a good way to spend an afternoon."

"Expensive, though," John replied, looking slightly ruefully at the receipt he pulled out of his pocket. "I thought it cost a lot in the UK but the prices here are considerably higher, more than I expected."

"It was worth it." Miki looked satisfied with the results of the last three hours. "I haven't had that much fun for weeks."

"It was a lot of fun, yes," her boyfriend agreed, putting the receipt into his wallet then returning it to his pocket. "Although the bruises will take some time to go away."

"They'll fade quickly," she told him. "I can hardly see any of mine."

"That's because hardly anyone hit you." John looked mock-annoyed. "You two were ganging up on me. Especially her." He indicated Nabiki, who was listening with a smile.

"How can one person 'gang up' on someone?" Miki asked reasonably. He looked confused for a moment, then worked out what she meant, laughing.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, you idiot," he grinned.

"So, what will we do now?" Nabiki asked, watching them both with amused fondness. "It's only about half past four."

"No more paintball, that's for sure," John replied, rubbing his arm with a wince.

"I think I've had enough as well," she agreed.

"I could eat something," Miki suggested thoughtfully. "We've been running around for hours. I'm
starving. Why don't we go home, clean up, then go out for a meal. Mom and the others might want to come as well. I know a nice restaurant I haven't been to for a couple of years quite close to home."

"Not a bad idea," John mused. He glanced at Nabiki who nodded.

"Fine with me."

"OK. Let's return all this equipment and head back, then." Miki jumped to her feet and headed towards the changing area, smiling to herself, with her boyfriend and friend following, chatting amiably.

"What is it that you do, Kimiko?" the middle sister asked, halfway through her steak. The Sano woman glanced over at her. "We got interrupted last night and I never found out." Kimiko grinned as she took a quick look at Hana, who scowled a little. Nabiki and Miki followed her gaze, then exchanged looks of amusement.

"I'm training as a vet," the youngest of the three sisters explained. "I've always been interested in animals. It's pretty hard work but very interesting."

"I see. Are you going to specialise in anything specific, or just deal with cats and dogs, that sort of thing?"

"Probably small animals, I think, yes," Miki's sister explained, smiling a little. "Cows and horses are large, smelly, and dangerous if they sit on you. Anyway, there are an awful lot of pets around the place and people want them taken care of, so it seems like a good career."

Nabiki put the piece of steak in her mouth, savouring it as Kimiko talked. After a while the conversation changed to a recounting of their paintballing, which had everyone grinning as John wildly gesticulated as he relived the great Tendo-Sano ambush manoeuvre. By the end of the meal, they were all in a very good mood, paying the substantial bill and leaving the restaurant. During the walk home they talked some more, Nabiki finding once again that she found Miki's family enjoyable.

Half-way back, a couple of kilometres from the house on a quiet residential road, she suddenly felt something dangerous approaching, whipping her head around to see a motorcycle coming around the corner behind them too quickly and hitting a worn manhole cover at exactly the wrong angle. The front tire of the bike slid sideways on the slick metal, leaving the rider in a precarious position as he fought to recover his balance, ultimately in vain, the bike tilting past the point of return as it came towards them at some eighty kilometres per hour.

"Look out," she yelled, pushing Harue to one side as the bike toppled, skidding directly towards them in a shower of sparks, the rider coming off and sliding along the road on his back, then rolling over and over. Hitting the curb the bike flipped end over end into the air as she ducked, seeing that it was going to hit her after having passed through the spot Harue had been standing moments earlier. Without time to do much else that wouldn't instantly give her away she put her hand out, carefully deflecting it barely over her head and that of Hana who was standing next to her, the older woman beginning to turn at her shout. It all happened so quickly that by the time the machine was past the rest of the family was only just turning around. Kimiko yelped as the bike crashed into the wall of the building next to them with a very solid crunch, John grabbing her and pulling her back just in time to avoid it falling back onto her.

Silence fell, broken by Miki who said faintly, "Holy shit that was close," then closed her eyes and
nearly fainted, swaying a little. John, still holding Kimiko by the shoulder, put his free arm around her and held her.

Nabiki straightened up and looked around, quickly lowering her hand. As far as she could see no one seemed to have noticed that she'd actually pushed the machine out of the way, it most likely looked like a reflexive action that would have stood little chance of working, luckily being missed by the flying motorcycle. "Are you all right, Hana?" she asked, turning to the older woman, who was staring at the crushed machine with wide eyes in a white face. The woman nodded automatically, still staring. A second later she looked down at her father who was rolling over on the pavement where Nabiki's push had sent him, raising his hand to his head, which had a small cut on it.

"Dad!" She dropped to her knees next to him and grabbed him. He looked back slightly dazedly, then turned to look at Nabiki, then the dead bike.

"Oh. That could have been nasty," he said in a distant voice, raising his hand to his head and feeling the cut, wincing a little.

Umeko also dropped to her knees, heedless of the damage she was causing to her dress, quickly checking his wound, then hugging him. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked, worried. He nodded, then winced again.

"I think so. My head hurts but other than that I feel fine."

Satisfied that there was no immediate problem with her companions Nabiki hurried over to the comatose form of the motorcycle rider, who was lying in a crumpled heap in the gutter looking very untidy. She could sense he was still alive, although unconscious, and probably not in serious danger but it seemed likely he wasn't going to be enjoying the next few days. His leather suit and full face helmet had apparently kept him mostly intact although she could see they'd both need replacing.

Kneeling next to him she quickly scanned him, using Jun's new sensory system to look for broken bones or internal damage. #He has a broken ulna, a mild concussion, and a number of lacerations to his back, Nabiki, but other than that appears to be mostly uninjured,# the SI reported, highlighting the damage with an overlay. She studied the ghostly image the machine produced, before calling her sister on the comm.

"Hello, sister, how are you?" Kasumi greeted her.

"I'm fine, but I've got someone here who just nearly killed himself," she said, sending the older woman the scans. Kasumi fell silent for a moment.

"He's in no real danger but he needs hospitalisation," she said after a few seconds. "The broken arm is fairly bad. Do you want us to come and help you?"

"That could be difficult to explain," she somewhat reluctantly replied. "I'd love to heal him up right now but it would cause a lot of questions if Yori or Chou suddenly popped up in Kobe for the first time right when I'm here."

"I understand." Kasumi sounded calm and comforting. "Call the emergency services and arrange an ambulance. He'll be fine, once that break is in a cast." She paused for a moment, then added, "It's not impossible that he might have an anonymous visitor at some point in the near future, after which he heals rather more rapidly than normal."
Nabiki chuckled to herself. "Thanks, sis."

"Are there any other injuries?" her sister asked. She looked over to the Sano family, who were clustered around Harue who was sitting up, holding his head.

"A minor head wound, but nothing serious," she replied.

"All right. If you need any help, just call, but you're probably correct that this should be handled without magical girl involvement."

"I'll let you know what happens, but I'd better call the ambulance and get back to the others before someone thinks something odd is going on," the middle sister said. "Talk later."

"Goodbye, Nabiki." Kasumi disconnected as Nabiki pulled out her phone, making it look like she'd removed it from her pocket. Miki was in the process of heading over, John behind her, as she dialled.

"Oh my god, Nabiki, is he all right?" her friend asked, staring at the man on the ground.

"I think so," she replied, "It looks like he's got a broken arm from what I can see and he's probably got a head injury judging by the damage to his helmet." She pointed, both of her friends looking. "Probably best not to move him. I'm calling an ambulance."

Less than a minute had passed since she'd noticed the biker, she idly noted, as the emergency operator answered her call. A quick conversation later and she hung up, dropping the phone into her pocket. "They're on the way, so are the police," she announced. The rider picked that moment to regain consciousness, groaning loudly. Kneeling down she put a restraining hand on him. "Lie still, please. The ambulance will be here soon." Indeed she could already hear sirens. A couple of minutes later an ambulance stopped next to her, the paramedics quickly exiting and examining the patient. She stood back out of the way, watching, with her friends.

Shortly after that the police arrived, a pair of officers looking around, then one of them heading to the small group of people, while the other one inspected the remains of the motorcycle, taking some notes.

"Can anyone tell me what happened?" the corporal asked, his notebook open. Everyone exchanged glances then looked at Nabiki. The Tendo sister took a step forwards, smiling a little, and began to explain the sequence of events.

Sitting in the living room, the Sano family was very quiet. After a while, Umeko got up and made some tea, returning to the room and passing it around. They all sipped it in silence for a few minutes.

"It would appear that I owe you thanks for myself, now, Nabiki," Harue finally said, feeling the bandage that one of the paramedics had fitted him out with over his mild objections. "By the sound of it you saved my life. Thank you."

"You're more than welcome, of course," she replied quietly. "I'm sorry you hit your head."

"It's nothing, I've had much worse on the job," he smiled. "It's certainly much less than I would have received by collecting a flying Honda in the face."

"True," she laughed.
"I'm just glad it missed you and Hana," Umeko exclaimed, sighing. Hana nodded vigorously.

"It went past close enough I swear I felt it brush my head," she said, still looking pale. She glanced at Nabiki, smiling briefly. "I don't think putting your hand up would have helped," she added.

The middle Tendo laughed again. "It was a reflex. Difficult not to when there's something heading right for you, even if it's pointless."

"I guess," the other woman giggled nervously. "God, that was close. It's a good thing you spotted it in time." She suddenly leaned over and hugged Nabiki hard for a moment. "Thank you for saving us."

"Don't worry about it," Nabiki smiled.

"Yes, she saves people all the time," Miki giggled. "Entire worlds of them at once, sometimes." Everyone looked at her somewhat oddly, although both John and Nabiki grinned. She flushed a little. "Sorry. Silly joke. I'm still shaking." Holding up her hand everyone could see it was trembling a little. John held it in his own.

"It's a calling," Nabiki said after a moment, folding her arms and deliberately looking as smug as possible for maximum comedic effect. Everyone stared at her, then slowly, one by one, began to laugh, the relief caused by the near miss coming out in the good humour.

As she was getting ready for bed some hours later, a quiet tap on her door made her look up, then open it. Kimiko looked in with a smile, before quickly looking both ways. Entering the room she closed the door and leaned on it, watching Nabiki watch her curiously, wondering what was going on. After a moment, the youngest Sano sister held out her hand.

"Thanks for saving my father. And my sister," she said very quietly. "She's a pain sometimes, but she's family."

"I'm not sure what you mean?" Nabiki half-asked. Kimiko smiled faintly.

"I'm not going to tell, or ask any questions, don't worry, my word of honour on that. I don't know what it was, martial arts or something else, but that bike wasn't going to miss. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye but..." She shrugged, still smiling. "Anyway, thanks."

After a long moment, Nabiki smiled back. She shook the outstretched hand.

"I admit to nothing, but it wasn't a problem, believe me."

"Because it's a calling?" Kimiko asked impishly while looking amused.

Giggling, Nabiki nodded.

"Exactly."

Kimiko laughed, hugged her for a moment, then left, leaving the middle sister smiling to herself as she climbed into the bed and settled down for the night.

"Hi, 'Biki. I'm sorry, did I wake you up? I forgot the time difference." Akane sounded mildly embarrassed.

"I was just drifting off," her sister replied, yawning without opening her eyes, feeling comfortable where she was. It was very convenient, she thought not for the first time, to be able to answer a
phone call without having to move. "How are things with you two? Settled in yet?"

"As much as we could be after only one day. We're just heading down to breakfast, it's... about half past eight, right now. So it's nearly one in the morning there, right?"

"That's right. But the next day of course, so you're talking to me in the future. It's Monday night here, or more accurately, very early on Tuesday." Nabiki laughed slightly as Akane giggled for a moment. "What have you done so far?"

"Well, Adrian was waiting for us when we got here, he took us to the hotel, which is really nice, it's a four star one quite close to the studio, the rooms are huge, then after we checked in, we went out for a meal at a nice restaurant with him, Matt, and Aaron. Aiko came with us, so did Richard and his wife and daughter. Afterwards they went off somewhere and we wandered around for a couple of hours seeing some of the sights. LA is pretty impressive in a way I've never seen before. Not as many people as Tokyo but a lot more different ones, I think." Her sister sounded excited, making her smile to herself.

"There are a lot of Japanese people here, actually," she added with interest. "We bumped into some tourists from Osaka who didn't speak much English and were lost. I translated for them and Adrian sent them off to where they were trying to get to. They were very pleased, I think they were getting a little worried."

"That was nice of you," Nabiki chuckled. Laughing, Akane agreed, "It seemed polite. Anyway, after that, it was about midnight, I guess, we went back to the hotel while the others went home. Shampoo wanted to try the pool on the roof so we went swimming for an hour or so. Or, at least, she did, I paddled around a bit." The younger sister sounded slightly embarrassed now. Nabiki snickered.

"Still not entirely happy in the water, are you?"

"Not completely. I suppose I'll probably have to overcome that, I expect stunt work will involve water quite a lot."

"Probably. Drowning on the job would be a silly way to go," the middle sister laughed. "When you get back, if you want, I'm happy to teach you to swim properly. It's not difficult once you get the technique right. I've offered enough times in the past, perhaps now you're ready."

"Perhaps." Her sister laughed. "I'll think about it. But thanks for the offer."

"What have you got planned for today?"

"We're going to the studio later, to meet various people and go over the plans for the next couple of days. It sounds both exciting and boring at the same time." Akane giggled again, making Nabiki grin into the darkness of her room. "Before that we're going to look around a little more, hopefully in air-conditioned buildings some of the time at least. It's already really hot, it's going to be a scorcher of a day, I think. Adrian will be here in about an hour. He even got us phones to use while we're here, which was a nice thought. He called me about ten minutes ago to check that we were on schedule when he left his house. Apparently the traffic is horrible here, worse than back home, but he's still going to be more or less on time."

"Have fun," the elder sister laughed. "Try not to destroy LA, they might be annoyed. Remember there's a damn great fault-line near the city."

Akane laughed as well. "Oh, very ha ha, 'Biki," she replied sardonically. "I'm not going to trigger
"an earthquake."

"Hopefully..." They giggled at each other.

"How is your trip going?" the younger woman asked curiously.

Thinking for a couple of seconds, Nabiki worked out what was safe to talk about. "Pretty well. I've met Miki's parents and two sisters. She's the middle one like I am, but a little younger. Kimiko is a bit younger than you, by a year I think, and the other one, Hana, is a little less than two years older than me. They're all very nice people." She described each of the family members while her sister listened. "Hana is absolutely obsessed with magical girls," she added with a snicker. "Miki is worse than you are, and Hana is much worse than that. When I mentioned the Yori and Chou action figures I thought she was going to have a stroke."

There was a gale of laughter from the other end of the conversation as Akane cracked up. "It was amazing. The colour her face went..." Nabiki was laughing quietly to herself, trying not to wake anyone, as she remembered the previous day. "Then, last night, we were talking again and Kimiko mentioned that Hana writes magical girl fan fiction." Fresh laughter came from Akane, who sounded like she was on the verge of collapse.

"You should see if you could get a copy," she shorted after she'd recovered a little. "It sounds fun."

"I might," the middle sister giggled. "Especially the latest masterpiece, Kimiko says it's about Yori." This put her sister into near convulsions of amusement by the sound of it. Both of them laughed for some time. When they finally calmed down, she continued, "Other than that, it's been very interesting. We went to a really good swimming pool this morning, then in the afternoon went paintballing. Miki and I did pretty well, John was a bit annoyed, but he shouldn't have picked the losing team..." She went over the events of the last day and a half, while Akane listened and made appropriate comments.

For a number of reasons she didn't mention either the arcade incident or the near-miss with the motorcycle. She was going to have to think about when and how she discussed either with her sister or the rest of her family, as she felt she should downplay both.

"Sounds like we're both enjoying ourselves," Akane finally said, sounding pleased. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Going up a local mountain to a sort of resort on the top to have a look around and do some photography, then figure out something else to do afterwards. It's likely that it will take up most of the day. We're not sure about the day after tomorrow yet. I'll probably leave Thursday night so I can help Auntie Nodoka get ready for the weekend."

"OK. Shampoo and I will be back either late Thursday or sometime on Friday morning, I think," the distant sister replied. "We'll need at least one night to recover, I suspect, even leaving aside the time difference." She chuckled for a moment. "Teleporting does weird things to your sense of time. We're both still feeling like it's the middle of the night."

"You'll be OK tomorrow, probably," Nabiki told her. "Just take it easy today. Do your best, let me know how it goes, all right? And say hi to Shampoo as well. Best of luck to both of you."

"Thanks, 'Biki. Have fun as well. I'll see you in a few days."

"Bye, sis." Akane hung up, letting the inside of the older sister's head go quiet once again. Rolling over she smiled at the ceiling then fell asleep in seconds, feeling pleased for her sister and her
Snapping awake at half-past three in the morning, Nabiki listened carefully. The window was slightly open to allow a cooling breeze to enter and through it the noise that had woken her came again. #Breaking glass, approximately six hundred metres away, Nabiki,# Jun reported quietly.#Based on the sound I believe it was a large plate-glass window. The most likely location in range is the small shopping precinct located here.# It displayed a map of the immediate vicinity with an icon indicating the location. She remembered walking past it that morning, seeing a number of shops in the middle of an area with few residential buildings present.

Getting up she went to the window, pulling out a camera drone and sending it off into the night. Seconds later she was watching two men in dark clothing in the process of wrapping a chain around an ATM which was bolted to the floor of a convenience shop they seemed to have backed a small SUV through the window of, then attempting to attach it to the rear of the vehicle, obviously intent on pulling it out by the roots and driving off with it. With a faint sigh she opened the window wider, carefully probing for anyone awake who might see her, either in the Sano household or the surrounding buildings. All she could feel was the faint ki emanations of sleeping people. A moment's thought and Nabiki swung herself out the window, taking on her flying Azumi form even as she activated her bracelet. A few quick flaps and she was soaring over the dark houses towards the robbers. She noticed that the street-lights in the precinct were off, leaving an island of darkness amongst the lit ones, suggesting the power was off there.

As she arrived overhead, she could see one of them fumbling with the chain, while talking in a low voice to his friend, who was apparently pointing out that the chain was too short for the job required of it. She quietly glided to a landing behind them, folding her wings and crossing her arms, while listening to what they were saying with interest.

"Look, just bring the truck closer, will you?" the first man said.

"I can't, you idiot, the window frame is in the way. We need to pull that out first."

"We don't have time for that. The police will turn up sooner or later." The first robber sighed. "This was supposed to take thirty seconds and we're already been here twice that long."

"I cut the power, the alarms are dead," his colleague replied. "We've got a couple of minutes at least."

"What if someone heard it? It made a lot of noise."

"Do you see anyone around?" The second man said, spreading his arms widely. The first man looked around, his eyes passing over 'Azumi', then snapping back to her. She waved, smiling nastily at him.

"Um..."

"What Um?" the second man said, puzzled by the way the colour had drained from his friend's face, apparent even in the darkness which was lit only by the running lights of the SUV. The first man pointed past his shoulder.

"There's a girl with wings standing behind you," he said in a hoarse whisper. Staring at him for a few seconds, the second man let out a small laugh.

"Good one. Now come on, let's get this damn thing connected and out of the way. We don't have long." He bent down to pick up the chain. His friend grabbed him by the shoulder, forcibly turning
him around. Both men stared at the silver-haired woman watching them with a coldly amused expression. After a second or two she slowly spread her wings to full extent, holding her hands out to the sides and forming a ball of energy in each one.

"Hello," she said in a low voice, smirking. The men looked at each other, then back to her.

"Oh, shit."

"Odd."

Miki looked over at her father, who was watching the local news quietly in the living room. The rest of them were in the process of setting the table, while Umeko brought out breakfast.

"What's odd, Dad?" she asked curiously. He got up, turning off the TV and coming over, sitting down at the table.

"There seems to have been an attempted robbery at that store over in the shopping area," he said, smiling at his wife as she poured some tea and handed him the cup. "Two gentlemen took it upon themselves to steal a vehicle, then drive it into the front of the building. It looks like they were going to try to heave the ATM out of the shop with a chain, but someone stopped them before they could finish. They even cut the power at the local substation to disable the alarm."

"Wow. That's pretty serious," Hana exclaimed. "Who stopped them?"

"No one seems to know," her father replied. "That's what's odd. They don't appear to remember much about it, or at least that's what they're claiming. But it looks like someone tied them up with their own chain somehow then hung them upside down from the nearest lamp-post before calling the police. It's very strange."

"Who could have done that?" Umeko asked, looking surprised. Kimiko was listening with a very faint smile, looking at her father and no one else.

"The police seem puzzled," Harue said, nodding as Miki motioned to the rice bowl. She passed it over. "The only thing that seems to be certain is that the person who called them was female."

"Hey, perhaps there's a magical girl in Kobe, now," Hana said excitedly. Kimiko snickered, shaking her head.

"You always say that every time something even slightly odd happens, sis." She laughed as Hana glared at her. "You remember the time they found that burglar head-first down the ventilation system in that garage?" She looked at John, who was listening with a smile. "She said it must have been a magical girl who stuffed him in there. Of course, it turned out he was an idiot that thought he could fit into a much smaller space than he actually could. He was in there for two days before someone heard him shouting."

Miki started laughing at her older sister's expression, and even her parents looked amused. Hana grumbled to herself. "It could have been a magical girl," she muttered. "She could have used her magic to make him think he could fit."

Giggling, Miki glanced at Nabiki who was sitting quietly enjoying the commentary, a smile on her face. "That's only one of about a dozen times I can think of that she's been certain there was a magical girl around here. None have shown up so far." She sighed a little, looking mildly wistful, then brightened up. "Mind you, no demons either, so all in all I suppose it's a good trade off."
"Quite possibly," the middle Tendo agreed cheerfully, trying her miso soup, which was nearly as good as her own sister produced. She glanced casually at Kimiko, who looked back for a moment, then bent over her own bowl, smiling to herself.

"Hello, Masao," a voice said from behind him, making him turn his head as he stopped, then moved slightly to allow other pedestrians past. Yori smiled at him as he grinned back.

"Hi, Yori. What brings you here?" He was a few metres from the café he often got coffee at on the way into work. She looked at it for a moment then gestured, following him in as he resumed walking. Waiting while he ordered drinks for both of them, she took the cup he handed her and accompanied him to a table in the corner.

"I have something for you, if you want it," she said as she sat. "A little present. It might come in handy in your line of work."

Studying her as he added a little more sugar to his coffee and stirred it, he raised an eyebrow. She looked somewhat amused and pleased with herself. "Hmm. That sounds... slightly ominous. Is it bigger than a breadbox?"

The young woman laughed for a moment, as he grinned. "It's more of a talent, actually."

"You want to give me a talent?" he asked after a moment's surprise. She chuckled, nodding. "Basically. We've laid hands on a fascinating spell from some new friends. Something very rare, very complicated, and very restricted, but we were able to get permission to offer it to you. You don't have to accept, but I think you'd enjoy it. I know we do." The girl sipped her own coffee, watching him with a small smile as he tried to work out what she was on about.

Naito put his cup down carefully, thinking. After a moment, he shrugged. "I give up. What is it?"

"The solution to the tower of Babel," she commented mysteriously, looking amused and expectant, as if she thought this was a sufficient clue to allow him to work it out. He thought some more, while she waited, obviously enjoying herself. Eventually, his eyes widened a little. Could she mean...

"A language or translation spell?" he asked in astonishment. The black-haired woman saluted him with her coffee-cup, grinning.

"Got it in one. Well done. Yes, we acquired a limited usage right to what's probably the most extensive and elaborate language spell there is, as far as I can find out. It's ancient, and sort of a state secret, normally restricted its designers. They decided they owed us a favour, this was part of how they repaid it." Finishing off her drink she put the cup down, folding her hands on the table and looking at him. "I'm afraid I can't say any more about that, though."

"Very intriguing," he mumbled, wondering where they'd been this time. It could have been almost anywhere based on his own experiences. More loudly, he asked, "So what languages does it handle?"

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"More or less all of them," Yori grinned, "from more or less anywhere. We haven't found one it doesn't work with yet, to be honest, and we've been trying for a couple of days. All the human ones and all the demon ones we could come up with it works with amazingly well. We're told that there are very few real limitations we're likely to encounter. It also makes learning the written form of the language much easier, it can take only a few hours in some cases."
"What's the catch?" he asked, looking at her with his own eyebrow raised. There was a pause, before she leaned slowly forward, her expression changing. He felt suddenly worried.

"I will require the liver and heart of your first-born male child," she replied in a low, eerie voice. He stared at her in complete shock. After a few seconds, she leaned back, the air of danger evaporating, then started laughing like a lunatic.

Naito shook his head, watching her in exasperation. "You, my dear woman, are totally crazy and have a very odd sense of humour." This only made her laugh harder. After trailing off into giggles, she grinned at him.

"You should have seen your face." He frowned back, causing her to look amused, before sobering up. "No catch. We thought you could use it, we trust you not to do anything stupid, and we like you. Our friends agreed when we explained. So, interested?"

With only a moment's pause, he nodded. "Yes. Very. You're right, it could be extremely useful. I'm fluent in English and German, with some Chinese, but not much more than that. Learning other languages has always been something I wanted to do, it just takes a lot of time and practice."

"I know that all too well," she replied, sighing slightly. "Mandarin particularly is somewhat difficult, I was studying it for several years and still wasn't very fluent. Now, though..." She grinned and rattled off a quick sentence in what sounded to him like perfect Mandarin. "No problem."

"Being able to speak and understand Trade could really be handy," he mused out loud, smiling slightly to himself. "OK, I'm in. What do I have to do?"

"We should go somewhere without an audience." Yori looked around, as he followed her eyes, noticing that there were one or two customers discreetly watching them, or more specifically, her. He nodded.

"OK. We're close to the office, will that do? I was going there anyway."

"That's fine." They both got up and left the café, arriving at the PSIA building a few minutes later. He waved his ID at the guard who nodded, pushing the button behind the security counter to unlock the inner door while looking curiously at Yori, who smiled at him. Both of them went in and the door closed again. "A private room would be best," she remarked.

"There's a conference room just down here," he replied, pointing. "There won't be anyone in it this early."

"Great." Entering the room behind him she closed the door, then looked around for a moment. "OK, this is fine. Right, it causes a few seconds of disorientation, so you should lie down, I think."

"Here on the floor?" he asked, looking at her.

"That will do," she agreed, watching as he lay down, looking mildly amused. "OK. Hold this for a moment." She handed him a dark blue near-cube a few centimetres across, which he accepted, inspecting it with curiosity. "Close your eyes." He followed the instructions, wondering what was going to happen. "All right, I'll activate it. You have to give your permission, it's a bit like the security spell. You'll know when." There was a low hum for a moment and the thing in his hands grew slightly warm. Then the world went very weird for a little while.

"Urgle," he commented intelligently, opening his eyes again and waiting for everything to settle down. He looked up at Yori who was smiling down at him, before she relieved him of the device.
and made it vanish, then offered him a hand up. "That was extremely peculiar," he added, less
disoriented.

"It's a little odd," she agreed, grinning. "Everyone felt it. But there's no long term issues, it's only
while it's linking in to your mind." Shaking his head a little he could almost feel things dropping
into place. Sudden realisation struck him.

"We're speaking Trade, aren't we?" he asked incredulously. She nodded, grinning more widely.

"Good, isn't it?"

"It's pretty damn unbelievable," he mumbled, listening to his own voice with slightly numb shock.
It was a remarkable personal demonstration of magic unlike anything he'd previously encountered.
Slowly, a grin grew to match hers.

"Thanks. Very much indeed. This could be... interesting..." he told her with complete honesty,
speaking Italian just for the hell of it.

Slightly out of breath, Miki glanced at John, who smiled back when he noticed her looking at him.
They were hiking up the last part of the path that terminated at the top of Mount Rokko, just to the
west of Kobe, which gave some fairly spectacular views over the entire area. Nabiki looked back
over her shoulder, grinning at them.

"Tired yet?" she asked, not looking worried herself. Miki sighed, then walked a little faster to come
up beside her friend.

"You have better stamina than I do. It must be all that swimming."

"It's good aerobic exercise," the Tendo woman agreed. "We could have taken the cable car."

"That's no fun," John puffed from beside her, stopping for a moment to massage his calves, before
carrying on. "We can go down on it, secure in the knowledge that we did it the hard way, unlike
those soft city dwellers." Miki giggled, gazing at her boyfriend fondly, while he looked pleased
with himself. After a moment he also laughed.

Turning so she was walking backwards up the path Nabiki chuckled. "That's an interesting attitude.
I assume Bristol is some hardened frontier town where you grew up killing and eating anything
that crossed your path, oh great mountain man?"

John shook his head, snickering. "Not exactly, no. Some areas of it are admittedly not entirely safe,
but by and large it's a lot like Kobe, or Tokyo even, only flatter for the most part and with a lot less
people. There are a few pretty steep hills, though." He looked up the path, wincing a bit. "Not as
steep as this or as tall."

Turning around again and continuing to walk, Nabiki replied, "The first part wasn't too bad. We're
nearly half way up this last bit so it won't be long now. We can collapse in a restaurant, admire the
view, and get soundly taken advantage of by the no doubt excessively high prices for lunch."

Laughing, Miki nodded. "I haven't been up here for a few years, but I remember the food was
pretty good. You're right though, it's expensive."

"Captive market," John sighed. "Tourist traps are always like that."

"The botanical garden is nice," she added. "There are lots of other things as well, it's a major resort.
In the winter the skiing is fun.

"Way too hot for skiing," John muttered, stopping again and fumbling in the small backpack he had for a bottle of water, which he drained quickly. Nabiki pulled one out as well and drank from it as they took a breather, looking around at the view. "Almost too hot for climbing mountains as well."

"We're not exactly climbing it," the Tendo sister laughed. "More like walking up a steep street." She nodded to a couple who passed them, the trio moving back slightly to allow it. Both the older people nodded back, smiling, then continued on their way. John was right, Miki thought, it was indeed quite a hot day, although as they climbed the altitude was bringing the temperature back down to something reasonable. She remembered how much colder it got at the top and decided it was probably a good thing it was so warm.

After a moments more rest, they resumed the walk. Eventually the path levelled out as it reached the top and they looked around. "Let's go to that restaurant first," Miki suggested, pointing. "I could do with a rest and something to eat even if it is overpriced. There's a good view from inside as well from what I remember."

"Fine by me," Nabiki replied. John nodded and they all headed off in that direction. Shortly they were sitting at a table waiting for their orders to arrive, looking out at Kobe and the surrounding area, much of which was industrialised, including some fairly impressive port facilities, pointing out various things to each other.

"It's amazing at night," Miki commented. "Lights as far as you can see. During the day it's a bit grim, there's only so much you can do with a port, after all."

John, who was watching something below through a pair of binoculars he'd produced from his pack, nodded absently. "True enough, I guess, although it's still quite impressive. Bristol has some pretty large port areas but you can't really look down on them like this."

"Same with Tokyo," Nabiki agreed. "You can go up in a few of the buildings and look at the port, but it's nothing like as far up as this is." She looked up as their meal arrived, thanking the server. Eating took precedence for the next twenty minutes.

"Expensive, yes, but good food," she said as she finished her meal, looking satisfied.

"It's not at all bad," John agreed. They talked for a little longer, looking out the window, then left the restaurant. After a short discussion they headed for the botanical garden, deciding to investigate the place.

An hour later Miki leaned against a tree, watching Nabiki framing a shot with an expensive looking camera. The other woman pressed the shutter button, then lowered the camera from her eye, smiling, as she stood up from the slight crouch she'd gotten into to get the shot just right. "I'll have to change film, that was the last shot on the roll," she said.

"That's a very impressive camera, Nabiki," Miki said admiringly. Engaged in the process of carefully reloading the thing, the Tendo woman smiled a little, nodding.

"It's a nice one, definitely. I was wanting something like this for quite a while and took the opportunity of the holiday to give me the excuse to buy it. I've got a lot of film to develop when I go back." She held up the roll of film she'd extracted from the camera, which she'd put back into the silver package the replacement one had been in, before putting it carefully back into her pack. "One more, now."
"I'll be interested in seeing them when you've got them processed," Miki noted. She looked around for a second. "Any idea where that boyfriend of mine got to? He wandered off ten minutes ago now."

"I think he's back over there somewhere," Nabiki replied, indicating where the path had split a couple of hundred metres back. "He was looking at an interesting tree." She laughed for a moment. "I think it was an excuse to have a break."

Giggling, Miki grinned at her friend. "I think you may be right. I'm going to go and look for him."

"OK. I want to take a few more photos, though. Shall I meet you guys later?"

Nodding, Miki asked, "Where?" She pulled a tourist map out of her pocket and opened it out, looking at it for a few seconds, then around at their surroundings. "We're, um... here, more or less. How about up here at the observation deck? There's a good view from there."

"All right, that looks fine," the other woman responded, studying the map for a moment, then nodding. "Forty-five minutes or so?"

"Sounds good," Miki agreed. She put the map away, looking up as she did. "Mind you, if those clouds come in, we won't see anything. It gets really foggy up here sometimes." Nabiki followed her view, frowning slightly.

"Hmm. I see what you mean. The wind is blowing this way as well. Oh well, if it clouds over we can go and do something else."

"I think we should go to the hot springs on the way down," the Sano woman suggested. "If we go back that way, it's about an hour or so walk to Arima, then we can take the bus back home."

Putting her camera away, Nabiki thought for a moment, then nodded again. "That's not a bad idea. I'm up for it if John is. All right, I'm going to wander around for a while and shoot another couple of rolls then I'll meet you, OK?"

Waving, Miki headed off to find her wayward boyfriend, while behind her, her friend went in the direction of a display of odd-looking bushes.

Finishing the third roll of film Nabiki sat on a rock and reloaded the camera with the second to last one in the box, putting the exposed roll back into the new one's packaging to protect it, then sticking it into her ki pocket through the back-pack to make it look normal in case anyone was watching. She smiled a little to herself. 'No one would believe how much stuff I have in my backpack' she thought, amused. She could, after all, produce things such as over a hundred litres of water on demand from something that was apparently barely capable of holding the camera she put back into it, before zipping it up. Hopping to her feet she looked around, nodding politely to a pedestrian who walked slowly past enjoying the day. He nodded back with a smile and went about his business.

'It would appear that the weather forecast was in error this morning, Nabiki,' Jun commented as she glanced up, noticing that the clouds were drawing in rapidly. '#This weather wasn't due to arrive for another three hours.'

'Better make the best of it, then,' she replied, smiling internally, heading off in the direction of the observation platform. Miki and John should, in theory, be on their way there as well. She idly cast her sense outwards to see if she could locate them but found they must have been out of range.
Walking slowly onwards, she looked around curiously, stopping now and then to examine the scenery. There were growing numbers of people apparent as she left the immediate area of the botanical garden and entered the busier parts of the resort.

Stopping briefly to look at the view towards Osaka and Kobe through a gap in the buildings, she sighed a little as the lowering cloud started covering it. Seconds later the distant city-scape had vanished into the mist. 'There it goes. Oh, well. I got some nice pictures even so.'

'It is unlikely to clear in the next hour as far as I can determine,' Jun told her. She shrugged a little.

'That's what happens up mountains in Japan, even ones only a kilometre or so high,' she commented philosophically. 'It's been nice up until now and it's still pretty warm. We can find something else to do other than looking at the view.' Walking towards her goal, she slowed a few hundred metres further on as she heard a car engine rev up, screaming far higher than seemed reasonable for the winding roads at the top of the mountain. Puzzled, she turned slightly in the direction it was coming from, shown on the map overlay Jun was producing as the car park for the 'Garden Terrace' complex, which seemed to be a restaurant and a few other touristy things, a little way from her original destination.

By now it was getting sufficiently misty as the cloud-base lowered that the visibility was down to less than a hundred metres to unaided vision. Jun's sensory package dealt with the fog quite well for some considerable distance further than that, using a mix of wavelengths, but even then she could no longer make out the city below. It had begun using the enhanced vision modes without comment as the fog grew heavier.

The screaming engine sound abruptly terminated in a distant crash, followed by some crunching sounds that died away into the mist. Cries of shock were audible after the louder sounds stopped. Something was obviously amiss. Running now, she soon arrived at the car park, to find a crowd of people standing around looking at a gap in the trees on the south-eastern edge of the car park, a number of them frantically using their phones. "What happened?" she asked a middle-aged woman who was watching with worry. The woman looked at her for a moment then went back to observing the drama.

"Someone got out of their car up the road there and left it running," she explained, indicating a position some distance from the car park. "Her child was in the back seat. Apparently he climbed over the seat and managed to put the car in gear and then pressed the accelerator, the car went down here, hit a couple of other vehicles, then went right over the edge over there with him in it." She looked shocked and pale. "Poor little thing, he was only about five. I hope he's all right." She didn't look hopeful.

'A few metres past the boundary of the car park the hillside drops off quite rapidly,' Jun told her quietly, displaying a topographical map of the surroundings. 'The tree cover is heavy enough to slow a vehicle, but if it had sufficient speed when it hit, the slope is enough that it could continue for some distance. I would estimate that it would be roughly in this area depending on the size, weight, and velocity of the vehicle when it left the road.' It put a marker about two hundred metres down the mountain-side, which was a vertical drop of over a hundred metres.

'What are the odds he's still alive?' she asked, thanking the woman and glancing around, then quickly heading off to find a place without witnesses, activating her bracelet as soon as she was out of sight. The SI paused for a moment.

'Reasonable, but by no means certain,' it replied. 'If the airbags deployed, and the vehicle was correctly orientated, the occupant may be uninjured. If, on the other hand, it rolled, or hit an
obstruction such as a tree branch that penetrated the windscreen...# The machine didn't continue. It didn't need to. She nodded, scanning the area, then jumping onto the roof of a two-story building. Checking one more she leaped off again, taking on her flying 'Azumi' form in the process and soaring out into the fog, heading down the slope while probing with her ki senses and Jun's sensory package.

She located the vehicle within thirty seconds, circling over its location. Normal vision wouldn't have seen it easily from her position, as it was obscured both by the foliage and the mist, but the thermal signature showed it clearly. #It is on its roof,# Jun commented with a worried tone. #That's not good. But it looks like it fairly slowly rolled at the last moment. That may have saved the child.#

"He's alive, I can feel it," she said, dropping lower, while picking a good place to land among the trees. Shortly she was standing next to the car. Bending down 'Azumi' peered in, to see a small boy lying in an awkward position on the ceiling of the car, one leg tangled in the steering wheel. His ki output was fluctuating in a manner that suggested a fairly serious injury. Inspecting him carefully she found his leg was broken in two places and he had several broken ribs, at a minimum.

#There would appear to be damage to his lung, here,# the SI told her, indicating a particular injury. #The fourth rib on the left side has torn it as it snapped. In addition he has a punctured diaphragm. He won't be able to breath for much longer. Moving him is inadvisable.#

'Damn.' She commed her sister and Ranma. "Got another one, guys."

"I thought you were just visiting friends," the martial artist commented wryly as she sent him the scan information.

"I thought so as well," she responded with a sigh. "But things keep happening..."

"We know how that goes, sure enough," he chuckled. "This kid is a mess. We'll get Aiko back and be with you in a couple of minutes. He's not going to last long enough for the rescue people to get to him."

"Thanks," she said with relief. She could hear people up in the car park still shouting, and distant sirens approaching the area. Less than a minute and a half later 'Chou', 'Yori', and Aiko appeared next to her. The blonde woman dropped to her knees next to her sister, giving her a quick smile, and reached into the crushed vehicle, putting her hands on the small boy. Golden light flared.

"He's lost a fair amount of blood, mostly internally," she reported after a second or two. "The ribs are bad, the leg is as well, and there's minor spinal damage." Glancing at 'Yori' she looked concerned.

"We need to get him out of there," her husband noted. She looked at Aiko and 'Azumi' for a moment. "You guys steady this thing, I'll cut it open, OK?"

"Right." Aiko nodded to her friend, then she grabbed the front of the car, holding it still. The middle sister moved to the rear of the vehicle and did the same. Producing an energy blade, 'Yori' carefully sliced the vehicle in half, Aiko gently separating her part from the rear, while 'Chou' lifted the patient out and put him on the ground, then bent over him. As the other two pushed the remains of the vehicle to the side, 'Yori' joined her wife at the young casualty's side, a purple glow mixing with the golden one.

"Can you hold his leg like this, please?" 'Chou' requested. Her sister did as requested. Shortly the blonde removed her hands. "That's done."
"The ribs are done as well. Just working on the lung. Check for other damage will you, love, while I finish this and do the diaphragm?" 'Chou' nodded silently, resuming her work.

While the middle sister and her friend watched quietly, the two martial artists healed the boy, finishing after a little less than five minutes from the time they'd appeared. Finally they both sat back looking satisfied. "He'll be fine, now," 'Yori' said, smiling. "And he'll be asleep for about another ten minutes."

"Thank you all," 'Azumi' told them, relieved.

"No problems." The martial artist looked up the hill towards the sounds coming from the car park. "You OK with the rest?"

"I think so. I'll take him back and hand him over, then sneak off." She giggled. "I'm not going to stick around. I need to be Nabiki again, without any reason to have her associated with flying magical girls."

"No names, then, like that fishing boat." 'Yori' snickered. "Have fun. We'll see you later."

"Bye." She smiled as Aiko grinned at her, then stepped back, the others joining her. The outbound flash lit the fog, which by now was fairly thick, then she was alone with a sleeping child. Looking down at him she shook her head. "Come on, kid, lets get you back to your mother before anything else happens." Bending down she effortlessly picked the child up, holding him close, then hopped onto the remains of the car, before taking off and flapping hard. The extra weight of the boy wasn't too difficult to handle although she could certainly notice it. Swinging widely out over the slope she gained altitude then headed back to the car park and all the flashing lights.

"What on earth is going on?" John asked, as he and Miki approached the commotion in the car park. She shrugged.

"No idea. It certainly seems to be causing a fuss, though." Walking closer they found a witness and made enquiries. The man explained, waving at the fire and rescue team who were attaching ropes to the trees near the edge of the car park as they prepared to work their way down the trail the car had left as it penetrated the undergrowth on its way down the side of the mountain. "Oh, dear," Miki sighed, worried on behalf of the boy and his mother. John put his hand on her shoulder. "That poor child. And his mother." They looked over to the late-twenties woman who was sitting on the back of the open ambulance talking frantically to a paramedic and a police officer, who appeared to be trying to calm her down.

"It's horrible," John replied quietly. "But at least the slope isn't too steep. I mean, you couldn't easily walk down it, but it's not a cliff as such. Maybe he's all right."

"I hope so," she said, watching the people get ready to descend the slope.

Someone behind them suddenly cried, "Look!", making everyone nearby turn, then follow her outstretched finger. Rather suddenly, complete silence fell, broken only by the soft sound of huge wings flapping a couple of times.

Miki stared in total shock, as did everyone else, as the flying girl dropped out of the fog and landed gently in the middle of the car park, folding her wings behind her. She looked around at the people staring at her, a small smile on her face, meeting Miki's eyes for a moment, then turned toward the ambulance, walking over to the three people in the back of it. All of them were gaping at her silently. After a couple of seconds, the mother noticed what she was carrying, letting out a shriek of
mixed relief and terror, before leaping out of the vehicle and running over with her arms out. The winged woman gently transferred the child to her, leaning in and saying something quietly for a moment.

The woman, tears running down her face, smiled brilliantly at the girl, who grinned back. Taking a few steps back she looked around again, waved, then took off with a blast of air that washed over the crowd, vanishing almost instantly into the mist. The sound of wings beating came back for a moment until it faded away.

Silence fell once more, broken eventually by a small voice asking, "Mommy? Where are we?"

Total bedlam broke out as tourists began talking loudly, everyone trying to work out what had happened. Miki watched the mother holding her child, while the paramedic jumped to his feet, apparently suddenly remembering his job, and ran over to check him out. The policeman who had been talking to the mother seemed to be writing some notes with a bemused expression on his face, shaking his head slowly. Over where the rescue crew had been setting up they seemed to be trying to work out what to do. In the end, a couple of them headed off down the mountain-side, she presumed to see what had happened to the car.

Eventually, she turned to John, who was switching between watching the mother with her little boy and staring upwards with an odd expression. "We just saw a real magical girl," she said, feeling happier than she thought possible. He nodded, still looking upwards.

"Seems like it," he said absently.

"Can you remember what she looked like?" Miki asked, frowning. She'd suddenly realised that the details seemed to have slipped her mind. Lowering his gaze to hers, her boyfriend frowned as well.

"She was... she had... wings? She was flying?"

"I know that much, I think. But what did she look like?"

He stared blankly at her. "I have no idea."

"Weird. Neither do I," she mumbled, straining her memory, without success. A voice behind her made her jump, then turn, to find Nabiki looking curiously at her.

"There you guys are. I've been looking for you." She looked around at the assembled crowd of emergency vehicles and bystanders. "What's going on?"

"Bizarre." Nabiki grinned at her friends, who were sitting in the steaming water across from her, both of them wearing the expressions of people who were trying very hard to remember something they simply couldn't. Miki growled in frustration.

"It's so annoying. I was twenty metres from a flying magical girl, and I can't remember anything about what she looked like! Not her hair colour, or eye colour, or anything about her face or clothes..." She sighed heavily. "I wonder who she was? And why she was here?"

"Good thing she was," the middle sister laughed. "From what you said it could have been unpleasant if she hadn't turned up."

"Maybe she was just passing?" John mused. He shrugged a little. "I guess we'll never know." After a moment, he chuckled, glancing at Miki, who looked back curiously. "Cheer up. You might not know anything about her, but you at least saw her. Hana... didn't." Miki suddenly got a very
pleased expression, cackling with glee. Nabiki grinned at John, who smiled back.

"Oh, that's going to drive her totally crazy," the middle Sano sister giggled, highly amused and apparently no longer annoyed about her inability to remember the details. Satisfied with the outcome, Nabiki leaned back in the hot water and closed her eyes, pleased with the way the day had gone.

"It's been very nice having you here, Nabiki," Umeko said, hugging the middle Tendo, who reciprocated. "Feel free to drop in any time you're in Kobe."

"Thank you, Umeko," she replied with a smile. Turning, she shook hands with Harue, who grinned at her.

"And thanks again for pushing me onto my face on concrete," he joked. She chuckled, Miki and her sisters laughing as well.

"I'm more than happy to do it any time, Harue," she giggled.

"Good luck with your degree," he added. "Have a safe trip back."

"Thanks. And thanks for letting me stay here, it's been a lot of fun."

"It was no trouble, Nabiki, at all. We loved having you." Umeko smiled at the Tendo woman, putting her arm around her husband's waist and leaning on him. They watched as Nabiki headed off with Miki and John, Hana and Kimiko accompanying them, walking towards the train station.

"It's been nice to meet you, Hana, and you, Kimiko," she said as they walked. "Hana, I'll ask about those action figures, I promise, although as I said, I can't make any guarantees." The older woman looked at her with an expression of near-delirious hope even despite the caution.

"Please do, Nabiki," she requested, smiling weirdly. "It would mean a lot to me." Miki poked her, so she added, "Both of us, I meant."

"Of course you did, sis," Miki said slightly sarcastically. Kimiko started laughing, followed by John, both of them exchanging a glance with an amused Nabiki. The two older sisters started arguing in a fairly good-natured manner, an argument that lasted most of the way to the train station, while the remaining members of the group listened with amusement.

When they reached their destination, they exchanged glances. Miki leaned forward and hugged her friend. "I'll see you in Nerima at the weekend. I'm looking forward to meeting your family this time."

"They're all crazy, I warn you now," the middle Tendo laughed.

"Good. I like crazy people, they remind me of home," she replied, looking meaningfully at Hana, who went mildly pink and opened her mouth to say something. Kimiko helpfully stepped on her foot which made her yelp but close her mouth again, frowning a little.

Smiling a bit, Nabiki turned to the older Sano sister. "Hey, Hana? If you want, you can come to our party as well. You too, Kimiko. We've got plenty of room for you to stay over then go back the next day." Both the other sisters exchanged a glance, looking mildly puzzled. Nabiki along with John and Miki had managed not to let either of them know why the party was unusual. Amused, she glanced at Miki, who was grinning. "Tell her, but wait until I'm out of earshot, OK?"
“Right.” Miki laughed. Shaking hands with John, Nabiki waved to them all, then headed for her train, beginning to laugh when she heard a shriek go up from behind her.

"SIX?!!"

Giggling, she boarded the train and settled in for the homeward journey, pleased and relaxed by her visit.

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Note: The arcade game used for Nabiki’s routing of Kyo doesn't actually exist as such, it's sort of a hybrid of a number of different games I've seen over the years with a basis in Konami's Pop'n Music game. It's a long time since I went into an arcade...
The Hollywood Adventures! part 1

And we're back in the room.

My apologies about the more than two month delay in posting. Work got on top of me once again, which is irritating, but what can you do? Not to mention all the other things that tend to happen at this time of year.

The invasion of Hollywood by Akane and Shampoo is turning out to be at least a two chapter thing. This is the first part, there will be one or more other parts soon, and the party one is mostly done as well so will go up soon after the end of this storyline. Additionally I have outlined several more chapters and done bits of them too. Along with most of one that wouldn't let me be until I wrote it, which is some way down the line yet, but will eventually get merged in. So I've actually written quite a few words these last couple of months or so, just not all in a linear way.

I'm going to have to update my character list, it's not very current. Lots of new people seem to have turned up recently as well...

On a completely different note, having Jean Michel Jarre playing in the background seems to boost creativity, for me at least. Always has done. So thank him for about half of this chapter.

He'd probably like that. Apparently he's a decent guy :)

Adrian jumped a little when the three women suddenly appeared twenty feet away, unable to help it, despite knowing it was going to happen any moment now. He glanced at his watch, smiling, then walked over to them. "Right on time. Great."

Aiko grinned at him. "I do my best to run a tight schedule," she laughed, making him grin as well. Beside her, Akane chuckled, while Shampoo smiled, looking around with interest. Aiko followed the lilac-haired woman's eyes for a moment. They were standing in a car park behind a small mall, which had few vehicles in it at the current time. "Why did you want us here?" she asked curiously.

"I thought it was a good idea not to have three young women simply appear out of thin air in the middle of the studio quite yet," he explained, laughing for a moment at the thought of the reactions that would have followed such a thing. They were probably going to have to learn to live with it, he mused, if things went the way he expected. "This is on the way to the hotel, the studio is about half a mile over there," he added, pointing, "so it was convenient. I'll take you to the hotel and get you settled in. I can show you the way as well, so if you want to come back this way, you'll know how." Looking at Akane and Shampoo he smiled as they exchanged a glance then nodded understandably.

"I assume you won't be hanging around the entire time providing instant transportation, after all," the director grinned, looking back to Aiko. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm certainly sticking around to meet Richard and Emily," she grinned. "Hey, if you like, we should all go out later. But no, I'll probably have to get back sooner or later. I might drop in to see how things are going, though." She looked at Akane. "Just call me when you need a lift home, OK, if I'm not around?"

"Thanks, Aiko," the blue-haired woman smiled. "I know I've said it before, but you really are being amazingly generous with all this jumping us back and forth." Aiko waved a hand
negligently, smiling at them all.

"No problem. It's not hard, I enjoy travelling, and I like meeting new people. Plus I'm curious to see how it all turns out." Holding out her hand she shook both Shampoo's and Akane's, then stepped back a few feet. "I'll call you later, but I'm off to say hi to Richard and his family. See you." They all turned their heads away from the flash, then the girl was gone.

"I still can't get over that," Adrian laughed. Looking thoughtful, he added, "I wish I could figure out how to get her into a movie. I can think of all sorts of ways she and the others could do something amazing." Shaking his head as Akane giggled, he shrugged. "Oh well. I have to start somewhere. You guys are going to be amazing as well, in a slightly different way, but a good one. Come on, my car is over here." He led the way to his Mercedes, popping the trunk with his remote and taking their bags, which he stowed away before closing it again. Shampoo admired the vehicle then frowned as the Tendo woman took her moment of inattention to grab the front passenger seat.

"Hey! I wanted sit in front," she complained mildly, getting in the rear as Akane laughed.

"Too slow, Shampoo."

"Tell that in next spar..." the Chinese girl retorted, putting her seat-belt on. Laughing as well, Adrian got in behind the wheel, putting his belt on with one hand while he started the engine with the other, then slipped the vehicle into drive and headed out of the car park.

Glancing sideways he studied Shampoo in the mirror, then looked at Akane. Both of them were watching the scenery passing with small smiles, looking excited and happy, as well as somewhat nervous, particularly Akane for that last part. Returning his attention to the road he asked, "How have you two been since the last time we met?"

"Very well, thanks, Adrian," the Tendo woman replied, taking her attention off the passing world and looking at him. She still looked slightly nervous but seemed to be relaxing, the excitement remaining, he noted with amusement. "We've both been training hard and Shampoo has been practising her English as much as possible."

"Still needs much work but is better," the Amazon agreed, laughing a little. "Not good, sorry, I am not good with languages."

"You'll pick it up in no time once you're using it all day," he assured her.

"That's what Aiko said," Akane noted. "She speaks it really well, much better than I do."

"She and her friends are remarkably fluent, I'd agree," Adrian replied, slowing for the next set of lights, then waiting for them to change. "None of them really have much accent at all. Yori and Chou basically have almost none, but the others are nearly as good." He accelerated again as the light went green, swerving to avoid a sports-car that suddenly cut in far too close in front of them. "Idiot," he muttered. More loudly, he continued, "You have an accent, certainly, Akane, but it's not at all bad, better than a lot of people from Japan I've heard by a long way."

He glanced at her for a moment again. "Your father, uncle, and aunt all seemed to speak English surprisingly well, I noticed when we were over a while back. How's your sister at it? Nabiki, isn't it?"

"She's very fluent as well," Akane told him with a faint smile. "She was always good at languages." Grinning for a moment, she looked over her shoulder at her friend. "She's sort of the exact opposite of Shampoo in that respect." The Chinese girl in the back seat reached out and smacked her on the
back of the head, giggling.

"Impressive. Many Americans aren't very good at other languages, except Spanish in parts of the country. Is English taught a lot over there?"

"It is around Furinkan, certainly, it was part of the school syllabus the whole time I was there, and Dad said the same," she replied. "Not everyone is good at it, I certainly know a lot of people who can barely speak it, and some older ones who can't at all, but it's pretty common at home to find someone who can understand it quite well."

"Interesting. And in this case, very useful." He smiled at her laughter. "Oh, while I think about it, in that box on the back seat next to you, Shampoo, are a couple of packages I put together for you both." The girl looked down, picking up the box and putting it on her legs, then opening it, while Akane twisted around in her seat to look. Inside it, there were a couple of large envelopes with one of their names on each. Shampoo handed Akane the one addressed to her then opened the one she had left with a curious expression. Akane did the same with hers, looking into it.

"There's a cell phone each with all the relevant numbers for me, Matt, Jim, and Aaron already programmed in, as well as a limo firm we use, a very good pizza delivery place, the main studio switchboard, and your home numbers, as well as the numbers for each other. And Aiko's number as well." He smiled as Akane pulled out the phone and studied it with interest. "Keep them. They're billed to the studio, don't worry about using them. There's also three thousand dollars cash each for running around with. That should be enough for the next few days but if you need any more just let me know. It's easier than changing Yen, you'll probably need it for tips and things like that." He laughed a little. "Americans tip everything. I know it's not the done thing in Japan and you're not used to it, but be warned, it's sort of expected here. Fifteen percent is a safe level, not too much or too little."

He explained a little more about the subject, both young women listening and nodding. "It's very generous of you, Adrian," Akane said in the end.

"Don't worry about it, it's not a lot of money for the studio, believe me. This is essentially a paid job trial so they're not fussed." Putting the envelope of cash she'd been looking through back into the larger one, Akane removed a few papers and looked at them. "Maps of the area, a brief itinerary of the next couple of days, and some useful addresses," he explained.

"OK. Thanks." She flipped through them quickly then put everything away, and the phone into her pocket after turning it on. "So what's the plan now?"

Indicating left he took a turn, then glanced at her. "More or less what we discussed. One of the studio executives had a minor emergency so he's asked if we could delay everything a little tomorrow. As a result we'll have a couple of hours extra in the morning to look around if you'd like. It shouldn't cause any real problems, although I apologise for it on his behalf."

"Not problem, Adrian," Shampoo told him from the rear of the vehicle. "We don't mind."

"OK. Well in that case, we'll get you settled in to the hotel, which is the one we always use for guests of the studio, then we can look around for a while. Aiko's idea is a good one, we could go out for a meal as well. I know several very nice restaurants. There are lots in LA." Akane looked back to Shampoo who nodded with a smile, before turning to him again.

"That sounds interesting. I'd like it as well. I like Richard and his family."

"Great. Right, here we are," he replied, indicating again, pulling into the entrance of the hotel. He
drove slowly up the palm-tree lined main drive for a hundred feet then parked in a short-stay space. A bell-boy popped up out of apparently nowhere and hurried over as they got out, making both young women look slightly surprised. Adrian motioned him off with a gesture before he'd made it half-way, the young man looking mildly disappointed but retreating, then opened the trunk again. "There's not enough luggage to bother with help," he laughed, picking up their bags and then closing and locking the vehicle. Leading the way inside all three of them sighed a little in relief as the cool of the air-conditioned interior swept over them.

"It's been a very hot day," he added, "and still is. What's it like in Tokyo?"

"Not as hot as this but very warm," Akane told him. "I'm glad to be inside now. Is it always this hot at this time of year?"

"It can be. Today was a little excessive, though. It's forecast to cool down a bit over the next few days." Walking over to the desk he smiled at the young woman behind it who stood up as they approached. "Hello. There should be two rooms booked under the name of Mountain Pictures Studios, for Akane Tendo and Xian Pu?" The pretty blonde tapped on a computer keyboard with elegantly manicured fingertips for a few seconds, then nodded with a smile.

"Hello, Mr Stewart, it's nice to see you again. Yes, here we are. They're paid for already by the studio as usual." She looked at the two young women who were inspecting the tastefully and somewhat elaborate lobby with expressions of interest. "If you could both fill out these cards, please?" The woman slipped a pair of registration cards across the desk to them along with a couple of pens. Both his guests signed in the appropriate place, adding the details the receptionist asked for, then handed the cards and pens back.

"Thank you." She put them away, before typing again for a minute or two. "Here we go, these are your key cards, they open the main door, which is locked after eleven PM, your rooms, and the sports centre upstairs. You're in Suite 1216, Miss Tendo, and you're next door in 1218, Miss Pu." The girls took the cards she handed over. "Access to the pool closes at two AM but the gym is open all night. Breakfast starts at seven in the morning, the restaurant is just down that corridor over there." She pointed for a moment, as they looked and nodded. "It closes at eleven, but room service is available twenty-four hours a day. Please enjoy your stay. If you need anything, dial zero on the phone and someone will be able to help."

"Thank you very much, Helen," Akane replied, smiling, looking at the woman's ID tag for a second. Helen smiled back.

"You're more than welcome, Miss Tendo." She pointed again. "The elevators are over there. Up to the twelfth floor, turn left, it's a short walk down the corridor."

"Thanks," Adrian told her, discreetly slipping a fifty across the desk, which vanished without trace or a change in her expression. Smiling to himself he picked up the bags which he'd put on the floor then accompanied the two young women to the elevator. Shampoo pressed the call button, the doors opening almost immediately and all of them entering. "We've been using this hotel for several years," he explained as they silently ascended. "It's a very nice place. Not the highest end one around, but it's got an excellent reputation, and an extremely good restaurant. Their steaks are amazing. The swimming pool on the roof is pretty good as well, you should check it out."

Once the doors opened he lead them down the corridor towards their rooms. "She means it about the room service as well," he laughed. "They have a concierge team that can do almost anything."

Akane grinned, glancing at her friend, who was looking around with a smile on her face. "I've never been in a hotel this nice before," she admitted. "Or really stayed in many hotels at all."
"You'll enjoy it," he told her. "If you were here for longer we'd arrange a short-term apartment but for only a few days this is easier. OK, here we are." He stopped outside 1216. Akane pulled out the card she'd received, looked at it for a moment, then inserted it into the slot in the door reader.

"Other way up," he grinned.

"Oops." She giggled, taking it out and reinserting it. The little light blinked green, the lock beeped, and she opened the door, walking in then stopping dead. "Oh, wow! This place is enormous!"

"Move out way, Akane," Shampoo commented, making the Tendo woman take a few steps further to allow them to enter as well. She looked around, then at her friend, smiling widely. "Is very nice."

The room, or rooms, actually, formed what was close to an apartment. The main room one entered from the corridor was a large one, with a window at the far end overlooking the city, a desk on one side near it, while a sofa and two chairs surrounded a table on the other side. Opening off the main room to the left was the bedroom which contained a large double bed, another desk, and two more chairs, they discovered when they explored, along with another window that was slightly smaller. The somewhat elaborate tiled bathroom opened off the bedroom. Both young women wandered around for a little while as Adrian watched with amusement.

"It's really nice," Akane laughed. "This room is twice the size of the living room at home and the bedroom is bigger than Dad's. About the only thing missing is a kitchen!"

"There's a microwave and a kettle in that cupboard for snacks," he pointed out, "but normally the sort of people who stay in a place like this expect to have someone bring them food. Which, of course, they can do, quickly and efficiently. I stayed here myself once while my house was being fumigated and almost didn't want to go home." He grinned as they both giggled. "Shampoo, you're next door." All three of them went back into the corridor and examined the next door suite, which was laid out as a mirror image of the one Akane was in. Shampoo took her bag from Adrian and put it on the bed, then rejoined them in the living room.

"Is good room. I like it." The Chinese woman smiled as he nodded to her, satisfied. Pulling an envelope out of his inner jacket pocket he looked at it for a moment, then nodded again.

"May as well get this out of the way first." Opening it he removed some papers, handing them each the appropriate set. Both women looked at them with interest. "This is some standard, basic liability waiver documentation that Legal insists on us getting signed. It basically says that stunt work can be dangerous and that you won't immediately sue us if you chip a nail or something." Akane started laughing as she read the paperwork. "It's a little more complicated than that, of course," he added, snickering. "I'd suggest that you read it thoroughly later then sign it if you're happy, give it back to me in the morning. If you have any questions, either call me, or wait until tomorrow and we can clear them up." He examined both of them, remembering the demonstration in Richard Harrison's back garden, then shook his head.

"I very much doubt that anything we can do to you stands much hope of really causing damage, based on past performance, but we have these hoops to jump through. When this goes further I'd strongly suggest you get your own legal representation to look over the full contracts, but for now this is pretty basic. I wouldn't think all that much of it actually applies in this case but the studio insists."

Laughing a little, Akane glanced at her friend, who grinned back. "We understand. We'll look it over and sign it later." She studied him in return for a few seconds. "You seem very sure we'll get the jobs."
"I am," he replied honestly. "You both have a level of talent I've never seen anything even close to before. What I can do with you two available... It's almost unbelievable. If the studio doesn't hire you, they're idiots, and despite what some people have said in the past, by and large they're not. So, yes, I fully expect that you and I are going to be working together pretty soon." He grinned as she looked pleased.

"That nice to hear, Adrian," Shampoo told him. He shrugged.

"It's the truth. I'm looking forward to it, you have no idea how much. Right, let's go and show you guys around the area for a while. Then we can see about going out for a meal, with Richard, Aiko, and the others. I'll call Matt and Aaron as well. Oh, and Jim, he'll want to come." They headed back downstairs, both young women waving to Helen at the front desk, who nodded to them with a polite smile, soon finding themselves back in his car and driving back into LA.

"Lieutenant?" Harrison looked up at the uniformed officer who had stopped by his desk, raising an eyebrow. "You have a visitor," the man said, pointing. He looked over and smiled happily at Aiko, as she waved to him from near the door.

"OK, thanks, Mark," he replied, waving her over. The officer nodded with a smile and went about his business, casting the Japanese girl an appreciative look as she walked over. She winked at him as he left, causing him to grin. "Hello, Aiko," Harrison said, watching with amusement.

"It's nice to see you, Richard," she said happily. Sitting in the chair she acquired from the empty desk next door, she leaned back and smiled at him. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"And Emily and Serena?"

"They're doing well, too," he said, smiling. "Emily will be very pleased to see you. We were talking about you and the others only a couple of days ago. Serena is looking forward to going back to school, sort of, but is also enjoying herself. Still doing the archery, she's getting pretty good. I had to buy her another bow, she outgrew the last one remarkably fast. The new one has a high enough pull that I find it a little difficult." He shook his head in mild wonder. "Nothing like that horrific thing you gave Shampoo, but impressive even so." Aiko snickered at the memory. "How are Akane and Shampoo getting on? I assume that's why you're here? Adrian and Jim were over last week for beer, they mentioned the girls would be coming over again soon."

"Yep, that's it. I dropped them off with Adrian a few minutes ago. They're going to be doing some practice stunts, getting specialist training, meeting the studio people, that sort of thing. It will probably go on until Thursday or so from what I know." She looked around, then back at him. "Should be interesting. I hope they do well."

"So do I. They seem like very decent and intelligent young women," he told her.

"They are." She smiled a bit. "Akane deserves some good luck after some of the things that happened to the poor girl earlier on in her life. I think they're going to have fun." Aiko smirked a little. "But you may find that, professionally, things go a little weird around here." He looked narrowly at her as she grinned.

"I hope not to the level of Minato," he growled. "That place is insane. If demons start popping up I know who I'm going to blame and it's not Akane or Shampoo." The brunette started laughing, which he joined in on.
"I don't think it will go that far," she laughed, shaking her head. "But if it does, you have my number, and Yori's. Call us and we'll come and help."

"Hmm. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or not." The brunette grinned again at his words.

"Don't worry," she said, laughing, "I'm sure you'll get used to it..."

Both of them collapsed in howls of laughter, making everyone else in the large room look to see what on earth was going on. Eventually, wiping his eyes, he smiled. "Thanks, I needed a good laugh. So, what are you planning on doing next?"

"I was thinking we should all go out for a meal later," Aiko replied. "Adrian and the others seemed up for it. Are you?"

He thought for a moment, then nodded. "I'd like that. Let me call Em and find out if she had anything planned. Hang on a second." Picking up his desk phone he hit a speed-dial number and waited, the phone at the other end being picked up after half a dozen rings.

"Hello?" His wife's voice sounded in his ear, making him smile.

"Hi, dear, it's me. Look, Aiko is in town, she brought Akane and Shampoo over for Adrian for a few days. Would you like to go out later with everyone? I'd imagine Jim is probably coming, and Adrian will most likely bring those guys from the studio as well."

"That sounds really nice," Emily told him, sounding pleased. "Serena would enjoy it as well, she was very impressed by both those young ladies last time. Where did you think of going?"

"I'm not sure yet. Down-town somewhere, I guess." He looked at Aiko who nodded, holding up some fingers. "Around half past seven to eight seems to be the idea."

"All right. I won't make dinner, then." She laughed as he smiled a little. "Should Serena and I meet you, or are you coming home first?"

Harrison mulled the question over, glancing at Aiko, then replied, "I think I'll come home. I was close to leaving anyway. It'll take about forty minutes at this time of day, which leaves time to change."

"I'm happy to provide transportation, Richard," the Japanese girl told him in a low voice, looking amused.

He nodded. "Aiko says she's OK with taking us so we can leave the car at home."

"Oh." His wife sounded slightly hesitant. "Is it... safe? Teleportation, I mean."

"It's fine, dear, trust me. The first time will make you feel sick but it passes in a few seconds. You're fine after that."

"...OK, dear." She still sounded a little worried, making him smile.

"Don't worry about it, everything will be fine. I'll see you soon."

His wife blew him a kiss down the phone, then laughed, hanging up. He put the phone down. "She's not entirely sure about the idea of your form of transportation, I think," he commented to Aiko, who grinned.

"Don't worry, I'll jump her around the garden a couple of times first. No problem."
"Serena will love it, I think," he added, laughing.

"I suspect so." Glancing at the paperwork on his desk, she asked, "Much more to do before you can go?"

"Not really. I need to finish these forms, then send the Captain a report I've nearly finished. It won't take long." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you OK with waiting? It'll be maybe fifteen minutes."

The brunette leaned her chair back and smiled. "I'm in no hurry." She watched as he finished the paperwork, signing the relevant documentation, then handing it off to one of the civilian clerks, before quickly typing the remaining half-page on the report he'd been working on when she'd arrived. "You misspelled 'necessary' there in the third paragraph," she pointed out helpfully, making him chuckle.

"I have no idea how you can be that good with a foreign language, not to the point of correcting my spelling," he laughed as he made the correction.

"It's a gift," she snickered. Emailing the report to his superior and printing out a hard copy for the records took only a couple more minutes, at the end of which he shut down his computer, locked his desk, and stood up.

"That's it. Done for the day. Let's go." Waving to a couple of colleagues Harrison followed her across the room, pausing to sign out, then both of them went down to the parking garage. Soon they were driving somewhat slowly through the early evening traffic. Ten minutes into the drive, he glanced over at his companion, who was watching the passing vehicles with mild interest. "I have a question you might possibly have the answer to," he began. She glanced at him curiously.

"I can try," Aiko said, smiling a little. He got the distinct impression she had a very good idea of what he was going to ask.

"Any idea what that twitch in the world last week was?" he asked. She inspected him for a moment, then returned her attention to the passing vehicles. There was a long pause.

"I know what it was," she finally said, sounding both resigned and slightly annoyed. "I'm not entirely sure you really want to, though." Glancing back at him for a second, she added, "I can tell you something about it, but you may well wish you hadn't asked if I do."

Looking at her, he wondered if she was serious. The expression she was wearing suggested this was the case. After a few seconds, he sighed a little, nodding. "I appreciate the warning but I'm very curious. I'd like to know."

"Your choice," she replied, before beginning a story that made a cold chill go down his back more than once in the next fifteen minutes. When she finished, they drove in silence for a few minutes, while he considered what he'd been told. He was fairly sure there was a lot more that she hadn't told him, but all things considered, that was something of a relief.

"I can understand why you didn't want that story widely spread", he finally said, his voice wavering a little more than he expected. He cleared his throat and carried on. "Thank you for telling me. And for saving the universe."

Aiko grinned briefly before her face went back to rather tired and irritated, then smoothed out into her normal cheerful look. "You're more than welcome, of course," the girl replied, "it's what we do, and it needed to be done. Right place, right time, sort of thing. But it wasn't fun." She watched the
car in front while she talked. "The PSIA is in the process of sending out a rather sanitised explanation to various governments, yours included, which is... not entirely wrong. But not entirely right, either." He laughed a little at her tone, which was amused and somewhat sarcastic.

"I can imagine based on what you just told me. Not the sort of thing you want to be even that open with to most people."

"Not really, no," she agreed with a laugh. "We've told various people we can trust not to over-react some of the truth. You've had enough experience of weird things so that we feel that you're safe knowing it, but it would be for the best if you didn't pass it on. Not at the moment, at any rate. Perhaps one day."

"I can understand that," Harrison sighed. "I won't tell anyone." He shook his head for a second. "The Captain would love to have an explanation for it but I don't think that particular one would make him sleep any better."

"Probably not." Aiko snickered. "It doesn't help me and I deal with this sort of thing on a daily basis and have done so for years." They both fell silent again, busy with their own thoughts. Eventually Harrison turned onto the road leading to his street.

"Nearly there, now."

Seconds later he slammed on the brakes, skidding to a halt and swearing, as a dark blue high end sports-car with several young men in it shot across the junction in front of him against the lights, barely missing the car coming in the other direction which also panic-stopped. Even aside from the near accident the thing that really drew his attention was the way two of the young men were leaning out of the rear windows of the car firing automatic weapons behind them, with another one shooting through where the rear windscreen had once lived. They watched open-mouthed as the car roared off down the street, barely having time to exchange a glance, before a customised pickup loaded with several more youths with far more heavy weapons than seemed rational shot past as well, the occupants returning the fire of the leading car with considerable enthusiasm although little aim.

"Well, shit," Harrison growled, grabbing for his radio and calling central dispatch to report it, while turning to follow cautiously.

"That seems a rather dangerous hobby," Aiko noted sardonically. She looked at the bullet-holes in a street-sign they were just passing, which had had the misfortune of getting in the way. "Does this sort of thing happen a lot in LA?"

"More than I'd like, that's for sure," he snarled, hanging up the mic again and speeding up, as he flipped the switch that turned on the hidden lights and siren. "Idiotic gangs. One of them upsets another one, they retaliate, and before you know it there are bullets everywhere. Lots of completely uninvolved people end up hurt as well, which really pisses me off." Ahead of them, the truck could just be seen fishtailing wildly around a corner, causing a small accident as everyone frantically tried to get out of the way. Just as they reached it and began the turn a police cruiser roared across the junction from the right to join the chase. He slowed a little to let it pass then floored it after them.

"So what's the normal procedure you guys use in a case like this?" the girl beside him asked, sounding completely calm to an absolutely eerie level. He glanced at her for a moment to see her watching the cars ahead with interest but no worry.

"We've put out a call, they'll try to deploy spike strips on the road ahead of these lunatics, but that
relies on being able to have someone in the right place at the right time. If we were on the freeway it wouldn't be too much of a problem but those guys are heading back into town. Too much traffic, it's getting in the way." He shook his head. "They don't seem to care but we can't just charge ahead and wind up killing someone who doesn't get out of the way fast enough. That never goes down well with the public."

"No, I can see where it wouldn't," she replied.

"Same problem with shooting at them. Too much risk to citizens," he added with a heavy sigh. They followed for another half mile, two more cars joining the chase behind them. The two vehicles in front didn't seem too fussed about the police escort, being more interested in the mobile war they were engaged in, which was causing a considerable amount of consternation to random passers-by. Luckily there was so much noise involved that somewhat miraculously most people seemed to be able to find cover in time. The two gang vehicles had been forced to slow to twenty or thirty miles an hour by traffic that simply couldn't get out of the way, both of them weaving in and out of it manically while still shooting at each other. "Fuck me, how much ammo do those lunatics have?" he grumbled to himself.

"Way too much," she said quietly. After a moment, Aiko turned to him. "Richard, I know it's your city and I'm just visiting, but if you want I can probably stop this before it get even further out of hand." He glanced at her for a moment, then returned his gaze to the road, thinking. The sight of a large shop window disintegrating in a hail of missed bullets decided him. One or more deaths were inevitable at this rate, assuming they hadn't already occurred, and it didn't seem likely that normal policing was going to bring it to a speedy enough end.

"Do what you need to, but please try not to destroy too much of the infrastructure," he finally said. She nodded.

"OK. Look away."

He did so, asking incredulously, "You're going to teleport from a moving vehi...?" That was as far as he got before she wasn't there any more.

Blinking slightly at the reflected flash, he waited for something weird to happen. It didn't take long.

Javier stared in disbelief, swearing in shock at the sight of the woman standing in the road a couple of hundred yards away, her arms crossed, apparently waiting for them. He shouted over the sound of the boys in the back seat firing at the pursuing Red Dragon triad members who they'd managed to open up a four hundred yard lead on, "This bitch is crazy!" Beside him, his good friend Ricardo, known as 'El Cortador' for his predilection for using knives on his enemies, very slowly, turned to look from where he'd been staring over his shoulder. Both of them ducked a little as a bullet whined past a little too close.

"Well, just run her over, then, if she won't move," he replied, shrugging, then going back to observing the firefight in the back seat, handing more loaded magazines to Juan for his stolen M-16. Grimly setting his jaw, Javier put his foot down as they reached a gap in the traffic which had mainly moved to the side to allow the entire cavalcade of vehicles through, showing considerable unwillingness to become involved. The girl didn't move except to unfold her arms, then hold up a hand in the universal 'Stop' gesture.

Shaking his head in mixed wonder at her bravery and incredulity at her stupidity, he stepped harder on the gas. Now only a hundred yards away, he could see her look mildly annoyed, nothing more
than that. She shrugged, making it clear somehow that her attitude was basically 'OK, I tried,' then levelled her right hand at the oncoming vehicle, like she was pointing a weapon. He was just wondering why, since she obviously had nothing in the raised hand, only to gape in total shock as a brilliant deep sapphire blue glowing ball of *something* appeared in it. Involuntarily raising his right foot a little he slowed, making Ricardo glance at him.

"What's the problem?" his friend asked, before catching sight of the girl, who was only fifty yards away now. He swore in shock, crossing himself, then both of them yelped as the ball of light leaped from her hand and zoomed towards them at some incredible speed. Javier barely had time to hit the brakes as hard as he could before it hit, striking directly in the centre of the radiator.

The enormously loud explosion that sounded deafened all of them, while he lost control of the car, the wheel pulling itself out of his hands. All the air bags went off, the car slowed suddenly with a massive grinding sound, then he felt it begin to roll as it slewed sideways. Wondering what in god's name the woman had fired at them, Javier braced himself, blinking furiously from the flash and knowing that this was likely to be his last few seconds.

A sharp jolt and a screech of metal tearing heralded the vehicle abruptly stopping as if it had hit a telephone pole. All five of the occupants were nearly knocked senseless by the impact, but luckily it had slowed just enough by the time it hit whatever it was that they were merely thrown around a lot rather than ending up crushed. Even so, he was seeing two of everything for several seconds.

In the back seat, he could hear Juan swearing to himself in Spanish, while unintelligible mutters seemed to be coming from Antonio. Hugo was ominously quiet. Painfully, he pushed deflating air bags away from his face and tried to see out the window, only then realising that the car was at a very strange angle, nose down and tilted to the side. His eyes widened when he saw the woman standing at the side of the vehicle with her hands on the roof. He looked up to see that there were two distinct bulges visible on the inside through the metal, cloth and plastic of the top of the car.

As impossible as it was, it certainly *looked* like she'd somehow stopped the car rolling with her bare hands!

His ears still ringing from the explosion, he watched her, motionless, as she grinned at him. She looked Japanese and perhaps twenty or so, very short but well built, with dark brown hair. Giving him a smile that, while friendly, made chills run down his back, she said in perfect Spanish, "Please get out of the vehicle and leave your weapons behind." A shot from behind her made her grin suddenly disappear, as one of the triad gunmen fired in their direction. She glanced over her shoulder, frowning. "Hang on," she added, "I'll be back in a moment. Don't go anywhere."

The girl disappeared, seconds later there was the roar of the engine of the pursuing truck revving up, then another loud bang and a flash of blue light from somewhere behind them. A couple of shots sounded, before everything went remarkably quiet. He could hear sirens approach, stop, then go silent.

Light footsteps sounded, coming nearer, then the girl appeared outside his window again. "OK. Like I said, out of the car and no weapons, please. These nice policemen would like to have a word." Staring at her, he wondered if he'd managed to knock himself out in the wreckage of the crashed vehicle. He looked at Ricardo, who stared back, blinking in somewhat dazed disbelief. The swearing from the back seat got more involved.

"Come on, I don't have all day. I've got a restaurant date for later." She looked impatient. Reaching out a trembling hand he tried the door handle, which grated a little but didn't result in anything particularly useful happening.
"It's stuck," he said weakly.

"Oh. Fair enough." She looked understanding, just before she reached out and effortlessly ripped the entire damn door off its hinges like it was made of modelling clay. "There you go."

"Thanks," he replied after a very long pause. He could feel something running down his leg that wasn't blood.

Shortly all five of them were standing or in the case of Hugo, sitting, on the road beside the remains of the car they'd stolen. Javier stared at it in shock, before locking eyes with his friends, who looked back wide-eyed. The engine compartment, including the front wheels, was entirely missing, the remaining metal looking like it had been melted with some enormously powerful blowtorch. How the hell whatever had done that had managed to achieve that result without killing all of them on the spot he had absolutely no idea. Neither did any of the substantial number of cops who were milling around, judging by the expressions on their faces as they stared at the car, then the girl who was responsible for it.

He noticed numbly that there were indeed two hand prints in the roof, embossed a couple of inches deep. Looking at them he shuddered. As he was handcuffed by a uniformed officer, he saw the man was also staring at the car in shock. Their eyes met, before they both turned their heads to look at the girl, who was walking over to the triad truck which was also missing an engine. Everyone jumped as a burst of automatic gunfire came from it, aimed at the Japanese girl, who stopped in her tracks. All the cops dived for cover as he and his friends hit the deck, although he couldn't stop watching to see what happened next.

Expecting her to drop lifelessly to the ground, the watching cops, crowd, and gang members gaped as she sighed, held out her hand, opened it, and let a number of what were obviously bullets tinkle to the ground. She called something in Mandarin to the occupants of the destroyed truck, sounding annoyed, while another ball of energy formed in her other hand. There was a pregnant pause before several shaken and pale triad members slowly pulled themselves out of the vehicle, lying face down on the ground. Looking around at the cops, who were still lurking behind anything reasonably bulletproof, she vanished the ball of energy and put her hands on her hips.

"Well? They're not going to arrest themselves, you know," she called. After several more seconds had passed a couple of cops stood, approaching the stunned triad members while giving the petite brunette girl a very wide berth. This seemed to amuse her.

Javier noticed a man standing off to one side, who he immediately recognised as a police officer despite being in plain clothes, who seemed to be the only one not looking terrified, stunned, or surprised. Instead he looked mildly impressed and rather amused. The girl walked over to him, grinning, they had a short conversation, after which the plain-clothes cop went and talked to the uniform in charge, who was looking like he couldn't believe the last five minutes had actually happened. Eventually, they shook hands, before he and the girl got into a car and drove away.

Still trembling from adrenalin and not entirely sure he was actually awake, Javier slowly sat done on the kerb, staring at the remains of the car he'd been driving, wondering what the fuck had happened.

Harrison drove slowly back in the direction they'd come, heading for home, thinking on the way that he was really looking forward to some beer at the restaurant. He considered for a few seconds more then decided that was too long to wait. He would check the fridge when he got home.

"Holy shit," he finally said. Aiko giggled as he glanced at her. "That was... impressive. And deeply
"It seemed like the quickest method to stop it without hurting anyone too much," she replied calmly. Handing him a business card which she quickly jotted a number on the back of, she added, "Sorry about destroying both vehicles. They were pretty badly damaged already with all those bullet holes in them so it probably wasn't all on me though. Get their insurers to call this number in Tokyo, quote that code on the back there, and it will get sorted out." He took the card and glanced at it, seeing only a phone number and the word 'Reparations' written on it in English under a couple of Kanji symbols he guessed said basically the same thing. Reaching up he flipped down the sun visor, stuck the card under it, then flipped it back.

"Thanks," he said, not sure what else to say. She laughed again.

"That was kind of fun to be honest," she commented with a smile.

"For you, perhaps." Harrison glanced at her again, smiling wryly. "I may have a little trouble explaining it to the Captain."

"I'm sure he'll accept your explanation, Richard," she laughed. "Captain Martinez struck me as a reasonable person. If you have any problems, just call, and I'll come and talk to him."

"Perhaps." Not entirely convinced and not looking forward to the talk he was sure was in his future, he shook his head, pulling into his driveway and turning the car off. "Come on inside. I need a beer. You want one?"

"Please," she said, getting out of the car. Following him into the house, she smiled at Emily who was waiting for them. "Hello, Emily."

"Hello, Aiko," his wife said, sounding pleased to see the girl. "It's very nice to see you again. Are you in LA for long?"

"I'm not sure. Probably no more than a day or so but I'll be back and forth helping Akane and Shampoo while they're at the studio." The Japanese girl followed as they all went into the living room, Harrison detouring via the kitchen and finding that as he'd remembered there were indeed beers in the fridge, gratefully grabbing two bottles. He returned to the living room and handed one to Aiko, who smiled at him, popped the top off, then looked at the other one in his hand. With a grin he handed it over and reclaimed the other one, while she opened the new one and took a pull on it. Emily was watching with amusement.

"You seem slightly frazzled, dear," she said to him as he sat next to her on the sofa, stretching out his legs and leaning his head back with a sigh, his eyes closed. Without looking he waved the beer bottle at Aiko, hearing her chuckle quietly.

"Blame our young friend here. Can't take her anywhere without something weird happening." He opened his eyes to grin at the girl as her laughter became slightly louder, before glancing at his wife, who looked confused. He explained, with gestures, which became more vivid as the level in the beer bottle dropped. By the end of the story he was laughing as well while Emily was shaking her head in amazement.

"You guys really do have way too many guns lying around the place in the US," Aiko commented, finishing her own drink and putting the bottle on the floor.

"You certainly don't have to tell me that," he grumbled slightly, still smiling a little. "We see things like that much too often. Oh well, there isn't a lot I can do about it except deal with the
"True, I suppose." They all looked up as Serena came in, Sophie with her, from the back garden, his daughter carrying her new bow and her friend holding the quiver and arrows.

"Hi Aiko," Serena said happily, putting her bow down and quickly walking over to shake the woman's hand, grinning with pleasure. Aiko smiled back, looking genuinely pleased to see her.

"Hello, Serena, and you, Sophie. How are you girls getting on?"

"Really well, thanks." His daughter laughed. "Did Dad tell you about how I needed a new bow?"

"Yep. It sounds like you're really coming along with your archery." Aiko looked amused for a moment. "Still hunting wild greenhouses?" Sophie burst out laughing as Serena got a slightly embarrassed expression on her face, while Harrison and his wife cracked up.

"I only did that once." She thought for a moment, then admitted, "Maybe twice." There was a pause, then she very reluctantly added, "Or it might have been three times. But that last one was a total fluke."

"I'll say", Sophie giggled, "I didn't know you could bounce an arrow around three corners!" Serena went red as her parents laughed even harder.

Aiko snickered. "Serena Harrison special technique, Boomerang Arrow?" She grinned at Serena's expression. "If you could do that on purpose it would be a damn good trick."

"Please don't give her ideas," Harrison pleaded when his daughter's expression turned from embarrassed to thoughtful, making the rest of them laugh. "I've already got enough complaints from the neighbours."

"Dad!" The young woman looked at him in exasperation. Sophie laughed again, moving to sit in the chair next to the Japanese girl. Aiko, still grinning, glanced at her.

"How's the Aikido coming along, Sophie?"

"Very well, thanks. Sensei says he's very pleased with my progress. He thinks I'll be ready to move up a level soon."

"Impressive. Well done, keep at it." Aiko looked pleased. "One day you'll have to show me what you can do." Sophie looked slightly worried about this, making the young woman grin. "Don't worry, I'll wait until you've got more experience, and I'll go easy on you." Giggle, the blonde girl nodded.

"I'm going to have to go soon, Ser," she said to her friend, pulling out her phone and looking at the time on it. "Mom will be here in about ten minutes."

"OK." Both girls got up. "We're just going to clean up, Mom," Serena said, before they left the room, talking animatedly. Aiko watched them go with a smile, then turned to Harrison and his wife.

"I'm glad to see both girls are sticking with their new hobbies," she commented. "That shows dedication."

"Serena seems very keen on becoming a good archer," Emily told her, smiling proudly after her daughter. "I think that Shampoo's demonstration really kicked it up a notch, when she saw what
"That woman is unbelievably good with a bow, true enough," Aiko agreed. "A lifetime of training and some remarkable talent as well. Very few people could ever get as good." She looked after Serena for a moment before returning her attention to them. "I don't know if Serena is one of them but it will be interesting to find out."

"Sophie seems very quick to learn as well," Harrison mused. "From what her mother said, her teacher is extremely impressed with how quickly she's picking it up. Serena is talking about trying it again at some point but at the moment she seems more interested in the archery. Mind you, they show each other how to do things all the time. Sophie is actually getting quite good with the bow from what I saw last week, and Serena knows enough to get someone a lot bigger on the floor if he wasn't expecting it."

"I'm quite happy about that," Emily noted, looking mildly worried for a moment. "There have been enough muggings and assaults around here in the last year that knowing how to take care of yourself is probably a good idea."

"Very true," Aiko agreed. "Although, at their stage of training, it's just as important knowing how to run really fast if you find yourself in over your head." She grimaced for a second. "We found that out the hard way ourselves years back. Even magical abilities don't win every fight. Sometimes, you run like hell." Harrison grinned, sensing an interesting story. His wife nudged him, looking at her watch.

"You can hear about magical girls gone wrong later, dear, we need to get ready." Reluctantly he got up, looking disappointed, hearing Aiko laughing quietly as he went upstairs with Emily.

Looking out the car window as they drove slowly along, Akane smiled to herself. She was still finding it slightly difficult to believe that she was actually here in LA, about to start training for a job with a movie studio and possibly become a stunt woman, or even an actor! After years of wanting to do something along those lines she still found it weird to know that it was in her grasp. 'And all because of Yori, in the end,' she thought wonderingly. 'Although I suppose the Elder isn't completely wrong when she points out that Ryoga had something to do with it. Not that I'll ever tell him that!' She glanced over her shoulder to see Shampoo watching the people walking along Hollywood Boulevard with a small smile on her lips.

'I'm glad Shampoo came along on all this,' she mused, returning her gaze to the street. 'It's good to have a friend you can trust to back you up when you're this far from home. Dad said Americans are weird, I might need backup.' She noticed a man wearing a dirty trench-coat and little else except for a paper bag on his head, with eye holes cut in it, waving his arms frantically and apparently berating passing tourists, who were giving him a very wide berth. 'He didn't say that were that weird.' Shaking her head a little she watched the odd man until he suddenly bolted for no obvious reason.

Adrian slowed, indicating right, then turned into the entrance of an underground car park, stopping to take the ticket the machine offered, then driving on when the barrier raised. "This is pretty central for this area, we can get out and walk around for a while," he said. "The Hollywood Walk of Fame is quite close, and Mann's as well. You'll like that. There's lots of other things to see around here too." A few minutes later he found an empty slot in the otherwise pretty full parking garage, pulling in and stopping. "OK, this should do it." They all got out, he locked the car, then led the way to the exit elevator. Shortly they were on the street.

Walking along the two young women looked around with great interest. "It's not quite as busy as
"This is a pretty touristy area," Adrian agreed. "Lots of people on a nice evening like this, especially at this time of year. They come from all over the world to look around." Arriving outside a fairly elaborate building he stopped, waving a hand at it. Akane instantly recognised it, and the surrounding area, it was very familiar to her from innumerable films. "There you go. Mann's Chinese Theatre, built in nineteen twenty-seven. It's not the biggest place you'll ever see but there's a lot of history behind it." They joined the many obvious tourists wandering along inspecting the posters, the buildings, and most of all the concrete tiles with the hand- and foot-prints, along with signatures, of famous actors through the generations. She was fascinated by it, picking out names she recognised.

"Oh, Leonard Nimoy, from Star Trek," she said, making her to companions look as she pointed. "Nabiki always liked that show." She grinned for a second. "For a while when she was about eleven she was going around pretending to be a Vulcan, saying things were illogical. It was really funny. It drove Dad nuts."

"I'll have to meet this sister of yours one day," Adrian chuckled. "She sounds interesting."

"She's really, really smart," Akane confided, "and she's very good with money and things like that. And information gathering." She produced a tiny smile. "At one point in school that was her entire hobby, gathering information and selling it. I'm glad she doesn't do it any more."

"People change as they get older," Adrian noted, nodding, looking like he was remembering something. "We've pretty much all done something in our past we're not proud of. Things I got up to when I was a kid... Well, I was lucky to avoid jail for a while there, let's leave it at that." She exchanged a look with Shampoo, both of them wondering what he was talking about, but neither willing to push.

"I suppose you're right," was all she said. "I'm certainly not proud of a lot of what I did. True, it turns out some of it was from a medical condition, but that doesn't excuse it all."

"All in past, no point worrying," Shampoo advised. "Also did stupid things now regret." The Amazon shrugged. "Can't change it, just move on."

"Wise words," Adrian chuckled.

Akane grinned, nodding. "Nabiki has been very supportive of all this, and she's also the one who pushed me into the therapy in the first place. I owe her a lot as well as Yori and Aiko." They wandered slowly along the pavement looking at the scenery, both girls stopping every now and then when they spotted one particular name or another.

"What about your other sister?" Adrian asked after a minute or two. "You mentioned you hadn't seen her for a while, and Soun said she'd left a while ago. Do you ever speak to her?"

The youngest Tendo sighed deeply, shaking her head, while Shampoo looked at her with some concern. Eventually she replied, "No, I'm afraid not. Kasumi... she left under some unpleasant circumstances, I suppose you could say. It was our fault, all of us, we pushed her away. I was the main problem, I know that now. It wasn't..." She sighed again, sadly. "It wasn't nice. There was... an accident."

"Oh." Adrian turned his head to look at her for a moment. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Not as sorry as I am about it," she replied heavily, "but thank you. We haven't heard a thing about
her or from her in almost five years now, which is the single biggest regret I have in my life. I'll never forgive myself for what I did."

They walked along in silence for a little longer. "Family problems are always unpleasant, no matter what the cause," he said in the end. "I had some issues with my brother Jeff many years ago which meant that neither one of us spoke to each other for nearly a decade. The funny thing now is that I can't even work out why." He shrugged a bit. "Heat of the moment, you say or do something hurtful, it gets blown even further out of proportion... Never a good thing. But, with time, this sort of thing often blows over. We talk quite often now, I wouldn't say we're hugely close, but we get on fine. He lives in New York, which may well be helpful, we don't see each other all that often."

Akane smiled as he grinned, Shampoo snickering beside her.

"What does he do?"

"He's a stockbroker. Quite a good one as far as I know. He earns a decent living at any rate. Although, over the last few months, there's been a lot of confusion in the market because of that Canadian thing, Halleckton. That Murray bastard seems to have screwed up financial issues beyond anything anyone could have expected. He and his friends were up to their necks in manipulating the market, bank fraud, you name it." Adrian sighed a little. "Caused a lot of problems when it all fell over. Mind you, probably nothing like as bad as it would have been in ten years when it fell over by itself. That's what Jeff says and I suppose he's in a position to know."

Akane nodded slowly. "It's not something I know anything about although I'm sure Nabiki would understand it. She's talked about it a little, mainly to Dad, but I've listened a few times." She laughed for a moment. "I don't understand half of what she was talking about. I do know that Aiko and the others were involved in it somehow although they haven't said all that much about the whole thing. It sounded pretty nasty though from what she did say."

"The news reports were amazingly confused," he agreed, smiling a little. "Something impressive happened, that much is certain, but no one seems to know what, or at least isn't telling the public."


Laughing, Adrian nodded. "You've got that right. I've heard at least two scripts are going around at the moment based on it, although I think both of them are probably completely off-base as far as what happened. It'll be interesting to see if anyone picks them up." He laughed some more as they both grinned. "Mind you, whatever that twitch in the world was would be even better. I've got a couple of ideas myself on that subject. Perhaps some day."

"There are some amazing theories going around about that," Akane agreed, smiling to herself. "I've been reading them on the internet. No one has any real idea but everyone has an opinion. Elder Cologne seems to know more than most people about it but she's not talking. It seems very likely that it was some weird magical thing defending itself from some sort of attack, though, from what she did say before she went all quiet about it."

Adrian looked at her again, this time with surprise. "Magical attack? Hmm, hadn't heard that one. It's even weirder than the aliens. That seems to be the current hot favourite theory."

Akane laughed for a second. "Maybe it was magical aliens?"

All three exchanged glances, then burst out laughing. "Yes, that sounds so much more sensible," Adrian managed after a few seconds of hilarity. "Magical aliens. I really must see about some sort of script based on that idea." He shook his head as the young women exchanged glances and grins.
"It's going to end up in a movie, for sure, probably more than one, but I have no idea if any of them will ever be close to the truth, whatever that is." He snickered for a second. "Richard told me about some of the ideas he'd heard from just after it happened. There were dozens. To be honest, magical aliens is one of the more sensible ones, that's how insane some of them were."

"We live in strange world," Shampoo laughed. "Might be true."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. At least nothing seems to have happened as a result, which I suppose is a good thing." Reaching the end of the walk of fame, they looked around.

"I can't get over how many palm trees and things there are everywhere," the Tendo woman said, peering up at a particularly tall specimen they were standing next to. "It's sort of weird in the middle of a city."

"Seems normal to me," Adrian commented, following her eyes and smiling a little. "There are a lot in LA. You should see some areas of Beverly Hills." He shrugged slightly. "It's what you grow up with. Palm trees in LA, I seem to remember a lot of cherry trees in Tokyo, I've been to places in southern Europe that had orange trees complete with fruit in the middle of the city."

"Nice to have green around," Shampoo agreed, inspecting the tree curiously. "Grew up near forest, mountains, things like that. I miss it sometimes. Tokyo has many parks but not the same as village. No palm trees, though, even at home." Poking the trunk gently she shook her head. "Strange things. Not like normal trees."

Hearing Japanese being spoken, both young women looked around, to see a group of middle aged Japanese people wandering past with a remarkable collection of cameras, taking pictures of everything in sight, while at the front of the group a woman who was apparently a tour guide was pointing things out. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves which made Akane smile a little. Adrian followed their eyes and laughed for a moment.

"We get a lot of Japanese people as tourists around LA," he commented, watching with amusement as two of the tour group took a picture of the palm tree Shampoo was standing next to. She moved out of the way so they could get a better shot, grinning. "It's something of a stereotype but your countrymen do seem to like their photography."

Akane giggled, waving as three of the tour group spotted her and the other two, looking curiously at them for a moment as if trying to work out whether they were worth photographing, before shaking their heads and moving off after the tour guide. She turned to Adrian. "You see it in movies, but I've never seen it in real life before," she laughed. "It's not quite so obvious at home."

"You should see the studio tours when it's a Japanese group," he smiled, "the sound of shutters going is like machine-gun fire. It's a popular destination." They resumed walking along, looking at the sights, while Adrian pulled out his phone and made a few calls. Eventually he put it back in his pocket. "OK, Jim and his wife are going to meet us at the restaurant in about forty-five minutes, which gives us time to get back to the car and drive there. Matt and Aaron will be there a little after that."

"What restaurant is it?" Akane asked curiously.

"A place called Spago. It's one of the best restaurants in LA. They moved to Beverly Hills a couple of years ago." Adrian smiled. "It's not cheap but it's really very good indeed. I think everyone will find something they like there."

"Nabiki showed us a restaurant in Tokyo which sounds a little like that, a weird fusion between
Thai and French food," Akane replied. "It's pretty expensive but the food is fantastic. I'm looking forward to this one."

"Should call Aiko to let her know," Shampoo commented. Akane nodded, pulling out her phone and dialling.

"Hi, Akane. How are things going?" The voice of the brunette magical girl came after only two rings.

"Fine, thanks, Aiko. Adrian got us checked in at the hotel, which is amazing, and we've been looking around down town for a while. We saw the walk of fame thing with all the footprints, for example."

"Oh, right, outside Mann's. I've been there, it's pretty cool."

"Isn't it? Anyway, we're going to the restaurant, for about..." She looked at her watch, "half past seven. Some place called Spago in Beverly Hills."

"OK. I've heard of it but I've never been there. It's supposed to be pretty good."

"That's what Adrian said."

"Right, we'll meet you there. See you soon."

"Bye." She disconnected and dropped the phone back into her pocket, then looked mildly puzzled. "How did she know it was me?" she asked the world at large. Adrian and Shampoo both looked curiously at her.

"What do you mean, Akane?" the director asked.

"Aiko greeted me by name, but I was using this new phone you got me. How did she know it was me?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Obviously magic. Or..." They waited. "It might have been the fact that I called her on both of the phones so she would have their numbers."

"Ah." Akane giggled as he grinned. "That makes sense."

Returning to the car they left the car park and headed towards the restaurant, both young women still looking around with great interest. The area they found themselves driving through half an hour later was impressively up scale, making them exchange looks of amazement. Adrian took a somewhat circuitous route so he could point out some of the larger houses belonging to famous stars, which both of them inspected with interest.

"You might be able to afford something like this in a few years," the director chuckled, as they slowed to view one impressive property at the end of a long drive. "Both of you."

Shampoo shook her head. "Too big," she replied. "Nice to look at but not good to live in. Waste of money in long run, Great Grandmother said. I think she's right."

"Elder Cologne gave me the same advice," Akane commented, glancing at him as he smiled. "She says the money is safer in the bank or under the mattress than in over the top purchases that are just made to make other people jealous."

"A wise woman, the Elder," he laughed. "I was very impressed by her when I met her last month."
He accelerated, moving past the estate and going back onto the main road. "She's right, of course. Quite a few stars who have made the big times end up penniless a few years later because they blew everything on big houses and fast cars."

"I'll be more than happy with a sensibly sized house or even a flat," the youngest Tendo mused. "I've never lived on my own before. It will be nice in one way, to have space that's all mine, but it will take some getting used to as well, not having my family around me."

"I'm sure you'll find it suits you in the end," he said, glancing at her, then at Shampoo in the rear-view mirror. "There's nothing to stop you joining forces, either, if you wanted company for a while." Akane looked back at the Amazon, who seemed interested, then nodded.

"Very true. Want to share, Shampoo?"

"Have no problem with it," the other woman smiled. "Someone has to know how to cook or both starve to death." Akane frowned as her friend giggled. Adrian chuckled.

"Come on, she can't be that bad at it."

Peals of laughter came from the Chinese girl in the back seat. Akane growled slightly, crossing her arms and staring out the windscreen. "Have no idea! Akane could burn water." Shampoo giggled some more. "Akane has burned water. Nearly set kitchen on fire. Last time cooked, almost had to call hazmat team. Or experienced mage." She looked at Akane who was going pink with embarrassment. "Or both."

"OK, OK, I'm not good at cooking, we get it," the Tendo daughter snapped, turning her head to look out the side window. Shampoo grinned, but subsided. Laughing, Adrian glanced at them both, but didn't add anything to the discussion. A few minutes later, he pointed.

"There we go, that's the restaurant. Looks like that's Jim and Sandra outside, they beat us here." Pulling into the car park, he turned the car off, then waved to his friends. "Let's go and get something to eat, shall we?" he said, Opening the door and getting out. Akane and Shampoo did likewise, the Tendo woman still looking mildly irritated, but rapidly cheering up.

"Are you sure it's safe?"

Harrison exchanged a glance with Aiko, who looked amused, then Serena, who rolled her eyes, making sure her mother couldn't see it. He smiled tenderly.

"Dear, it's perfectly fine. Aiko says she's never hurt anyone with teleporting and she's been doing it for nearly eight years now. She'd know if anyone would, right?"

Emily looked nervous, but nodded. Aiko laughed for a moment. "Honest, Emily, the worst thing that ever happens is that someone has a particularly weak stomach and throws up a lot for a minute or two. I did myself the very first time. Yori didn't even notice. Everyone else is somewhere between those points." She grinned as Emily looked even more nervous. "It only lasts for maybe thirty seconds or so and never comes back. Well, not unless you go a really long way." Harrison wondered what counted as a 'long way' for a moment.

"Come on, dear, she's just going to jump you around the garden a couple of times. I felt a bit sick the first time but after that it was no problem. I'm sure you'll be fine." Not looking particularly certain, his wife eventually nodded.

"Great. Look, we'll just go from here to over there by the back fence, OK?" Aiko moved a little
closer to Emily, with Serena eagerly taking her place next to her mother, looking excited.

"I can't believe I'm going to teleport!" she almost squealed, practically vibrating with joy. Aiko laughed for a few seconds.

"It's a lot of fun. Right, ready?" Serena was already nodding, while Emily took a moment and a deep breath, before indicating she was set. All three women vanished and reappeared on the other side of the garden instantly, the flash reflecting off the white side of the house. Harrison blinked a couple of times, walking over to his family. His wife was looking a little wobbly and definitely rather green, but didn't do much more than sway a little, with Aiko steadying her.

Serena gurgled a few times, looking very unwell, dropping to her hands and knees, before shaking her head and standing up again. "Ew. That was horrible," she moaned. Harrison grinned at her, patting her on the head, then reclaimed his wife from the magical girl, who stepped back.

"I think you were slightly understating it, Richard," Emily groaned, before covering her mouth with both hands. After a moment she looked somewhat less ill and lowered them again. "That said, it's passing very fast."

"You'll both be fine in a second or two," he assured them both. Sure enough, very quickly both his women regained normal colouring, Serena becoming very excited again.

"That was so amazing," she grinned. "You're sure it doesn't come back?"

"Nope," Aiko assured her. "Not except in pretty unusual circumstances. The next one might make you slightly dizzy for a second or two, it does with some people, then you barely feel it. Let's go back and I'll prove it." She moved closer to them all and the world flickered, leaving them back where they'd started. Emily twitched at the sudden spacial displacement while Serena started laughing.

"SO cool!" she yelled, punching the air.

"It's good, isn't it?" Aiko asked, laughing.

"I wish I could do that," the teenager giggled. "How far can you go?"

"I'm not sure." Looking reflective, Aiko glanced at Harrison, who was also interested. "As far as we've been able to work out the only limitation is really one of available energy. Certainly anywhere on the planet is easy."

"Really?" Emily gasped, stunned. "I know you can go to Tokyo and back just like that, but really anywhere?"

"Yep. Unless there's the right sort of anti-teleportation ward, it works fine everywhere." Aiko grinned at them, then got a slightly mischievous look. Before Harrison could say anything the world flickered again, becoming very bright compared to the early evening it had just been, and considerably hotter. They all blinked furiously while Aiko laughed.

Looking around, Harrison inspected the landscape, freezing when he spotted something a couple of miles away that he instantly recognised. "Where are we?" his wife asked, confused, looking in the other direction. He put his hand on her head and gently turned it so she was looking at the same thing he was. She gasped at the point Serena started laughing wildly.

"That's..."
"Ayers rock," he completed the statement.

"The locals prefer Uluru," Aiko commented with a grin.

"We're in Australia?!!" Emily shook her head, causing him to grin as well. The expression on her face was amazing. His daughter bent down and picked up a small red rock, turning it over in her hands.

"Yes. Nice place, nice people, but kind of hot." Smiling widely, the magical girl waved a hand at the scenery. "Like I said. Works everywhere." The world jumped once more and they were standing outside the back door of the Harrison household, gaping at each other. Serena looked around, stared at Aiko, then inspected the rock she was still holding.

"So cool," she whispered to herself, looking very happy indeed.

"Shall we go and meet the others?" the Japanese woman asked after a moment, appearing satisfied.

"I'll just get my jacket," Harrison replied, shaking his head in amused wonder, guiding his stunned wife inside. "Come on, dear, grab your purse. Food awaits us."

Snickering, Aiko watched them go into the house, before glancing at Serena, who was bouncing her rock in her hand. "Sophie will be jealous," the girl commented. "I didn't get her one."

Aiko grinned.

When Harrison and his wife came out ten minutes later Aiko was juggling half a dozen rocks of different colours while their daughter was tossing her new ones from a small handful. Both of them looked over at Harrison, Aiko not missing a beat. He stared at the rocks, seeing that one of them looked volcanic, one was zebra striped in black and white, a couple were some sort of quartz, and none of them seemed to be local ones. Sighing a little he shook his head but said nothing as the two younger women quickly dumped their toys on the patio table then moved closer.

"Ready?" Aiko asked, her expression amused. He looked at her for a moment then nodded, smiling.

"Ready."

Once more the garden flashed and they were gone.

"Ah, there's Richard and family now," Jim mentioned, indicating past the small group at the table. Akane looked over her shoulder to see the policeman and his wife and daughter enter the restaurant, talking briefly to the Maître-de, who led them over moments later, Aiko following and glancing around curiously.

"Hello, everyone," Harrison said, smiling at them all. "Akane, Shampoo, it's nice to see you again. You remember Emily and Serena?"

"Of course," Akane replied, smiling back, then nodding to the other two. "It's nice to see you all as well. How are you both?"

"Well, thanks," Emily replied, sitting down in the chair her husband pulled out for her. Serena took the next one along, opposite the two Japanese women and Adrian, while Harrison sat next to her. Aiko looked around the table for a moment then sat next to Akane, who smiled at her for a moment. "I understand you're here for a few days, both of you?"
"Yes, we're doing some more demonstrations, followed by some training and a few screen tests, amongst other things," the Tendo woman said. "It sounds fun although I for one am still very nervous about it."

"Looking forward to it," Shampoo laughed. "But slightly worried as well, yes."

"They'll both be fine, trust me," Adrian chuckled. "After seeing what they can do I can't think of anything that could really cause a problem, as long as they stay reasonably calm and do their best."

"That's what Nabiki told us as well, basically," Akane laughed. "And Cologne. And my father. And Auntie Nodoka. I hope everyone is right."

"We are, don't worry," he assured her. "You're both unbelievably talented and are going to do very well. You already won me a two thousand dollar bet, remember." She giggled, thinking back to the first time they'd come over. "Matt and Aaron are still annoyed about that," he added, grinning like a shark. "Serves them right."

The two men he'd mentioned arrived a few minutes later, Aaron with his wife Naomi, Matt on his own, all three of them having shared a car. Aaron introduced his wife to everyone, shaking hands with Shampoo and Akane, then they sat down. Shortly they'd placed their orders and were sipping drinks, waiting for the starters. "So, Akane, Shampoo, are you looking forward to tomorrow?" Matt asked, pouring himself a glass of water, then passing the jug to Adrian. The two young women exchanged glances.

"I think so," Akane said, grinning. "Everyone keeps asking that."

He laughed. "I suppose you're getting tired of it. OK, I'll keep my questions until we're at the studio."

"What likely to happen?" Shampoo asked curiously. He looked at her, thinking for a few seconds, before answering.

"Well, what we've tentatively planned is that you'll do another, possibly longer demonstration, similar to what you did in Richard's back yard, for a few of the other studio people. Three executives, possibly some people from the stunt department, that sort of thing." He glanced at Adrian who was grinning. "I suspect that we'll probably then have a break while they recover." Aaron started laughing, as did Richard and Jim. Shampoo looked very amused.

"After that, we have a number of training sessions in mind, some vehicle training, familiarity with various firearms, things of that nature, that tend to come up in stunt work. We'll go over that in more detail tomorrow."

Aaron added, "The weapons training is pretty simple, we're not expecting you to pick up marksman level shooting instantly, it's more along the lines of learning firearm safety and how to hold them, load them, unload them, and carry them in a convincing manner. People tend to pick up on that in a movie if it looks wrong, especially in the US." Shampoo and Akane nodded, listening carefully.

"That will take up the rest of tomorrow and all of Tuesday, and possibly quite a lot of Wednesday morning as well, I think," Adrian told them, watching their reactions, while everyone else listened. "There's some more paperwork to go over as well as that liability waiver I gave you both earlier but at this stage it's pretty straightforward."

"Wednesday afternoon it gets interesting," Matt went on, when Adrian fell silent. Akane sipped the wine she'd picked, nodding slightly, while Shampoo leaned back in her chair and watched him.
"We've got four stunt scenes we want to try, all of which are from scripts we've done recently, or are in upcoming movies." He glanced at Aiko, adding, "One is from that spy movie that we were shooting the first time you lot were here." She grinned, remembering the trip.

"Hopefully the collapsing lighting gantry is an optional extra," the magical girl snickered. Adrian shook his head slightly.

"God, don't remind me. It took me three days to calm down after that."

"How are the new pills working out, by the way?" Richard asked curiously. The director chuckled for a moment.

"Pretty well, actually, much better than the last ones. I've been calmer the last three weeks than I have been for years."

"Don't overdo it," Jim told him, grinning. "You can become too calm. If you feel yourself having trouble standing up, you should cut back." He laughed when Adrian sighed heavily, glancing at the others, who were smiling.

"He's never going to let me forget that," he commented, making Jim laugh harder. "You forget one time how many tranquillizers you took and people keep bringing it up for years."

"You did end up lying on your face on the carpet and giggling a lot in the middle of a meeting, Adrian," Jim told him, causing everyone else to collapse in laughter. Adrian sighed again, folding his arms and waiting for the merriment to die down. Eventually they fell silent as the food arrived. When everyone was served, Matt, who was still smiling a bit, resumed talking.

"OK, like I was saying, four scenes. One is a chase scene that requires jumping from a motorcycle to a car, one is a martial arts fight across a series of rooftops, one involves a number of falls and jumps in a city environment with gun-play, and the last one is a sort of bar fight using swords."

"It sounds amazing," Serena commented, making everyone look at her, which caused her to seem slightly embarrassed. Akane smiled at the girl, nodding enthusiastically and making her smile back.

"It does, doesn't it? I'm really looking forward to it."

Adrian said, "We're expecting the stunt tests to take at least one day, possibly two. That takes us through into Thursday afternoon or evening. Once everyone has had time to look at the rushes and discuss it, we'll probably have a meeting to work out what the next stage is. I strongly suspect that the end result of that will be a job offer before you go back, or within a week of your return."

Feeling somewhat overwhelmed Akane nodded, closing her eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at Shampoo, seeing her friend looked excited.

"Assuming that happens, you'll get initial contracts within a month, which will require a certain amount of paperwork. At that point, you must get a legal opinion of your own on those contracts, OK?" They both nodded. He looked satisfied. "I don't want to overemphasise it, and I don't think anyone is going to try anything, but for everyone's protection, it's important that you get impartial advice on the contracts for yourselves, like I said when we had the first meeting. You may find things you want to change, or things you don't like or think are missing. You'll want to get all that
sorted out before you sign anything because it's a lot more difficult later and no one wants any misunderstandings."

"I understand, Adrian," Akane replied, thinking carefully about it. "Nabiki told me more or less the same thing a few weeks ago. She looked up a number of LA lawyers who were experts in contract law on the internet and gave me a list."

"Great. That's a good start. If you want, I can look at that list and tell you which ones I think are good, but if you don't want to do that, you can call around and check them out yourselves. We'll have some free time tomorrow morning, also Wednesday morning in all probability." Adrian ate a few bites of lamb shank while the youngest Tendo woman thought, glancing at her friend.

"May as well trust you to look at list," she commented. After a second, she grinned predatorily. "Know where you live after all." Aiko started laughing as Adrian stopped chewing, looking worried for a moment. Harrison snickered.

"I'd be very impartial, Adrian," he advised. Swallowing slightly harder than the mouthful of meat required, the director nodded wordlessly. "I know a number of lawyers as well, Akane, a couple of them are contract specialists. If none of the people on your list are suitable I can give you some names."

"Thanks, Richard," she replied.

"I can hop you around town if you want, guys," Aiko chuckled, amused. "I'm probably going to stick around for a day or two."

"You could come and watch if you want, Aiko," Adrian told her. She raised an eyebrow, thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Why not? I'm curious to see what happens. I might have to leave at short notice but I'll come back. You know what my life is like." The magical girl looked at Shampoo and Akane. "If that's all right with you two, that is. I don't want to make you nervous."

Akane smiled momentarily. "I don't mind, certainly, Aiko. It would be nice having you there." She turned to Shampoo who was half-way through a large lobster, the Amazon merely nodding.

"What happens after all that is done?" Emily asked curiously. Adrian and Matt looked at each other, glanced at Aaron, then the director turned to her.

"We have a few more possible tests depending on how much time is available. A bit more training, possibly introducing the girls to some of our martial artist experts, that sort of thing. Then it might be an idea to look into things like bank accounts, stuff like that. Human resources will be able to give us a list of everything that would be needed to allow them to live and work here." He turned back to the two young women. "The paperwork is pretty complicated as far as that is concerned but the HR and Legal departments are very good at sorting things out. By the time you have the contracts they'll have got everything set up, I think. They've done it before with talent from outside the US, it seems to take about six to eight weeks worst case from past experience."

"Is that an H-1B visa?" Aiko asked, looking interested. "A friend of mine got one of those a couple of years ago, he's an electronics engineer for some company in Houston."

"It might be, or they might go the route of O-1B, which is for a foreign-born person with extraordinary ability in the motion picture industry, amongst other things. It's a much better fit than
an H-1B I suspect, although either would do." He grinned for a moment. "Proving 'extraordinary ability' is going to be pretty damn easy in this case." Aiko glanced at Akane and Shampoo, then snickered, while everyone listening looked amused.

"Guess so. You'll probably have it on film if nothing else."

"Exactly." He looked very satisfied as Akane and the Amazon exchanged a look.

"We'll probably wind up by midday Thursday," Matt remarked, pouring himself and Aaron some more wine. The weapons master waved to the waiter for a fresh bottle, receiving a nod in return. "You two might want to go immediately or you could stick around and see the sights."

"We need to be back by Saturday morning, Tokyo time, at the latest," Akane told him. "Aunt Nodoka has a big party scheduled for Saturday which we don't want to miss. Yori and the others are coming, aside from anything else, and I really want to talk to her and thank her. It's all because of her that this is happening in the first place."

"That young woman does seem to have a powerful affect on everyone she meets," Aaron noted, smiling a little. Akane nodded.

"She does. I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for her and Chou, and the rest of them as well," she replied soberly, staring at her plate for a while. "Nowhere good, I think."

"They good people," Shampoo agreed quietly. "Have much respect for all of them." She glanced at Aiko, who was smiling slightly. "Including you. Would be much more difficult if had to fly from Japan."

"It's no problem, Shampoo, like I've said. I'm more than happy to bring you guys over whenever you need, assuming there isn't some world-ending catastrophe going on at the time." The magical girl and Harrison exchanged glances, Akane noticed, looking up, but the policeman didn't comment. "If there is, there might be a slight delay." Aiko laughed as Akane grinned at her. Shampoo shrugged, also grinning.

"Can wait."

"Before you guys go back we should have another barbecue," Harrison suggested, looking around the table. "The last one seemed pretty successful."

"Sounds like a good idea, Richard," Adrian agreed. Everyone else seemed up for it. "Wednesday evening, perhaps?"

"Works for me." Matt looked at Aaron, who whispered to his wife, then nodded.

"Me too."

"Can I invite Sophie and her mother?" Serena asked. Emily looked at her, then around at everyone else, who all seemed fine about it.

"Of course, dear. Is her father going to be in town as well? I seem to recall that Joan mentioned he'd be back by then the last time I spoke to her." Serena frowned a little, thinking, then nodded.

"I think he comes back from Florida on Tuesday night," she said slowly. "Sophie talked about it yesterday but I was trying a difficult shot and wasn't listening very well." The teenager looked mildly embarrassed. Emily looked over at Akane and Shampoo, who were listening curiously.
"Sophie's father works for NASA, he's one of the scientists who's working on some sort of probe mission to the moon." She glanced at Serena, who nodded.

"Lunar Prospector it's called," the girl said. "It finished last month. They crashed it into the surface about three weeks ago, Sophie said. They were looking for ice and stuff like that."

Akane smiled. "I wonder if they found any?" she asked. Aiko giggled, then seemed amused when everyone looked at her.

"Probably, if they were looking in the right place," she said placidly, sipping her wine. Harrison looked mildly suspicious, studying her, which caused her to lift her glass in salute for a second. After a moment he shrugged and went back to his steak, smiling slightly.

"Sophie is really proud of him," Serena continued, "but she's also a bit sad she doesn't see him very often right now. Since that project started he's spent a lot of time travelling or a long way from home. She was saying that she's hoping he's going to be back more now it's over."

"Well, if he's back, ask her to invite him along as well, will you please, Serena?" Emily requested. The girl nodded.

"OK, Mom."

"Make sure you bring plenty of that hot sauce, Jim," Aiko said, glancing at the man in question. He grinned at her.

"I've made another batch recently, and a few jars of magical girl grade sauce as well. I was hoping I'd have a chance to test it."

She laughed as did everyone else. "I'll have to take some back for Misaki and Yori."

"Assuming you survive, of course."


"Oh, god, I remember what your ordinary sauce is like, Jim," Harrison groaned. "That's bad enough. The special stuff is horrific. And now you're making something even hotter than that?"

Jim nodded happily. "Yes, it was an interesting problem. But I think I might have done it using some moruga scorpion chillies. They're unbelievably hot."

"If any normal person tries it they'll probably explode, though, so be warned," Sandra giggled from beside her husband. "He was wearing three pairs of rubber gloves on top of each other and a breathing mask when he was cutting those chillies and he still complained that his fingers went numb and his eyes were watering." Harrison paled, while Aiko looked pleased.

"Sounds delicious," she snickered.

"Just keep it away from the rest of us," the policeman pleaded. "I want my colon to stay where it is."

"Ew! Dad!" Serena looked disgusted, making everyone laugh.

"That meal was amazing," Akane commented happily, looking around as they walked. Shampoo nodded, looking pleased.
"Was very good. Like to go back sometime."

"It's a very nice restaurant but not cheap," Adrian agreed. "Worth it on the whole, though, although I wouldn't want to eat there every day."

After the restaurant, and a while in the bar next door, the various parties had gone their separate ways, Aiko taking the Harrison family home then coming back to wish them a good night, before popping off somewhere, looking like she had something interesting planned based on the slightly evil smile she was wearing. The Tendo woman and her two companions had gone back into town to look around at the night-life.

They wandered along for a while, just looking around and watching the people around them, some of whom were obviously tourists, some of whom were locals, and a few of whom were clearly insane. Akane stared at a woman who was dressed like a ballerina, except wearing highly polished military boots, and was carrying a large CD player in a backpack which was blaring out a military march tune. The woman seemed happy enough although the tourists were moving well clear, just in case. Adrian watched with her, shaking his head in amusement.

"There are some weird people around Hollywood," he noted casually. She nodded slowly, watching as the woman disappeared around the corner.

"You can say that again," she laughed. "Nerima is pretty weird as well, but in a... quite different way."

"Minato even more nuts," Shampoo giggled. "Demons irritating but good workout."

"Demons?" Adrian asked curiously.

Akane chuckled. "Shampoo had a run in with a whole pack of small bitey ones a little while ago," she told him. "We got a copy of the news broadcast on DVD, a friend of mine recorded it, if you want to see it. It's pretty impressive. Shampoo was really good even though she had to steal a magic staff from a young magical girl."

"She not happy about that," the Amazon laughed. "Looked very upset. Gave it back when done with it though."

"Yes, covered in goo, which didn't make the poor girl any happier," Akane replied somewhat sarcastically. Shampoo shrugged, still grinning.

"Only demon slime. Washes off."

Laughing, Adrian shook his head, looking at the two women. "I definitely want to see that," he chuckled. "Maybe it's something we should look into doing as a stunt in some future production."

"Have no idea how crazy Minato is," Shampoo snickered. "Make people complain special effects too unrealistic." He laughed again, more loudly.

A couple of minutes later, Akane noticed a couple in their late sixties, both Japanese, looking worried a few metres away on the sidewalk. The man was studying a map with an air of mild despair while the woman was looking around, apparently trying to read the road signs, without a lot of luck based on her expression. Turning to her companion, she shook her head, causing him to sigh loudly. Glancing at Shampoo, Akane walked over, politely bowing a little.

"Hello, I'm Akane Tendo. Are you lost?" she enquired in Japanese. Both the older people suddenly looked vastly relieved.
"Oh, thank god, someone who speaks a sensible language," the man said, smiling and bowing back to her. "We're lost, yes. We're part of a tour group from Osaka, we got separated from the rest of the group hours ago and we've been trying to find our way back to our hotel ever since. Unfortunately neither one of us speaks much English, or any Spanish, which seem to be the only languages anybody around here knows. And both our phone batteries ran down so we can't even call for help, the tour company numbers are on them and neither my wife or I can remember them."

"There are some very strange people as well," the woman confided, looking around. Remembering her own thoughts on that subject Akane laughed.

"I know what you mean," she replied. "Where do you need to go to? My friend here, Adrian, is a local and I can translate for him." She indicated the director who was listening with a politely puzzled expression. Shampoo whispered to him what Akane was saying, causing him to nod his understanding.

"It's..." The husband pulled out a piece of paper and looked at it. "The Sheraton Universal hotel," he read, showing her the Kanji. She looked at the address, then repeated it in English for Adrian's benefit.

"I know it. Decent place a few miles away."

"What's the best way to get them back?" she asked.

"Probably a cab, I'd think," he replied. "We could offer them a lift but we won't get five people in my car, and it's a fair distance out of the way anyway. Will that do?"

"Adrian says a taxi will be the best way to get back," she told them. "Would you like us to call one for you?" Both the tourists nodded gratefully.

"That would be wonderful, thank you, dear," the woman said, sounding very relieved. She laughed a little. "We tried asking a cab driver but he didn't seem to have any idea what we were saying. I'm very impressed how fluent you are in English."

"Thank you," Akane smiled. "I'm still learning it but I may well end up working here in Los Angeles, so I need to be as fluent as I can get." She turned to Adrian for a moment. "They'd very much like a cab," she told him, which made him grin.

"No problems, Akane. I know a good trustworthy company I can call for one, it's a little late for just getting one off the street around here." He pulled out his phone and made a call. Turning back to the two tourists she smiled at them.

"He's calling a taxi company he knows to send a cab here, it won't take long."

"Thank you so much, young woman," the man said, looking pleased and grateful. "You're a credit to your family." Studying her, he asked, "What sort of job will you be doing here in the US? Something in the financial services, or the legal profession?" He looked her up and down, obviously impressed with the good quality dress she was wearing. Laughing, she shook her head.

"No, I'm a martial artist, as is my friend Shampoo here, we're over for some interviews about becoming movie stunt women." Both the tourists looked at each other, then inspected the Tendo woman and her colleague.

"Martial artists?" the wife echoed, looked startled. After a moment she seemed to be thinking. "Hold on... Tokyo accent, martial artists... Let me guess, you're from Nerima, aren't you?" Akane giggled, nodding.
"Impressive. How did you work that out?"

The woman smiled back. "An old friend of mine lived there for many years. He said it was a very strange place that seemed to attract martial artists and absolute chaos in equal quantities. Only equalled by Minato, which is full of magical girls and demons."

"Both of those are true," Shampoo laughed. "Nerima is a madhouse but a lot of fun. Minato is just nuts."

"I see," the wife remarked, looking at her husband, both of them seeming amused. "That has the ring of bitter experience."

"Yes," the Chinese girl replied, smiling back at them. "I ran into some demons myself a while ago, I had toothmarks in my leg for a week. And we both know some magical girls, actually."

"It's why we're here in the first place," Akane explained, to which they looked puzzled. "Long story. Very long, and very weird."

Just then, a taxi pulled out of traffic and halted next to them, Adrian going over and talking quickly to the driver, before handing him a fifty. "Here you go," he said, opening the rear door for them with a smile. Both the husband and wife looked surprised.

"We can pay," the man exclaimed. Akane translated, grinning, to which Adrian waved his hand airily.

"Don't worry about it. My gift to visitors to our city," he replied, which Akane translated back for their benefit. They exchanged a glance then both made a gesture of respect to him.

"Please tell your friend that we very much appreciate the gesture and all the help," the man told Akane, helping his wife into the car.

"I will," she assured him. "Have a good trip back and enjoy the rest of your stay in the US."

"Thank you dear," his wife called from inside the taxi, smiling at them all. "And good luck with your job interview. Show them what proper Japanese martial arts are like." Giggling, Akane nodded, waving at the car as it pulled out again. She turned to Adrian.

"Thank you very much for doing that," she said. "It was a nice thing to do."

"It's no problem, really, Akane. It was nice of you to stop to help them in the first place. Don't worry about it, I have more money than I could ever spend sensibly, I'm hardly going to begrudge a mere fifty dollars to help out some stranded tourists."

"It was still nice of you, even so, Adrian." They resumed their walk, eventually ending up back at his car. Shortly they were heading for their hotel.

When they arrived, he got out as they did, leaning on the car and looking at them. "I'll try to be here about half past eight tomorrow morning, traffic permitting," the director told them both. "Does that sound all right?" Akane glanced at Shampoo, who nodded.

"It's fine by us, Adrian."

"Great. I'm looking forward to it. Get a good nights sleep, have a decent breakfast, and I'll see you in the morning."
They stepped back as he got back in, waving at him as he pulled away, then after another glance at each other, went into the hotel, smiling at Helen the desk clerk, who smiled back and greeted them, before going up to their rooms. "I want to have a look at that swimming pool," Shampoo announced at the door to her room. "A quick swim sounds like a nice way to round off the evening and get ready for bed. You coming?"

Thinking for a moment, Akane nodded slowly. "I'm not a good swimmer but I guess a paddle wouldn't hurt," she replied. Shampoo poked her shoulder.

"You really need to learn how to swim properly, you know," she commented. "It's bound to come up sooner or later as a required skill."

"I know," the youngest Tendo sighed. "But you know me and deep water."

"You take to water like... like... like a chicken takes to a tank of hot custard," Shampoo giggled. When Akane looked curiously at her, puzzled, she added, "You know. Lot of flapping and squawking followed by bubbles."

Sighing, but amused, Akane shook her head in mock disgust. "Is that an ancient Chinese saying?" she enquired, making Shampoo grin.

"No, but it should be. Very evocative, I think. I should write it down."

"You're an idiot, Shampoo," the Tendo woman laughed. They separated to go into their own rooms, meeting up again a few minutes later. Carrying towels and bathing suits they headed for the roof, following the signs to the pool and the sports centre. When they arrived the two young women looked around with interest. "It's very well equipped," Akane noted, looking at all the exercise gear and machinery arranged around the large room.

"The pool is through there, I think," Shampoo said, pointing. Moving through the gym, nodding to the two women and one man who were using the various exercise machines, they went down a short corridor and found themselves in a glassed in section of the roof which had a large square pool in the middle of it. The long sides of the enclosure were open, sliding doors apparently able to close it in during inclement weather, while outside there was a walkway around the edge of the roof from which they could see the lights of LA laid out all around them.

"Wow. That's pretty impressive," the Amazon warrior added, studying the view. Walking over to the pool she knelt down and put her hand in the water. "Nice temperature as well."

Akane went to investigate the various rooms that opened out from the corridor they'd come along, returning a moment later. "There's a nice sauna back there and a steam room as well. And I think there's a great big hot tub out there on the roof." She pointed. "I think we might want those after tomorrow to relax. I'm planning on getting very tense and worried during the day." Shampoo studied her, shaking her head, then both of them laughed.

"Come on, I want a swim. Let's get changed."

Shortly Akane was floating on her back in the shallow end, having eventually managed it after a number of attempts which mostly ended up making her cough a lot to remove the water that had taken up residence in her lungs, much to Shampoo's amusement, while the Amazon was doing slow passes back and forth in the deep end. Staring up through the glass roof at the few stars visible through the light pollution, listening to the splashing of her friend and the distant sounds of the city, she wondered once again how she'd ended up where she was. It still seemed like a dream sometimes, the change was so remarkable for less than two years.
‘I owe Yori and the others so much,’ she thought to herself yet again. ‘I wish I could do something for them as nice as what they did for me, but I can’t see how I ever could repay it.’ She sighed a little. ‘I guess I’ll just have to do my best to prove I’m worthy of the opportunity I’ve been given.’ After a moment she though sadly, ‘I wish I could tell Kasumi and Mom how well my life is going now.’ Sighing again, more heavily, she rolled over to try a little swimming...

Once she’d been pulled out by Shampoo and hacked up the water yet again, she decided she was ready for bed.

Sitting at his desk having just arrived at the station, Harrison turned on his computer and checked his schedule, then picked up the pile of paper in his IN tray and leafed through it. Stopping on one page, an eyebrow went up, before he glanced over at the next desk. "Hey, Diego, what's this about?" he asked the other lieutenant who had got there a while earlier, waving the sheet at him. The other man looked at it for a moment then shrugged.

"I'm not sure, actually. It looks like we had a wave of those weird cases like what happened around New Years. About a dozen gang members so far found tied up with evidence of crimes next to them. They don't seem to know what happened, either, just like last time. It's kind of strange."

Harrison nodded slowly, trying not to grin, suddenly having a fairly good idea what had happened.

"Useful, I suppose, saves us the trouble of rounding them up," he commented. Rojas laughed.

"True. It's sort of non-standard, but the Captain seems fairly pleased even so, it's solved two very nasty muggings, three assaults, a robbery, and a kidnapping. He was looking kind of amused. Oh, by the way, he wants to see you. Something about that drive-by or whatever the hell it was yesterday evening, apparently you were involved?" The other man looked curious.

Sighing a little, Harrison nodded, getting up. "Yes, I was there. It was... eye-opening." At Rojas' expression he simply added before walking away, "Let's just say that those young women who visited aren't people you should annoy and leave it at that." Inwardly he was highly amused at how his colleague went very quiet very suddenly, wondering yet again what exactly Yori had done to him. The man had never explained. Nodding to a couple of other officers as he passed, he headed for the Captain's office, knocking twice before opening the door.

"Ah, Harrison." Captain Martinez looked up as he entered. "Come in, sit down." Closing the door he did as requested. The man behind the desk looked at him for a moment, then turned his attention to a sheet of paper on his desk. "I had a few questions about an interesting incident yesterday evening..."

Sighing slightly, Harrison began explaining, wishing Aiko was there to help.

Her toothbrush in her mouth, Akane wiped her hands on a towel, before picking up her new phone which was making a beeping noise from where it was sitting next to the sink. Flipping it open one-handed she looked at the display then removed the toothbrush and answered it. "Good morning, Adrian," she said, smiling to herself.

"Hello, Akane. I hope you slept well last night?" the voice of the movie director said.

"I did, actually, the beds here are very comfortable indeed. I'm just about ready to go down to breakfast, I think Shampoo is as well."

"OK, that's good," he replied. "There's no hurry, I'm a little delayed because of some sort of
accident on the freeway, the traffic is appalling. I think I'll probably be forty minutes to an hour late according to the traffic report on the radio. Sorry about that, but have a good breakfast, maybe a swim, and I'll see you as soon as I can get there."

"Thanks for letting me know," she said, looking at her reflection in the mirror and running her hand through her hair, idly thinking she needed a trim. "We'll be waiting."

"Great. See you soon." As he hung up she closed the phone and put it down again, then resumed brushing, walking out of the bathroom and over to the window, looking out at the view. It was brilliantly lit, a perfect day, and already quite hot as far as she could see, with only a light breeze blowing. After a moment she went back to the sink, rinsed her mouth a couple of times, then got dressed. Glancing at her watch she saw she had a few minutes before the time she'd arranged to meet Shampoo in the restaurant, so after a second or two pulled out her new phone and called Nabiki. When her sister answered she heard how tired she sounded, suddenly realising how late it was back in Japan and ending up feeling slightly embarrassed.

Having apologised, she sat on the bed idly watching the news which was playing with the sound off on the large TV in the corner of the room, chatting with her sister, who had perked up fairly quickly. Having gone over the previous day she enquired about Nabiki's own trip, which by the sound of it was a lot of fun, causing both of them to giggle a lot. The youngest Tendo was looking forward to meeting Nabiki's friend Miki, hoping she was going to come to Nodoka's party. The young woman sounded very interesting.

After a few minutes she said her goodbyes, Nabiki wishing her well, then disconnected, dropping the phone back into her pocket. Standing, she walked over to the TV, which was doing some sort of report that seemed to be on young men found tied up around downtown LA for some reason, looking at the image for a moment and wondering what it was about before turning it off. Having reclaimed her room key and checked that she had everything she needed, which was mainly a small bag with her practice clothes, a towel, and some washing supplies in, she left the room, tapping on the door next to hers. Shampoo opened it almost immediately, smiling at her, her phone to her ear, then waved her inside.

"Yes, Great-Grandmother. I understand. No, I won't. Yes. Yes, I'll make sure I do." She rolled her eyes at her friend making Akane laugh very quietly. "Yes, she's here right now. OK. Yes. No, I won't do that either. All right. Have a good night, say hi to Mousse for me, and I'll see you soon. Thanks." A moment later she disconnected and put the phone away with a small sigh, smiling.

"She has a lot of advice. Most of it is very sensible, but she seems to think my memory is bad, she keeps telling me things she's told me two or three times already." Akane giggled a little at this. "She also said to say hello to you and that she expects both of us to do our best and show these Americans what true martial arts are. And to take a photo of any of them we see riding horses and shooting at things." Both of them laughed at this.

"I think she's probably a little out of touch over that one," Akane chuckled.

"True, but she seems fond of the concept for some reason." Shaking her head, Shampoo picked up her own bag and they both left the room, heading for the elevator.

"Adrian called, he's going to be late because of traffic," Akane said as they descended. "Probably around an hour."

"OK. More time to eat, then," her friend noted.

Nodding, she grinned. "Hopefully it's good food. I wonder what it will be? Probably not the sort of
"Hey, I'm open to practically anything at this point, I'm starving," Shampoo laughed.

"After that huge lobster last night?" Akane looked askance at her companion. "And the dessert? And the cheese and crackers after that?" Snickering, the Chinese girl nodded.

"I was hungry and it was really good food. Anyway, we're going to be working hard today, we'll need the energy."

"True, I suppose," she allowed, walking out of the elevator when the doors opened, Shampoo following. They headed into the restaurant, looking around curiously. Stopping just inside the entrance they gave their room numbers to the well dressed young man at the desk who called over a waitress to take them to a table, which they were soon seated at.

"We have a breakfast buffet," the willowy brunette told them, "or you can order from the breakfast menu." She handed them both the relevant menus with a smile.

"Can I have a coffee, please?" Akane asked, smiling back. The woman nodded, glancing at Shampoo, who indicated she'd have the same. Once she'd left to retrieve the drinks they both looked through the menu. "Hmm. Quite different from home. I was right. Let's see..." After a moment, the youngest Tendo put the menu down. "I'm going to quickly check out that buffet."

"OK," Shampoo replied, still puzzling her way through the menu she was holding, as her written English skills weren't wildly good yet. Wandering over to the buffet table, she poked around for a while, coming back with a plate of bacon and eggs, hash browns, and some cold cuts of meat. As she sat Shampoo looked at her plate for a moment, slightly curiously and not looking completely sure about it. "Any good?" she enquired as Akane tried the food.

"It's... different, certainly," the Tendo woman replied, cautiously trying the bacon. "A little overdone. I've heard that Americans like their bacon extra crispy. But it's not bad."

Shampoo considered the buffet but ended up ordering some soup and bread instead, adding some of the cold meats from across the room, when the waitress came back with the coffee. Half an hour later both women were feeling fairly well fed. Turning around in her seat after she finished her food, Shampoo looked speculatively at the buffet again, making Akane smile, before grinning and going over to fetch some more bacon along with some bread with which she made a number of bacon sandwiches. "It's really nice like this," she announced, pleased.

"I've heard people say the humble bacon sandwich will make even a vegetarian eat meat," Akane giggled, stealing the last one off her friend's plate and trying it appreciatively. "I can see why."

"Richard seemed to like them at the barbecue last time when they ran out of burgers," Shampoo agreed, wiping her mouth and waving for a refill on her coffee, which was quickly brought. "Thanks," she said as the waitress complied, smiling.

Eventually they moved to the lounge area off to the side of the restaurant, looking out at the view and talking for a while. A few minutes later Akane remembered the paperwork Adrian had given them the night before, pulling it from her bag and looking it over. "Have you signed yours yet?" she asked her friend, who shook her head, also retrieving the papers she had.

"No, I got about three quarters of the way through reading it last night and fell asleep," Shampoo replied. They spent the next twenty-five minutes going through the papers, Akane reading some of the parts the Amazon was having trouble with, before signing each copy. "Seems fairly simple,"
the Chinese girl commented.

"Yes, he said it was pretty basic. Nothing I can see that would cause us any problems at any rate," Akane said, rereading the top sheet again to make sure she hadn't missed anything. "But I think he's right, we really do need some legal expert to look over the real contract. I've heard all sorts of horror stories about contracts going wrong if you don't check them thoroughly." Putting her paperwork away again she rummaged around for a moment, finally coming up with the list Nabiki had given her and studying it curiously. "We should look into these people," she added. "Do you think showing it to Adrian like he said is a good idea?"

Considering the matter, Shampoo nodded slowly. "I don't see why not. He seems to be an honest and trustworthy person, after all. Even Great-Grandmother said so and she's a very good judge of character. I can't see that there would be any real reason for him to try to trick us, it wouldn't get him anything except a beating after all." She laughed when Akane snickered, still reading the list. "I think he's just trying to make sure we're happy and feel that we haven't had our trust abused, which is nice. Let's see if he can suggest who on that list is worth talking to."

"We should probably ask Richard for the names of the people he knows as well, like he suggested last night." Folding the list up Akane put it back in her bag. "I very much doubt that a policeman would steer us too far wrong, especially one Aiko knows and trusts."

"Yes, I think so as well." Pulling out her phone Shampoo poked around on it for a moment. "He gave me his number last night after the meal. Um... right, here it is. Should we call him now?"

Looking at her watch Akane nodded. "May as well. It's just after nine, he should be at work by now, I think, and Adrian probably won't be here for about half an hour." Shampoo showed her the number which she quickly entered into her phone.

"You should call him, you're better at this damn language," Shampoo laughed.

"It's not that bad," Akane giggled, dialling the number. "A lot easier than Mandarin."

"There are so many rules for it," Shampoo grumped, "and for each one there's exceptions. It's crazy." Grinning at her friend, Akane listened to the ring tone until it was answered.

"Richard? It's Akane Tendo here. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Oh, hello, Akane. No, not at all, it's nice to hear from you," the officer said, sounding pleased. "I was just writing up a report about Aiko's little incident yesterday." He sighed a little. "The captain was amused, in the end, but there were quite a lot of questions. We're not used to that sort of thing here. Yet." She laughed at the tone of his voice, remembering the story she'd heard at the restaurant.

"I hope it didn't cause you any trouble," she told him.

"No, not really. For some reason, probably due to what happened just after Christmas, magical girls seem to have a lot more leeway around here than you'd think likely, and there's no denying that she brought what could have been a very bad situation under control amazingly suddenly. Luckily no one was killed as a result of those idiots, by some miracle, but there are a dozen or so minor wounds to deal with and a hell of a lot of damage." He sighed again. "Anyway, enough of that, how can I help you?"

"We're just waiting for Adrian and we wanted to ask you about those contract lawyers you mentioned last night. Would it be possible to get some names?"
"Sure. Hold on, let me find my diary." There were rummaging in desk drawer type noises for a few seconds in the background, then his voice came back. "Here we go. Now, let's see..." She pulled out the list again, opening the printout up and turning it over, then looking for a pen. Shampoo handed her one with a smile. Taking it she poised it over the paper in anticipation. "Right, this guy is someone I've known for a while, I know he does legal work for a number of movie people. George Brekenridge. Nice guy." He read off a phone number and address which she wrote down. "Here's another one, Julia Schultze. She's someone I haven't had too much contact with but a number of friends have, they say she's very, very good. Not exactly cheap, of course, but smart and knowledgeable." Again, he gave her the details.

"Thanks, Richard," she said, writing that down as well. Thinking the name sounded familiar, she turned the printout that Nabiki had given her over and skimmed it. "Ah. I thought I'd heard that name before, it's on the list Nabiki gave me."

"OK. Might be worth running it past Adrian as well. If he's heard of her, I'd suggest she might be a good one to try first," he replied. "I've got one more for you, Silvio Ramirez. Jim used him for years. He's getting on a bit, he must be at least sixty, but he's got a very good reputation. I know he's familiar with Hollywood contracts as well." She wrote down the contact details one last time. "That's all I've got. Hope it helps."

"It should do. Thank you very much. It was nice seeing you and your family last night." Akane gave Shampoo her pen back and put the list away again.

"Same to you. I'm looking forward to the barbecue. Good luck with your demonstrations and so on. I expect there's going to be a lot of very impressed people wandering around in a daze by tomorrow night." He laughed as she giggled. "I know it impressed me and I've seen Yori and the others in action. You may not have their abilities but you and Shampoo are so far ahead of anyone other than them I've ever seen I can't see how you can fail."

"It's very nice of you to say that, Richard. Hopefully you're right. I'm still nervous but I'm also looking forward to it."

"Just do your best. Once you're concentrating on what you know, you'll just get on with it, trust me." He sounded honestly convinced, making her smile. "Anyway, I'd better get back to this report. Have fun."

"Thanks. See you at the barbecue. Give my best to Emily and Serena."

"Will do. Bye."Disconnecting she put the phone in her pocket.

"He seems in a good mood."

"He's a very nice guy," Shampoo noted, smiling a little. "I like him. His wife is nice as well. And Serena is going to be very good with a bow, I think. She's got something about her that makes me think she'll take it as far as she can."

They talked for a while, until the Amazon looked up, then waved past Akane's shoulder. "Adrian is here," she said, standing up. Doing the same Akane grabbed her bag, turning to greet the director who was walking into the lounge towards them, looking slightly annoyed yet also pleased to see them.

"Sorry I'm late, ladies, that drive was hell. Way too hot to be sitting in a car on the freeway for an hour even if it's air conditioned, all over some idiot who decided to make a turn far too late and missed." He shook his head in disgust. "The driving ability of some people in this country is
appalling. They need to go back to school." Both women laughed as he scowled for a moment. "Oh well. I'm here now. How are you two?"

"Fine, thanks," Akane replied.

"Good too," Shampoo added. "Decent breakfast, good sleep, ready for fun." He grinned, looking much happier.

"Great. It's going to be a lot of fun seeing what happens. I'm expecting a lot of jaws dropping in a few hours." Waving to the exit as they laughed again, he added, "Shall we go? Do you have everything you need?" Akane nodded, lifting her bag.

"We've got our practice clothes and everything else we thought might be required." As they followed him out to the car, she reached into the bag and pulled out the liability waiver, handing it to him when they stopped next to the vehicle. "We signed these as well, they look fine." He took the papers from her, then Shampoo as the other woman also handed her copy over, quickly skimming through them before nodding.

"Great. Thanks. Nothing that looked problematic?"

"No, it seems pretty simple," she said, opening the rear door as Shampoo, grinning, grabbed the front seat this time.

"That's the idea," he told her, also getting in and putting his seatbelt on. Soon they were heading down the main road. "OK, since I was late, there's not a huge amount of time left to get to the studio, even with the later start, so we may as well go there directly. I can show you two around until everyone is ready then we can blow some minds. That sound all right?" He looked at Shampoo, then over his shoulder at Akane, a somewhat shark like grin spreading across his face at his thoughts.

"Is good idea, I think," Shampoo agreed, also grinning. Akane laughed.

"Fine by me."

"All right, then, it'll take about twenty minutes to get there." Driving steadily along the road, he suddenly said, "Hmm. I should tell Aiko when we're going to be there so she can meet us." Reaching down to the centre console he flipped up the cover over the dial pad for the phone, pressing a two digit short code then the execute button. A couple of rings sounded through the car speakers before the magical girl answered.

"Hi, Adrian. How are things this beautiful morning?"

He smiled, as did the other two. "Fine, thanks, Aiko. I'm just driving to the studio with Akane and Shampoo, we should be there in about twenty minutes. Do you want to meet us there?"

"Sure. At the front gate?" She sounded cheerful.

"That would do it. See you soon."

"Bye, guys," Aiko replied, then disconnected. He glanced at his companions, who both looked amused, then went back to concentrating on his driving.

"I wonder if she'll wait until the last moment or actually be waiting for us?" Akane mused.

Adrian shook his head a little, grinning. "No idea. With her, she might be in the middle of the
Amazon jungle right now, or half a mile away. No way to tell." They laughed, exchanged looks, then began talking about the upcoming day.

"And this is the stage we're using for the bar fight scene," Adrian explained, waving his hands at the cavernous space, currently mostly empty except for the complex lighting rigs in the roof space and all the various scenery backdrop equipment around the walls. Akane and Shampoo looked around with interest, nodding as he spoke. Aiko was standing next to them watching with a small smile on her face.

"It's enormous," the Tendo woman said. He smiled, looking around again.

"Not the biggest stage, that's on the other side of the lot, but yes, it's pretty large. We can set up all sorts of things in here, up to and including some very convincing street scenes. Anything larger than that, we either use the big one, or do outside, but it's useful to be able to shoot indoors when it rains." He laughed for a moment. "Not that it does all that often, this is LA after all, but when it rains, it often rains hard. And it can get very windy as well."

"Must be annoying chasing a fake building across the lot," Aiko snickered, making him glance wryly at her.

"It's happened," the director sighed. All three women broke down laughing.

"Well, that's most of the studio, or at least a quick tour of it," he added. "Let's go and find Matt, he should be with Aaron in the armoury at the moment, then we can go over what we're going to do first while we wait for Mitch and Jennifer to arrive. I got a text from Mitch a few minutes ago, they'll both be here in about fifteen minutes or so." He saw they were looking mildly puzzled, so went on, "Mitch Lloyd is the chief operating officer of the studio, Jennifer Huang is the human resources director. The final person we're waiting for is Anton Moelker, he's the executive producer. He had to fly out to New York for a small family emergency yesterday morning but he landed at LAX about ten minutes ago so he should be here within an hour and a half."

Leaving the enormous building they walked back across the large studio lot, the director pointing out various other things as they went. A few minutes later the group entered the armoury, Shampoo and Akane both stopping dead and looking around in impressed amazement at the enormous quantity and variety of weapons both ancient and modern. Aaron looked up from where he was discussing the dismantled guts of a machine gun on his desk with Matt, both of them smiling at the women. "Hi, ladies," he said, nodding to them, then standing, while Matt walked over and shook hands.

"Hi, Aaron," Aiko replied, grinning at the expressions on the faces of her companions. She looked around for a moment, then back to him. "Still pretty impressive."

"It's not bad," he chuckled, following her gaze. He watched as Shampoo headed for a collection of swords neatly stored in racks on one wall, inspecting them closely, before turning to him.

"May touch?" she enquired, pointing to one specific one. He grinned and nodded.

"Help yourself," the arms-master replied. She smiled back, carefully lifting the sheathed two-handed jian from the rack, then removed the sheath with a practised gesture, handing it to Akane, who stepped back out of range of the more than a yard long blade. This weapon, unlike many of the others, was real and razor-sharp. The Amazon warrior held the sword up, studying the blade for a moment, before falling into a combat stance and beginning an advanced training exercise with it, slowly at first, but steadily speeding up. Everyone watched, Akane with great interest, Aiko with
an experts eye, and the others with expressions ranging from impressed to worried. Adrian was the worried one, the noise the blade made as it ripped through the air was a little intimidating especially in such close quarters.

"Good grief," he muttered, watching the young woman move gracefully about wielding the heavy blade like it weighed nothing, her long hair swaying too and fro as she moved. Beside him, Aiko laughed slightly.

"She's pretty impressive, isn't she?" the brunette asked rhetorically. He nodded wordlessly. Finishing the exercise Shampoo stopped dead, glanced at Akane with her hand out, caught the sheath her friend tossed her and in one smooth motion flipped the blade in her other hand end for end and slid it back into the sheath without touching it. Akane and Aiko both clapped, laughing, while Shampoo bowed to them with a grin, then turned to put the weapon back on its rack. Aaron whistled quietly and shook his head in respect.

"Damn good, Shampoo. I'm amazed." She smiled at him not looking even slightly tired.

"Thanks, Aaron. Basic exercise, too showy for combat, but good for keeping reflexes in shape." She glanced at Adrian who was exchanging a look with Matt. "Showy good for movie?"

"Oh, yes, I think showy is very much what people will like," Matt replied after a moment, looking amused. He grinned at her, making her grin back. "Today is going to be a lot of fun."

Aaron turned back to his desk, looking down at the stripped down MP5 lying there. "I'll just put this back together and lock it away then I'll be ready," he said. Aiko walked over beside him, also looking at the weapon.

"Heckler and Koch MP5A2 9mm submachine gun," she said after a moment, picking up the barrel and looking closely at it. "Modified for blank firing only."

He inspected her for a moment, looking slightly surprised. "Yes, exactly right," the man replied. "I wouldn't have expected you to know so much about firearms. As far as I know Japan is very restrictive in which ones people there can own. I know the penalties for firearm-related crime are very harsh."

She nodded, smiling slightly, putting the barrel back on the workbench. "Oh, yes, very much so. We've got possibly the strictest laws in the world covering guns, in fact, although the UK is a close second. Even the police don't use them unless they absolutely have to although they carry them. But, that said, I've been around. I know quite a bit about all sorts of things you wouldn't normally expect, aside from the magic." Her smile widened. "Yori has had all of us learn even more things as well. You wouldn't believe some of the things she knows about." Gesturing to the desk, she asked, "Do you mind if I have a go? I haven't disassembled or reassembled one of these things in a while, it's good practice."

Everyone watched her, then Aaron stepped back, looking interested. "Be my guest," he replied. "Try not to break it, I only just replaced the firing pin after some actor bent the damn thing. No idea how."

Looking amused, she sat at the desk while everyone else came closer to watch. Picking up a couple of parts she studied them for a moment. "Hmm. OK, this is the clicky bit and this is the bangy bit, I think," she mumbled, before giggling as he sighed. Putting them down she rearranged the parts on the desk for a few seconds until she seemed satisfied with the order they were in. "Right. Let's see..."
Everyone gaped as her hands blurred. There was an almost continuous metallic clicking sound as the firearm grew out of the pile of parts in her hands, until they stopped moving an implausibly short time later, like a weird sort of time lapse animation. Picking up a small screwdriver she reattached the rear sight, then put the completely reassembled weapon down and cracked her knuckles, grinning. "Five and a half seconds. I'm out of practice," she announced, standing up and reaching out to close his open mouth gently. "Thanks."

After a long moment he shook his head, transferring his gaze to her. "You..." He shook his head again, beginning to grin as well. "You people are just insane."

"Oh, sure, but we're also quite nice," Aiko laughed. Clapping her on the shoulder he laughed as well, picked the weapon off the desk and checked it over carefully, then went off to lock it in the relevant cage, still chuckling to himself. When he returned they left the armoury, soon finding themselves in the main office complex attached to the studio complex. Adrian lead the group up to the fifth floor conference room which had been set aside for their meetings over the next couple of days, opening the door and waving everyone inside. He put his briefcase on the table, Matt doing the same with the one he was carrying, then looked at the guests.

"Anyone want coffee? Tea? Anything like that?"

"Coffee would be nice, thanks," Akane told him.

"Also think so," Shampoo added, looking out the window at the end of the room for a moment, then turning back to him. Aiko smiled when he looked enquiringly at her, nodding.

"OK. Matt, could you arrange that, please?" he requested his colleague. The stunt director smiled, nodded, and left the room. "Find a seat and sit down, guys, the others should be here soon," he added, sitting down himself at one end of the table. By the time Matt came back everyone was seated. He took his place next to Aaron.

"The coffee and some snacks are on the way," the ex-military man noted, opening his briefcase and removing a folder, then putting the case on the floor next to him having closed it.

"Thanks, Matt." They all looked up as Jim came into the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Sorry I'm late, traffic is terrible," the new arrival said apologetically, also sitting down. "Hi, Akane, Shampoo, Aiko. Did you all have a good night after the restaurant?"

Aiko leaned back in her chair and looked amused for a moment. "It had some fun parts, yes, thanks," she replied, sounding satisfied. He looked curiously at her but when she didn't expand on the comment simply grinned and turned his attention to the other two.

Akane laughed, glancing at Aiko, clearly also curious but not asking. "It was fine, thanks, Jim. Adrian showed us around for a little longer then we went back to the hotel, which is really nice. Shampoo swam for a while, I tried not to drown, then we had a good night's sleep."

Chuckling, Shampoo added, "Akane not try too hard not to drown. Had to pull her out six times." This caused Aiko to begin laughing quietly to herself, which Akane seemed to take in good spirits. The Chinese Amazon snapped her fingers, reaching for her bag and removing a DVD in a case. "While remember, here copy of... fun with demons... in Minato recently." She grinned, sliding it across the table to Adrian, who picked it up and looked curiously at it. Pointing at the DVD player built into the wall under a ceiling mounted projector, she added, "Could watch now. Set mood."
Shaking his head in amusement, Adrian commented, "We'll wait for the others, I think, they'll want to see it as well." She nodded, so he put it down then pulled out his own paperwork, putting his case on the floor as well, then flipped the top of the three folders open and glanced at the itinerary on the first page, making a couple of quick notes in the margin as he through of a few things he wanted to change. Matt was reading through his own folder, talking quietly to Aaron, who was studying one of the pages his colleague had handed to him.

"OK, before the others get here, you two, I'll tell you a little about them." He glanced at his watch to make sure he had time. "Mitch is a decent guy but a little... how shall I put this... a little behind the times in his attitude to women in the industry." He held up his hand in an apologetic gesture while the young women listened intently. "Not in a bad way, not really, he doesn't even realise he's doing it most of the time. But he's over sixty, he's been in the industry his entire working life, and when he started women weren't taken as seriously as they deserved especially in the stunt area. They still aren't, unfortunately, although it's got a lot better. That sort of history is hard to overcome. He tries, when he realises, but please try not to get too annoyed if he's a little... patronising."

Matt chuckled for a moment, causing their attention to shift to him. "I strongly suspect that when he sees what you're capable of his attitude will change quite fast, if only out of self-preservation."

Aaron nodded soberly from beside him as they laughed. "Adrian's right, Mitch is a good guy, but he can certainly come off at first as a bit of a chauvinist. Unfortunately that's pretty common in the movie industry, like a lot of others. Give him the benefit of the doubt because he isn't deliberately trying to be like that, he can't really help it."

"He'd be somewhat horrified if he knew how it looks to people sometimes," Jim added quietly. "Most people don't want to tell him though because he's pretty damn high in the corporate structure. They're a little scared of what he'd do. Probably needlessly."

Akane glanced at Shampoo and said something to her in Japanese, causing the Amazon to smile, nod, then say something back, rolling her eyes. Beside her, Aiko snickered but didn't add anything. Turning back to them Akane said, "We'll be on our best behaviour, Adrian. We're not unfamiliar with that sort of thing, it's pretty common in Japan, I'm afraid."

"In our culture, historically, women have been of the seen, not heard, variety, at least publicly," Aiko noted, looking mildly amused. "Although in a lot of cases it's the wife who really runs the family. Tamiko's mother is a good example of that. So is Nodoka in many ways." She shrugged. "It's not like that in Minato, for fairly obvious reasons, or Nerima for the most part, but you certainly encounter it in other places that aren't used to women with... unusual abilities."

"I can sure imagine that the 'know your place, woman!' types probably wouldn't survive first contact with a magical girl or female martial artist," Matt snickered. The almost identically dark grins that came across the faces of the three women on the other side of the table made him laugh quite a lot.

"Not so much, no," Aiko laughed.

Watching, Adrian shook his head, glancing at Jim, who was listening with amusement and interest. His colleague returned the look, raising one eyebrow for a moment, then went back to listening. "Right, anyway, other than that, Mitch is a good and intelligent executive who makes some pretty sensible decisions. He can be a little cautious but once you've convinced him he'll pull out all the stops. It offsets some of the other executives who can be... difficult." He sighed as his colleagues all nodded at once. "Luckily in this case we don't have to deal with them very much at the moment. Now, Jennifer is a bit different. She's younger, very smart, and very good at her job, but also very
by the book. She's going to be a little awkward I think since we're going to be asking her to change the normal rules quite a lot on what's allowed."

"I've been talking to her since your last visit," Jim told them, "softening her up, if you want to put it that way. But she's going to have to see it for herself before she'll really believe it."

"She kicked back a bit about the salary I suggested," Adrian went on when his friend finished, "but I think once she sees the demos she'll give in pretty quickly. Mitch will be easy to convince from that point. The studio has a lot of money and he'll see it's a fantastic investment very quickly, more than worth it from everyone's point of view. The fact that you're both female will help with Jennifer, she's also very keen on getting more women into the industry."

"So we need to impress them both," Akane stated, nodding. She glanced at Shampoo, then Aiko, who was still smiling slightly. "I think we can manage."

Roaring with laughter at her dry tone, Adrian nodded. "I don't doubt it." He looked at his colleagues for a moment. "Perhaps we should make a bet with them both?" The somewhat unfriendly looks he received from Matt and Adrian made him laugh even more for a few seconds. When he calmed down, he continued, "Anton, the executive producer, is also a decent guy. He's quite enthusiastic about the whole thing. He's always had a soft spot for martial arts movies and has said a few times in the last couple of years we should do one, but there haven't been any good scripts we've seen for some time. Most of the decent ones seem to come out of Hong Kong these days. He'd love to do a good American one if possible."

"Part of the problem is that action movies in the US almost always end up being about how big an explosion can you make and how many gun fights can you throw in," Matt said, looking somewhat annoyed. "I've been in real combat, I know how damn unrealistic most of them are, but it sells. More and more CGI is needed these days, it's almost becoming a matter of who has the best computers. The story seems to be an afterthought in a lot of cases. Be nice to buck the trend."

"I've heard on the radio that there's talk of some new stealth project for a martial arts movie by a studio that's being very quiet about it," Aiko laughed, making Jim and Adrian look hard at her, then exchange glances. "One with, how did they put it, 'previously unknown female talent' in it." She seemed to find the subject very funny.

"Hmm. Yes, that's a rumour that's been going around for a few months now," Adrian mused out loud, inspecting her closely. "Oddly enough, since about the time you and the others turned up around the holidays."

"There's a very annoying teenager who keeps turning up asking about what it's called and when it's going to be out," the director went on, sighing, still looking at her. She smirked. "He's going around all the studios making a damn nuisance of himself, he keeps appearing where he shouldn't be. Security is going nuts trying to keep him out." The magical girl began giggling. After a few seconds he shook his head with a small sigh, returning his attention to Akane and Shampoo who were looking slightly confused. "Anyway, those are the three executives you'll meet today. There will also be a camera crew, some other stunt people, that sort of thing, but those three are the ones you need to show your stuff to at the moment." He looked up as one of the PAs came in with a tray of coffee and another one of small sandwiches on a trolley, parking it next to the table. "Thanks, Beth. Have Mitch and Jennifer come in yet?"

"Yes, they're downstairs, they should be here in a couple of minutes," the short blonde told him.
"OK. Send them in when they come up will you, please?" She nodded, leaving the room again. "Help yourselves to sandwiches," he told the room at large, pouring coffee for the three women first and handing it across the table. Aiko took hers, then went and stood by the window watching the people working in the lot below, sipping the drink. Shortly everyone had a drink and a sandwich.

Finishing her ham and cheese sandwich, which was surprisingly good, Akane twitched a little as the conference room door opened again, two people entering, a very expensively dressed tall man in his sixties with grey hair and a short beard, and a somewhat shorter yet still quite tall woman of obvious Chinese ancestry mixed with something from much further south, probably West African. She was very good looking but somewhat severe in appearance, wearing a nice suit that gave off an effect of authority. Feeling slightly intimidated for a moment, Akane suddenly thought, *She's nowhere near as worrying as Ms Aoyama so how bad can she be?* The thought made her smile internally. After *that* particular woman, this one should be pretty easy to deal with. If nothing else she didn't make you feel like your coffee was about to freeze solid.

"Ah, hello, Adrian," the man, Mitch, said expansively, looking around the room with avuncular good humour. "Everyone seems to be here except Anton." He nodded to Matt, Aaron, and Jim, who greeted him.

"He'll be here in about forty-five minutes according to his latest text," the director replied, glancing at his watch. "He's through security and was getting into the car five minutes ago."

"Good, good," the COO said, looking at the coffee-pot with interest. Matt poured him a cup and handed it to him, then did the same with the HR director, who thanked him in a quiet voice, studying Akane and Shampoo carefully, after a quick glance at Aiko who was still by the window. "And these lovely ladies must be the prospective new talent, I assume," he added once he'd put his cup down. Walking around the table he held out his hand. Akane stood, as did Shampoo, both of them shaking it in turn, Adrian making the introductions. "Good grip," he commented with a smile. "Especially for a woman."

The youngest Tendo sister glanced at Adrian, who she could see was holding in a slight sigh, while Jennifer had definitely rolled her eyes but said nothing. "Thank you, Mr Lloyd," she replied, trying not to become annoyed. She could see why Adrian had warned them.

"Oh, call me Mitch, please," the man said, looking them up and down for a few seconds, then returning to the head of the table, Adrian making way for him without a word, moving to the side they were sitting on and taking his seat. "Now, I've heard some remarkable things from Adrian and the other guys, all about a demonstration you did for them. Please don't be offended if I say I'm still a little sceptical about it all, what they told me sounds somewhat fantastic."

"If not impossible," Jennifer muttered. He didn't seem to hear.

"But I'm more than willing to be convinced," he went on. "You clearly impressed them a lot, which I know isn't easy at least in the case of Aaron and Matt. Adrian can be a little overenthusiastic at times." He looked at the director, who smiled back, although Akane could tell he was mildly irritated.

"They're everything I told you and then some," Adrian said evenly. He glanced at Matt, then Aaron, before his smile turned slightly evil. "In fact, I'll bet you... two thousand dollars, say... that less than an hour of demonstrations will make you believe everything I told you." The stunt director and the armourer both developed completely blank expressions, saying nothing. Akane could have sworn she heard a faint snicker come from Aiko but when she looked the woman was
still staring out the window, her own face expressionless.

"Ah, Adrian, Adrian, are you sure you want to make a bet like that? It seems easy money to me. Some of the things you've said are hard to believe." Mitch smiled at his director. "I wouldn't want you to feel I was taking advantage of you."

"Oh, I think I could live with it," Adrian chuckled. "Let's raise it to three thousand."

"All right," the other man agreed. He glanced at the woman beside him, who simply shrugged.

"It's your money, Mitch," she said, still inspecting Akane and her friend.

"Indeed, indeed. All right, so you've been over all the preliminaries with the young ladies?" Adrian nodded, pulling the waivers out of one of his folders and sliding them across to Mitch, who glanced at them then passed them on to Jennifer. The woman read both of them carefully before slipping them into a folder of her own.

"It seems in order," she announced.

"Good. Well, what's the first step, Adrian?" Mitch looked at both young women again. "This is your show, we're just here to see it."

"We're going to do the martial arts demonstration in Stage Three, we've got some props and equipment set up there, similar to what Jim and his friend Richard arranged when Akane and Shampoo came over the first time. Aiko suggested a few other things she thought might make things more interesting." He motioned to the brunette woman by the window, who turned around and leaned on it, smiling.

"Hopefully it should be worth watching," she said casually. Adrian smiled a little while Matt, Aaron, and Jim all chuckled. Mitch looked at them for a second, seemingly slightly taken aback, then moved on.

"That sounds good," he replied.

"It will take us through up to lunch, I think," Adrian continued. "After that, we're going to begin the special training, beginning with the vehicle handling. We're going to start at the vehicle depot car park with Greg then move onto the skid pan later." Both executives nodded. The director turned to Akane and Shampoo, explaining, "Greg Crossley is our driving expert and lead vehicle stunt man, he used to race Indy car, then stock cars off road. Brilliant driver and a damn good instructor." They both nodded, glancing at each other.

"When they've got some time behind the wheel, Aaron is going to take them through firearms training as well, or the basics of it, so they know which end to point at people, that sort of thing," he went on, grinning as Akane rolled her eyes and Shampoo laughed. Aaron looked amused.

"That'll take care of today. Tomorrow is going to be more driving training at the airfield for the more advanced stuff and anything else that we need for the four scenes we've got planned. We'll do action scene eighteen from the spy movie we were filming a few months ago, starting Wednesday. We've still got the sets in storage for that which will get put back in Stage One in the morning."

Mitch nodded, looking interested.

"That's the one with the running battle through the office building, correct?"

"Yes, it was a pain to shoot the first time, but we have a good idea of what we're looking for. It'll be very interesting to contrast it against what we shot for the actual movie. We'll run it twice, once each with Akane and Shampoo in each role, after some dry runs." Mitch nodded again, making
"Good, good, that sounds very sensible. What's next?"

"There's the car chase scene from the bank robbery film that we're considering, which we'll do at the airfield, we've got the old sets from a few other street scenes still up out there. We're going to use the same one for the running martial arts fight scene, which is one Aaron and Matt came up with, it's a mash-up of a few different Hong Kong movie scenes plus some stuff they thought up based on the first demo the young women did. It reads as impressive although not many people could pull it off without a lot of CGI." He grinned. Mitch made some more notes.

"May I see the scene notes?" Jennifer asked. Adrian passed her several stapled pages out of one of his folders, which she took and skimmed, then read one page more carefully.

"This is... potentially very dangerous," she said, raising an eyebrow. "Do you have a risk assessment for this scene?" She indicated one paragraph, looking mildly irritated. "We're going to need to set up a significant amount of safety equipment, which will pull people from other projects..." Adrian raised his hand, smiling, cutting her off.

"Don't worry, it's nowhere near as bad as you're thinking. Yes, normally, we'd use that equipment, but in this case it's overkill, trust me."

She looked very dubious. "I'm not entirely sure you understand the risks involved," she replied, shaking her head. "The liability should something go wrong would be significant, the waivers notwithstanding."

"Wait until after the demo," he told her. "Then rethink your objections, OK?"

After a moment she nodded, making some notes of her own, still not looking convinced. "I'm not going to sign off on it until I'm satisfied all the risks are understood," she cautioned, making him sigh faintly, then glance at the three women to one side and wink, making Aiko snicker and Akane hide a grin.

"That's fine, Jennifer," he said. She looked more or less satisfied, handing him the papers, which he put back in his folder, then continued. "The final scene is basically a classic western bar fight, but with swords rather than guns. It's nothing we're planning on using in any upcoming production although it should be a good test, and impressive. Anton suggested it. We're going to do that in Stage One as well."

"All right, that sounds very good." Mitch studied the notes he'd made, then looked up. "This is, what, about two days in total?"

"Should be. We'll be ready to start Wednesday morning so if everything goes to plan we should have the rushes ready by sometime later on Thursday. We're expecting about forty, maybe sixty minutes of raw footage of the final scenes." Adrian seemed satisfied, looking at Matt and Aaron, both of whom nodded. Jim was taking notes and listening carefully.

"If we have time I'd like to do the helicopter assault scene from that military action project we're considering," Matt added. "We've got everything available with a bit of creativity, including the chopper, I can get it here on short notice, the guy who flies it is a friend and he's up for doing me a favour. They're using it for a movie at Universal at the moment so it's close by, but they've shut down production for a week due to the lead coming down with food poisoning."

"Ah, interesting." Mitch seemed to like this idea. "All right, if there's time, that could be a good
way to round things off. It's all depending on the demonstration, of course, though." He smiled at Akane and Shampoo, apparently genuinely. The youngest Tendo smiled back.

"We're fairly sure we can show you something you'll like," she told him, feeling inwardly mildly worried yet still eager.

"I do hope so, Miss Tendo, I do hope so. I've been looking forward to this for some time."

"Once everyone here has seen the raw cut, we'll edit the best takes into something more professional which you can show to the board," Adrian said, adding in an aside to Akane and Shampoo, "I'll also give you a couple of DVDs of the footage, raw and edited. For your collection." Pleased, Akane smiled at him.

"I think we'd both like that, Adrian," she replied honestly.

"Would like to show to Great Grandmother," Shampoo laughed.

A few minutes later, after they'd gone over some more information which Akane, for one, couldn't really make heads or tails of, there was so much studio jargon involved, the door opened to admit a fairly short yet very energetic looking man in his late forties, with short red hair and piercing grey eyes behind stylish glasses, who looked quickly around then smiled. "Ah, Anton, you made it,"

Mitch exclaimed, standing and greeting his colleague.

"Finally, yes. I'm very sorry to have caused this delay," the man said with a trace of some European accent in his tenor voice, sighing a little, then perking up. "But I'm here now. What did I miss?"

"We were going over the plans for the next few days," Adrian told him, as he sat on the other side of the table, glancing at his co-workers, then studying the young women with lively interest. "This is Akane Tendo, and Xian Pu, or Shampoo as everyone tends to call her. And a friend and associate of theirs, Aiko, who's here for... backup and transportation reasons." The director grinned as Aiko chuckled.

"Very pleased to meet you all," Anton smiled, "I've heard some very interesting things from Adrian and the others. I'm looking forward to the next few days with great excitement."

"Thank you, Anton," Akane replied, nodding with a smile. "We're looking forward to it as well, although I'm still a bit nervous about it." She looked around. "All this is a bit more than I was expecting."

"Don't worry about it," he laughed, "we always go over the top. That's more or less normal operating procedure around here. The whole place is total chaos at the best of times." Mitch looked at him, making him grin. "What are you looking at me like that for, Mitch, you know what it's like. Everyone here is crazy. They wouldn't be working in the industry if they were normal."

Sighing slightly the executive eventually looked away from his colleague, conceding the point, which made everyone else other than Jennifer, who was still making notes, smile. "I suppose that's not entirely wrong," he admitted.

They went back over the material they'd covered earlier quickly to bring the late arrival up to speed. Reading the last of the notes from both Mitch and Jim, Anton seemed pleased, handing the papers back to their respective owners. "Great. It looks like we're going to have an interesting few days. Adrian, do you mind if I watch the stunt scenes?"

"Not at all," the director replied. "Please feel free to join us at any point."
"Thanks."

"I won't be able to see anything other than this demonstration, I'm afraid," Mitch said, shaking his head, "We have a board meeting, then tomorrow I have to fly out to Vancouver for a couple of days, but I'll be back mid-day Thursday at the latest."

"Not a problem, Mitch," Adrian responded. He looked at his watch. "Well, everything should be ready by now. Let's get down to Stage three and make a start, shall we?" He had a sudden thought, though, picking up the DVD case Shampoo had given him. "Oh, before we do that, Shampoo brought some footage of her own that she thought we might like. We should watch that first, it's not very long, is it, Shampoo?"

The young woman shook her head. "About five, ten minutes at most." She grimaced a little. "Seemed longer at time, believe me. But over fairly quickly."

Getting up he walked over to the AV equipment built into the wall, pressing the switch that made a hidden screen descend from a slot in the ceiling to cover the window, producing a faint hum, then loaded the DVD into the machine. Turning on the projector mounted on the ceiling he picked up the remote control and returned to the table and his seat. Thirty seconds later the machinery had warmed up and was illuminating the screen with a high resolution logo. "OK, let's see what you get up to in your spare time," he chuckled, making Shampoo groan a little while Aiko and Akane burst out laughing. He pressed play.

The recorded news program began showing, a brief introduction from a studio anchor giving way to what they all recognised as the young woman on the other side of the table, with three young women off to one side watching as she jumped around, a much younger one in an elaborate pink dress standing beside them holding a long staff with a glowing blue gem the size of an apple mounted on the end of it in her hands. It was a fairly normal looking street scene, somewhere in Tokyo judging by the Kanji text on all the signs, but the dozens of little monsters running around and growling were anything but normal.

"Holy fuck," Matt whispered in awe. "The teeth!"

"What the hell are those things?" Jim yelped in shock. Aiko sighed heavily.

"Very annoying little demons that are in some way associated with that little girl in the pink dress. Chiyoko, she's called. Nice girl, but... not a good shot." They watched as a sparkling beam of some sort of energy shot from the gem on the end of the staff the young girl was wielding as she levelled it in the general direction of one of the little creatures, missing it completely and coming perilously close to Shampoo, who squawked in alarm and dived out of the way.

The recorded Amazon stood up again, stared at the large hole in the side of the car that was only a metre from where she'd been standing, then turned to glare at the girl, who looked embarrassed and apparently mumbled something. Giving her another evil look the older woman went back to the fight, kicking one of the little demons clear across the street and through a shop window, both the window and the demon exploding into bits in the process. Adrian gaped, Jennifer made a faint disgusted noise, Aaron swore to himself, and everyone else watched in amazement.

Akane noted with idle amusement that Aiko was watching the video with approval and a very analytical expression, making her wonder if she was critiquing the Chinese woman's performance. The thought made her grin for a moment.

On the screen the girl fired another magical beam of destruction that once more missed the target, assuming one defined the target as the small demon chewing on a lamp post. If, on the other hand,
one assumed the target was the completely innocent and uninvolved mailbox a couple of metres behind Shampoo, her aim was dead on, as half of it vanished with a screech. Shampoo made a remarkably similar sound and dived at the girl, wrenching the staff from her grasp, which she didn't appreciate at all judging by the yelling, fiddled with it for a moment, then swore and proceeded to use it to mulch a large number of demons over the next few minutes.

Eventually finishing off the last one, she returned the staff to the girl, who seemed to be having some digestive distress based on the amount of vomiting involved, then talked with the other three women for a while. The segment ended with all four of them walking off together a little later, the young girl leaving in a different direction, then returned to the studio where the anchor talked for a moment before going to a different story, at which point the recording ended. Pressing stop Adrian simply stared at the logo that came up for several seconds before turning to look at Shampoo along with everyone else in the room. Most of them were apparently having some difficulty with what they'd seen, Akane noticed, hiding a grin.

"What..." The director shook his head for a moment then tried again. "Ah, all right, thank you Shampoo, that was very... interesting." He looked at Mitch who had an odd expression on his face. "Does that sort of thing happen a lot in Minato?"

"Think so," the young woman replied agreeably, glancing at Aiko, who sighed a little, smiling slightly. "First time I ever got involved. Would prefer not to again. Little demons bite."

"They do indeed. They'll eat anything, you really don't want one latching on to your leg if you can avoid it," the brunette confirmed, making several people shudder at the thought. "Those particular ones aren't all that common although they certainly turn up more than we'd like. But there's quite often something interesting going on at home." She grinned at their looks, jumping to her feet and retrieving the DVD which she handed to Adrian in its case. "Come on, let's see what Akane and Shampoo can do, all right? I'm looking forward to it." The director took it from her slightly numbly, looked blankly at the thing, then shook his head hard before putting it into his case.

"Yes, you're right. Good idea." He looked at the Amazon, who returned his gaze with an amused look, then shook his head again. "Let's go." He rose and headed to the door. Everyone stood up, as Matt held the door open, collected their papers, and followed the director. Akane, Aiko, and Shampoo brought up the rear accompanied by Jim, who grabbed the last sandwich on the way out of the room, making the magical girl look at him and grin.

"Just like Misaki, she'd never leave a sandwich behind either." He snickered, eating it with enjoyment.

"They're not bad and I didn't have any breakfast," he told her, finishing it off quickly. She laughed for a moment.

"Adrian, we need to stop to change into our practice clothing," Akane called. Adrian turned around, walking backwards for a moment.

"There are some facilities for that in the studio, Akane," he told her. The Tendo sister nodded and kept following as he turn around again.

After a five minute walk they arrived at the door to another cavernous building, large enough to have contained the entire Tendo Dojo and grounds and some fifteen metres high inside. There were half a dozen men putting the finishing touches on a fairly elaborate set of equipment, which made Akane stop and stare, then slowly smile. Shampoo looked as well, nudging her with a grin. "They went all out, didn't they?" she whispered in Japanese. Akane nodded.
"Not bad at all," Aiko said, smiling. She moved over to the first prop, which was a wooden pole like the one that Richard and Jim had installed in the policeman's garden, set into an oil drum full of concrete to hold it upright. "Think it will stand up to you, Akane?"

The Tendo sister came over and looked at it carefully, experimentally pushing it. "It should do for a while at least," she replied. "Assuming it doesn't tip over."

"There's nearly half a ton of concrete in that drum," one of the men who was working nearby said, overhearing them and looking mildly puzzled. "It's not likely to fall over." She glanced at him, then Aiko, before turning away, both of them smirking slightly. He watched them go back to the others then shrugged, going back to his work. Shortly he and his colleagues finished, had a brief conversation with Aaron, then left, closing the main door in the process.

"So, Adrian, explain what we're looking at," Mitch requested, inspecting the various props scattered around the huge empty building with interest. The entire room was lit brilliantly with high intensity lamps in the ceiling, nearly as brightly as the day outside.

"OK." The director pointed at the wooden pole set into the drum of concrete. "That's half a telephone pole, for the strength training demonstration. That pile of concrete blocks next to it is for the same idea, as is the pile of two inch boards on the other side." He indicated a series of prefabricated heavy-duty fence panels that had been set up in a sort of a maze covering a thirty metre square area. "Those are for running around on." With a glance at Shampoo, he added, "We have a bicycle available, if you want." She grinned while Mitch looked somewhat puzzled.

"On that side, we have a number of very large crates set up to emulate buildings," he continued, turning to the left and pointing again. "Anything from ten to thirty feet, which is as tall as we could get in here and still leave room under the ceiling. That gantry at the back is the viewing platform so we can see the tops of them. That other one to the right of it in the corner is for the camera crew." He waved to the five or six people who were standing on that particular gantry adjusting a pair of elaborate tripod-mounted HDCAM camera rigs, one of them waving back to him. "We're recording this high def tape, we'll do the stunt shoots on both tape and film."

"In the middle we've set up an arena for hand to hand combat." He turned to the right. "Finally, on that side there's a number of archery targets set up. Shampoo, I found a compound bow like Serena's one, only a lot more powerful, along with a large number of arrows. Will that do?" He smiled a little nervously. "I thought that monster Aiko gave you last time might be a little excessive in here, if you missed it would go right through the wall of the building."

The Amazon drew herself up. "Miss? What you think I am, amateur?" He laughed as she grinned.

"Not at all, obviously."

"Sounds good," she added, nodding.

"Aaron has provided a bo staff each and a bokken as well," he finished, looking at both young women. "Can you think of anything I've missed?" Akane shared a glance with her friend.

"I can't think of anything major," she admitted. "We can do more or less what we did at Richard's house but more of it. Is that what you want?"

"Pretty much, yes. Anything you can think of that won't wreck the place," he laughed. "Make it impressive."

"Could use real sword," Shampoo mused. Aiko handed her the same one she'd provided during the
first demo without a word, making her smile and nod, then inspect it, while Mitch, Anton, and Jennifer looked puzzled.

"Where did that come from?" Mitch muttered. Anton shrugged but looked interested.

"Thanks, Aiko."

"Would you like me to do the same thing I did last time?" the brunette enquired. Akane looked at Shampoo, who nodded, then Adrian, who shrugged with a smile.

"I don't mind," he chuckled. "Although we may want to hire you as well." The magical girl laughed for a moment.

"Sorry, like I've said, too many other things to do. But I don't mind helping."

"That would be great, Aiko, thanks," Akane told her, feeling slightly relieved. She thought it was probably a good idea to have someone they trusted to run the demo and Aiko had done a superb job on the previous occasion. That meant both of them could simply concentrate on the job at hand and not worry about the actual sequencing.

"Thanks," Shampoo added. She gave the sword back. "Will ask for it when need it."

"All right, then, why don't we go over to the observation area and let the ladies get ready, Mitch," Adrian commented, turning to the studio executives. "Akane, Shampoo, if you go through that door over there in the left corner you'll find a place you can change, OK?" Both young women nodded, as did the COO, who was still looking around with a certain air of puzzlement, but followed the director as he headed to the rear of the building some seventy metres away, Jennifer beside him. Anton watched them before turning to Akane and Shampoo.

"I'm looking forward to this," he confided, smiling widely at both of them. "Unlike Mitch, I think Adrian is telling the truth. Don't disappoint me, OK?" Akane grinned back at him.

"We'll try not to, sir," she replied. Laughing to himself, he nodded to her with a grin then went after the others. Matt, Aaron, and Jim nodded to the three women then followed. They watched as most of the studio people ascended the stairs of the gantry to the platform at the top, standing in a line along the railing which gave them a view from about half way up the wall. Adrian went over to the camera crew first and talked to them for a few minutes before joining his colleagues. When they were in place, Aiko turned to the Tendo sister and the Amazon.

"So, what do you want to do first?" she asked. "Same as last time, or open with some sparring first?" The other two exchanged a glance, thinking.

Eventually, Akane replied, "Why don't we start with some sparring between Shampoo and me, then maybe end with the both of us against you?" She looked mildly worried, yet interested. "You mentioned doing that last time but we never got around to it."

Aiko smiled. "Sure, I'd like to try that. OK, then, we'll start with some sparring, do a little staff work and kendo, then you can show off some roof-hopping and fence running. Shampoo, can you shoot at the targets while on a bicycle?"

The Chinese girl looked surprised, then thoughtful, before grinning.

"I'm certainly willing to try," she giggled. "It'll look amazing if I can pull it off."

Nodding, Aiko grinned. "That it will. Which is the whole point." She looked over at the people
watching. "If you want I can shoot at you a bit to give you an incentive to really get moving."

Akane felt worried, glancing at Shampoo, who was looking at the magical girl with raised eyebrows. "Um... I'm not sure..."

Prodding her on the shoulder, Aiko snickered. "Don't worry, I'm joking." Akane sighed in relief. "Probably..." There was a long pause, before she added, "I do think you need to show off some fairly serious stuff as far as Jennifer is concerned, it should make her realise that you can take it so she's not so worried about liabilities."

"OK. We'll just go and change, back in a minute." The youngest Tendo headed for the door Adrian had pointed out with Shampoo beside her, returning a couple of minutes later having changed into her gi and going to the area in the middle of the huge room that had been marked out on the concrete floor with black and yellow tape in a circle some fifteen metres in diameter. She moved to the middle of it and turned in place, looking around, before nodding. "This should do nicely," she muttered. Shampoo, standing beside her, nodded as well.

"Let's keep it inside the circle to start with, it's good training," the Amazon commented.

"Sounds like a plan. Right, you two, take your places, get ready, and give them a good show."
Aiko stepped back, grinning at them, as they smiled at her, then moved to face each other from two metres apart. "Forget about the cameras, just ignore them completely. Don't think about the people watching either, just concentrate on doing what you both do well, all right?" Both the young women nodded, wearing similar small smiles of anticipation. Akane could feel her worry subsiding as she found herself in a familiar position despite the unfamiliar environment, excitement building as it always did before sparring, especially with Shampoo. She could see in the other woman's eyes she felt the same.

"OK. Get ready. And... Begin!" The command came in a sharp voice, both the women blurring into action.

Watching the three young women talk quietly amongst themselves for a couple of minutes, apparently deciding how they were going to arrange the demonstration, Adrian smiled to himself. He had a good feeling about this. Glancing at his colleagues, he met Jim's eyes, the other man appearing amused, then looked past him to Aaron and Matt. Both of them were watching Akane and Shampoo intently, obviously not wanting to miss anything. He felt they were probably even more interested now than they had been at the initial demo, since they knew more or less what to expect and were able to appreciate it better.

He was glad that Aiko had ended up staying to help, he thought it was likely that the magical girl would not only referee the event very competently but most likely bring out the best in both the others, who clearly held the brunette in high esteem and some awe. Which, to be honest, was entirely understandable in his opinion.

Looking to the other side he studied Mitch for a moment, then Jennifer and Anton. All three of them were watching the women below them with interest but in different ways. Mitch was standing with his hands on the railing of the gantry, studying all three girls with a neutral expression that he knew showed hidden interest, not letting anyone else know his true feelings, or so the COO would like to believe. In fact, for those that knew him well, it was obvious that he was extremely curious to find out what would happen.

Anton, on the other hand, wasn't hiding his interest at all, leaning casually on the railing and looking like a small boy expecting something fun to emerge from a present he'd been given on his
birthday. Adrian smiled to himself. The executive producer's liking for martial arts movies was well known, which played neatly into his own plans. It hadn't taken much to get the other man very enthusiastic about the whole idea, especially with Matt, Aaron, and Jim all backing up his tales of what these young woman had pulled off at their first meeting.

Glancing at Jennifer, he suppressed a very small sigh. 'She might be a problem,' he thought, a little worried. Even though Hollywood was shamefully under-represented by women, sometimes the ones that were there, who were almost invariably extremely talented in his experience, seemed to somehow resent other females entering their domain. He had no idea why but he'd definitely seen it on a number of occasions. It certainly wasn't all of them, or even a majority, but it happened often enough that he was slightly concerned.

The fact that both Akane and Shampoo were young, very attractive, insanely talented, and smart might almost work against them in that scenario. He hoped not but wouldn't be entirely surprised if it happened.

Adrian wasn't sure if Jennifer would react like that but he had noticed that she was acting more aloof than normal, which was slightly worrying, standing with her arms folded and just looking at them. She was a somewhat unemotional person at the best of times, but right now she was watching with an expression somewhere between mild indifference and slight distaste for whatever reason. Add to that her tendency to be very inflexible where the HR rulebook was concerned and it might become necessary to appeal to a higher authority, in other words Mitch. The executive could certainly over-rule her if she dug her heels in, which the director was fervently hoping wouldn't be the case, but the question really was whether, under those circumstances, he would.

Shaking his head very slightly and not allowing his thoughts to cross his face he turned his attention back to the women in the middle of the room. His ruminations had only occupied him for a handful of seconds but during that time Akane and Shampoo had apparently reached a consensus on their next action, Aiko stepping back with an anticipatory grin on her face to a point near the edge of the marked circle, then commanding "Begin!" in a hard voice that would have had any military recruit snapping to attention on the spot.

The instant that she spoke, both the Japanese woman and the Chinese Amazon moved towards each other so fast the observers on the gantry could barely follow the movement. Adrian watched with satisfaction, grinning to himself when he heard Mitch utter an obscenity under his breath in shock. He could virtually feel Anton's glee as they watched. Even Jennifer, when he looked sideways for a moment, was gaping in amazement, her expression one of stunned awe. Quickly looking over to his left he saw that the camera crew seemed to be on the ball, focussing on the action, although they all looked amazed as well. Luckily they were very professional and their instincts overrode their surprise. Adrian returned his attention to the women below, pleased.

Jumping a good six feet straight up after an initial exchange of dozens of blows, Akane did a perfect split as Shampoo dived through where she'd been, before twisting in the air and aiming a kick at the lilac-haired woman's back, which the other fighter avoided with an adroit twist. Catching one heel Shampoo flipped her friend through two complete somersaults to land almost on her face, putting her hands out just in time and propelling herself back again onto her feet. Anton audibly giggled with joy at the move.

Looking amused yet determined, Shampoo moved in for the kill, striking out in a flurry of punches, almost all of which Akane managed to avoid, although half a dozen landed, the impacts rocking her as the Amazon's fists walked up her ribcage in less than a second. Recovering and deflecting a second round of punches while everyone on the gantry winced at the sound of the rapid yet obviously extremely powerful punches, the youngest Tendo leaned away and spun into a
combination of a low sweep that caught the other woman's ankles, staggering her before she could react, then as her other foot came around when the first one landed on the ground as a pivot, she dipped her torso nearly to the floor and brought her foot up to intersect Shampoo's head with a loud thud.

Adrian winced again, that had sounded impressively lethal. Beside him, Matt made a small noise and when he looked, had wide eyes and a somewhat shocked expression. The director looked back in time to see the Chinese woman flip backwards onto her hands, then tuck into a roll, apparently uninjured, although she stayed out of reach for a moment while she recovered.

"Holy shit," Mitch muttered from his other side, his voice faint. Again, Adrian kept his grin hidden.

The two women circled each other warily ten feet apart while Aiko kept a close watch, then re-engaged in another round of strikes almost to fast to see. This time, Shampoo gained the upper hand, somehow managing to bend around another kick and redirect it in such a way that Akane spun like a top before falling over, looking dizzy. Aiko laughed out loud and Shampoo grinned.

"Hey, that's Dad's move," Akane growled when she could stand again, her friend graciously allowing her the time to recover. Shampoo snickered.

"Soun gave permission to use. You just slower learning it."

Akane looked at the other woman with narrowed eyes, then stepped forward again into another stance. "Fair enough. Try this on for size." Studying her briefly, Shampoo laughed.

"Great-grandmother teach you well. But I know too." They moved together, yet another series of lightning-fast moves resulting in both of them rolling apart, then charging back into the fight. Adrian could see that they were obviously thoroughly enjoying themselves, their audience no longer relevant. Aiko looked up at him and grinned, making him nod back with a smile, before going back to watching the match.

The spar went on for about ten more minutes, cycling through at least four distinct styles that Adrian could see, although he suspected that there were subtleties of the art that he was missing. Matt and Aaron both seemed absolutely fascinated by the sight. Eventually, Aiko stepped forward and snapped "Cease!", both women freezing into immobility instantly, before relaxing and bowing to each other, then turning to face the magical girl.

"All right. Very good, both of you. You're definitely better than you were, Akane, by a significant amount. I'm impressed and pleased. You've improved as well, Shampoo, some of those moves are really good." Aiko grinned in a way that made even the observers up on the gantry suddenly shiver. "Let's see how you both do against me now, OK?"

Akane looked at her, then at Shampoo, meeting the other woman's slightly worried expression with one of her own, before swallowing and nodding. 'Oh, shit, is this actually a good idea?' she wondered to herself, suddenly unsure she was up to really properly sparring with the magical girl. The time in the Dojo that had started all this off was still a vivid memory, as was the obvious fact that Aiko hadn't been trying all that hard at the time. She felt that this time might be a little different. Glancing at Shampoo she could see her friend was thinking along the same lines. Laughing a little, Aiko added, "Don't look so worried, this is just for fun." Her expression became less lethal-looking although neither of the other two were entirely reassured. Thinking for a moment, the brunette went on, "To make it more impressive, let's say that we don't have to stay in the circle, either."
"Um, all right," Akane replied, slightly puzzled. What was the woman up to? She was sure the brunette had something spectacular planned.

"Reset." They moved apart into their starting positions. Aiko moved to stand near one side of the marked area, equidistant from both the others. She looked over her shoulder at Adrian, smirked a little, which he responded to with a similar expression apparently having a fairly good idea that she was going to do something weird, then looked back at her opponents. Both of whom exchanged glances, then set themselves into an opening stance, ready for action, key to instant reaction. She paused, then again gave the command.

"Begin!"

Both women charged the brunette almost before she closed her mouth, moving even faster than they had been before, covering the twenty feet separating them in no more than a second or two. Jennifer made a small sound of disbelief, Anton choked out a gasp, while Mitch was completely silent. Just as they reached her, Aiko grinned and vanished in a flash of rainbow light, making everyone blink wildly. Jennifer yelped loudly, staring in shock. "What the *fuck...?" Mitch whispered, staring.

"Hey! No fair teleporting!" Akane sounded outraged, rubbing her eyes. The magical girl reappeared behind her from thin air, poking her in the back once, then stepping back as she collapsed with a yell of irritation. Giggling, Aiko ducked the viciously quick kick Shampoo threw at her without any effort, making it look almost casual, then moved to face the Amazon, who struck out again and again with incredibly rapid punches, apparently using that speed technique that Akane had demonstrated the first time. Each time the brunette moved just enough that she wasn't where the punch would have landed. Eventually she jumped clear over Shampoo, flipping in the process, so she went through a position where they were almost head to head, grabbing the other woman as she reached a completely inverted attitude with a grip of steel and somehow transferring momentum to her so it was suddenly Shampoo who was flying through the air. One of the cameras panned to follow the Amazon while the other remained on the two women in the middle of the room.

Landing lightly in a crouch, Aiko ducked a flying kick from Akane, who had recovered from whatever it was that she'd done to the Tendo sister, without even looking, dropping flat to the floor then pushing herself off into a rearwards flip that again ended up with her behind her opponent. Akane seemed to be ready for this, already turning to face her. The blue-haired woman was smiling and frowning at the same time, looking both excited and wary, while Aiko was obviously thoroughly enjoying herself.

They exchanged a series of punches and kicks, none of Akane's landing, while several of Aiko's got through the other woman's defences, although Adrian was certain she was pulling the force of her blows to avoid damage. Shampoo came roaring back into the fight a few seconds later from where she'd landed half-way across the room, an expression of determination on her face, which quickly turned into one of horrified wonder as the brunette apparently had no more difficulty fighting both of them at the same time as she had one on one. The camera crew were keeping their equipment on the action, panning wildly to follow the women.

"Holy shit, that girl is unbelievable," Matt mumbled, watching with wide eyes. "I thought Akane and Shampoo were incredible, but this is..."

"I told you the first time," Adrian chuckled, satisfied with the reaction. "And Yori and Chou are so much better even than her that they make her look slow. I'm pretty sure from what I saw that Yori could take on Aiko and her whole team at the same time without much effort. Even without all the
magical things."

"If any of those women wanted to actually kill you, you wouldn't stand a chance, would you?" the stunt director mused in a low voice, sounding horrified as if he'd only just worked out quite how dangerous they were, even 'mere' martial artists like Shampoo and Akane, never mind a full blown magical girl like Aiko. Both Aaron and Adrian shook their heads.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone as potentially dangerous as even Akane," Aaron replied, similarly quietly. "She strikes me as a genuinely nice girl, not at all someone who is particularly aggressive, past problems aside, but if she came after you, I don't think you could do anything other than run like hell and hope you were faster." They watched the spar for a few seconds more, both Aiko's opponents showing excellent teamwork, not that it was actually helping very much. She was just too good. "What Aiko or any of the others could do is beyond belief. I mean, look at that!"

He waved a hand shakily as Aiko vanished with a bright flash again, both the others whirling to stand back to back, looking around cautiously. "She'd make one hell of an assassin, I don't think you could keep her out of anywhere."

"Where did she go?" Matt queried. They looked around, as did the two women in the marked off area, with no luck. One of the cameras was being panned around as well on the next gantry. A couple of seconds passed, then Akane suddenly looked up, yelled, and dived out to the side, just as Aiko dropped out of the air onto her and Shampoo having teleported back near the ceiling. Adrian jumped at the yell, his heart racing, then watched as the Amazon also rolled away from the inbound magical girl, who landed lightly, striking out as she did and barely missing Shampoo. Akane leaped back into the fray, more incredibly fast blows coming thick and fast. Once again Aiko parried them all.

Finally, just as Shampoo joined her friend, Aiko disengaged and jumped out of range, calling "Cease!" at the same time. Again, both the others stopped dead. They were panting a little but otherwise looked more or less ready to keep going. Smiling, Aiko tossed both of them a bottle of water each, removing the cap of one for herself. All of them drank deeply for a few seconds.

Shaking his head in awe, Adrian simply watched, his hands on the railing. After a few seconds he became aware he hadn't heard a peep out of the three people who had never encountered what these women were capable of before, turning to look curiously at them. He grinned at the expressions.

Mitch was no longer watching with his neutral face on, rather he was gaping open-mouthed, while Jennifer was simply staring with her eyes wide, her arms now dangling limply at her sides. Beside her, Anton was gripping the railing of the viewing gantry with the biggest grin Adrian had ever seen him wear, not taking his eyes from the three women who were now discussing something. Glancing at his friends, Adrian grinned as well when they also spotted what the other executives were doing, all three men chuckling. He noted in passing that the camera crew were talking quietly amongst themselves, apparently in shock as well.

"Hey, Mitch? Are you impressed yet?" the director asked, a laugh in his voice. There was no response. "Mitch?"

Very slowly, the COO turned his head, looked at Adrian, then went back to watching the three women. His mouth worked for a moment but nothing came out. "I think he might be broken," Jim whispered loudly, provoking a sudden wild laugh from Anton, which made them smile.

"Oh, my god, we're going to make so much money," the producer said in a faint voice, his grin
widening to the point he was in danger of losing the top of his head.

"It gets better," Adrian chuckled. Aiko looked over, amusement on her face, an eyebrow raised. He nodded happily, making her smile, then say something quietly to Akane, who grinned and headed towards the pole in the barrel of concrete, flexing her hands, with Shampoo beside her. Stopping in front of the pole, she inspected it, then lashed out with a fist, making the entire barrel jolt sideways as a large chunk of wood splintered off and flew across the floor. A hit with her other hand made it move again, smaller pieces raining down. They watched as she converted it to kindling over the space of the next thirty seconds with a series of kicks and a few more punches, smiling to herself, then split what was left in half down the middle with a final knife-hand blow. Nodding in satisfaction she turned to Shampoo and had a short conversation.

Jennifer and Mitch both made almost identical squeaks of shock when she turned back to the barrel, squatted down, wrapped her arms around it, then stood up again, walking off with it to put it twenty feet away. Adrian grinned, even though he was also staring in amazement. He knew she was preposterously strong but even so this was impressive. When she looked over at him and winked he laughed, sure she'd done it just to make a point, rather than because it was in the way. Matt whistled softly from beside him, making him glance at his colleague. "Holy crap, that girl is strong!" he said in a low voice.

"Yep," Aaron grunted, watching closely. "You could say that."

Moving to the pile of concrete blocks, which consisted of three pallets like the one Richard and Jim had originally provided, the two girls snapped the steel strapping easily, then began building a series of stacks eight blocks tall, putting a layer of the thick wooden boards across one pair to form a flat surface about three feet square. Shampoo stepped back while Akane moved to the first stack, paused, then punched straight down, the top three blocks exploding into powder. As the dust from the first strike settled she lashed out with a kick which destroyed the next two blocks.

"Those are real blocks, by the way," Adrian commented off-handedly, looking at Mitch, who was staring in total shock, not apparently having moved for the last five minutes.

"Oh. Good." The response was delayed and very weak.

Moving to the next stack the Tendo woman jumped straight up, bringing her right leg down in a high axe kick from the level of her shoulders directly into the middle of it, which made all but the lowest block crumble to small chunks with a loud crunch. Not stopping, she whirled into a low spin, her other leg lashing out and destroying the middle of the third tower and spraying small bits of concrete thirty feet across the floor in a wide arc. Jennifer made a tiny sound of disbelief. Adrian kept his glee mostly to himself but inwardly was both extremely pleased and very impressed. He got the impression that they'd been thinking hard about how to make this demo as impressive as possible, probably with the input of Aiko as well. It was certainly working, he mused to himself, stealing another quick look at the three people to his right.

If Anton got any happier he was liable to have an accident, Jennifer looked like she thought she might be dreaming, and Mitch was just standing motionless watching in stunned amazement.

Back on the floor, Akane nodded to Shampoo, who nodded back, stepped up to the fourth pile of blocks in an aggressive stance, pulled her hand sharply back, then... gently reached out and poked the top block with one finger. There was a very small pause during which she moved back a couple of feet before the block abruptly exploded with a loud bang, fragments spraying everywhere and the concussion cracking the next three blocks, which slid to the floor in pieces. She grinned, before demolishing the remainder with one punch, brushing the dust from her hand with satisfaction.
"Fuck." The word came from Anton, who looked astounded. "How did she do that!"

"Ancient Chinese Amazon technique," Aiko's voice said from behind them, making everyone jump violently. None of them had noticed that she was no longer on the floor, engrossed as they were in watching the other two. She snickered, moving up to stand next to Jim and watching as Akane attacked the wooden planks, punching half a dozen holes completely through them with a series of blows. "Very painful to learn, I'm told."

They all looked at her, then back at the others. Shampoo was finishing off the destruction of the boards and last stack with a pair of clubs she'd pulled from nowhere, whirling them around with graceful skill, finally stopping when nothing was left except for splinters and gravel. "Ah. The next exercise will need the sword, I think," Aiko added, slipping under the railing and dropping the twenty feet to the floor, landing lightly and walking over to her friends. They watched her go with a mix of expressions.

"Who the hell is she?" Mitch asked in a faint voice. "Is she looking for a job as well?"

Laughing, Adrian shook his head. "No, she's a mutual friend of the girls there and me. She's got a full time career, she's just helping out and providing training and transportation."

"What sort of career?" Anton asked curiously.

"Magical girl, saving the world, protecting the community, that sort of thing," Adrian replied casually, grinning to himself. The producer stared at him, then back at the brunette, who was talking to Shampoo having just handed her the sword she'd produced earlier. The clubs the Amazon had been wielding so skilfully had vanished again. Glancing at his colleague, Adrian added, "It's a thing in Japan. There's lots of them."

"Ah, OK." The other man didn't seem to have anything to add to that, although it looked like he was desperately trying to think of something.

Having apparently come to an agreement, Aiko and Akane each picked up one of the heavy wooden boards, holding them by the ends like batons, ones that were twelve feet long and very heavy, then stood on opposite sides of the Amazon. Shampoo immediately began what could best be described as a lethal dance with the sword, spinning and twirling it, each blurringly quick strike steadily shortening the boards like some weird form of wood chipper. In under a minute she reduced them to splinters, finishing up with a showy flourish and sheathing the weapon. Handing it back to Aiko, she grinned.

Having dropped what was left of her board, Akane ran over to a table on which a pair of bo staffs were lying next to two bokken and the heavy compound bow Adrian had sourced, retrieving the staffs and returning. She tossed her friend one, the other woman catching it, then both of them moved back to the marked area in the middle of the floor, facing each other while Aiko stood to one side. Giving the start command, the third woman watched with satisfaction as the two combatants immediately began sparring, the sound of staff on staff filling the room with a fusillade of clicks and bangs at machine-gun rates.

Watching Akane jump over a sweep from Shampoo, then the Amazon promptly do the same thing back, Adrian felt very happy. He noticed that Anton was now leaning on the rail gently laughing to himself, having apparently moved past shock into simply enjoying the sight. Mitch still looked like someone had unexpectedly pushed an ice-cube somewhere intimate although he was beginning to appear closer to normal, albeit stunned. Jennifer was watching open-mouthed, her cool attitude totally broken, twitching a little at particularly loud cracks from the staff work. Akane picking up half a ton of concrete like she was moving a chair seemed to have been the specific thing that broke
"Cease!" The command once again caused an immediate cessation in activity. Taking the staff back from Shampoo, the youngest Tendo sister returned it to the table and picked up the bokken, handing one to her friend, then they took their places again. Aiko nodded, satisfied, before issuing the instruction to begin, having had a brief word with both young women, who were grinning.

They immediately slashed at each other, Akane ducking and Shampoo jumping over the respective blows, before the Amazon let out a hideously loud yodelling war-cry which made everyone twitch in shock, then charged the other woman, who turned and bolted towards the stack of huge wooden and metal crates along one side of the studio room.

"Jesus," Mitch squawked in shock, stepping back from the sudden yell. Matt chuckled, making the COO look at him for a moment, then go back to watching the action below them. Pursued by the lilac-haired woman, Akane reached the first crate, one about fifteen feet tall, and without breaking step jumped high enough to land neatly on it, running across the top and jumping another ten feet to the next one. Behind her, Shampoo cleared the height of the first crate. Everyone gaped, even Adrian, the height they'd both managed to reach in one jump was insane. The camera crew were frantically trying to keep both of the women in shot at the same time while not bumping into each other in the process.

Both women dashed back and forth across the simulated rooftops engaged in a running battle with the bokken, Shampoo taking the attacking position for a couple of minutes, then running for it when Akane turned around and lurched for her, rolling sideways at the last moment, before jumping to her feet and heading for the next crate along with the Tendo woman in hot pursuit. Several people made different sounds of shock when Shampoo leaped backwards off the top of the pile, apparently to a nasty injury or death, but twisted in mid-air like a cat, rolled when she landed, then more or less bounced right back up the side to end up behind her attacker in what was obviously a deliberate move.

"Oh, my god." The whispered comment came from Jennifer who, when Adrian looked at her, was pale.

Back at the 'roof-top' fight, Akane was on the run again, Shampoo having turned the tables once more, and finding herself at the end of the stack, looked wildly around, then jumped across a ten foot gap to land on a ladder for the lighting rig that ran around the studio and back and forth across the ceiling, half a dozen narrow walk-ways giving access to the truss-work that carried the lights themselves. She shot up it like a squirrel, ran lightly across a truss, then jumped onto one of the walkways. Shampoo stood and watched for a moment before grinning and following. Adrian heard one of the camera operators swear to himself as he tried to get the heavy machine to tilt up enough to follow the action.

"Um, are they supposed to be up there?" Jim asked curiously.

"It wasn't in the plan," Adrian admitted, looking up with amusement and glee, "but it's damn impressive. Look at them go!" He shook his head in wonder as the two young women charged around in the overhead fixtures, jumping from truss to walkway and back, the clacking of the bokken on each other a counterpoint to the metallic sounds of the trusses moving around.

Down below, in the middle of the floor, Aiko was watching with a smile as the other two enjoyed themselves. Eventually, though, she whistled sharply, which made Adrian jump, but had little effect on either Akane or Shampoo who seemed to be enjoying themselves to the point they'd lost track of what they were supposed to be doing. The director looked down at her as she turned to grin at him, then shrugged slightly. "Hey! Guys! Next part, OK?" Her call didn't have much more effect.
When she raised a hand and let fly half a dozen tiny balls of blue light which shot through the air with a whine and popped on the ceiling producing a sound like gunshots, though, everyone stopped dead and stared in shock, even Akane and Shampoo. Mitch made a squeak of what almost sounded like terror, staring fixedly at the magical girl, who was looking up with her hands on her hips at the two women in the rafters, almost directly above her. She gestured.

"Come on down, I think you've made your point for that exercise," she called. Akane looked at Shampoo, who nodded, then both of them dropped out of the ceiling to the floor, rolling when they landed and jumping to their feet. Anton watched with a huge grin, then looked up at the walkway they'd both been on.

"Holy shit, that's about thirty-five feet!"

"Something like that," Matt replied, sounding somewhat stunned himself.

"Impressive."

They all nodded like a row of little dolls that you'd find on the back shelf of a car. Even Adrian was impressed. He was beginning to wonder when they'd actually find the limits of what these young women could do physically. They'd obviously been practising a lot since he'd last seen them in action.

"That was pretty damn good, guys," Aiko said, looking approving. She glanced over at their audience. "We should probably bring it to a conclusion fairly soon or poor Mitch over there is going to go catatonic."

"Jennifer doesn't look much better," Akane giggled, trying not to grin. The brunette nodded with a smile.

"Anton looks like he's just had every Christmas present of a lifetime all at once, though," she replied. "I can guarantee he's on your side, for sure. OK, Why don't you run around on those fences for a few minutes, then you can do a little archery, Shampoo, which should be a decent conclusion to the whole exercise. That'll have been about an hour and a half all in which is more than enough I'd think." She inspected both the other woman. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine, thanks, Aiko," Shampoo laughed. "It's not as tiring as a proper training exercise even though it's gone on for a while. Mostly it's just damn good fun."

"I'm going to want lunch soon, I think, but I agree, it's not too difficult. Elder Cologne drives us much harder. So do Dad and Uncle Genma," Akane added, grinning. She wiped her brow with her sleeve. "Mind you, I could do with some more water." Aiko handed them each a bottle, smiling.

"I haven't met her yet," Akane noted with interest. "I've heard a lot about her, though. She sounds fascinating but a bit scary."
Nodding, Aiko smiled at the youngest Tendo. "She's extremely smart, very sensible, and a very
decent person. She's like a sister to me even though we've only known each other for a couple of
years or so. You'd like her, I think. But yes, she can be damn scary. Not quite to the level Yori can
reach without much effort but a lot creepier." She giggled a bit. "It's really funny when she just
stares at a criminal or someone like that and they surrender on the spot. She's the only one other
than Yori I know who can pull that trick off so well."

Both Akane and Shampoo laughed, finishing their water and handing the bottles back to Aiko who
made them vanish. "I'd like to meet her one day," Shampoo remarked.

"I'm sure you will sooner or later," Aiko replied with a small grin. "OK, break's over, get back to
work."

"Ma'am, yes, Ma'am!" Akane snapped, saluting, then laughing.

Aiko shook her head. "You're nearly as bad as Tamiko when you're in a good mood," she giggled.
Grinning, Akane turned to the Amazon, who was snickering to herself.

"Come on, I'll race you around that fence maze," she said, pointing at the set-up a few metres
away. With a whoop she dashed for them, the Chinese woman right behind her, both of them
jumping on top of the narrow panels and running across them. Aiko stood and watched with
amusement.

Adrian wondered what they were talking about, the voices not only too low to hear, but in Japanese
as well. Thinking that he should probably see about learning the language as it looked likely that
he'd be working with Japanese people quite a lot in future, he waited for them to resume the
demonstration, pleased at the way both women seemed to have relaxed to the point they were no
longer at all self-conscious about the people watching. He caught Matt's eye, who nodded slowly,
apparently thinking much the same thing.

Handing their empty water bottles back to Aiko, Akane and Shampoo ran towards the fence panels
he'd arranged to have set up, easily jumping some six feet onto them, then ran along the top of the
narrow fence with as much confidence as if it was a normal sidewalk. Shaking his head a little and
smiling at the sight he watched as they circumnavigated the entire maze, occasionally jumping
from one to another to mix it up a little. After a few minutes of this, Shampoo dropped off the
fence, Akane following her, then they quickly built a ramp of blocks and the single board left
intact.

Jumping onto the bicycle that had been leaning against the table with the weapons on, the Amazon
pedalled rapidly, accelerating at speeds more commonly seen with motorcycles, hitting the ramp
and jumping ten feet into the air, then landing on the top of the fence. She cycled along it as if she
was on level ground, hopping from panel to panel with aplomb, smiling to herself, while Akane
watched, grinning. Adrian shook his head in wonder at the sight.

Finally growing bored of this pursuit the Chinese woman shot off the end of the final fence panel,
skidding in a wide turn and heading back to the table, where she dismounted. Picking up the bow
she inspected it closely, nodded approvingly having tested the pull, then sorted through the three
dozen arrows on the table next to it, rejecting about a third of them. Putting the remainder into the
quiver also supplied she adjusted it at her waist before walking to the opposite side of the studio
from the targets, about a hundred and eighty feet separating her from them.

"Can she actually hit them at that distance?" Anton asked with some amazement. Adrian and Jim
exchanged a glance, laughing hard for a moment, before the director nodded happily.
"Just watch," he advised. 'God, if you'd only seen her shooting that thing of Aiko's at Richard's house,' he thought to himself, grinning like an idiot. 'I've never seen anything remotely like it.' One of the cameras focussed on Shampoo while the other one was filming the targets. The lilac-haired young woman nocked her first arrow, aimed, and released, all in one smooth action, the arrow humming across the huge room to land an inch off the centre of the target she'd shot at. Looking mildly irritated with herself she repeated the action, nodding contentedly before the arrow even hit, this time in the exact centre.

Anton muttered, "Good grief," shaking his head in awe.

The Amazon shifted her stance a little, then fired six arrows in succession so rapidly that all of them were in the air before the first one landed. Each hit the middle of one of the half-dozen targets. Looking pleased, she walked back towards the front of the building, then turned and ran back, firing on the move, again each arrow hitting mere fractions of an inch away from the first set. Anton whistled in awe, Matt laughed, and Aaron swore mildly. "Incredible," the arms-master commented in a low voice.

Jumping onto the crates again, Shampoo ran across the tops of them, intermittently firing an arrow, once or twice in mid leap. All of them hit the targets, although one or two were some way off the bull. Finally, having only five left, she dropped to the floor, jogged back to the table, then got back on the bike, cycling in a large circle without using her hands. Each time she was oriented correctly she fired another arrow, holding the bow horizontally so it wouldn't foul the handlebars. The first one missed the target she was aiming at completely, but the other four each found their mark. When she'd shot the last one she dismounted, putting the bow back on the table and leaning the bike against it, then talking to Aiko and Akane for a moment, gesturing to the one she'd missed with an annoyed expression. Aiko grinned at her and said something that made her laugh.

"That was... unbelievable," Matt commented quietly.

"And incredibly impressive," Adrian agreed. They all watched as the two young women shook hands with Aiko, then walked to the middle of the marked area, facing their audience, before bowing.

"That concludes our demonstration," Akane called, smiling. "We hope it was what you were looking for."

After a long pause, Mitch stepped forwards, licking dry lips. "Thank you very much, ladies. I think I speak for all of us when I say that I've never seen anything even close to what you just showed us. It's given myself and my colleagues a lot to think about." Adrian watched his face, which was rather pale, inwardly feeling very satisfied. He glanced at Jennifer, who seemed to be trying to regain her customary cool, without as much success as she probably wanted, and Anton, who was almost rubbing his hands together in glee.

"Thanks, all of you," he said to the three women on the floor below, Aiko having joined the other two. "Let's break for lunch. Jim will show you where the showers are, you two can change back into your normal clothes, then we can have something to eat and discuss the next step."

"OK, Adrian. Thanks." Akane grinned at him, appearing very pleased with the way the last hour and a half had gone. He couldn't blame her, they'd outdone themselves with a truly incredible show. He looked over to the camera crew, the man in charge of it giving him a thumbs-up as his people shut everything down, all of them looking amazed and impressed.

Jim headed down the stairs, going over to the young women and talking to them for a moment, then leading them out the main door. When they'd all disappeared and the door had swung shut
again, he turned around and leaned against the railing, his hands on it on either side of his waist, then studied the three people who had just received their first glimpse of martial arts Neriman/Amazonian style.

"So, Mitch..." he began, smiling deviously. "Do you feel that I won the bet?"

The COO pulled his eyes from the door with a visible effort, staring at him for several seconds before he seemed to come back from somewhere else, then very slowly nodded, reaching into his inside jacket pocket and pulling out his wallet. Opening it he counted for a moment, then handed over a thick bundle of bills, which Adrian took and put into his own pocket without looking at them, grinning like a shark.

"I think you did, Adrian. I'm sorry I doubted you." Mitch shook his head. "That... That was so far beyond my wildest dreams I have no words to describe it."

"It hit me like that the first time as well," Adrian consoled him. "Yori and her friends are unbelievably more advanced than Akane and Shampoo are but even those two are vastly past anything else any of us have ever encountered." He glanced at Matt and Aaron, both of whom nodded soberly.

"They're off the scale good," Aaron added, shrugging a little. "I have no idea how on earth anyone could become so skilled at such a young age, or at all, for that matter, but there it is. Yes, Aiko is much better, but from what Adrian and Richard have said none of those other girls are likely to be looking for jobs. Akane and Shampoo are. We'd be criminally negligent if we let another studio snap them up. And you know as well as I do that if any other studio ever got wind of this they'd offer them almost anything to go with them instead."

Mitch looked suddenly worried. "Shit. You're right about that. Universal or any of the others would sell their souls for that sort of talent." He turned to Adrian. "Do you think they'd accept if that happened?"

Considering the question for a moment the director finally shook his head. "Not if we proceed reasonably quickly and are scrupulously honest with them, I think. They promised me after the first demo at Richard's house that they wouldn't go anywhere else if we went ahead within six months. I think that both of them have a very strong sense of personal honour, so they're going to stick to their word. It would be a very bad idea, though, to not do the same." He looked around at the others. "If we play fair with them, they'll play fair with us, I have no doubt. If, on the other hand, anyone on the board tries any tricks I doubt it will work out well."

"It would be a phenomenally bad idea to try ripping them off or tricking them," Aaron muttered. "They're bad enough, I sure as hell wouldn't want an angry Akane coming after me with blood in her eye, but they also know some extremely frightening people." He looked at Mitch with a totally serious expression. "Trust me, we don't want their friends deciding that they want revenge because we did something stupid."

Nodding to himself, Mitch thought for a while. "True, true. You're probably right. I can think of a couple of people on the board that may need that point to be pushed pretty hard. Hmm." He glanced at Jennifer, who seemed to have pulled herself together. "What do you think? You've been very quiet for the last hour or so."

She looked back at him. "So were you." He shrugged, smiling a little.

"True enough. All things considered, it's not a surprise, though."
Looking over the room, she nodded. "No, it isn't." She paused for a few seconds. "I'll admit quite happily that what we just saw was unbelievably impressive, if not actually totally terrifying." The woman paused again, thinking, as the rest of them waited quietly. "That aside, there remains the issue of whether their undeniable talent would translate into something we could capitalise on."

"I don't think there's any doubt about that at least as far as stunt-work goes," Matt interjected, making her study him for a moment, then reluctantly nod.

"You'd know more about that than I would, I suppose. All right, I can accept that."

"But you have reservations," Adrian commented, watching her face. She nodded slowly.

"I do." Pulling a folder from her briefcase, which she'd brought with her from the meeting and put on the floor, she flipped it open and paged through the documents inside for a moment, stopping on one sheet. "From your initial interview with both girls, I noted that Ms Tendo has been undergoing therapy for anger management issues for nearly two years at this point. I find that... concerning. Especially in light of the abilities we've just had demonstrated to us." She looked up, slightly pale. "I mean, if for whatever reason she became annoyed, the damage she could cause is... truly horrific. We could be opening ourselves up to a very considerable liability by taking her on. I have no doubt that we could be held responsible for any untoward issue that came up as her employers in a lawsuit."

Mitch looked thoughtful, rubbing his chin reflectively. He turned to Adrian. "She has a point, I'm afraid. That young woman could tear through LA like a tornado, which wouldn't reflect well on the studio at all."

Sighing a little, Adrian nodded a couple of times. He looked over his shoulder at the destruction wrought by the two women, before turning back to his colleague. "It's possible, that's true, but I have to admit, I don't think very likely. Not by this point. A year ago from what I've found out, I'd have agreed with you, but now...?" He shrugged a little. "She's been very open and honest with us about her previous problems and the treatment she's received for them. From what I know there was an obscure yet real medical issue that was finally sorted out by Yori some time ago, after which her therapy became very effective. The young woman herself seems more relieved about that even than the rest of her family. She doesn't want to be driven by anger. Inherently, she's a very nice, normally very calm, and genuinely likeable girl who's had some unfortunate problems growing up."

Turning around he waved at the half-demolished studio. "Yes, she could cause enormous damage if she wanted to. Any of her friends with similar skills could as well, and Aiko and her friends could probably wipe out entire cities, as horrifying as that is to consider. But I don't think they would." Turning back to the others, he gestured at Matt and Aaron who were silently listening. "Matt has a military background, a hell of a lot of training in more weapons and techniques than I can count, and the contacts to get enough hardware to assault a small town successfully. No one is scared of what he might do." Matt looked mildly insulted and also amused, making the director grin for a moment. "Aaron is sitting on enough real weaponry in the armoury to fight a small war and also knows how to use it. He could kill you in about a dozen ways from where he's standing without even trying. Don't forget both of them know a lot about martial arts themselves."

The COO looked at Aaron, who smirked at him, then casually stepped just a little further out of reach, apparently unconsciously, which made the smirk widen for a moment. "But no one is worried that either of them are going to go off and cause chaos. Or at least, not cause chaos we're not paying them to cause." Adrian grinned as Anton laughed. "Any of the stunt people we employ could be very dangerous in the right circumstances. Most of them are at least familiar with one or
more martial arts, most of them know a lot about firearms, all of them can fight well. You pretty much have to be able to know how to fight for real to be able to fake it convincingly, you know. But I can't think of the last time one of our guys was involved in anything that could cause the studio any problems."

He fell silent, while Mitch thought, glancing at Jennifer who seemed content to let him ruminate. After a little while the other man nodded slowly. "Yes, yes, all that is true, I agree. I've never quite though about it in those terms before but you have a point. Yet, none of our people are capable of... that." He pointed at the piles of crushed concrete blocks. "And to the best of my knowledge none of our people are currently being treated for anger issues bad enough to warrant therapy."

"Not entirely true," Matt said, causing everyone to look at him, "there have been one or two of my people in the past that have needed some sort of intervention, and there's one guy at the moment who's going through something like that."

"Indeed?" Mitch inspected him.

"Yep. It's not relevant to the studio, it's the result of a bad breakup with a girlfriend, but it happens." The stunt director shook his head for a moment. "It's not as uncommon as you might think, especially among people with a military background. Quite a few of my guys came from the forces one way or another."

"Interesting," the COO murmured.

"When we went to Tokyo to talk to them a while back I spent some time discussing the issue with her father, when Akane was off showing Matt the family Dojo," Adrian continued after another pause. "He told me that he was extremely proud of how well his daughter had overcome her issues in the last few months. I raised the question of whether he thought it possible that she'd get into the sort of state that could cause problems. He thought about it for a while, then said he didn't think it was likely any more. Apparently she had something of a breakthrough some time back concerning the main trigger of her anger, which lead him to believe that she had finally overcome most of the problem. He was honest enough to say that he wouldn't have been so sure six months before that. I believe him."

Matt glanced at him. "Hmm. That's funny, I talked to Nodoka when Akane and Shampoo were talking to you and Soun, she told me pretty much the same thing. They all seem very proud of how Akane has matured a lot in the last year or so. She was sure that, barring some very unusual circumstances, the young woman would be very sensible." He looked mildly confused for a moment. "She also said that both Akane and Shampoo were running scared from some woman who's been keeping an eye on their exploits, someone called... Ms Aoyama, I think. Some intelligence agent or something like that who had reason to look into the weirdness around Nerima, the area of Tokyo where all the martial artists tend to wind up. Odd place, based on the stories I've heard." He grinned momentarily as Adrian snickered. "Anyway, she told me that she thought that the possibility of this Ms Aoyama becoming irritated would be enough to keep the young woman on the straight and narrow even in the absence of anything else."

Adrian smiled a little. "I think what both of us are saying is that we honestly doubt that Akane is any more prone now to sudden attacks of homicidal rage than any of the rest of us are, although admittedly the results if she did get into that state could be... impressive. I, for one, trust her, based on the contact I've had with her since we met."

Mitch studied him, then looked at both Matt and Aaron, who both nodded. "So do I," the stunt director commented. "I think both young ladies are honourable and decent people who deserve a chance. And, of course, they have skills that are enormously valuable to us." He grinned again.
"I'm also very interested in the fact that both of them are allowed to teach some of those skills to my people, which I'm looking forward to. With both excitement and mild terror."

This provoked a smile from the COO, who studied them for a little longer, before turning back to Jennifer. "They make a convincing case. Does it settle your mind?"

"To a degree," she admitted. "Not completely but I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt for now." Reading the paperwork again, she added, "I do think that we'd need to make continuing any therapy until such time as the therapist was satisfied Ms Tendo was genuinely cured of these tendencies a condition of employment."

"That's reasonable," Adrian agreed, privately slightly surprised at the sensible suggestion which he expected Akane would be fine with. "I suppose we'll need to find a suitable therapist locally, but I don't think that will be too difficult."

"I know a couple of names," Matt said, making him look over, then nod his thanks.

Glancing at Jennifer to see if she had any more issues, Mitch nodded to her when she shrugged wordlessly and closed her folder. Turning back to the director, he thought for a few seconds. "All right. I'll want to see the results of the trial stunts and the training, but assuming everything goes to plan I'm prepared to argue your case before the board next week. I still have mild reservations about the issue Jennifer raised but I'll trust your judgement on it." He scanned the faces of Matt, Adrian, and Aaron, all of whom looked pleased. "Anton? Any input?"

The producer turned to look around the large room, a small smile on his face, before replying. "All I can say at this point is that I think my dreams may have come true." Adrian chuckled, feeling pleased and gratified. He'd been pretty sure the other man would see his side almost immediately and so it seemed to be. "Yes, there are some minor problems, Akane's potential anger issues aside. Shampoo will need to learn English better, for one."

"She's improved a lot just in the last few weeks," Adrian put in, making him nod. "Fair enough. Still has a way to go but she obviously understands it pretty well, just has issues with speaking it right now. We'll need to sort out work visas, immigration documentation, tax codes, all that sort of thing, but again none of that is particularly difficult. We've done it before enough times." Looking back over his shoulder at the targets bristling with arrows, he shook his head in wonder. "No, I'm certainly in favour of it, on a trial basis if nothing else. We'd know within six to eight months if it was going to work out. Personally, though, I have a very good feeling about it."

"So do I," Adrian told him.

"If it does work out well, are there more like those two in Japan?" Anton asked with a wry grin. Everyone, even Jennifer, laughed at his comment.

"As it happens, yes. Akane's family Dojo is in the process of training what might end up being the next generation of action stars," Adrian snickered, glancing at Matt, who nodded vigorously. "Damn right they are. I'm giving serious consideration to seeing if I could send a couple of my guys over for advanced training. Their Anything Goes family style is unbelievable. Even if they couldn't bring our people up to that level, I'm damn sure they'd still improve out of all recognition."

"Interesting thought," Mitch commented after a moment. "We'll see how it goes, but that might well be worth looking into. It would give us an edge, certainly." He clapped his hands together loudly. "Well. Thank you all for arranging this remarkable performance." Looking at his watch
quickly, he continued, "I'm going to have to go to my next meeting but I've got a lot to think about. Keep me up to date on how it goes and I'll talk again Thursday sometime."

"OK, Mitch. Thanks for coming." Adrian shook his colleagues hand, then Jennifer's. Both of them headed down the stairs and across the floor to the door, the HR director apparently deep in thought. The people remaining on the gantry watched them leave.

"Well." Anton turned to the three people remaining. "That went remarkably well, all things considered. I was a little worried Jennifer would bring up some show-stopper, but she was unusually cooperative today."

"She's still in shock," Aaron chuckled. "Wait until tomorrow."

"The poor woman isn't that bad," Adrian commented, grinning. "She's just very picky about doing her job right, which is a good thing on the whole."

"Mitch seemed... taken aback," Matt added, also with a wide grin on his face. Anton burst out laughing.

"Oh, god, did you see his expression when Akane picked up that barrel and walked off with it?" he snickered. "Hey, Adrian, it really is full of cement, right? Not something lighter?"

"No, it's full of real concrete and really does weigh something like half a ton," the director confirmed, amused. "It took one of the big forklifts to get it in here in the first place. They're going to wonder how on earth it got all the way over there when the guys come in to clean all this up."

Laughing like an idiot, Anton leaned on the railing for a while.

"It's been a hell of a lot of fun, guys," he finally said, calming down. "Let's go and get some lunch. I'm interested in learning more about those young women. And I'm really looking forward to the next few days." He headed for the stairs, still snorting with laughter intermittently. Adrian glanced at his co-workers, grinned, then followed, the others trailing behind him. He stopped to talk to the camera chief, who was holding a stack of large video-tapes.

"This is all of it, Adrian," the man said, showing them to him as his people left the building carrying the camera equipment.

"Great. OK, Kevin, get it over to edit and get them started on it. I left instructions on what I want done. Thanks." The man nodded, looking back at the room full of equipment, then left shaking his head in wonder.

Coming out of the shower combing her hair, Akane grinned at Shampoo who was nearly finished dressing. "Think it went well?"

"I think they're going to have to go and sit down for a while," her friend giggled. "Poor Mitch looked like he couldn't work out which way was up. Jennifer seemed to have just shut down completely."

"Anton looked like he was enjoying it," the Tendo woman noted, putting her comb down and reaching for her bra.

"Almost too much," Shampoo agreed with a grin. "I'm pretty sure he's on our side, he was practically from the start."

"I guess we'll have to see what they say," Akane agreed, finishing dressing, then checking herself
in the mirror. She noticed her friend was carefully wrapping up what she recognised as a bar of the special Jusenkyo products soap and putting it into a waterproof bag. "Is that the new stuff that Cologne got for you with the different smell?"

Shampoo nodded, slipping it into her bag. "Yes, it's still not exactly wonderful but I can live with it. Apparently something about the magic makes producing some with no smell at all difficult. Great Grandmother tweaked the recipe and got the village to send some of the new batch over, it turned up about ten days ago. I've got about fifty kilos of it at home, it should last for years. But this is the only bar I brought with me so I don't want to lose it."

Grinning, the Tendo woman asked, "What if Adrian wants to demonstrate the instant Shampoo-cat magic?"

The other woman laughed. "I've got a bottle of special cleanser that removes it as well, but that smells even worse than the soap. Hopefully he won't need it demonstrated. But if he does, it's covered."

Amused, Akane finished putting all her things back in her bag before she zipped it up, then both of them left the room, finding Jim and Aiko chatting in the corridor of the office building in a small alcove that contained a pair of chairs. Both of them looked up as the two women approached.

"All done?" Jim asked. They both nodded.

"Yes, thanks, Jim," Akane replied.

"Great. Let's get to the executive cafeteria, there's plenty to eat there and I'd guess you're both hungry after all that exercise." He stood up, as did Aiko.

"Could certainly eat," Shampoo agreed happily. With Jim leading the way they arrived after a few minutes walk, looking around with interest, then investigating the food available. Ten minutes later all four of them were sitting around a table in one corner of the large room, next to a window which showed a good view of the studio facilities from their third-floor height.

"This is pretty good," Aiko noted appreciatively, trying her roast beef.

"They feed us well," Jim agreed with a smile. "It keeps people happy and happy people tend to do good work."

"Very enlightened," she snickered. Akane laughed, cutting another piece of chicken, which was indeed very tasty.

"You all did extremely well," the man told them after a few more bites of his own food. "If you were wondering. Very professionally arranged, well executed, and remarkably impressive."

"Thanks, Jim," Akane responded after a look at Aiko and Shampoo. "Aiko certainly helped a lot. Without her, I don't think it would have gone so smoothly."

"Don't put yourselves down," the brunette smiled. "I'm glad to help, but I think you'd have done fine by yourselves."

"Possibly, possibly not. You made it a lot easier, though." The young woman accepted the thanks with another smile, not saying anything more on the subject.

Watching them with a small smile of his own, Jim shrugged a bit. "Regardless, I think it worked out really well. Anton will definitely support Adrian, I'm sure. When Jennifer and Mitch have
calmed down, I suspect they'll be fairly enthusiastic about it as well. I'd guess that they won't make any decision until after the trial stunts and so on, but I'd be surprised if you weren't offered contracts by that point. And disappointed, as well."

"It's nice to hear that," the youngest Tendo sister replied after exchanging a pleased and slightly worried look with Shampoo.

"Adrian say similar," Shampoo added, "but nice to have confirmed."

"I think you should forget about that part of it for the next couple of days, myself, and just concentrate on the training and the work," the safety director continued after taking a drink of his coffee. "It's going to be a lot of work but worth it. And I think you'll find it a lot of fun as well."

"Both looking forward to it," the Amazon noted with a grin. "Never been in helicopter."

"That scene could be amazing if we have time to do it," he agreed, laughing. "Matt is pretty keen on it so it'll probably happen." He looked up, then waved, making the three women follow his gaze to see Adrian, Matt, Aaron, and Anton enter the cafeteria. The director waved back as they went to get their own food.

"Adrian looks extremely happy," Aiko noted in a low voice, amusement in it as well. Jim nodded, grinning.

"Like a kid with candy. He's really invested in this whole idea. You have no idea how much he wants to do this."

Akane giggled a little. "He's mentioned it a few times."

"I'll bet he has," the man snickered. Five minutes later the four men joined them at the table. "So, is Mitch impressed?" Jim asked wryly. Adrian exchanged a look with the others then all four of them collapsed in laughter.

When they recovered Adrian gasped, "You might put it that way. I thought he was going to pass out at one point." He shook his head in wonder. "I'm still amazed that he took it as well as he did. Jennifer was looking kind of stunned as well when she left."

"What's the verdict?" Aiko asked. He glanced at her, then looked at Akane and Shampoo, who were both waiting, feeling nervous. The youngest Tendo was trying not to show her worry and she could see the Amazon was in the same state when she looked across the table at her.

"It's too early to say, to be honest, but all the indications are very promising," the director finally said. Akane suspected that there was more to it than that but didn't think it was a good idea to press for details, presumably everything would come out in the end. "Overall it's going very well. We'll know more once all the trials are finished but I doubt you'll be disappointed with the results."

Smiling, Akane looked again at Shampoo, who appeared very happy. "Well done, guys," Aiko congratulated them. She got a sudden distant look for a moment. "Whoops. I need to go, but I'll come back when I'm done. Thanks for the food, Jim." Finishing her own coffee with a couple of quick gulps as she stood up she moved away from the table and vanished mid step. Everyone blinked at the flash.

"I still find that very strange," Matt commented idly, picking up a french fry and biting into it. Everyone stared at him, then at each other, before shrugging and going back to eating.
"Look, just call that number, everything will get sorted out, I promise," Harrison sighed, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. The other one was engaged in holding the phone to his ear. The woman on the other end of it was being remarkably obstreperous which was beginning to annoy him.

"Yes, I understand that your client's vehicle was destroyed. No, no one used a rocket launcher on it. Not in the middle of L.A. Yes, I know what it looks like but trust me, it wasn't that." He listened some more, trying not to sigh. At the next desk, Rojas was grinning, listening to his side of the conversation. He rolled his eyes at his colleague.

"Look, Mrs Hansen, the vehicle was stolen and used in the commission of a very serious incident, which resulted in the destruction of that same vehicle. Luckily no one was killed. It was necessary to damage the vehicle to bring the entire incident to a conclusion before someone died. Now, as I've explained, if you call that phone number I gave you and quote the code I also gave you, I'm assured that the entire matter will be settled quickly and to you and your client's satisfaction." He listened for a moment more, frowning a little. "That's not entirely fair, is it? Under normal circumstances something like this could drag on for weeks, but I suspect you'll find it will be settled in a couple of days in this case."

There was another pause. Rojas put his feet up on his desk, popping open a can of 7-Up and listening with a smile. "Would you have preferred that your client's vehicle was used in a murder, then?" Harrison smirked at the answer. "No, I can see why that wouldn't go down well. We could hardly just wait for the perpetrators to either run out of ammunition or just get bored, could we? So we dealt with it." He shook his head a little, doodling on his desk pad with his free hand, drawing a little figure hanging from a gallows and writing 'Mrs Hansen, RIP' underneath it. "It was a colleague from a special tactics law enforcement group that actually did the damage," he replied when the annoying woman finally left a gap. "She's very good at bring things like that to a stop, extremely suddenly. Would you like me to have her come over and explain how she did it to you? Perhaps with a demonstration?" Rojas winced as Harrison grinned evilly.

"All right. Yes, just call the number, that's right. Thank you, Mrs Hansen. Yes, you have a nice day too. Good bye." He put the phone back in its cradle very gently, then started softly banging his head on the desk, muttering to himself, accompanied by the laughter from the other lieutenant.

"God preserve us from middle-aged insurance claims adjusters with bad attitudes," he moaned.

"Sounds like she was a little uncooperative," the other officer noted. Lifting his head Harrison stared at his co-worker, then dropped it to the desk again.

"You have no idea. She was looking for any excuse to not pay out on that damn policy. Stupid, really, that reparations number in Tokyo will pay for everything from what Aiko said. The insurance company won't be out of pocket at all. They just seem to like being difficult."

"I hate insurance companies," Rojas commented, crushing his empty can in his fist then tossing it into the garbage can next to Harrison's desk.

"You hate everyone," Harrison muttered, making the other man grin.

"Not everyone. I just respond badly to authority."

Lifting his head again and staring for a moment, Harrison said, "You are authority. More or less." Rojas shrugged. "What can I say? I'm complicated."
"No, you're not. Trust me." They shared a smile then Rojas looked at his watch.

"Right, I've got an informant to beat up. See you." He stood up, took his weapon out of the top drawer of his desk and holstered it, picked up his jacket, then left the room, nodding to a few other officers on the way. Harrison watched him go, smiling a little, before turning back to his work.
More Hollywood Adventures

Carz n gunz n bikez n shit...

The second part of the Great Hollywood Adventures of Akane Tendo and Xian Pu.

Guest starring Aiko Maedam and a cast of several.

This chapter brought to you by large amounts of caffeinated energy drinks and the smell of spicy pizza. Jalapeños rule.

Closing in on 1800 reviews, with more than 1.2 million words in the main story. Wow. Amusingly, that seems to suggest that approximately 666 of my words are worth one review. There's something about that number that seems vaguely familiar...

I thought this bit would be a two chapter side-story, but I've been informed by Ms Tendo that she intends to do enough in a week in Hollywood that it will take at least three chapters to record her exploits. What can I do?

My chapter lengths seem to steadily be creeping up, to around the 35 Kword length recently. The last one was 10 Kwords more than that, even. Funny, when you realise my shortest chapter was only 2700 words or so, which is barely a decent scene length :) It wasn't until chapter 21 I passed 10 Kwords for the first time. After this section is done I'll probably ease back on the length of the chapters, which will let me put them out faster if nothing else. This last part, though, has more or less required fairly long chapters. So you'll just have to live with it!

Hopefully shorter chapters will allow better use of my time which in recent months has had many other things calling on it. I can sit down and push out a few thousand words in one go, but then might not be able to look at it again for a week, which means I need to re-read everything to make sure I'm being consistent. The sheer complexity of the story is becoming sufficient that I need to go back and read my own chapters sometimes to refresh my memory of what I'm trying to do! I've got a plan, but some of the details can go adrift if I'm not careful. Although sometimes that works out as I end up taking a minor mistake and running with it, writing the relevant parts needed to turn it from a mistake into a planned plotline. My subconscious seems to be writing at least a third of all this...

Note 1: I realised to my annoyance that I made a silly time-line mistake with the last chapter. Interestingly, no one seemed to pick up on it, but I know it's there and it's irritating me. The most annoying part is that it was in my notes but I somehow missed it when expanding them out into the chapter. Whether I'll go back and fix it at some point I'm not sure yet. It would involve rewriting about a fifth of the chapter to make everything consistent, and adding probably two to three thousand words.

I may well leave it until I finish the story, which is some way off yet, but when I do I intend to go back and correct a lot of small stylistic errors and minor mistakes to make the entire thing consistent anyway. Which will probably take nearly as long as writing the damn thing in the first place :( My style has evolved over the last couple of years (god, has it been that long already?!) so the first chapters and the most recent ones are somewhat different in writing technique. I think it's better now, personally, but regardless it should be the same all the way through.

In any case, that's not happening for a while. Then there's book 2 to think about...
Note 2: While I know a bit about firearms in general and a little more about one or two specific ones, I'm no expert. If I've made silly mistakes let me know. The manuals for the relevant weapons may not pass on everything that an expert would know about them, this is pretty common for any machinery in my experience. But I've tried to make it believable, or at least, as believable as it could be under the circumstances :)

Note 3: The following information is copied from my profile update for those who haven't seen it.

Enormous thanks and appreciation to everyone who has read, enjoyed, and commented on the story so far. There is a significant amount of brand loyalty going on :)

Hopefully I can continue to be of some amusement value to everyone for some time to come. It's amused me as much to write it as it apparently does others to read it.

I also note with some shock that the reader 'KitsuneHerikawa' has gone to the trouble of creating a wiki for the DSR series, which is far above and beyond the call of duty. I'm impressed speechless by it. And kind of pleased. It's found at sisterhood-of-doom.wikia.com.

In addition the first bit of fan art for the story (and quite possibly the only bit of fan art for the story) was done by another reader, tommygunner70. It can be found at tommygunner70.deviantart.com.

Again, I'm very impressed and pleased.

(And now the chapter notes are as long as some fanfics I've seen...)

Greg looked at the two women who were staring around the vehicle depot with interest, studying them for a moment, before turning to the others. "Are you sure about this, Matt?" he asked quietly. "They're pretty young to be the stunt wizards you're saying they are."

The stunt director smiled back at him deviously, looking like he had a wonderful secret that he wasn't sharing, then nodded. "Oh, trust me, they're pretty good. But neither one of them has much experience driving, so we need to train them up this afternoon." Greg stared at him for a moment before turning the Adrian, who simply shrugged with a small grin. Seeing no support coming from the director's direction he went back to his immediate boss.

"Train them up how, exactly?" he asked suspiciously. "What sort of thing are you going to want them to do? I mean, if they're not all that familiar with driving in the first place, what type of scene do you have in mind?" Matt handed him a script and briefing document before he stopped speaking. Taking it, the mid-thirties sandy-haired man glanced through it quickly, then went back and read it more carefully, his eyebrows going steadily upwards. "Are you both nuts?" he asked in shock when he reached the last of the five pages, his mid-western accent strengthening due to stress.

Adrian looked at Matt for a moment. "Are we nuts, Matt?"

"Probably, but not in a bad way," the other man chuckled.

Shaking his head in exasperation, Greg flapped the paperwork in his colleague's faces. "This stunt would be asking a lot for our most experienced drivers to pull off without someone ending up in hospital. And you're expecting me to train two, two..." He glanced at the two young women who were inspecting one of the training cars, the one with the long lilac hair peering into the cabin, apparently pointing out the roll cage to her companion, trying to come up with a non-insulting
description for them. "Two inexperienced girls to drive like this requires?"

Matt nodded, grinning.

"Yep."

"And how long do I have to pull off this miracle?" the driving expert asked with asperity.

"The rest of the afternoon and some of tomorrow as well," Adrian casually replied.

Greg stared at him, open-mouthed. "The rest of the afternoon," he finally said. "Oh, well, in that case I have no idea why I was worried. And here I was thinking that it's the sort of thing that would need a decade of experience at least. Stupid me." He sighed heavily, shaking his head.

"Just give it a try, Greg, OK?" Matt requested, an amused look on his face. "I think you'll find they pick it up pretty quick. Check them out on the basics of driving, take them around the course a couple of times, then show them some of the stunts we commonly do. Two wheels, J turns, jumps, spins, that sort of thing. We've got everything set up."

Not entirely convinced, the instructor turned to study the girls again. Both of them were looking under one of the cars by this point. "Why did you have me tell all the other guys to leave early?" he asked. "And what did you say their names were?"

"We're keeping this all sort of under wraps at the moment," Matt said.

Adrian nodded. "It's not exactly secret, but we're not talking too much either, we don't want any of the other studios to find out yet." He indicated the two women. "Akane Tendo, that's the one with the short blue hair, and Xian Pu, or Shampoo, the other one. Akane is from Japan and Shampoo is from China. They're both martial arts experts who could pull your appendix out your nose if you insulted them, so I'd suggest you don't," the director told him, still looking amused. "But they're also both very nice young women who are smart, very fast to learn, and more than willing to learn anything you can teach them."

Greg nodded dubiously. "All right, I guess. But don't blame me if it all ends badly," he told the other two. Shaking his head, he walked over to the car and the two women, who stood up and smiled at him. Adrian and Matt came along with him.

"Hello. I'm Greg. How are you both?" he asked politely.

"We're both fine, Greg," the blue-haired young woman replied, equally politely, holding out her hand, which he shook, then turned to the other one and did the same with her. "I'm Akane, and this is my friend Shampoo. Her English isn't fantastic yet but she understands more than she speaks."

"Nice meet you," Shampoo added, looking pleased. "Sorry about language problems, still learning. Difficult language, too many rules." She grinned as despite himself he chuckled a little. Pointing at the car they'd been examining, she asked, "Can go upside down safely?"

"Yes, it's got a heavy roll cage built into it along with a reinforced structure, crash proof fuel cell for the gas, a sealed battery so it won't leak if the car is inverted, a number of other modifications like a plastic windshield and so on. It's what we use for basic training and simple stunt-work." He turned to look at the battered blue Ford sedan. "For anything more complex and for all the actual filming we use cars built for that specific job, but this one and the other two over there are what we practice with. They don't tend to last too long." Shampoo snickered, looking at the dents in the vehicle.
"Looks like went through war," she commented. He shrugged a bit.

"Pretty much." Inspecting them both, then glancing at Adrian and Matt, who were listening silently from off to the side, he asked, "How much experience do either of you have with cars and driving generally?"

Akane looked at Shampoo, then replied, "I haven't had much. A few lessons perhaps two and a half years ago so I have an idea of the basics but no more than that. It's very expensive owning a car in Japan compared to the US and where I live there wasn't much need for it, so I didn't bother." Greg nodded slowly, listening, then turned to Shampoo.

The other woman said, "Not as much time in car as Akane. Drove go-karts a few times. Tried jeep in home village with friend when very young. Got in trouble, didn't ask first." She grinned. "Army man very annoyed." This made Greg laugh for a few seconds. "Other than that, little experience. More with motorcycle but rusty."

"OK. Right. Looks like our work is cut out for us, then." He glanced at Adrian, adding in a low voice, "One afternoon?" The director nodded, still smiling in a way that made it look like he knew something Greg didn't, which was beginning to get right up his nose. Returning his attention to the two women he saw they were also looking amused, yet simultaneously slightly nervous and very eager.

Pondering the problem for a few seconds, he finally shrugged and opened the driver's side door. "OK, then, I guess we just dive in and see what happens next. You go first, Akane, since you have some experience. Matt, can you get the door there?" The stunt director nodded, walking over and flipping the switch that raised the roller door for the garage the cars were kept in, brilliant sunlight flooding in and overpowering the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. "We'll try some basic driving exercises so I can assess your current abilities, then we can work out what the next step is."

Looking at her for a moment he went over to a rack of crash helmets, pulling one off and inspecting it, then rejecting it in favour of a different one, which he brought back and handed to her. "Here, see if this one fits."

After a moment's minor confusion about the chin-strap, the young woman managed to get the helmet on. "How does it feel?" he asked.

"A little tight but not too bad," she replied, adjusting it slightly.

"A little tight is good, very tight is bad," he told her, smiling slightly. Gently moving it around on her head he nodded. "That's a pretty good fit. OK, you'll want this neck protector as well." He showed her how the thing fitted, doing the velcro strap up. "This will stop you breaking your neck if we hit something or roll it."

"I wouldn't think you're likely to roll the car just testing her driving skills," Adrian commented, watching. Greg gave him a tired look.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever met some of the drivers we've used in the past," he sighed, shaking his head. The other four people all laughed at the tone in his voice.

"Experience?" Matt asked.

"Yes, of the 'Oh my god I can't believe you managed to do that, you idiot!' variety," Greg commented bitterly. "Impressive, but for all the wrong reasons."

"Anyway, let's see how we get on this time. Hopefully we're not going to end up inverted during a three point turn, but better safe than sorry. OK, Akane, why don't you get in and..."
we'll adjust the harness for you." He watched as she slid easily into the bucket seat. "Pull those straps over your arms, yes, like that, then that one there, they all snap into the lock in the middle." He checked that the harness was secure, adjusting the straps for the smaller frame of the young woman as opposed to him as the last driver of the car. Satisfied, he nodded. "Looks good."

Having retrieved his own helmet and neck guard and donned them, he got into the passenger seat after pointedly handing Matt a large fire extinguisher, which made the other man snicker quite a lot. "Just in case. Bear in mind that if it needs to be used I'm going to beat you severely with it once the fire is out." Even Shampoo started laughing at this point. Getting into the car he rig his own harness then closed the door.

"OK, make sure the transmission is in park, put your foot on the brake, then start the engine." She did as requested, making him nod approvingly. "Good. Now, into drive, gently on the gas and Oh god I said GENTLY!" The instructor grabbed frantically for anything solid to hold onto as the car, tires smoking violently, slewed sideways with a screech of rubber on concrete and shot out the main entrance, slamming to a halt fifty feet outside the building. Breathing hard he stared out the windscreen for a moment before slowly turning his head to glare at the Japanese woman who met his gaze with an embarrassed one of her own.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "This car is a little more powerful than the one I learned in."

After a long moment he nodded once. "OK. No harm done, I guess. Let's try that again, all right?" She nodded, still looking embarrassed, then put her foot down much more carefully this time. The car moved off a little more quickly than he wanted but compared to the first time it wasn't too bad. Sitting back he kept one hand ready to grab onto the door handle while he began giving her instructions, taking her through her paces on the course set up in the empty car park at the rear of the garage.

Adrian watched with a grin as the car disappeared in a cloud of smoke, the yell of protest coming from inside it barely audible over the scream of the engine. Shampoo started laughing again while Matt was watching with his left eyebrow raised. Looking at the fire extinguisher his colleague was holding the director chuckled. "You may need that thing yet," he commented.

Shrugging, Matt led them outside as the cloud of smoke thinned. They stood to one side of the door and watched the car begin to move off again, at something much closer to a sane speed. "I'm sure there won't be any fire involved," the man said calmly. He paused for a few seconds, then added, "Well, fairly sure. More or less." There was another long pause. "I think."

They grinned at each other then watched with Shampoo as Akane drove around the course that was laid out in traffic cones and water filled polythene barriers, only killing a few of them until she was doing the course at a fairly steady if not enormously high speed. Ten minutes later Aiko came around the corner with Jim, both of them talking together, to join them.

"Ah, you're back, then, Aiko?" Adrian asked. The brunette nodded.

"Yes, it wasn't too serious, Yori needed me to give her and Chou some rapid transportation to a medical emergency. Everything worked out OK." She looked at the car, then down at the skid marks leading from inside the garage, raising her eyebrows. "Everything going all right here?" she asked. "Only it looks like someone was in a hurry."

Grinning, the magical girl shook her head, watching the car go past on another lap of the course, steadily picking up speed. "She seems to be doing pretty well now," she noted.

"Yes, she seems to be picking it up quickly, actually," Matt replied approvingly. "Greg wasn't at all sure about all this but he's giving it a try anyway. Personally, I have no doubt that both the young women can do it very well." Shampoo gave him a pleased look.

"I'm certain of it," Adrian put in, leaning against the warm wall of the building and watching as well. "The advanced stunt training is going to be the interesting part."

"Do you do that here?" she asked curiously, glancing about. "It's a pretty big car park or whatever it is but I'd have thought you'd need more space for some of the stuff you're planning."

"We can do a lot of it here, yes," Matt replied. "Things like specialist turns, slides, spins, even some two wheel driving using that ramp over to the left there. For the things that need more room we use an old airfield to the north-east of LA, about fifty miles away, there's a decent length track and a skid pan set up there. That can wait until tomorrow. Hopefully by the end of today both Akane and Shampoo will be up to speed on basic car handling, although I'd expect that driving on the road would be more work. Learning the rules and so on is more complex than just knowing how to make the car go in the right direction, of course."

"Not to mention the fact that you guys drive on the wrong side of the road in the US," the brunette chuckled. He shrugged.

"A matter of viewpoint, of course. I think anyone who drives on the left is crazy." They shared a grin. "Shampoo, you drive on the right in China, right?"

"Yes," the Amazon replied with a nod. "But not drive on road before so have no... preconceptions. Is that right word?" She looked curious, smiling when he nodded. "Looking forward to this."

"Assuming everything works out, which I'm certain it will, they'll both need to get US driving licenses, it's almost impossible to get around without a car in this country," Adrian commented, watching Akane do another lap of the course, her smile visible despite the helmet. Greg was talking to her as they went past, looking much less worried now. "That would make more sense than going out then back here. We can do some motorcycle work as well while we're there." He glanced at Aiko. "You coming for that?"

"I don't see why not," she replied, smiling. "It sounds like fun and I'd like to see it. There's nothing particularly major going on at home at the moment and I can get back if I'm needed." She turned to him curiously. "What's involved in this firearms work?"

"Mainly firearms safety, terminology, and how to carry and handle the various weapons in a safe and convincing manner, to start with," Matt replied for the director, also turning away from the driving. Shampoo was listening although she kept her eyes on the car, watching carefully what her friend was doing. "There's a firing range under the armoury which is built to police standards, we use it for live firing. I think Aaron will probably want to check them out on pistols and one or two of the common automatic weapons down there as well, if only with blanks, to get them used to the noise and feel of the things." He laughed slightly. "I remember from basic training what it was like for some people who'd never fired an automatic weapon before the first time they did. Half the guys dropped them. We had one incident with a faulty M-16 that jammed on full auto somehow which was... kind of scary." He shook his head for a moment. "Everyone hit the deck and luckily
nobody got shot, but it was sort of exciting for a few seconds. Poor guy got a real shouting at from the instructor. Everyone was scared shitless by the whole thing."

Aiko nodded, grinning. "That must have been impressive," she noted wryly.

"That's one way to put it," he agreed, snickering. "The sergeant had a more colourful description."

"So, I suppose it'll be something like 9mm pistols, that MP5 Aaron was repairing, M-16s, perhaps an AK-47?" she asked. He nodded again.

"More or less, yes. Possibly some revolvers as well. Nothing particularly specialist, just the sort of weapon that's used a lot in movies mainly because they're commonly found in law enforcement and military usage in the US or are otherwise familiar to people. There are some more esoteric ones that might get used but it could take days to go through everything, there's no point for the trial stunts we're doing at the moment. We're not going to need to use anything really heavy or excessive right now."

Adrian laughed in a low voice. "Although it would be kind of amusing to see one of them firing something like an M-60 from the waist without any problems," he snickered. "They're both strong enough to do it without any real trouble. It would look very impressive."

Laughing, Matt glanced at the director. "Oh, yes, that would be pretty amazing. Or something even heavier. A Barrett M-82 for instance. The damn thing is nearly four feet long."

"They're easy enough to fire," Aiko smiled, "Not a lot of recoil. If you want something really silly looking for a medium height woman to use hand-held try a Browning fifty calibre machine gun with a shoulder sling. That looks completely ridiculous." They all stared at her for a few seconds, causing her smile to grow. "Like I said, I get around. There's this place in South Africa that will let you fire all sort of weird weapons if you pay them. For enough cash you can shoot a live cow with an RPG." Adrian went green at the thought. "Although I didn't do it, it seems a little excessive and cruel," she added, grinning.

"You have an interesting back-story," Jim commented after a moment. She looked at him with amusement.

"You have no idea," she replied, laughing. "And if I told you..."

"You'd have to kill me?" he asked with a smirk.

"You'd probably want me to," she assured him seriously, which made the smirk vanish. Shampoo giggled a moment later, followed by Aiko bursting out laughing.

"You're weird," the man finally said, shaking his head and smiling. She laughed even harder for a moment, nodding, then turned to watch as Akane pulled out of the course, drove carefully up to them, then stopped. She talked to Greg for a moment then both of them got out of the vehicle. The Tendo woman was smiling widely and the instructor was looking thoughtful.

Moving to join her friend, Shampoo began talking with Akane in a low voice, the Japanese woman gesturing as she described what she'd been doing, while Greg came over to them, nodding a greeting to Jim and looking curiously at Aiko, who smiled at him, before turning to Matt and Adrian. "I'll say one thing," he began without preamble, "that young woman has the fastest damn reactions of anyone I've ever met."

"Impressed?" Adrian asked, amused.
The instructor, slightly reluctantly, nodded. "Yes. She picked it up much quicker than I expected. Oh, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't let her loose on the freeway without a lot more work, but as far as the actual steering the car goes, she's driving to a level that I'd have said was the result of a couple of months of practice normally after, what, about half an hour or so?" He checked his watch, his eyebrows raised. "OK, forty minutes. Even so, damned impressive. I'm interested to see how her friend does."

"I suspect you'll find Shampoo picks it up at least as fast," Matt suggested, watching the two women talk. The Amazon was leaning in the window of the car, Akane having gotten back in, listening and nodding as the other woman explained something. "One thing I've definitely learned about those two is that once they decide to learn something, some skill, they seem to keep at it until they do it." Greg followed his gaze, rubbing his chin in thought.

"I'm beginning to see that, yes." He turned back to the others. "I'm still dubious about your damn stunt but I'll agree it might not be completely impossible. Just very unlikely."

Adrian laughed. "Your reservations are noted. Neither of us will hold it against you if you turn out to be right, but I think you'll be surprised." Greg grunted quasi-agreement, then walked over to the two young women, where Shampoo was now experimentally trying on the helmet Akane had been wearing, which seemed to fit. He checked it, then nodded, watching as she put on the neck protector as well, her long hair coming out from under it and draping down her back. Once she was in the driver's position and the harness adjusted to his satisfaction he got in the passenger side again, Akane backing away as her friend started the car. It moved off somewhat erratically but much less enthusiastically than it had done in her case, the Chinese girl apparently being a little more cautious with the gas pedal.

Walking back to them Akane grinned happily, waving to Aiko as she approached. "That was fun," she noted with a laugh in her voice. "Although Greg was sort of worried for the first few laps. He kept making little yelps and grabbing the handles when I hit things." Adrian exchanged a look with his colleagues before laughing for a moment.

"I wonder why he did that?" he asked with amusement.

"No idea," she replied, giggling. "A big strong man like that getting all worried by a couple of little accidents." Aiko snickered, Akane throwing her a grin.

"So how do you feel about driving now?" the magical girl asked. Akane thought for a moment.

"It's a lot of fun, but I'd be very nervous about driving in traffic," she replied after a few seconds. "I'd need to study all the rules and things for a while before I'd be confident about doing it right."

"That puts you ahead of a lot of people who drive around here," Adrian chuckled somewhat sarcastically. "You'd think that they'd never seen a driver's handbook judging by what I see every day on the freeway." She glanced at him with a grin.

"So you mentioned this morning."

Smiling a little they both turned to watch with the others as Shampoo did a few more laps of the course. Matt nodded approvingly as the car finally pulled over near them and both occupants got out, exchanging a few words over the roof then walking over, Shampoo pulling the helmet off after a brief fight with the strap. Greg stopped next to Adrian while the lilac-haired woman joined Akane and Aiko, all three of them talking in rapid Japanese, the brunette magical girl laughing at something the Amazon said.
"What do you think?" Matt asked. The other man watched the women for a moment more then turned to him.

"I think that both of them are pretty amazing at least as far as their reaction speed goes," he said after a few seconds. "That Shampoo girl is even quicker than Akane was, although not by much, but in either case they're way past anyone else I've ever seen. They'd probably make amazing fighter pilots if that was the sort of thing they wanted to do." He shrugged slightly. "Both of them are driving to a pretty reasonable standard, to be honest. To an insanely good one if you take the last hour and a half as more or less the only training they've had. They picked that part up very quick." He studied Shampoo for a couple of seconds again. "Like I said, I wouldn't want to put either of them on the road in traffic without more training but they could certainly handle the actual driving part."

"So you want to try teaching them some more advanced driving next?" Adrian looked enquiringly at his colleague, who thought for a little while then finally nodded.

"OK. I'm still not sure how this is going to play out but it's worth a try, I'll admit." Sighing a little as Matt and Adrian both grinned at him, he turned to Jim, shrugged, then walked over to the three women. Jim watched him go with a smile.

"He's a little worried by all this isn't he?" the safety coordinator asked rhetorically.

"More than a little, I think," Matt snickered. Jim looked at him, then down at his feet.

"Why do you have a fire extinguisher next to you?" he asked curiously.

Sitting beside Greg, now in the passenger seat, Akane watched carefully and listened intently as he explained the manoeuvres he was about to do, then executed them, quickly and surely with an expertise that betrayed just how long he'd been doing this sort of thing. He'd spent some time explaining to both her and Shampoo after their initial driving appraisal a lot of things about cars that she was still digesting, the difference between manual and automatic transmissions, front and rear wheel drive, the importance of weight distribution, how to brake properly without skidding, as well as how to make the vehicle skid, and a number of other concepts. She was going to have to think about it all for some time before she fully understood everything, the Tendo woman decided, wondering if she could find some books on the subject to study.

Driving was complicated. Oh, the actual pointing the car in the right direction and not hitting anything was easy enough, at least on a course where they were the only thing moving, but doing it on a road with hundreds of other people, many of whom were, to listen to Adrian, actively trying to kill you, was something that she was feeling somewhat worried about. At least that part of it wasn't going to happen immediately for which she was grateful. But the other things, all the advanced turns, slides, and in a while, jumps and rolls, were taking a lot of thinking about. That said, it sounded like a lot of fun.

"OK. This one is called a bootlegger turn. It's easier with a manual transmission but you can do it in this. You get up to a decent speed like this, put the car in neutral, then hold the handbrake with the release pressed. Flick the steering wheel, pull the handbrake hard..." he suited action to words, the car immediately slewing sideways with the tires shrieking, "let go of the brake, steer into the skid when you're in the right position, back into drive, and back on the power." The slide turned into a spin which abruptly ended with them pointing in the other direction having turned almost in the length of the car. The rear wheels smoked as the car slowed rapidly, then accelerated back the way they'd come.
"Eep," Akane squeaked, holding onto the harness with both hands. Greg grinned at her reaction.

"Want to see it again?" he asked. After a few seconds of recovery she smiled back, nodding.

"Yes, please." He obliged a couple of times.

"It's not hard and it's used a lot. Got it?"

"I think so."

"OK." He looked pleased. "Next, more or less the same thing, but backwards. That one is a J turn. It's a bit different because you keep going in the same direction if you do it right." Repositioning the vehicle at the side of the large empty expanse of tarmac, he turned it to face the wall of one of the studios, then looked over his shoulder. "See, you put it in reverse, again accelerate, get it up to about thirty or so, then quickly off the gas, turn the wheel hard," again he demonstrated, the car spinning through a hundred and eighty degrees in less than a second, "Opposite steering to stop the spin, into drive then back on the gas." They speeded up, now pointing forwards. "That one is taught to advanced drivers in security courses, for getting out of a tight situation when you've driven up to something you really need to get from away fast. It saves the time of turning around and being shot at."

Akane nodded thoughtfully, picturing the idea. It seemed valid. Again he demonstrated a few more times, then went on to other more advanced techniques. After about half an hour he stopped the car in the middle of the space they were driving around and turned to her. "Do you think you're ready to try it?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied, slightly nervously.

"Great. Keep calm and don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't get too close to the buildings if you can help it, keep it in the middle here where there's plenty of space." She nodded then they both got out, exchanging places. Behind the wheel she went over his instructions in her head for a couple of minutes before taking a deep breath.

"OK. What should I do first?"

"Try a simple handbrake turn. Just try to make it go half way round the first time and stop. That's pretty easy."

With a nod she put the car in drive and carefully headed to one corner of the parking lot, turning around to face the centre, then stepped on the accelerator. When the car was at the appropriate speed she quickly put it in neutral then grabbed the handbrake, applying it with one hand while spinning the wheel with the other. The car spun gratifyingly to end up pointing more or less in the direction they'd come from.

"Not bad for a first attempt." He looked pleased, as did she. "Try it again." After half a dozen attempts she was performing the manoeuvre with aplomb. "OK, again, but a little faster." They called a halt to it when she was spinning the car a full three hundred and sixty degrees from a bit over thirty-five miles an hour. "That's enough, any quicker and we'll run out of room." Greg nodded to her. "But not at all bad. Try the J turn next."

They went through half a dozen specialist moves in the next hour, at the end of which he looked genuinely happy. "I'm impressed, Akane. You picked that up very fast. You wouldn't believe how long some of those took a few people I've taught over the years, people who had been driving for a long time." He sighed a bit as she giggled.
"Maybe it's because I've got no idea what I'm doing so I'm really listening to you?" she suggested, making him chuckle.

"I guess it's possible, sure. You're certainly a quick study." Pleased she grinned at him. "I think I should show Shampoo everything we've done so far then we can move on to the complicated stuff afterwards," he added. With a smile she dropped the car into drive, stomped on the gas, then hurtled towards the watching people on the other side of the lot, making him yelp despite himself. At what she judged as the correct distance she rapidly put the car in neutral, pulled the brake, released it, steered, then counter-steered, sliding neatly to a halt with the car side on five metres from the others, all of whom other than Shampoo and Aiko had scattered. The magical girl didn't move a muscle, merely watched with amusement, while Shampoo took one step back to put Aiko strategically between her and the oncoming car, which seemed to amuse the brunette even more.

"Um. Yes, you seem to have mastered the power slide parking manoeuvre," he admitted after a few seconds, looking slightly pale. She guessed she'd taken him by surprise. Giggling Akane undid her harness and jumped out, walking over to her friends. The instructor followed more slowly, going over to talk to Adrian, who was returning from a safe distance with the other studio people.

"Having fun?" Aiko asked, smiling. She nodded.

"It's a lot of fun, yes. A bit scary at first but not too hard if you listen. He's a good teacher."

"You certainly seemed to be enjoying yourself out there," the brunette laughed. "Remember, you're not supposed to drive like that in traffic, the police tend not to like it." She grinned again. "I think they think it's showing off."

Snickering, Akane grinned back, then turned to Shampoo and began telling her what she'd learned.

"That looked pretty convincing," Matt quipped as Greg joined them. The instructor gave him a hard look.

"It was a little unexpected," he responded wryly. "That girl does indeed learn fast. She'd need a lot more experience to be able to do it for a living but I think she'd be very good at it. So far I haven't found anything that she's had too much trouble picking up." He glanced over his shoulder at the blue-haired woman who was talking to her friends with a big smile on her face. "One thing I did notice is that she's not even slightly scared by any of this. She was nervous, sure, but not actually scared, even when I was driving pretty hard. Most people who have never done it before get at least a little worried." He shook his head a little. "It's like she's not worried about getting hurt, which isn't the normal reaction. Especially with women."

He noticed Adrian and Matt exchanged a glance that made him suspicious. Jim's nearly hidden grin added to this.

"There's something you're not telling me isn't there?" he asked with narrowed eyes. Adrian, after another quick look at his two colleagues, shrugged innocently.

"Would I keep something important from you, Greg?" he asked happily.

"...Yes. Yes, you would," Greg replied after another hard look, which made all three of his companions snicker.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find out sooner or later," Adrian chuckled looking far too pleased with himself for the other man to be comfortable about. "Oh, look, I think Shampoo is ready for you."

He pointed past Greg's shoulder to where Shampoo, helmet and neck protector on, was getting into
the passenger side of the car with an anticipatory smile on her face. Sighing a little Greg looked over his shoulder then back at the director.

"This isn't over, you know," he muttered before heading back to the vehicle. He could hear muted laughter from behind him making him sigh again.

"Like this?" Akane asked, a little worried. Beside her, Greg nodded, also looking just the tiniest bit apprehensive through his otherwise placid and professional expression, as the car lined up on the special ramp that would propel the left side up into the air, to a position that would, hopefully, leave her driving on two wheels. He'd demonstrated the process a dozen times, going over the concept thoroughly, including the ideal speed to reach just before hitting it, how to keep the car balanced, how to get it back on four wheels again without losing control, and now it was her turn to try it for the first time.

'I can't believe how quickly this is all going,' she thought to herself a little wildly, gripping the steering wheel hard and staring at the innocent steel construction a hundred metres away on the heat-shimmering tarmac. 'This morning I'd had a grand total of five driving lessons three and a half years ago, now I'm in Hollywood being taught how to get a car on two wheels, on purpose!' She shook her head a little, tightening her grip to the point she heard the steering wheel make a tiny sound of protest, which caused her to guiltily back off on the pressure before she broke something. With another glance at her instructor who nodded to her, apparently trying to be reassuring, the youngest Tendo took a deep breath, put the vehicle in drive, then began accelerating.

"Careful, keep the speed at the right point," Greg cautioned her as she went a little too fast. Backing off on the throttle she nodded tightly, aiming carefully. A few seconds later the front right wheel hit the ramp, the car jolting as it tipped hard over, then the rear wheel reached it. A moment later she was looking at the world at about forty-five degrees as the car shakily wobbled along, the left side a metre or more in the air. "Good, keep it steady, a little to the right..." He reached out and gently held the wheel, adjusting it slightly. The car wobbled more for a moment then stabilised. "Great. A little more gas..."

Unfortunately, in her combined nervousness about what she was doing and her exhilaration about actually doing it, she twitched the wheel the wrong way at exactly the wrong second just as she applied power. There was a horrible moment, almost like being weightless, then they could both feel the car tip past the point of no return. "Eep!" she squeaked inanely as it ponderously tipped further and further, sawing frantically at the wheel in a vain attempt to stop it.

It was no use. "Crapp," Greg yelped, as the car rolled onto the driver's side, then skidded across the lot with a scraping sound, both of them hanging on for dear life.

'Damn, I'm glad we weren't going faster,' Akane thought frantically as she watched sparks fly through the plastic side window which was flexing madly, coming loose a few seconds later and vanishing in pieces. Even knowing she could easily take it, regardless of the helmet and neck brace, it was something of a shock. After a few tens of metres the car slid to a halt, slewing sideways at the last moment, then teetered precariously before almost gracefully rolling even further until it was completely upside-down, rocking gently from side to side on its roof.

There was a very long pause.

Eventually, she turned her head to look at her compatriot, also hanging upside down, strapped securely in place with a resigned expression on his face.

"Sorry," she said in a small voice.
He made an inverted shrug. "It happens. That's why the cars don't last long. And why there's a roll cage." Giving her a small smile he added, "You've been doing very well up until now. Don't worry about it. We'll get the truck out, pull the damn thing back onto its wheels, then have another try."

Embarrassed, she nodded, then smiled back. "Oh, we don't need to get the truck. Hang on." Hitting the quick release for the harness she grunted a little as she ended up on her head on the roof, wriggled around for a moment until she was in the right position, then slithered out the window which was now empty of obstructions. His verbal objections to her sudden disappearance she ignored as she studied the car for a moment then reached down to grab the roof over the mid-point of the roll-frame attachment, lifting steadily. The car was soon back on its side so she repositioned herself and pushed. It dropped back onto the wheels with a solid crunch, bouncing a little on the shocks. Walking around the vehicle she inspected it, not seeing anything that looked seriously out of place, although there were some fresh dents, the driver's wing mirror was missing, and the left side of the car seriously needed new paint. Looking around she found the mirror a few metres back and ran over, picked it up, then returned to the vehicle.

The door seemed stuck when she tried the handle, requiring a fairly hard pull to open, which produced a protesting metallic groan. Getting back in she tossed the mirror into the back seat then fastened her harness again, reaching over and slamming the door shut, which took three attempts before it latched. "There we go," she said in satisfaction, turning the key experimentally. To her pleasure the engine, which had cut out when the car went inverted, started and ran perfectly after a couple of tries. "Should we reset for another go, Greg, or do you want to check the car first?"

When there was no answer she asked, "Greg?", turning to look at him. He was staring out the windscreen, his face blank, both hands gripping the dashboard like he was clamped there.

"Hey, Greg? Are you all right?" Akane peered at her instructor, worried. After a few seconds had passed with no response she waved her hand in front of his visor. "Greg?"

Eventually she shook her head, bemused and rather concerned, then carefully drove back to the garage and the other people who were watching. Shampoo and Aiko were leaning on each other laughing hysterically while Adrian was watching with vast amusement. Jim seemed resignedly pleased, and Matt was shaking his head, walking over to peer into the car when they stopped a couple of metres away. "I think there's something wrong with Greg," she said as she turned the engine off. "I'm not sure what, though, his helmet isn't damaged. But he's not saying anything and won't let go." Matt leaned on the car and giggled. Staring at him with irritation, she added, "Laughing isn't very useful, is it? He's your friend, help him! I don't know what to do."

Still giggling, Matt walked around to the other side of the car as she got out and followed, opened the door, then poked the driving instructor in the shoulder a few times. Eventually, very slowly, the man turned his head to stare at them, not saying anything. Thirty seconds or so passed then he reached down and released his harness, got out of the vehicle, looked at Akane, then the car, before turning away and walking into the garage past everyone else. He didn't say a word. A moment after he vanished into the dim interior the electric roller door ground into action, slowly descending until it stopped with a loud clank as the bottom edge touched the ground. Silence, broken only by Matt, Aiko, and Shampoo, who were all laughing like idiots, fell.

Bewildered, Akane stared at the garage, then looked around, trying to work out what the problem was. Giving the three laughing lunatics an annoyed glare she made her way over to Adrian. The director was leaning against the building, his shoulders shaking, obviously attempting not to burst out laughing as well. "What the hell is wrong with Greg?" she demanded, confused and not liking it. He inspected her for a moment before sliding limply down the building to sit on the ground, rocking back and forth as he lost it. She stared at him for a moment before sharing a glance with Jim, who shrugged, a wide grin on his face.
"Everyone has gone crazy," she muttered.

Reaching out he patted her comfortinglly on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Akane," he said, grinning. "We'll give him a while. I just think Greg's not used to it yet."

For some peculiar reason the comment made Aiko and Adrian, particularly, howl with renewed mirth. Shaking her head in irritated despair Akane wandered off to sit in the shade while waiting for everyone to regain their sanity, taking her helmet off and wishing she had something to eat. She was getting hungry.

Adrian found Greg sitting in his office in the vehicle depot, a very small glass of spirits in front of him on his desk. The man was staring at it with slightly glazed eyes. Walking over the director picked up the bottle next to the glass, examining it for a moment. "Balvenie 21 year old single malt," he commented, raising an eyebrow, then unscrewing the cap and taking an appreciative sniff. "The good stuff, definitely." He put the cap back and placed the bottle on the desk, discreetly out of reach. As far as he could see the glass in front of the other man was probably the only one used from the bottle.

After a few moments during which neither of them spoke, Greg reached out and picked up the glass, looked at it for a second or two, then sighed and put it down again. He looked up. "Martial artists?"

"Yep."

"With super powers?"

Adrian studied him, a small smile on his face. "Why would you think that?" he asked innocently. His colleague stared at him with an almost angry look mixed with total bewilderment on his face. Waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the parking lot, where the director had left the others, Aiko still snickering, Greg sighed deeply looking lost.

"That car weighs a solid two tons. That little slip of a girl just rolled it from its roof onto its wheels, by herself, without using anything other than her hands. That's impossible."

"She's pretty strong," Adrian admitted. He got a gimlet stare back.

"It's impossible," Greg reiterated. Leaning against a filing cabinet the director grinned at him.

"But...?"

After a long moment Greg groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. "But she did it. I don't know how she did it but she did it. She just got out, bent down, rolled the fucking car over like it was a... a... child's toy, or something, then got back in without a care in the world. Who the fuck are those women?" he said, almost pleading with his last words.

Taking pity on him, Adrian replied, "They're very unusual people, admittedly. Both of them are unbelievably good martial artists. Honestly, you wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it. They make anyone else we've ever seen look like an amateur. And they have some interesting talents apart from that, which seem to be the result both of some very unconventional training and enormous inherent talent." He shook his head a little in wonder as Greg hung on his every word. "Akane is incredibly strong, for a human never mind a woman. Rolling that car over is nothing. She could pick the damn thing up and throw it across the car park if she needed to." He shrugged as his colleague gaped in shock. "I haven't seen it but Aiko has. Honestly, I don't really have a good
explanation as to how they can do it but they definitely can."

"Shampoo too?" the other man asked plaintively.

"She's not quite that strong, from what she says, but she's a little faster. And by faster, I mean both of them can punch you about two hundred times a second." Greg stared in disbelief. "I've seen it. You can't even see their hands move, it's just a blur."

"How...?" Greg looked lost again. He tried again, clearing his throat. "Where the hell do they come from? Mars?"

"Tokyo, actually, in Akane's case," Adrian chuckled. "Shampoo is from China originally although she lives in Tokyo these days as well."

"Are there more like them?"

The director grinned once more. "Yes, in fact there are. Aiko is much better than either of them as a martial artist, faster, stronger, and she can do all sorts of other weird things as well. But she's already got a job." Greg stared at him for a long time, then reached out without looking, fumbled around for the glass, picked it up, then brought it to his mouth and flipped the contents down his throat with a twist of his wrist. Swallowing he blinked a few times.

"She and her friends are pretty amazing, even to Akane and Shampoo," Adrian smiled. "And there are a couple of them, Yori and Chou, who are much better even than that. I mean, unbelievably better. Nice girls as well."

"How do they...?" Greg seemed to run out of words but Adrian got the gist of his question. He laughed a little.

"Magic, basically. They're magical girls, sort of freelance community defenders in Japan. For some weird reason there's lots of them there. I looked into it after I met Yori and the others back around the New Year, they turned up here with a friend of Jim's on a tour of the studio. There was an accident and they saved several lives." He shrugged a bit. "I reacted even worse than you did in some ways. It was pretty unbelievable. One thing led to another and eventually Yori ended up giving the card I gave her to Akane, who always wanted to go into the movies. They came over, did a demonstration for us, which was amazing, we took it to Mitch, now they're over for a second round of demonstrations and trials. I'll show you the tapes of the martial arts demonstration if you want." He studied his colleague for a few seconds. "You going to be OK?"

"Not really, but I can deal, I think," Greg admitted. He shook his head in wondering disbelief. "Magic, for god's sake?"

"Yep. It's very impressive." Adrian laughed. "For example, if you want instant proof, keep an eye on Aiko. She can teleport. She's their group's main transportation method I think. Akane and Shampoo are being brought back and forth by her from Tokyo, they haven't used a plane yet."

"You're joking."

"Nope." He snickered. "I've been to Nerima, the part of Tokyo they come from, courtesy of Aiko myself. It's... unusual. But a very fast way to travel."

Greg stared for a moment then closed his eyes and shook his head. A few seconds passed in silence. "You've really screwed up my world view, you know."

"Sorry."
After another silence the driving expert asked, "Do Akane and Shampoo use magic?"

"No, as far as I can work out it's not that. I'm not sure what it is but both of them say they don't use magic at all. Shampoo knows a few spells, I've seen her light a candle without touching it just by mumbling something and snapping her fingers, but she says they're just tricks. Her great grandmother, who is about three hundred years old by the way, is apparently a good mage though." At his companion's disbelieving expression he laughed. "Honest. I've met her. She claims she met George Washington once. For some reason I didn't think she was making it up."

"Holy shit."

"We thought the same thing," Adrian snickered. "Japan is a very odd place, at least around Nerima, and apparently a place called Minato which is where Aiko and her friends come from is even weirder in some ways. It was something of an eye-opener. There are all sorts of things I never believed in for a second that seem to be true." He shrugged, pushing off from the filing cabinet. "I'm assured that eventually it seems pretty normal, despite how weird it is at the moment."

Studying the other man for a moment he asked, "You up to getting back to teaching?"

With one last, mildly longing, glance at the bottle of whiskey, Greg finally nodded, standing up and following the other man out of the office and across the garage floor. "You do know, I hope, that one day I'm going to work out how to get you back for dropping me into all this insanity?"

Adrian chuckled. "You're welcome to try. Don't upset Akane or Shampoo in the process, though. Or they might pick up your car and throw it at you."

Shaking his head wearily the instructor followed the director out into the sunlight, wondering why he'd bothered to get out of bed that morning if this was the sort of thing that was waiting for him at work. Even by the standards of the movie industry, which were odd at the best of times, it was a little excessive.

"Hello, my dear. How are things going?"

Smiling, leaning against the building in a shady spot next to Aiko and Matt, while she watched Shampoo driving around on two wheels grinning madly, Akane laughed for a moment at her father's question.

"Very well, actually, Dad. There have been a few odd moments but it's mostly great. The demo for the studio executives went really well, Adrian and the others were extremely pleased as far as I could tell. Aiko stayed to help us like she did last time which was really useful, it made it look a lot more professional." She glanced at the brunette who smiled a little, also watching the Amazon while talking very softly to the stunt director. Beyond them she could see Adrian and Jim discussing something, the latter pointing at the car while gesturing with his other hand to illustrate some point. "It was a hell of a lot of fun, too. Adrian set up a really good practice course in this huge building, one of the sound stages they've got half a dozen of at the studio here. It's enormous, at least twice as high as the Dojo and probably about a couple of dozen times the floor area. They had a maze of fence panels, lots of big crates set up to give a sort of set of buildings, targets for Shampoo to shoot at, lots of blocks and thick wood, everything we needed."

Laughing at her excited tone, Soun sounded very pleased. "I can tell you're enjoying yourself, daughter. I haven't heard you this happy for a while. It's very nice to hear I must say."

"Thanks, Dad. It's wonderful so far. I wish you could see it."
"Perhaps I can at some point. I'm sure Aiko wouldn't mind bringing us all over assuming you get the job, which I have no doubt you will." Glancing again at the magical girl Akane smiled to herself momentarily.

"That would be nice. Everyone is being very supportive, and Adrian is sure as well. So is Richard Harrison, he said some very nice things about us both this morning. We went out with him and his family, Aiko, and the studio people to a really good restaurant last night." She proceeded to fill him in on their activities over the last twenty four hours.

"Nabiki sounded pleased as well when I called her this morning," she added at the end.

"She called just now to say hello and mentioned that, yes," her father told her, sounding amused. "Apparently you still have difficulty working out how time zones work."

Snickering, Akane nodded a little, remembering how her sister had sounded rather sleepy. "I forgot," she replied. Looking at her watch she made a quick calculation. "It should be about eight in the morning there if I'm doing it right," she commented. "It's just after four PM here now."

"Yes, that's correct," he confirmed. "How late will you be working tonight?"

Looking over at Adrian she frowned slightly. "I'm not entirely sure," she admitted. "Adrian has quite a lot of plans and things for us to do but I think he's moving them around in his head as he sees what happens. I'd guess we're probably going to be at this for another hour or so, that would give Shampoo about the same time in the car as I've had. Greg is teaching us each a set of moves and skills, one at a time, then testing us on them, alternately. So far it's going very well." A muted chuckle from the woman near her made her grin. "Mostly. Although there have been a couple of weird things."

"It would be unusual if there weren't," Soun joked, sounding very amused. "Considering who you are and who you're with."

She laughed for a few seconds, fully agreeing with the comment. "Oh, I know that, I'd be getting worried if everything went completely to plan. It would mean that something even weirder was going to happen." She told him about the earlier minor issue with an upside down car and the driving instructor's reaction, which she still found slightly over the top, but having had it explained could see the funny side of. Her father, by the end of the explanation, sounded like he was at the point of falling over from laughter.

"Oh, my dear, that's fantastic. That poor man. I can see why it might come as a shock to people who weren't used to what we in Nerima think of as normal, or at least not all that unusual," he chortled. She could picture him wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, the image making her grin again, missing him for a moment quite severely. "Americans especially would be a little... startled... I suspect. They do seem to have that reaction based on the ones I've met," he added after a moment's louder laughter. "Mind you, Adrian and his friends seem to have come to grips with it admirably rapidly."

"I think Adrian is having a hell of a lot of fun not telling anyone in advance what's going to happen," she giggled, watching the director as he watched the car on the tarmac with a broad approving smile, an expression he'd been wearing for most of the day. "He seems to be enjoying himself as much as we are."

"I found him a very interesting person to meet," her father noted. "You two were very lucky to be introduced to him. I suspect your relationship with the man will bring you all good things and a lot of entertainment."
"I think so too," Akane agreed. Fifty metres away Shampoo again hit the ramp, popping the car back onto two wheels with less effort this time, her fourth attempt. "It's really nice to be able to use my skills for something I always wanted to do. I owe Yori a lot for that. I hope I can repay her somehow one day." Aiko glanced at her, smiling a little, before going back to her conversation, but she got the impression the brunette was approving of the sentiment and somehow quite amused by it at the same time.

"She strikes me as someone who remembers people and what they do for each other very well, but isn't concerned about it, so I doubt you need to repay her," Soun told her. "I suspect she's be pleased if you did but not at all offended if it never happened. That's not why she and her friends do what they do." His voice was thoughtful. "With the abilities I know they have, never mind the ones I suspect they haven't shown off, they could do almost anything they wanted, yet they spend their time helping other people for no other reason that I can see than that they feel it's the right thing to do. It's very honourable, indeed. I suspect their parents, if they even know about it, are very proud. I know I would be."

She smiled, laughing under her breath. "I can understand that, although I have a feeling that their parents may well not know. From what my magazines claim most magical girls are sort of secretive, even from their families. It's not all that surprising I guess. But I see what you're saying. Even so, I'd like to do something nice for them at some point. They've all done so much for our family and me personally."

"That they have," her father agreed readily. "We have much to be grateful for, your meeting them, even under the circumstances that caused it, was a wonderful thing." They were both silent for a moment, reflecting on the recent past.

"I hope Nabiki is having fun with Miki," Akane finally said. "She sounded happy and relaxed when I talked to her earlier."

"By what she said they're having a very good time. Apparently they're going swimming today at some sort of very elaborate facility near where Miki lives. It sounds very nice. You know how much your sister loves swimming."

"She's really good at it as well," the youngest Tendo smiled. "Much better than I'll ever be." She laughed for a moment. "She seems to have a good life now. No weirdness in it, just some good friends, something she's having fun doing, and probably a decent career soon. I'm very happy for her."

"As I am for both of you," Soun responded, an amused note in his voice again. She noticed idly that Aiko was grinning a little again, thinking Matt must have said something funny. "Although I wouldn't count weirdness out of her life just yet. She is a Tendo and a native of Nerima, after all." He laughed as she sighed a little.

"Dad, she's the most normal one of all of us," the young woman said, shaking her head. Aiko, beside her, was grinning more widely but still chatting to Matt. "I very much doubt that anything strange will happen in a career in accounting or business or whatever she ends up doing. She'll just make a lot of money and enjoy herself in the process."

"Perhaps," the distant Tendo patriarch commented, not sounding entirely convinced, yet still apparently in good humour. "Perhaps not. Remember, daughter, you have a limited ability to plan your life completely. Trust me on this. Reality has a way of causing you to have to change your plans a lot sometimes with little warning. Still, I expect that whatever either of you does, you'll do it superbly. All my daughters will rise to the top of their professions, whatever that ends up being, I have no doubt."
Thanks, Dad." Touched, Akane smiled again. "I'd better go, Shampoo is nearly finished and Adrian is waving to me. I'll see you in a few days."

"Have fun, take care, and give my best to Shampoo and Aiko, will you please?" Soun requested.

"I will. Bye, Dad."

"Goodbye, my dear," he chuckled, before hanging up. Flipping the phone shut she dropped it back into her pocket, before turning to the brunette who had stopped her conversation with the stunt director, both of them now looking at her.

"Dad says hi," she remarked, grinning at Aiko. "He'd like to come over some time, I think," she added. "Personally I suspect he just wants to give teleporting a try."

Aiko laughed as they walked back to join the others, while Shampoo drove over and parked, jumping out of the car and removing her helmet then shaking her hair out, looking very pleased with herself. "That's no problem, of course, Akane," the woman told her. "I'm more than happy to oblige."

"Thanks." They grinned at each other then turned their attention to the driving instructor who had gotten out of the vehicle as well and was studying them with interest.

Turning to the driving expert and ex racing pro, Adrian asked curiously, "So do you think?"

Running his hand through his short hair while watching Akane and Shampoo, who were both in the car again, practising a number of stunt manoeuvres with the Tendo woman at the wheel for the moment, Greg considered the question for a little while. Eventually he turned to the director with a sigh and a shrug. "They've learned a hell of a lot much faster than I'd have believed, I'll admit," he replied slowly. "Whether that's enough for this crazy stunt of yours I wouldn't want to say right now but it's a lot more possible than I thought when you came in." He shrugged again. "We'll have to see how much they remember tomorrow. There's more to teach them as well, of course, before they can pull it off, we'll need a lot more room for that."

"We're going out to the airfield tomorrow afternoon for some more instruction," Adrian told him. "That's where the stunt will be run Wednesday or Thursday, all the sets are pretty much ready to go right now. We've got a team going out to fix up the specific things we need for the scene in the morning."

"OK." Greg nodded. "Sounds good." He watched as the car spun twice, then straightened out into a normal attitude, before spinning again half way around in the other direction and going into reverse. Raising an eyebrow he was forced to admire the skill Akane was showing. "Not bad at all," he murmured. Adrian and Matt both laughed, watching as well. Jim was talking to Aiko, both of them seeming pleased.

"She's really picked it up, hasn't she?" the director enquired.

"She has. Both of them have, to be honest, I'm actually impressed. I wish that other stunt drivers I've trained were so good at listening to instructions." He smiled briefly. "You were right, they're both quick and eager to learn new skills. Whether that will be enough to make up for lack of experience I have no idea but we can certainly try and see what happens." The car stopped, both young women getting out and swapping positions before slamming the doors and roaring off again, Shampoo power-sliding the vehicle half-way across the car park before handbrake-turning, then coming back more slowly, weaving in and out of the traffic cones that had been put out to form a
"If they're as tough as they are strong, I guess that even if they do wreck they'll survive." He sighed a little, glaring at Adrian for a moment, the director meeting his look with a small grin. "I still haven't forgiven you for that, you know, Adrian. I nearly had a heart attack when that girl rolled the car back like that. You could at least have warned me for Christ's sake."

"Would you have believed me?" the other man asked in a reasonable voice. Greg opened his mouth with his hand up, thought for a second, then closed it again, lowering his hand and sighing faintly.

"No."

"There you go, then." Adrian looked amused. Aiko was snickering from beside him.

"It's a lot to take in, Greg," she commented sympathetically, giving him a look, "but all in all you're doing pretty well. But you have to admit your reaction was very funny. Your expression was hilarious." Matt and Jim began laughing again at this. He frowned at her for a moment or two before, somewhat grudgingly, smiling slightly.

"I guess it was. It was... kind of a shock."

"Fair enough. But you're over that, now, I hope?" He shrugged again, turning back to watch the car the two young women were driving.

"More or less. But, I still..." He trailed off in shock as he watched a young man, wearing an absolutely huge backpack, his dark hair kept out of his eyes with a bandanna, casually walk out from between the garage and the sound studio next to it, his gaze locked on a large map he was unfolding, heading straight across the car park mere yards from where Shampoo was driving. She was looking over her shoulder at the last cone which she'd come so close to it was wobbling and didn't see the fellow as he stepped in front of her. "Holy shit!" Greg shouted in surprise. "Hey! Watch out, you idiot!" he yelled at the top of his voice, cupping his hands around his mouth, while beside him the others made various noises of surprise. It all happened so quickly he couldn't see any way that the imminent accident wouldn't occur. At his call the man looked up, turning his head to peer over his shoulder, unfortunately looking away from the direction that contained an oncoming vehicle doing about thirty miles an hour.

"God," Jim squeaked as the car struck the man squarely. Adrian fainted, Greg noticed absently out of the corner of his eye, while Matt took a step forward, his hands up as if he could somehow drag the poor fool out of danger, but it was far too late for that. He also noted that for some warped reason Aiko was laughing furiously.

What happened next made all the studio people, the conscious ones at least, stop dead and gape.

The car slammed to a halt like it had hit a telephone pole, with similar results as the radiator got pushed right back into the engine compartment, the hood crumpling up as well. A horrible metallic crash sounded, accompanied by various scraping noises, then as Greg closed his eyes, it went quiet. "Oh, fuck," he moaned, opening them again, then staring in disbelief.

The young man, who looked to be in his early twenties, had dropped his map but other than that looked more or less undamaged, all the more impressive considering he was still standing no more than a yard from where he'd been, the front of the car wrapped around him. Looking both annoyed and guilty he pushed against the vehicle, which had stalled and was obviously beyond repair, making it scrape loudly as it slid backwards a little, oil and coolant forming a puddle around his feet. They all watched, Aiko still giggling, as he brushed himself down as if he'd only had someone...
flick sand at him, before bending over, picking his crumpled map off the ground, then walking around to the passenger side of the car. He bent down to look in the window, his mouth opening, then froze. Greg could see him go completely white from twenty-five yards away.

"RYOGA!" came a scream of rage from inside the vehicle. The door exploded completely off the side of the vehicle, catching him in the face, as Akane got out having apparently not bothered to remove her harness judging by the way the straps were still hooked over her shoulders, the ends flapping loosely behind her. Looking terrified the man peeled the door off his head, dropped it to the ground, then stared in horror. Akane stomped slowly towards him, her hands clenching and unclenching, while behind her Shampoo exited the remains of the vehicle in a more traditional manner, pulling her helmet off to reveal a very annoyed and somewhat worried expression. She watched as her friend screamed rapid Japanese at the young fellow who was still as white as a sheet, backing away from the furious woman.

"Oh, this is fantastic," Aiko snickered quietly, watching intently. "What are the odds?" Greg glanced at her in stunned amazement before going back to watching the scene playing out in front of them.

After a thirty second lecture, during which the girl had ended up glaring at the young man's face from about six inches away, shouting at him in fury, he began backing away faster and faster. She kept hurling invective after him, various insults making Aiko laugh again, shaking her head in respectful amusement. "You'd better run, Pig-boy!" Akane yelled in English as the fellow turned and broke into a dead sprint, ripping her helmet off and flinging it accurately and at very high speed at him, causing it to shatter on impact with his legs. He yelped and accelerated, dropping his map in the process, before vanishing around the corner of the sound stage warehouse that ran along the back of the parking lot. Staring after him with her fists clenched Akane breathed hard for a few seconds before turning away with a sniff, flipping her hair out of her eyes, then inspecting what was left of the car. Shampoo was leaning on the roof grinning, apparently now merely amused.

Picking up the door that was lying in a crumpled heap on the ground, an impression on the outside of it that was a fairly good replica of the young man's face, she shoved it into the open passenger side then nodded to Shampoo. The Amazon moved to the rear of the car while the youngest Tendo woman went to the front, then both of them picked the vehicle up, the sight making Greg hiss in shock, carrying it back to the garage where they put it down again. Akane looked sadly at the wreck before walking around it to talk to Shampoo, the others watching with various expressions. Still intermittently chuckling to herself Aiko knelt down and poured some water from a bottle over Adrian's head to revive him, making him sputter a little then sit up, rubbing his face.

"What the hell just happened?" Greg queried weakly, still watching Akane and Shampoo talk next to the remains of his car. The brunette stood up again, grinning.

"Ryoga is, how shall I put it...?" She snapped her fingers. "An idiot, that's it. One that has a long and sordid history with Akane. He's a martial artist as well, in all truth a very good one, but he's also got some pretty serious personality issues, plus the worst sense of direction on the planet." She shrugged, shaking her head. "No one has the faintest idea how he does it, least of all him, but he can walk into a closet and not come out again. He'd get lost in a phone booth if you welded the door shut. He's also got an irritating habit of turning up in the weirdest places, generally when it would cause the most trouble. Kind of odd even by my standards. It's not teleportation like I do, or portals, or anything else anyone can work out." She looked over at Akane, who was pointing at the front of the car with a sour expression, Shampoo laughing at whatever she'd said.

"I'm actually impressed she only yelled at him. She's tried pretty hard to kill him twice before, and came damn close at least once. He's been warned off going anywhere near Tokyo ever again by
someone who you tend to listen to but he still turns up every now and then, normally running like a bastard when he figures out where he is. "The young woman chuckled. "Her anger management therapy has worked amazingly well but under the circumstances one can forgive her for getting a little annoyed."

Greg nodded somewhat helplessly, not entirely sure he understood any of this. Matt and Jim were helping Adrian to his feet. The director looked around wildly for a moment, then focussed on the remains of the car. "Oh, god, did they kill him?" he squeaked in horror, apparently not having listened to what Aiko was saying. She patted him comfortably on the shoulder.

"He's fine, Adrian. Relax. Akane shouted at him for a while then he ran away. Pity about the car, though." Looking puzzled he stared at her, then turned to the two other woman who were attending.

"I'm really sorry about the car," Akane said as she neared with Shampoo, who sighed. "Shampoo didn't seem him in time and I didn't grab the wheel fast enough."


Everyone looked at the remains of the vehicle, which had more or less bled out by this point, all the various fluids leaking from it now only dripping a little. "No use to anyone now," she added sadly.

"Don't worry, like I said, they get replaced a lot," Greg finally said, shaking his head in wonder. He half-grinned, half-grimaced. "Admittedly not normally due to hitting some weird kid, but we've got plenty of spares." He turned to Adrian who was still looking a bit shaken. "That said, I think that's probably enough for today." The director nodded slowly, casting one last glance at the wrecked vehicle, then turning to the others.

"I think you're right." Adrian looked at his watch for a moment. "It's just after five now so it's a good time to stop regardless."

"Good. I need another drink, I think," the driving instructor sighed. He reached out with his hand to the two women, who shook it in turn. "It was an experience meeting you, ladies."

Laughing slightly Akane smiled at him. "Thanks very much for all the instruction, Greg. It was a lot of fun. And I'm sorry if we've caused you any problems."

"It's not your fault," he replied with a smile of his own, casting a hard glance at Adrian to make it obvious whose fault he thought it was. The other man grinned.

"Was good fun. Thank you," Shampoo told him, also smiling. "Sorry again about car. Stupid Ryoga very tough, like hitting rock."

"I still can't believe that," Matt commented, staring at the destroyed vehicle. She followed his gaze.

"Pity. Liked driving it."

"It can stay there until the morning," Greg noted as they all walked over to look at it. "I really can't deal with moving it tonight. I'll get some of the guys to strip it for parts tomorrow then we'll scrap what's left." He looked around at the other people present. "I'm going home, getting pleasantly drunk, then having an early night. I think I deserve it after the last few hours."

They all laughed. "Thanks, Greg. We'll be going out to the airfield tomorrow around noon, I think," Adrian told him, shaking his hand.
"OK." He looked at them all again, shook his head, then wandered off, wondering what the next day was going to bring. Whatever it was, he expected it would be weird.

"Thanks for the lift, Adrian," Akane said as they stopped outside the hotel. The director smiled at her as he turned to look at her, then Shampoo in the rear seat.

"No problem," he replied with a laugh. "I'll come by tomorrow about the same time as today, traffic permitting. It should be fun."

"Looking forward to it," Shampoo grinned. "Was lots of fun today for sure."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "That friend of yours was certainly a surprise," he snickered. Akane groaned, rubbing her forehead.

"No friend of mine. He's a damn nuisance at best. Oh, well, we probably won't see him again." She pulled the map he'd been carrying out of her pocket, having retrieved it earlier. "And as usual he had absolutely no idea where he was. This is a map of Moscow." Adrian burst out laughing, the young women joining in for a few seconds.

"What a very unusual young man," he finally said. She nodded, looking amused and annoyed.

"That's a good description." Opening the door she got out, the Amazon joining her on the sidewalk, then both of them closed the doors. "See you in the morning," she called with a wave, Adrian waving back, then pulling away. They watched the car as it rejoined the main road, glanced at each other, then went into the hotel, nodding to the desk clerk on the way. He wasn't Helen, Akane noted with a smile. The man nodded politely back as they passed, heading for the elevators.

"What do you want to do now?" Shampoo asked as they ascended. "It's still pretty early, only about six or so."

"I'd like to try that hot tub, I think, then get something to eat. We could try out the restaurant, Adrian said it was good." Akane looked at her watch. "Maybe half an hour in the hot tub and a few minutes in the sauna? We'd be downstairs again by seven."

"Sounds like a plan," the Amazon replied, leading the way as the doors opened. She stopped outside her room. "Afterwards we could go out and look around some more. Maybe call Aiko and see if she wanted to come."

"We could do. In fact, why don't we invite her to the restaurant. We could have a private celebration of a good day and give her a meal as thanks for all her help." Akane smiled as Shampoo nodded, looking approving.

"I think that's a good idea. OK, I'll meet you in a few minutes after I have a quick shower." The lilac-haired girl disappeared into her own room, Akane entering hers and closing the door, going into the bedroom then tossing her bag onto the bed as she walked past before stopping at the window and looking out at the view for a moment.

'What a day,' she mused, smiling to herself. 'Learning to drive was huge fun. I still can't believe how much we were taught. Greg is a really good instructor although he looked a little shocked a lot of the time.' She giggled at the memory of his expression. In retrospect she could see the funny side of her little car on its roof event although she'd been completely lost at the time as to why he reacted like that. Heading back to the bathroom she undressed then got in the shower, sighing in pleasure at the hot water. A few minutes later she got out and quickly dried herself, putting her swimsuit on, then a hotel robe over it. She sat on the bed for a moment looking around the room
with a contented feeling. 'It's going well. I hope tomorrow goes as well as today did. Without the damned pig, though.' The memory of Ryoga turning up out of nowhere made her sigh. It had come as a shock although not as large a one as she might have expected. The guy did have a habit of appearing at the most annoying moment.

"Oh, well," she mumbled out loud, getting up again and heading for the door carrying a rolled up towel, "with any luck he won't be back for months. Ever, ideally." Making sure she had her keycard and phone in her pocket she left the room, reaching Shampoo's door just as it opened. The Amazon exited her room dressed in a similar manner to Akane, smiling when she saw her friend.

"I like these robes," she commented as she pulled her door closed. "Should we steal some?"

Laughing, Akane accompanied the other woman up to the top floor. "We can probably buy them from the hotel, I think I saw some in the little shop thing they have in the lobby." When they reached the roof they walked out onto it, looking around. Half a dozen guests were swimming in the pool, with only one person, a middle-aged woman who looked a little frazzled, in the hot tub. She was lying back with her head on the side, her eyes closed, obviously trying to relax after a hard day. "What do you want to do first, the sauna or the tub?" Akane asked. Shampoo shrugged after a few seconds thought.

"Let's try the tub for a few minutes, then the sauna, then back in the tub." She looked around quizzically. "I wonder if they have a cold plunge pool. Those are good after a sauna."

The youngest Tendo sister shivered at the thought, making the other woman grin. "Ick. I'm not sure about that."

"It's great. You get really hot, then really cold, then really hot again. Sorts you out nicely." Both of them took their robes off, folding them and putting them on a pair of deck-chairs near the hot tub along with their towels, before easing into the hot water. The other occupant opened one eye at the disturbance, smiled tiredly at them, then went back to dozing. "Ow. This is really hot," Shampoo added, slowly sliding down to a sitting position near a jet of bubbles.

"It's nice," Akane replied, leaning back and relaxing. "Oh, that's better," she sighed as the heat made her muscles loosen.

They lay in the water in silence for a few minutes, then idly began discussing the day, going over the various things they'd done and trying to guess what the next day would bring. Eventually, after twenty minutes or so, the two of them somewhat reluctantly pulled themselves out, picked up their things, then went into the sauna. The dry heat quickly left them bone dry again, just before they started sweating heavily. It was about sixty degrees centigrade in the hot room which had three or four people in it, all looking like they were melting. "Wow. This is a lot hotter than the tub," Akane noted, wiping sweat off her forehead. Neither of them could stand it for more than five minutes.

Exiting, Shampoo looked around, then headed to an alcove in the corner of the room, which proved to contain a shower fed with ice water. She jumped in and pressed the button that turned it on, squealing in shock at the sudden abrupt temperature change, before smiling at her friend. Akane watched in horror, shaking her head slowly. Getting out the Amazon waved at the facility. "Try it, it's good," she said, laughing.

"No thanks," the youngest Tendo said, backing away. Laughing, Shampoo put her hand into the stream and flicked cold water at her friend, who squawked in shock. "Hey, that's cold," she yelped.

"That's the point," Shampoo told her, fairly reasonably. They went back to the hot tub and soaked
for another ten minutes watching the sun set behind the buildings in the distance before finally drying off and heading back downstairs.

"I'll call Aiko," Akane said as they reached their rooms. "Meet downstairs at seven?"

"OK."

Inside her room, she showered again, brushed her hair, then got dressed in stretch jeans and a nice top, sitting in a chair by the window in the living room and looking out the window at the LA skyline, its lights glittering in the early evening darkness. Wondering if she should call home she decided in the end not to, leaving it until tomorrow. Pulling out her phone she dialled Aiko.

"Hi, Akane. What's up?" the magical girl replied after a couple of rings, sounding in a good mood. Which, to be honest, was pretty normal, she was a very upbeat sort of person.

"Hi, Aiko. Shampoo and I are going to have a meal in the restaurant here in the hotel at seven, we were wondering if you'd like to join us? Our treat. As thanks for all the help today if nothing else."

"That would be very nice. Thank you." Aiko laughed softly. "You don't have to think you owe me anything but I'll happily accept. I like eating. Not as much as Misaki or Yori, of course, but still..."

Akane giggled at the comment. "We'll meet you there, then, in about twenty minutes?"

"Sure. I know where your hotel is, Adrian told me the address today. See you soon." The brunette hung up, Akane dropping the phone into her pocket, then reaching for the remote control and turning the living room TV on. Flipping through the channels she stopped on the local news, near the end of the program.

"...ilar if not identical to the rash of cases over the holiday period. In those cases, as in the most recent ones, a significant number of known violent gang members were found tied up, sometimes unconscious, with evidence of their crimes next to them. Police have no idea what was done to them, there was and is no medical explanation as to how the sixty-three young men and two young women in question were rendered unconscious, and an air of mystery surrounds the entire affair. Despite the irregularities in the apprehension of the suspects the LAPD was quick to place them in custody and it is note-worthy that there have been no legal challenges to the arrests. Indeed, all the suspects were apparently quite willing, if not in fact eager, to be arrested and charged, most of them confessing to a number of crimes other than the ones the evidence found adjacent to them would indicate."

Akane listened with interest, wondering what the cause of all this was. It sounded a bit peculiar.

"Most of the suspects appear to have developed a near-pathological fear of young women in skimpy clothing, more than one of them allegedly actually screaming in terror and running back into the police station when released on bail and encountering the subject of their phobia. Psychologists we interviewed are baffled, stating only that some peculiar trauma must be involved, although they were disinclined to go on record discussing the subject without further information. Street crime in a number of the areas plagued by the gangs these suspects were members of plummeted immediately after the holiday period cases and stayed low for months, only recently beginning to rise once more. It seems likely that the events of last night may have a similar effect. LAPD sources seem amused if anything, stating only that they are pleased to have increased the crime clear-up rate by a significant amount and not commenting on speculation as to the source of the cases."

She shook her head in wonder, watching the report.
"So far in the last twenty-four hours a total of seventeen suspects have been discovered. We will continue to investigate the issue and bring you updates as they come in. This is Phil Hatfield, reporting for KTLA News from Hollywood. Now, back to the studio for the weather."

Watching the weather report for a moment, which was forecasting another hot and sunny day tomorrow, the youngest Tendo got up, turning the TV off before looking out the window. 'Strange place, Hollywood,' she mused, smiling a little, then headed out to meet Shampoo and Aiko in the restaurant.

"Adrian was right, that was an excellent meal," Shampoo stated with a satisfied air, leaning back in her chair and sipping her coffee appreciatively.

"Very nice indeed," Aiko agreed, motioning to the waiter for a refill, which he quickly obliged her with. Giving him a smile which he returned she also drank some, putting the cup down and looking across the table at the other two. "So, how are you feeling after today?" she asked.

Akane looked at the Amazon next to her, then back at the magical girl, who was waiting with a mildly amused expression. "Still sort of stunned by how fast everything is suddenly going, but on the whole, pretty pleased," she summed up after some thought.

"More or less the same," Shampoo agreed with a smile. "I think it went really well. Poor Mitch looked... quite surprised... but he seemed happy enough, Jennifer was a little shocked, and I thought Anton was going to have some sort of seizure from sheer joy at one point." She giggled a little. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so pleased."

Akane and Aiko both laughed. "It was very funny," the brunette snickered. "You won him over in about five seconds. From what Adrian said he wanted to be convinced anyway, which you managed damn well. Congratulations on a successful day. And on keeping your temper surprisingly well when a certain pig turned up." She saluted both of them with her coffee-cup.

"Thanks. And thanks again for all the help." Akane grinned at her. "Are you sure you don't mind spending all this time in LA?"

"No, it's no problem at all," Aiko smiled. "Things at home are surprisingly quiet at the moment. LA is an interesting place, plenty to see and do, and I'm having a lot of fun watching. I can get back whenever I need to anyway so it's not like it's much trouble. That said, I've got a couple of things I'll have to get on with tomorrow morning but I'll turn up later, if that's OK with both of you."

"Fine with me," Shampoo laughed, Akane nodding beside her.

"Maybe you should see if Adrian is all right with letting Serena and Sophie come and watch one of your practice stunts, if their parents will let them," the brunette suggested after a few more sips of coffee. "They'd probably love that. They're both on the school holidays at the moment."


"We can certainly ask him. I don't mind. They're nice girls."

"OK, we can ask tomorrow, then," Akane stated, finishing her coffee. Looking at her watch, she added, "It's only just after eight fifteen now, still pretty early. What should we do?" They all looked at each other.

"Go and look around town some more?" Shampoo queried. "Is anything still open?"
Aiko laughed for a moment. "Pretty much everything is still open. LA doesn't close early. Or, certainly, the Hollywood area doesn't as far as I can see. There's lots of things to see even in the middle of the night."

"We could go for a little shopping, then, if they're open," Akane smiled. "I need to get presents for everyone at home."

"Perhaps see what sort of night-life there is as well," Shampoo mused. "I haven't been to a club in months."

"Why don't we travel in style, then," the Tendo woman grinned, pulling out her phone and scrolling through the numbers in the memory, before selecting one. "Adrian said they use this limo company all the time." She hit the connect button and put the phone to her ear. Aiko watched with an amused expression.

"You know I can take us in seconds, right?" she asked, giggling. Akane nodded, laughing a little.

"I've always wanted to ride in a limo. Let's indulge." The phone rang a couple of times then a professional-sounding voice came to her ear.

"Limos Extreme Hollywood, this is Martin. How can I help you tonight?"

"Oh, hello, I was wondering if I could book a car for three people, please? My name is Akane Tendo, you were recommended by Adrian Stewart from Mountain Picture Studios."

"Hello, Ms Tendo," the man said. "Certainly. Mr Stewart told us you might be using our services. Can I confirm your address?" She gave him the address of the hotel. "We can have a car there in fifteen minutes. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Yes, thank you. Um, how much will this cost, can you tell me?"

"Don't worry about that, Ms Tendo, it's covered by the studio. Just enjoy your night out and please call us again when you require our services." He sounded politely amused.

"Thank you very much," she replied. Disconnecting she put the phone away, looking at her friends. "Fifteen minutes, he said."

"How much?" Aiko asked curiously.

"Apparently the studio is covering it."

"Not bad. They're certainly treating you well," the brunette chuckled.

"I'll say," Shampoo replied, finishing her coffee and reaching for a cracker from the plate in the middle of the table, nibbling it with an amused smile. "I could get used to this sort of service." Aiko grinned at her, also taking a cracker.

"With any luck you will, pretty soon, I think," she laughed. "Although you should probably be careful not to spend everything as soon as you get it. I knew someone like that once, the amount he'd spend would basically be about twenty percent more than he earned, no matter how much he earned. That's not a good idea, sooner or later it catches up with you."

"We've been warned about that," the Amazon said, "Great-Grandmother was quite explicit about it."
"Wise woman, the Elder, from what I know," Aiko agreed. "So, are either of you planning on trying driving at home?" The two other woman exchanged glances.

"I really want to read the driver's manuals first," Akane told her, shaking her head. "And we've only driven an automatic transmission car so far, on the right side of the road. A manual transmission on the left side might be asking a lot at this point."

"It's easy enough, although you're right, it's also different enough it can catch you out." Aiko shrugged. "Not that I do a lot of driving, it's not like I need to, but I've learned how. Misaki is a very good driver, brilliant in fact, and the others aren't bad. Incredibly quick reactions make up for lack of experience to a degree." She grinned a little. "Even so, Tamiko isn't someone who should be let loose in a car. Very fast, but... kind of scary." They laughed at her expression. "She tends to get carried away."

"Can Yori or Chou drive?" Shampoo asked curiously. Aiko nodded.

"Yori can, certainly, very well, although again she doesn't do it often. None of us have cars. I know a few of the girls who do but most of us tend to stay fairly close to home for the most part and don't need them. Chou can drive pretty well too but has a lot less experience at it. What with portal travel, teleporting, and that sort of thing, it's never been very important."

Akane was intrigued. "Can any of the others teleport? I thought that was your special skill." Aiko giggled, nodding.

"Oh, it is, and I'm very pleased about it. I've been doing it for years. It's enormous fun aside from anything else. I'm probably the most travelled one of all of us, on this planet at least." They looked oddly at her making her laugh again. "Portals, you understand. Yori and Chou have been through them a lot more than the rest of us, they treat them like doors into another room. It's kind of weird even for me."

"OK," Akane nodded, her mind trying to grapple with the concept. Teleporting was odd enough but hopping back and forth through portals seemed a little excessive, bearing in mind that they went to places demons came from. Still, Yori and her partner were the sort of person who could take that in stride if anyone could.

"But that said, both of them have been studying my teleportation ability for years. Chou is pretty sure she'll work out how to do it sooner or later."

"That's amazing," Shampoo commented, fascinated.

"They're really good at deconstructing and improving complicated magic," the brunette replied. "Better than anyone else I know by a long way."

"I wish I could do something like that," the youngest Tendo sister sighed. Aiko smiled at her.

"Be happy about all the things you can do, which is a hell of a lot more than almost anyone else ever could. Magic isn't easy for most people and the magical girl stuff, while it brings a lot of perks, also tends to add a hell of a lot of chaos to your life. I personally love it but it's not for everyone. Your life is already pretty chaotic."

Shampoo laughed for a few seconds, shaking her head in agreement. "Oh, god, isn't it? I'd like to teleport as well, it would be really useful, but if it meant I ended up having to go up against the weird demons you guys do, well..." She shrugged, still grinning. "I can live without all that perfectly happily." Akane nodded vehement agreement from beside her, making Aiko in turn
laugh.

"It's not ideal for most people, certainly. But it's often good fun." She thought for a few seconds. "When it's not completely terrifying or horrifically disgusting."

"Like Halleckton?" Akane watched as a cloud crossed the brunette's face at those two words, feeling suddenly guilty.

"Like Halleckton," Aiko agreed quietly. "I could have done without that."

Silence fell for a little while, the magical girl lost in her thoughts, while the other two exchanged worried glances. By her expression those thoughts weren't happy ones. Eventually, though, she shook her head slightly, her smile coming back although it looked a little haunted for a few seconds.

"Can't be helped. It's done with, we caught the bastard responsible, and it's out of our hands now." Her voice was soft and regretful. The youngest Tendo wondered, once again, exactly what had happened in a small town in Canada months ago, but decided that it might be for the best if she didn't know. Judging by the effect it had on Aiko, she though it would probably cause her sleepless nights.

"Sorry," she muttered. Aiko smiled at her.

"Don't worry. We've all learned to live with our memories. It was horrible, but like I said, it's all in the past now, so we move on. But, yes, to answer your earlier question, there are indeed bad parts to the magical girl life. That was a particularly nasty one." She looked up as one of the hotel staff approached, looking around for a moment before finding Akane and walking over.

"Miss Tendo? Your car is waiting outside."

Standing up Akane nodded her thanks, thinking quickly then discreetly slipping the young man a twenty dollar bill, folded tightly, as Adrian had demonstrated in the car that morning when she'd asked. It vanished as she shook his hand. "Thank you," she smiled, switching to English.

"No, thank you, Miss Tendo," he replied with a polite nod, turning and leaving. She glanced at her friends who both stood as well.

"Neatly done," Aiko giggled. "Have you practised?"

"No, but Adrian told us about tipping and the like this morning," she snickered as they left the restaurant, heading for the front door. "I'm impressed how smoothly he took it, there was no sign at all."

"They're very professional here," Shampoo laughed. "I'd guess they're even trained in accepting tips."

"Probably." Laughing, Akane led the way outside, stopping to inspect the long black car parked immediately in front of the main doors, a well-dressed and remarkably large middle-aged Hispanic man standing beside it waiting with his hands crossed in front of his body like something from a Yakuza movie.

"Ms Tendo?" he asked in a deep gravelly voice. She nodded, slightly awe-struck. Shampoo and Aiko exchanged an impressed glance.

"Yes, that's me."
"I'm Elias, I'll be your driver tonight. If there's anything you need please let me know and I'll do what I can to help." He opened the rear door and stepped aside. "If you'd like to enter the vehicle?"

Looking over her shoulder at the other two for a moment, she did as requested. As soon as they were all inside, he closed the door gently then got into the driver's seat. They looked around, inspecting the cavernous interior. "This is a little more over the top than I was expecting." Shampoo said quietly after finding a small refrigerator full of various snacks.

"Nice, though," Aiko grinned, opening a leather-covered bulge in the seat which turned out to contain a number of bottles of alcohol and some glasses. "Just like in the movies."

The dark glass window partitioning off the rear of the car from the driver slid down with a muted whine and they looked up to see Elias peering back at them. "Where to, ladies?" he asked politely.

"We're not sure, actually," Akane replied after looking at the others, who seemed perfectly content to allow her to be the spokeswoman. Aiko was engaged in sniffing the contents of the various decanters, settling on one that was half-full of a dark brown liquid that brought an impressed smile to her face, then pouring a small amount into a glass. Shampoo looked at it, then her, making her grin and hand it to the Amazon, pouring herself another one. "We were thinking of going to look around the area, perhaps do a little late-night shopping, then maybe find a club or something like that." He nodded slowly. "Can you suggest anything?"

"I believe so, Miss," he said after a moment's thought, turning back to the front and starting the car, which was virtually silent from the inside. "Do you wish to shop for clothes, jewellery, or souvenirs? Or perhaps something less common?"

Aiko looked up from sipping her drink, raising an eyebrow at it approvingly. "I could do with some new dresses, Fumiko was saying just yesterday that I hadn't got anything nice in months." Akane laughed, glancing at Shampoo, who shrugged.

"Clothes are a possibility, I think," she relayed to the driver, who nodded as he guided the large vehicle expertly down the drive and onto the main road.

"Certainly. In that case I have a number of possible destinations in the Hollywood area. Would you like me to take you to the first one? It will take about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Elias, that would be very nice," she responded.

"Of course. Please enjoy your trip." The partition slid upwards again with almost no sound.

"Do you think he can hear us?" she whispered after a moment, uncertain. Aiko looked up from examining the bottle again, tilted her head a little and appeared to listen, then shook her head.

"We're fine. I think you need to press that button there on the intercom beside you to talk to him," she replied, pointing to a discreetly positioned control panel in the midst of all the cream leather.

Slightly relieved, the youngest sister relaxed, looking around again. "Wow. This is like something from a movie. I wasn't expecting it to be so nice." Aiko handed her a glass with half a centimetre of liquid in the bottom, which she took and held for a moment. "And Elias seems very nice. Polite as well. He's like an American version of one of those English butlers you see in the movies."

"If butlers carried guns," Aiko snickered, making Akane and Shampoo stare at her in surprise.

"Really?" the Chinese woman asked curiously. She nodded.
"Yep. 9mm Glock 17 in a shoulder holster. His suit is tailored to hide it, which it does pretty effectively. Most people would never see it." The magical girl looked around with interest at the interior of the car as Shampoo and Akane exchanged a glance. "The car is lightly armoured as well, look how thick the windows are. I guess this company does a lot of business with people who might be worried about being shot at. I suspect Elias is probably pretty well-trained with his gun." She sipped her drink as Akane thought about that little fact, eventually trying her own glass.

"Gah." She coughed a little, making both Shampoo and Aiko giggle. "What is this?"

"A very nice ten year old brandy," Aiko replied, grinning. "About a hundred and twenty proof. I don't think you should have too much but it's a nice start to the evening." Shampoo sipped her own drink carefully, nodding after a moment.

"It's very good," she commented.

"Damn expensive, I think." Aiko looked at the bottle again then put it away, closing the mini bar. Tentatively, Akane tried another sip, finding it went down much more smoothly this time.

"I don't drink a lot," she said, sipping slowly. "But this is sort of nice. In small quantities."

"The best way to drink," Aiko laughed. "Too much and you just end up falling over."

"I've seen all to much of that," Akane sighed, finishing her glass and handing it back. "Poor Dad used to get drunk all the time. Uncle Genma too. Mainly on saké, of course, we couldn't afford brandy at the time. I guess we could now but neither one of them drinks that much any more. Which I for one am very glad about." She looked curiously at the brunette as the other woman nodded slightly, smiling. "Does alcohol affect magical girls like that?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, but admittedly not nearly as much as it does most people," Aiko chuckled. "I could drink this entire bottle and only get a little tipsy for half an hour or so at worst. Not that I would, even so, I like it but not that much. I prefer a good bottle of wine or some nice beer. Yori doesn't drink at all, she hates the taste if nothing else, but the rest of us do on occasion."

Amused, Akane smiled, then turned her head to look out at the scenery passing outside the window. "This is certainly a very civilised method of getting around," she giggled. "Slower than your way but very comfortable."

"It's fun," Shampoo laughed, rummaging in the fridge, finally surfacing with a packet of roasted peanuts, which she opened and began grazing on. "I've always wanted to go in a big limo too, I never thought I'd get to do it, though."

"Kodachi would go green if she saw us," Akane snickered. The Amazon burst out laughing, nodding. Glancing at Aiko, the Tendo woman explained, "Kodachi Kuno is an old... acquaintance..., I guess. Mad as anything, totally nuts, but a pretty good martial artist. Their family is rich, they've always tended to show it off, Kodachi more than her brother. But they don't have a car this nice as far as I know."

"I've heard of her," Aiko grinned. "Ms Aoyama mentioned she had an encounter with her a while ago. On the roof of the Tendo Dojo, in fact. She seemed slightly irritated about it." Akane felt herself pale. Across from her she could see Shampoo go still. "It's hard to tell with her but I got the feeling she wasn't entirely impressed with Ms Kuno." The brunette seemed very amused.

"Oh, god, even thinking about that woman makes me shiver," Akane finally responded, her voice trembling a little.
Aiko inspected her with a small smile. "I can understand that, I know her pretty well but she's not the sort of person you invite over for a drink."

"Not even close," Shampoo quavered.

"But, on the other hand, she seemed to like both of you, on balance," the magical girl continued, laughing a little at their shocked looks. "As much as she likes anyone. As I said, hard to tell."

"Likes us?" Akane finally gasped.

Shrugging, Aiko nodded, putting her empty glass away and closing the mini bar again. "Yep."

"But she terrifies us both whenever she turns up," the Tendo woman whispered, feeling cold. "She's absolutely horrifying."

"Oh, she is that, true enough. Trust me, she's not someone you'd ever want to annoy. Creepiest person I've ever met in my life. But, the critical thing is, she's also very, very smart, a good judge of character, and scrupulously honest." Aiko grinned at them, although there was a slight edge to her smile that made Akane think that she also found the woman in question quite worrying. "She did after all mention to Yori that she felt you were becoming very good at martial arts even for Nerima. She wouldn't have done that if she had a real problem with you." The young woman smiled again while Shampoo and Akane exchanged wondering glances. "For whatever reason she and her employers are taking an interest in you both above and beyond what they normally do."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing," Akane muttered.

"It's good as long as you don't disappoint them." Aiko looked at them both, smiling a little.

There was a long thoughtful silence. "What would happen if we did?" Shampoo finally asked. The brunette's smile faded.

After another few seconds, she replied, "It's probably best not to find out." Her face was serious. Shivering, Akane met Shampoo's eyes, in which she could see a similar trepidation to that which she was feeling. Aiko suddenly laughed. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Just try not to let anything bad happen without a good reason."

Quiet fell again as two of the three occupants of the limo tried to settle their nerves. Aiko seemed mildly amused, watching the world go past, until the others finally recovered enough to push the entire thought to the backs of their minds. Eventually the limo slowed, then pulled over to the side of the street. The partition slid down again. "We're here, ladies," Elias announced. He got out, came around to the other side, then opened the door, just as Shampoo was reaching for it. "This establishment has a number of clothing suppliers which can cater for almost any style or price you might wish. It's open until half past eleven o'clock tonight." They all got out, looking around. The building they were in front of, on a street that seemed to have a significant number of high end cars driving around, looked like a discreetly expensive mall of some sort. Inside the glass doors they could see a corridor with quite a few shop fronts opening off to either side, brightly lit and glittering.

"Looks interesting," Aiko laughed. Akane nodded slowly, inspecting it curiously, then looked at the driver, who smiled faintly.

"Take as long as you need. I will be waiting in the car in the parking structure across the road when you require me again." He indicated the parking facility with one hand. "On the ground floor, at the rear." Handing her a card he tipped his hat to her politely. "When you need me to bring the car
around please call that number." Nodding to them all he got back into the vehicle, which had been idling almost silently beside them, then indicated, performing a wide U turn that neatly ended up in the entrance of the parking lot, into which the vehicle disappeared. Akane watched, slightly stunned, then turned to her friends.

"Wow. Just... wow."

Shampoo giggled for a moment, shaking her head. "I didn't expect all the personal service," she commented, following as Aiko approached the doors to the shopping facility, looking very amused.

"I wonder how much the studio is paying for the car and the driver," the brunette laughed as she led them inside. "It's pretty obvious they're a lot more than a taxi company with some nice cars. I get the impression that if you needed to get rid of a body, Elias could probably arrange it fast and discreetly." Akane glanced at Shampoo, both of them bursting out laughing, before they all began looking through the various shops available.

"How about this one?" Shampoo pointed at a rack of silk blouses. Akane looked carefully at the emerald green one her friend was indicating, removing it on its hanger and holding it up to the light. "It looks like it would fit Nabiki."

"I think it would," the youngest Tendo mused, checking the label and converting clothing sizes from US measurements to Japanese ones in her head.

"Good material," Aiko commented, gently feeling the sleeve. "Very high quality silk."

"It's a colour she really likes as well," Akane noted. She checked the discreet price tag and paled slightly as she worked it out in Yen. "Not exactly cheap, though." Aiko looked and nodded.

"No, but it's very nice, this place has some really good stuff in it," she said, looking around. The saleswoman at the back of the shop seemed content to simply watch, although they all felt she would leap to attention if they were in need of help. It was fairly obviously a high-end boutique, not a mass market place. The prices if nothing else would prove that although as the magical girl had said, the quality of the goods on offer was very respectable.

"True. And I really should get her a nice present, she's been so helpful about all this." Weighing it up in her mind, the Tendo woman nodded sharply. "Right. I'm getting it." Carefully folding the top she put it with the few other items she'd found.

"Nice. OK, I'm going to check out that place over there, I'll see you in a little while," Aiko said, pointing across the corridor at another shop. They looked, then both the others nodded, going back to looking around. Aiko left while Shampoo pulled another blouse from the rack, holding it up against her chest and studying it.

"It's exactly the same colour as your hair," Akane giggled, inspecting the garment. Shampoo grinned.

"I like it. That's going on the pile."

Eventually they had enough in the way of purchases, heading to the counter. The woman behind it smiled as they approached. "Did you find everything you needed?" she asked politely.

"I think we did, thank you," Akane replied. She looked at the various small signs on the register. "Do you take Japanese credit cards?"
"Certainly, miss, we can accept Visa or Mastercard from all over the world. We have many international clients." Pleased that she wouldn't have to dip into the cash Adrian had given them, Akane pulled out her Visa card, thinking once again it was a good idea to have finally gotten one the previous year, at Nabiki's suggestion. Once more her sister had given good advice. She didn't use it all that often but it did come in handy now and then.

She looked at Shampoo for a moment. "I'll pay for everything with this, you can pay me back at home," she said.

"Thanks," her friend smiled, pleased.

Soon after, they left the shop with a couple of bags. Aiko was just coming out of the other shop, apparently empty-handed. "Did you get anything?" Shampoo asked curiously.

"Some very nice jeans and a dress," Aiko replied, looking at the bags they were carrying. "Do you want me to take those and keep them out of the way, like with the rest?" she asked. The two young women nodded, watching with interest as both the large bags they handed over disappeared without trace, as had the previous four with their other purchases.

"So. What next?" The brunette waited for them to decide, looking content and relaxed.

Looking at her watch Akane was surprised to see they'd spent nearly two hours just in the last three shops. "I'm pretty much shopped out, I think," she remarked. "I've got things for everyone at home and some nice stuff for myself." She glanced at Shampoo, who shrugged.

"I'm done, I think. I got a nice shirt for Mousse and some shoes that Great-grandmother should like, plus my own things. I can't afford too much more at the moment."

"In six months you could probably buy the shop," Aiko snickered. Shampoo grinned.

"Possibly, but right now, I'm pretty much tapped out."

"Why don't we see about some sort of club, then," Akane suggested. "I could do with a little music and some drinks."

"Sounds like a plan," Aiko agreed, Shampoo nodding as well. Pulling out the card Elias had given her, Akane dialled the number, then waited. It was answered on the third ring.

"Elias," came the reply in the driver's deep voice.

"Hi, Elias, it's Akane Tendo. We're finished here, we're just on our way outside."

"I'll have the car waiting, Ms Tendo," he assured her.

"Thank you," she replied, disconnecting and putting both phone and card away.

They made their way outside, looking left and right, to find the limo parked a few dozen metres down the road as there were several other cars immediately outside the shopping facility. A few people were wandering around looking in the shop windows. Turning to the left the three young women headed towards the car.

Ten metres from the vehicle, they passed a service alley which ran down to the rear of the shopping area. Akane noticed out of the corner of her eye that Aiko had slowed as she approached it, giving it a more than merely casual glance, making her sure that for some reason the magical girl was aware of something she wasn't. About to ask what it was, she instead twitched when a pair
of young men in their late teens, one white and one black, suddenly jumped out of the darkness to land in front of them, waving knives. She stopped dead as did her friends, all three of them exchanging a slightly incredulous glance. Aiko didn't look surprised at all, which in turn didn't surprise the youngest Tendo. She'd probably been aware of the two since they left the shop, Akane thought to herself with amusement.

None of them reacted in the way that the two muggers were obviously expecting, which made the pair look at each other in a somewhat confused manner before they got back to the job in hand. "Hey, bitches, give us everything you have," the white one said aggressively, stepping forward and waving his knife in a manner that he probably believed was menacing. Akane thought it was sort of cute.

"Why?" she asked reasonably. He looked confused again.

"Because I'm telling you to," he finally said. His accomplice nodded from beside him.

"What he said," the other young man explained.

Akane, Aiko, and Shampoo all looked at each other again.

"And?" Aiko inquired, appearing politely curious. He seemed puzzled once more.

"And what?" he asked, staring at her.

"And why should we do what you tell us to?" The woman expanded on her comment. He thought hard for a couple of seconds.

"Because... we have weapons and you don't?" the youth finally tried, slightly questioningly. He glanced at his companion who firmly nodded back, then returned his attention to the women. Aiko shrugged.

"OK, I suppose that's a reason. Not a good one, admittedly, but a real one." Akane smiled to herself. The brunette sounded relaxed and amused. All three of them noticed Elias exit the car and walk up behind the muggers, making very little sound, and look quizzically at them. The Tendo sister made a tiny gesture to him to wait. With a small nod he held his position, watching alertly and silently.

"So, if I understand your position, the fact that you're armed and we're not means we should follow your commands and relinquish our possessions to you?" Aiko asked in an even tone, sounding more than a little like a very cold woman of their mutual acquaintance. The mugger looked extremely puzzled, turning to his co-worker, who shrugged helplessly.

"Um... What you talking about?" he spluttered. Aiko sighed, sounding mildly put-upon. Akane saw that they were beginning to draw a crowd, several people stopping and watching, although the muggers didn't seem to have noticed, caught up as they were in the attempted mugging which had somehow gone very wrong for them.

"I am simply trying to get the rules of engagement clear in my mind." This didn't seem to help. She dumbed it down some more. "I'm trying to work out what you want."

"Oh." He brightened up, waving the knife again. "We want all your stuff or we'll cut you."

"Ah. I see." Aiko rubbed her chin in thought while Akane and Shampoo giggled quietly. Behind the muggers Elias was listening and watching with a small smile, his right hand inside his jacket. "And you feel that because you have weapons and we don't that we'll do what you say."
"Exactly." The other mugger looked pleased that they finally understood.

"There's a problem with that, though," Aiko continued, making them look oddly at her. "I have a weapon. Several, actually. Does that mean I don't have to give you anything?" She was suddenly holding a pair of visibly glowing, razor sharp scythes. Both young men locked their eyes on the twinned kama, paling slightly as she expertly twirled them in her hands without looking, then made a viciously quick slicing motion with one that produced a nasty tearing-silk sound as it cut through the air. Elias raised an eyebrow but otherwise didn't move.

"No fair, Aiko," Shampoo commented with a laugh in her voice. "I no have weapon. Why you have all the fun?"

"Oh, sorry, Shampoo," Aiko replied, looking at the Amazon with a grin. She disappeared one of her kama for a moment, retrieving the sword she'd lent to the other woman during the demonstration that morning then tossing it to her. Shampoo caught it without looking at it, spinning it through a series of blindingly fast motions to end up with it in a guard position horizontally in front of her, taking a stance that showed she was ready to either attack or defend at a moment's notice. She grinned over it at the two muggers who were staring at her in horror.

"Now have weapon too. Not give anything to you, yes?" They nodded convulsively, swallowing hard. Behind them, Elias' other eyebrow had gone up and the smile had widened.

"Do I get a weapon?" Akane asked, putting her hands on her hips and looking at her friends with amused irritation. Both of the others shrugged. "Oh, be like that, then," she snarked, before darting forward and relieving both muggers of their knives, going back to her position between the magical girl and the Amazon before either of the young men could react, a knife in each hand.

"Hey, look at that," Aiko giggled. "Now we all have weapons and you don't." She smirked nastily at them as they stared in disbelief. "I believe that according to your own rules of engagement that means you have to do what we say." Taking a step forwards she twirled her scythes again meaningfully. "Give us everything you have," she added, her voice dropping dangerously.

The two young men gaped at the three women, while several onlookers laughed or clapped, then turned to run, only to find a very large man in a nice suit pointing a pistol at them. "I believe you should listen to the ladies," he commented mildly in a deep voice. They froze, glanced at each other, then began emptying their pockets.

The car drew up outside the hotel, Elias getting out and going around to open the rear door. Three young women exited, laughing and in a good mood. He smiled as the blue-haired one bowed slightly to him. "Thank you, Elias," she said, her nicely-accented voice sounding pleased. "You've done a wonderful job. The club you recommended was excellent."

"Thank you, Ms Tendo," he replied, nodding respectfully back and accepting the folded note she slipped him very discreetly. "It has been a genuine pleasure driving you around. And it was most entertaining watching you and your friends deal with those young men." She chuckled, sounding both amused and a little tipsy.

"That was fun."

"It was unusual, I'll admit," he remarked, shaking his head a little. "But very effective." He watched the other two, the brunette who had somehow managed to produce a number of edged weapons from nowhere talking to the one with the long purple hair in Japanese, both laughing quite a lot about something. "I hope you and your friends enjoy your stay in L.A. If you need a car and driver
again, please consider contacting our company."

"I'll definitely do that," she assured him, grinning. When she glanced at the car he smiled again.

"I'll deal with the rest of the business on my way home, don't worry, Ms Tendo."

"Thanks again." She waved as she rejoined her friends, all three of them going into the hotel. Watching them go he shook his head slightly in wonder.

"Unusual young women," he mumbled to himself as he walked around to the rear of the car. "I wonder what they do for a living?" He looked at the hundred dollar bill the Tendo woman had slipped him, smiling a little. "Generous, too." Opening the trunk he looked inside at the two scared faces peering up at him past the gags and the remarkable amount of rope the brunette had pulled from somewhere. "OK, you two, we're going to take a little trip to the police station now. All comfortable in there?" There was some muffled cursing which made him grin as he closed the trunk again, before getting back into the car and driving off. Sometimes this job was a lot of fun.

Harrison sat at his desk, nibbling a bagel he'd picked up on the way in to work, as usual looking through the cases stacked up in his IN box that had come in overnight. Grinning he noted yet another sheet full of the 'unexplained' tied up gang members, the same thing that had happened on the previous night. 'Aiko's been busy,' he chuckled to himself. 'I wonder if she brought any of the others over to play?' Flipping further through the paperwork he stopped on one page, his eyebrows going up steadily, until he finally lost it and roared with laughter.

'Get used to it? I doubt it,' he giggled, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head with his hand over his eyes. Reading the report again he grinned. 'A reverse mugging. That's a new one on me. Leave it to those girls to manage that.' Putting the paperwork down he picked up his bagel, finishing it off while snickering to himself. 'I can see life getting very interesting when those two are working here, if that's what happens when they just go shopping...'

It took several minutes before he was able to get to work.

Glancing at Akane as they pulled up outside the staff gates, Adrian wondered why she was grinning to herself. Shampoo was doing the same in the back of the car. They'd both been in a weirdly good mood since he'd picked them up at the hotel earlier. Putting it down to excitement and anticipation he nodded to the security guard in the control booth at the gate, who smiled back, activating the barrier which rose out of the way. Driving in he made his way through the studio facility and parked at the back of the building containing the armoury.

"Aiko said she'd be here later," Akane commented as they all got out of the car. He locked it and nodded.

"OK. I left instructions at the gate to let her in when she turns up. Not that she really needs it, of course." Just as they were entering the building, another car arrived, disgorging Aaron, so he waited for the other man to catch up. "Hi, Aaron."

"Hello," the arms-master greeted them, seeming pleased to see the young women. "How did the driving go yesterday?"

"Very well indeed, I think, Aaron," Akane replied, then frowned slightly as they all went inside, the air conditioned interior considerably cooler than the outside temperature which was rapidly rising. "Although it ended annoyingly." He gave her a questioning look to which she sighed,
Shampoo laughing for a moment. "An old... acquaintance... unexpectedly turned up and got in the way. It caused some problems." Aaron looked puzzled, glancing at Adrian for a better explanation. The director sighed but laughed at the same time.

"You wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it," Adrian admitted, shaking his head. "But when you get time go over to the vehicle depot and have a look at the car they were driving. It explains a lot."

The compact and battered man looked mildly confused but nodded after a few seconds. "OK." Entering the armoury he walked over to his desk, dropped the bag he was carrying on the floor next to it, then sat down, rotating his chair back and forth for a moment. One of his subordinates stuck his head out of a side office at the sound of them arriving, then came out and handed his superior a clipboard with a number of papers on it. Aaron thanked him, flipping through them and signing a couple, while the others waited, Shampoo gravitating to the rack of swords again and inspecting a few closely.

Stopping on one sheet Aaron groaned as he read it, then looked up at his colleague who shrugged. "Again? That's the third time in the last six months. What the hell are those idiot actors doing to my guns?"

"No idea, but they seem to have some weird skill or talent for wrecking the fucking things," the man said in a very irritated voice. "That particular M-60 seems to be a favourite for some reason. It's jammed completely solid, I can't even get the bolt out of the receiver to fix the thing. It's like they poured glue into it or something."

"Assholes," Aaron grunted, sighing slightly. "I hate actors. You heard about that idiot who managed to bend the firing pin on one of the MP5s yesterday?"

The man stared at him incredulously. Adrian was chuckling quietly off to one side at their expressions, Akane listening slightly confusedly. "How the hell did he do that? It's an enclosed pin for Christ's sake." Aaron shrugged.

"No idea. The last eighth of an inch was sheared clean off. I had to replace it and the spring, which was distorted as well. It probably jammed and he tried to clear it with a crowbar or something stupid like that. Of course, his excuse was 'It just broke.' Sure it did." Aaron shook his head disgustedly as his co-worker sighed. Picking up the clipboard again he signed the last sheet then handed it back. "Thanks. I'll be busy all morning, so you deal with everything unless it's an emergency, OK, Mike?"

"Sure, Aaron," the sub-armourer replied with a nod, taking his paperwork back into the office. Aaron turned to the others.

"Sorry about that, the paperwork never stops."

"No problem, Aaron," Adrian replied. "So, how do you want to do this?" he asked. Shampoo and Akane came over and listened attentively. Aaron glanced at them, thinking.

"I've been thinking about it for a while. At the moment, we only need to get them to a level where they look convincing with firearms, enough to not stand out, and know how to use them safely, right?"

Adrian nodded slowly. "Pretty much, yes. We need to have them able to look like they mean business, not fight a war. Stopping them blowing their own heads off is probably pretty high up the list as well." He grinned as Akane giggled. Aaron smiled a little.
"True. OK, in that case, I think a standard firearms safety class is the first thing, which we can do downstairs on the range. Start them off with something simple like a 9mm pistol." He looked directly at the two young women. "Precision target shooting isn't required yet. Or at all, for acting and stunt work, generally, although you might well be very good at it, based on Shampoo's insane skills with a bow. But before I let you wave a gun around I want to make absolutely sure you know how it works and how to handle it without killing anyone, yourselves included." She nodded, as did Shampoo, the two exchanging a glance. "Even with blanks in they're not toys, something that a lot of people seem to forget. Even a blank can kill you if you use it wrong."

Getting up he went to one of the heavy duty locked cabinets on the wall, punching a combination into the keypad on it, which beeped and clicked. Opening the door he pondered the array of pistols nearly arrayed inside, before selecting a pair of 9mm Glocks, along with four empty magazines, turning and putting them on his desk then relocking the cabinet. Quickly and expertly he checked that the magazines were indeed empty, operating the slides to ensure the pistols were clear, then looked at the two women who were watching with interest.

"Glock 17 9mm pistol, very common in law enforcement, practically all the various services in the US use them, and others around the world as well. Very popular for civilians as well because it's very reliable, accurate, and fairly light because of the plastic frame." He held one of the guns up, showing it to them. "Unlike many firearms, this has an integrated trigger safety, not a separate safety catch. It stops the trigger being pulled accidentally or if you drop it." He demonstrated how it worked, the gun pointed carefully at the floor. Akane and Shampoo both nodded, listening intently.

"This is the magazine release. The magazine goes in here in the butt, until it locks in place. Press the button, it will drop out, you then put another one in. You cock the gun like this." He pulled the slide back and released it. "Always keep your finger off the trigger when you cock the gun. Now, when you pull the trigger, the round will fire, the recoil recocks the weapon and chambers another round. It will fire every time you pull the trigger until you run out of ammunition. The last round will leave the slide back. Pop out the magazine, insert another one, press the slide release, and you can continue firing. With practice you can change magazines in less than a second or two."

He inserted a magazine, then ejected it and snapped in another one fast enough that Shampoo clapped in impressed pleasure, which made him grin. "The magazine in this case holds seventeen rounds. Other weapons can occasionally have higher capacities, or more often lower. Revolvers, in the main, hold five to eight rounds, although the more common ones in law enforcement are at the lower end of that. We'll be covering a couple of them as well. Then there are the various rifles, machine guns, and more esoteric weapons. But for the moment I want to start with these, to get you used to them and the safety requirements. Let's go down to the range and I'll take you through what you need to know, OK?"

"We're looking forward to it, Aaron," Akane smiled.

"Hey, Mike, I'm going to be in the range for the next couple of hours," Aaron called to his colleague, who again stuck his head out of his office. "When Matt turns up send him down will you?"

"Sure, Aaron." The man gave them a quick smile then went back to his work.

"Follow me, please," the arms master said, heading towards a door to one side of the armoury carrying the two pistols, having handed Adrian the stack of empty magazines. Unlocking it with another keypad, he held it open as everyone filed through and went down the stairs. At the bottom, which was some distance down, they found themselves in a long room, at least twenty-five yards in
length and perhaps eight wide, with half a dozen stations separated by sound-absorbing barriers in front of a low desk-like construction splitting the room into two parts, the range proper being most of it. There was a rack of ear defenders hanging on the rear wall, along with a similar rack of transparent safety goggles. Next to them was yet another metal door with a keypad on it. Akane and Shampoo looked around with interest, Adrian moving to the side and keeping out of the way while watching them all.

"We can make all the noise down here we want," Aaron smiled, putting both the pistols he was holding on a table at the rear of the room, then moving to the door and unlocking it with the correct code. He disappeared into it for a moment then returned carrying a few cardboard boxes of ammunition. Holding up one box he showed it to them, then opened it and removed a cartridge. "This is a live 9mm round. Copper jacket over a lead core. Pretty standard ammunition. On the other hand, this..." Here he opened another box and removed a different cartridge, showing it to them. It had a flat end, the brass cartridge being capped with a small plastic plate. "... is a blank. It makes the right noise, if anything it's a little louder, but there's almost no recoil."

Looking sternly at them, he held the live round up. "This one will kill you. That's pretty obvious, a high velocity piece of metal going through you is going to ruin your day at the least. The thing a lot of people forget is that this can also kill you." He lifted the blank. "Not as easily, of course, but at close range, people have indeed been killed by blanks. Injuries are more common, but deaths have happened. The moral of the story is that guns are dangerous. Period. They're designed to kill. That's the entire point. A blank makes it much less dangerous, but not safe! Remember that."

Both women nodded slowly, exchanging a glance.

"I'm not trying to scare you, and I'm certain that you both understand the point I'm trying to make, but you have to keep it in mind at all times." He looked seriously at them. "I've been in this business for twenty-seven years, and I've known people who forgot. At least two of them died as a result. There have been some pretty nasty accidents as well. So just remember, OK?"

"We understand, Aaron," Akane said quietly. "We've both heard stories about the dangers of guns. There's a very good reason they're so hard to get in Japan."

"Good. Now, don't get me wrong, you don't need to be scared of the gun itself, it's not going to jump off the table and try to murder you, it's only a tool, but you have to treat it with respect, because it's a dangerous tool. The thing you'll find in this country, especially coming from outside, is that Americans have a very weird relationship to guns. Some of them are absolutely terrified of the things, they're completely sure that owning a pistol for example is proof that you're a murderer just waiting to pounce. That's stupid, of course." Shampoo grinned and Akane looked amused. "On the other hand, you find the opposite extreme, people who are convinced absolutely that any common-sense safety precaution regarding firearms is just a huge conspiracy by the government to take their guns away and impose martial law or some such crap. Also stupid."

He shook his head, sighing. "It's annoying. The damn things polarise opinion like you wouldn't believe. Those of us who simply work with them get it from both sides sometimes. Anyway, that's not really important, although I'd suggest that you don't want to get into a big conversation about firearms unless you know the person in question, they can often spiral out of control in a weird way."

"The voice of bitter experience again?" Adrian asked with a chuckle. Aaron scowled.

"God, yes. Teach me not to start a conversation in a bar again." Everyone else laughed, while he looked mildly irritated. "OK. Let's get some practical experience. First, we have to load the magazines. I'll do one, then you can try as well. It's pretty simple, you take a round like this, push it
in here like so, then put the next one in. You can see how many are in the magazine through the small holes here in the side." He demonstrated, quickly and competently loading the magazine with live rounds. They watched carefully until he'd finished.

"Take one each and do the same." Akane and Shampoo both picked up one of the empties, looking at them with curiosity, then began loading them, more slowly than he did, but quickly finishing. "Great." He loaded the remaining one. "Now, when you're in a stunt using firearms, always check that you have the right magazine. Don't trust anyone else, don't trust me, verify that what you have is what you thought you had, OK?" Both women looked at him for a moment, Shampoo raising an eyebrow. "Mistakes happen. If you're using a weapon that hasn't been modified to only fire blanks, and someone hands you a magazine that happens to contain a live round, and you fire it..." He shrugged as they winced. "It's happened. Never on my watch I'm very pleased to say but just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean it can't. So check. That's my personal rule."

"Insisting on that is one of the reasons we consider Aaron to be very good at his job," Adrian commented quietly. Akane looked at him, then back to the armourer.

"I understand," she said, smiling a little. "And I agree."

"So do I," Shampoo noted, putting the magazine she was holding down on the table. "Have no wish to kill when not needed." He looked at her slightly oddly then nodded, grinning as she giggled. "Mark of amateur."

"Hmm. Yes, I suppose it is. OK, grab some hearing protection and some shooting glasses and I'll show you how to fire these things correctly." Very quickly, all three of the others had suitable ear and eye protection on. He took one pistol and a magazine to one of the shooting stations, then flipped a switch on the table which made an overhead rail hum into life, quickly bringing a target carrier forward to the point he could reach it. Opening a cabinet on the wall he removed a pile of paper target sheets about two feet square. "We'll start with these ones." Clipping one to the carrier he sent it downrange to about ten yards away.

"All right, this is the front sight, this is the rear one." He indicated the relevant points on the weapon. "These are zeroed for ten yards, closer or further away you need to compensate. The maximum effective range is about fifty yards or so, not that it's not lethal well beyond that, but most people could never consistently hit a target much further away. In law enforcement you're normally less than fifty yards away from whoever you might be shooting at anyway so it's not a problem. For our purposes, you'll almost always be using blanks so range is irrelevant, you're not actually shooting at anything, but as far as I'm concerned you need to know how to use them properly even if we never need that skill." He grinned at the two women who were listening with care.

Inserting a loaded magazine, he turned to point the weapon down range. "Always keep it pointed away from people and down range when it's loaded, or any other time you don't know for a fact that it's not loaded. Assume all weapons are loaded and ready to fire unless you have personally verified that they're not. Understand?" Again, he got a couple of nods.

Operating the slide, he aimed. "The weapon is now live. Firing one shot." He pulled the trigger, the report of the gun making both Akane and Shampoo jump even with the warning. Adrian twitched despite himself. He wasn't good with sudden loud noises in enclosed spaces. Everyone looked at the target, which had a hole in it almost in the middle of the bull.

"Good shot," Shampoo said approvingly. He laughed a little.

"Not as good as your archery, but I'm not bad. Matt is better, he's won several marksman awards
and was his unit's sharpshooting champion with about six different types of weapons." Removing the magazine and working the slide to eject the chambered round he caught it as it flew out, then put pistol and magazine on the bench, the slide locked open. "The weapon is now clear." Glancing at them, he added, "Always be sure of that before you put it down. It sounds overly formal, but saying it out loud fixes it in your mind and helps you build the habit."

Both women nodded yet again. Satisfied, he replaced the free round into the magazine then stepped back. "Good. Akane, you're up first." Swallowing a little, appearing slightly nervous, the blue-haired young woman took his place then carefully picked up the weapon, inspecting it thoroughly, before inserting the magazine. Gently releasing the slide she raised it, then looked at him.

"I'm ready. Um, the weapon is live, I mean."

He grinned as she looked unsure. "Good. Now, brace your other hand around your firing hand, hold it steady with your elbow a little bent, yes, that's right. Line up the front and rear sights on the centre of the target. Lean forwards a bit more, turn slightly to the right, feet further apart, left one forward a little." Everyone watched as she followed the instructions. "The recoil will come as a surprise the first time. Be ready for it. It'll make the gun jump up and to the side a little. When you're ready, gently pull the trigger straight back, until you feel it take up the slack. Then a little more pressure will fire the gun." She swallowed again, the barrel wavering a little, then concentrated, firming her posture. A moment later she pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot and the recoil made her jump, the pistol jerking sideways and up, but she reacted very quickly and had it back to aimed downrange immediately.

"Very good indeed. And not a bad first shot." He looked at her, impressed. She'd missed the bull by a large margin but had hit the target about halfway between the centre and the upper right corner. "Try again."

Once more, this time with more confidence, the young woman aimed and fired. The shot was much closer to the middle of the target on the second attempt. "Again." The third shot was within an inch of the one he'd fired. "Very good."

Akane looked pleased, a lot of the nervousness going away. "Use the rest of the magazine. Don't fire too quickly, take your time between shots to aim correctly. There's no hurry." She nodded, aiming carefully. Thirty seconds later the slide locked back as the last round was fired.

Looking at it carefully, she extracted the magazine, checked it, then put both it and the gun on the table, the barrel pointing away. "Clear," she announced, making him smile approvingly again.

"Fantastic. I'd hoped you'd pick it up fast but that was remarkable." Hitting the switch to bring the target back as she smiled at the praise, he watched it whizz back along the rail, stopping it a couple of feet away. Adrian walked over to stand beside him, Shampoo doing likewise, as they all looked at the perforated paper sheet. "Damn that's impressive," Aaron chuckled.

There were two shots on the outer edge of the target zone, the remainder clustered within a circle about six inches across near the centre. Akane looked at it with a wide grin. "That was fun," she remarked, laughing.

"Nice shooting," Shampoo giggled, poking the target curiously.

Pleased, Adrian grinned at his colleague, who looked unusually happy. "You're a good instructor, Aaron," he commented.
"She's a good student," the other man replied, amused. "Listens to instructions then actually follows them. That's not common." He turned to Shampoo as Akane blushed a little, her friend laughing. "Let's give you a try, then you can both fire off a couple of boxes to get used to it. We'll try the blanks as well so you can feel the difference. After that, we'll get some other weapons to try you on. I've got some more firearm safety stuff to tell you as well, and I'll show you how to clean them properly too."

Both of them nodded, grinning, while he removed the used target and hung a new one, sending it out to the same place. Shortly, Shampoo was in position, carefully shooting at the paper, looking like she was enjoying herself.

"Hey, Aiko." Matt smiled at the brunette as she approached while he got out of his car.

"Hi, Matt. How are you today? Looking forward to weirdness?" Aiko snickered as he laughed, nodding.

"Oh, very much, yes. Yesterday was amazing." He laughed, as did the woman, locking his car and heading to the armoury. "I wonder what bizarre thing will pop out of the woodwork today?" he asked rhetorically, making her grin.

"No way to tell in advance," she shrugged, laughing again. "Generally we find it best just to roll with it, whatever it is."

"Adrian and Aaron should be on the firing range by now," he commented, checking his watch, as he held the door open for her, being rewarded with a smile for his trouble. "I had to sort out some things at a different site, so I'm a little late." He sighed for a moment, coming in behind her. "Silly problems, but they cause delays, which costs money, which in turn causes people to get very... overexcited."

"I understand," she replied, giving him a sympathetic look as they headed deeper into the building. "I had a few things to do at home that needed to be dealt with as well, so I only just got here. Good timing though."

Entering the armoury both of them looked around for a moment. A couple of people were visible near the back of the large room through the various racks of weapons, both apparently concentrating on something. A few seconds later a blonde, close-cropped head wearing rimless glasses poked out of one of the side offices.

"Oh, it's you, Matt. Hi."

"Hi, Mike. Where is everyone? Down in the range?" Matt looked around again.

"Yep. They've been down there for close to three hours. They seem to be having fun." The man grinned. "Gone through a hell of a lot of ammo so far. I just took half a dozen mags for the AK-47s down and a case of the 7.62mm blanks. Those two girls were grinning like idiots."

Aiko laughed, looking at Matt, who was also grinning like an idiot. Mike gave his colleague an amused look. "In fact, I think your range record might be in danger, Matt. That one with the long purple hair is an amazing shot. The other one is pretty fucking remarkable as well, considering Aaron told me neither one of them has ever fired or even held a gun before. Going to be stunt women, I believe?"

"That's the idea," Matt replied, laughing to himself. "Yesterday was teaching them to drive. Greg is still trying to get over it."
Chuckling, Mike shook his head then withdrew into his office, while Matt led the way over to the door to the range, punching in the combination then opening the door, above which the ‘Caution – Range in use’ sign was illuminated. As soon as he pulled it open a roar of machine-gun fire echoed around the room, dying away after a couple of seconds, to be followed by a certain amount of laughter. "Sounds like they're having fun," Aiko giggled as she followed him down the stairs.

At the bottom the room smelled strongly of nitrocellulose and primer, while there was a large pile of used brass in the corner of the room. Adrian was in the process of sweeping more empty casings over to it, Akane was holding an AK-47, and Aaron was pointing something out on it while Shampoo and the Tendo woman both listened carefully. They all looked over as the two new arrivals came into the room.

"Hi, Aiko, and you too, Matt," Akane cheerily greeted them both. "This is huge fun." Shampoo was grinning, before walking over to shake the hand of the stunt director.

"How's it going?" he asked the Chinese woman.

"Very well," she assured him confidently. "Guns very loud but easy to shoot. Not need so much skill like bow." He gave her a look, then glanced over at Aaron, who shrugged a little.

"Apparently she's right. You should see some of the shots she's pulling off. We need a much bigger range to really push either one of them but if they don't go in to the stunt work either of them could make a living at competitive shooting." He shook his head in wonder. "Akane is already a much better shot than I've ever been and Shampoo is just ridiculously accurate." He turned to the Tendo woman, who was looking mildly embarrassed at the praise. "Show him her target from about half an hour ago."

She nodded, putting the machine rifle down after expertly dropping the magazine and clearing the chamber, making Matt raise an eyebrow, then rummaged around on the next bench, which had a stack of target sheets about three inches thick on it. After a moment she came up with one specific one, handing it over. Matt stared at it as Aaron held it up with a smirk. Aiko snickered, shaking her head, then turned to the Amazon who was looking very pleased. "You saw Lethal Weapon, didn't you?"

"Fun movie," the woman giggled. "Though I could do that. Looks like I can."

Walking over and taking the target from his friend Matt whistled softly, inspecting the smiley face punched out in about thirty 9mm holes, with a little hat on top made of another dozen or so. "What was the range?" he asked.

"All the way to the back," Aaron told him, looking hugely amused. "Twenty yards. Three magazines one after the other so fast you could barely hear the individual shots. I'm surprised the action will cycle that quickly without jamming, to be honest. It was like a damn machine pistol."

"Hmm. And the weapon?"

"Glock 17. Both of them seem to have an affinity for the things."

"Wow."

Both men turned to look at Shampoo, who grinned at them. "Do it again," Matt requested. She nodded, glancing at Aaron, who waved his permission. Walking to the rear of the room she retrieved one of the pistols and several magazines, checking everything carefully, then returned to the firing position. While she set up a target Matt got eye and ear protection for himself and Aiko,
handing the brunette her equipment for which she thanked him. They all stood behind the Amazon as she ran the target out to the limits of the range. When it stopped she eyed it up, nodding to herself, before snapping a magazine in and cocking the gun, taking aim. "Weapon live," she announced to Aaron.

"Fire when you're ready, Shampoo," he said calmly. The result was an immediate fusillade of shots that made Matt blink, they came so close together. The instant the first magazine was finished she hit the release with her other hand, grabbed a fresh one and slapped it in before the empty hit the desk, then resumed firing. All told she emptied three magazines in less than eight seconds. When the slide locked back for the final time she straightened up from her firing stance, putting the gun down.

"Clear." Aaron looked approving, while Matt gaped.

"Holy shit," he mumbled under his breath. She flipped the switch to return the target, looking over her shoulder at the stunt director with a small grin. When the target carrier stopped they all looked at the result. This time the smiley face was winking and had a pipe coming out of its mouth instead of it wearing a hat. "Holy shit," he said again, shaking his head in awe.

"Can go faster but gun jam too much," she commented idly, removing the sheet of paper and holding it up to inspect it, before handing it to Akane, who put it on the pile of others, looking like she thought the whole thing was very funny.

"I'm going to have to frame a few of these," Aaron mused, inspecting the pile. Aiko snickered as the other two women looked proud.

"Gun art by Xian Pu," the brunette chuckled. "It'll be worth a fortune one day." This made them all laugh.

"I'd say things are going well," Matt finally said, rather weakly. Adrian laughed loudly, nodding proudly.

"Oh, yes, very much so. I can't wait to see what happens when we put all this together in a real trial stunt." He was rubbing his hands together with an excited expression, Matt was amused to note. "Mitch isn't going to believe it."

"Hey, Akane, have you demonstrated catching a bullet yet?" Aiko asked with an impish smile. All the men stopped dead, staring at her, then turning to inspect the blue haired girl who looked suddenly embarrassed, rubbing her hand over her face.

"Damn. You heard about that, then, I guess?"

Aiko nodded, grinning widely. "I did indeed. Nabiki happened to mention it when I bumped into her a while back. She seemed proud." Shaking her head slightly Akane looked at Adrian, who was gaping at her, before his expression slowly changed into one of awed expectation.

"You can... catch... a bullet?" he managed to ask. Aaron looked both shocked and worried, staring at the girl, who was going slightly red about the cheeks. Matt listened with surprise which he idly noted wasn't as great as he expected it should be.

"I caught one bullet," she replied, sighing a little, yet still looking oddly pleased with herself. "It was sort of an accident. I mean, I didn't intend to catch the thing, the thief shot at me and it was just a reflex." They stared at her, then exchanged glances.

"I think there's a story there we haven't heard yet, isn't there?" Matt asked slowly. She nodded,
grinning a little, before sitting on one of the tables and explaining. When she finished there was silence.

"I'm probably going to get it back when the case is over," she giggled. "Mr Ito is going to make it into a necklace for me. Lieutenant Sasaki thought it was a good idea when I came up with it."

"Holy shit," Matt mumbled, staring at the girl, who was smiling to herself.

"Catching bullets is quite an advanced skill," Aiko noted wryly, making everyone look at her. "Any half-way decent magical girl can do it, of course, and the more powerful ones don't bother half the time, it just bounces, but it's an impressive trick and makes people stop and think. But there aren't a lot of martial artists even in Nerima who are quite that quick, although some of them are certainly tough enough to take it if they miss. Ryoga probably wouldn't even notice if you shot him in the face with a fifty calibre rifle." She snickered at the look on their faces. "Mind you, that's at least partly because he can be a little slow on the uptake sometimes."

"Silly Ryoga," Shampoo snickered, making Akane grin and grimace at the same time.

"Who's Ryoga?" Aaron asked, sounding confused. Matt turned to him, thought for a moment, then sighed.

"A mobile crash barrier from what I saw yesterday." Akane began laughing, quickly joined by Aiko and Shampoo. "I'll tell you later."

Shaking her head with amusement, Aiko said, "So? Show them how to do it." She plucked a round out of the box nearest her and flipped it to Akane, who caught it absently, staring at her.

"What if I can't do it on purpose?" she asked in a worried tone. Matt and the other studio people looked at her, then back to Aiko when the magical girl snickered.

"It's easy. Look, I'll show you the right method." She glanced at Aaron. "Want to shoot at me?"

He stared for a long few seconds, worry and curiosity warring with each other in his expression. "Are you sure?" he asked in a tone of voice that suggested he most definitely wasn't.

Aiko laughed. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing." She lifted the end shooting station table which was hinged to allow access to the main range, going through it, then closing it behind her. Moving to a position in the middle of the room she turned to face them.

"Take a shot," she invited, folding her arms. He stared at her for a very long few seconds, before glancing at Matt and Adrian, who exchanged a glance.

"She's probably bulletproof, based on all the other stuff we've seen her do," Adrian slowly commented, rubbing his chin in thought. "And she's willing to allow it to happen."

"But..." Matt couldn't think how to end that sentence, finally merely shaking his head and stepping back. Aaron stared at them both, sighed heavily, and picked up the pistol Shampoo had used, opening the slide and inserting the round Akane handed him with a grin into the chamber. Releasing the slide he looked seriously at Aiko, who was smiling at him.

"You sure about this?"

"Yep. Aim off to the side if it makes you feel better, about here." She indicated a spot a couple of feet to her right.
"OK," he sighed, taking careful aim, then firing despite his obvious qualms. The report of the gun sounded and Aiko dropped like a stone.

"SHIT!" Adrian screamed, nearly fainting. Aaron stared in horror, then slowly turned as Akane and Shampoo began laughing hysterically. Glaring at them he opened his mouth, then looked back to the magical girl on the floor, who suddenly sat up and held up a gleaming copper-jacketed slug, grinning like a lunatic.

"Oh, you little bastard," he growled.

"Sorry, Aaron, I couldn't resist." She stood effortlessly, approaching and handing him the expended bullet. He took it and looked at it with wonder, still frowning, before shaking his head and laughing.

"Absolutely unbelievable. Can all you guys do that?"

"Pretty much. I showed a friend of mine a while ago how to do it, she'd never had the opportunity to try, and she picked it up very fast. A helpful burglar was shooting at us," She giggled for a moment as he stared. "He gave up after a few shots but we were done by then anyway. Some of the girls have never tried, some have done it a lot. Depends on what you run into." The brunette shrugged for a moment. "A hell of a lot less guns in Japan of course so it doesn't come up nearly as often as it probably would here."

"Good grief. How fast a round can you catch?" He seemed fascinated and appalled in equal measure as far as Matt could see, while the stunt director didn't know what to think.

"I'm not sure. I've seen Chou grab something that was going about Mach 2 past her ear without much trouble. But she and Yori have reflexes and speed that even we think are pretty incredible." Aiko smiled as he paled. "But I've never had anyone shoot at me yet with something that fired a bullet too quickly to either grab or deflect."

"And if you miss?"

"You get a hole in your shirt. Which really annoys some people." She snickered as he shook his head again in wonder. Turning to Akane the brunette added, "Want to try? I'm sure you can do it, these 9mm rounds are pretty slow." With a mildly apprehensive expression the Tendo sister nodded.

"Right. You take my position, I'll shoot at you," Aiko grinned, hopping over the table and relieving Aaron of his pistol en route. He looked at his hand in mild shock, she'd done it so quickly and smoothly he'd had no way to even block her. Popping the empty magazine out she grabbed a loaded one and competently slotted it into the gun in a way that showed she was more than familiar with the process. He stepped back as Akane slowly went through into the range area, stopping and turning around at the same place Aiko had done.

"OK. The trick is to grab hold tightly, not too soon or it bounces off your knuckles which stings a lot when you're learning, and not too late or you'll just drop it again or it will bounce as well. It will probably make your arm go back, you're not as strong as I am, but don't let go, all right?" The blue-haired woman nodded, exchanging a glance with Shampoo, who smiled at her encouragingly.

"I can't believe I'm allowing this in my range," Aaron grumbled. Adrian, who had recovered and was glaring at Aiko's back to Matt's inner amusement, shook his head.

"I know it's a bit unusual but I really want to see what she can do," he replied quietly. The armourer
looked at him, then back to the two women facing each other. He sighed.

"So do I," he admitted.

Shampoo watched carefully as Aiko aimed. "I'll fire past your shoulder, a little low, all right?"

"OK," Akane said, a slightly quavery note in her voice. The magical girl pulled the trigger, the gun not moving even a fraction of an inch in her grip from the recoil. Akane's hand blurred even as the trigger operated, then she yelped.

"OW!" Waving her hand she sucked the knuckles, making Aiko laugh.

"My friend did exactly the same thing. Don't worry, the bruises won't last long. Wait just a little longer before you close your hand."

"I just saw someone shoot someone else in the hand and the woman is just bruised?!!" Aaron muttered in a low voice, one that sounded incredulous. Matt glanced at him, then went back to watching to see what happened next. He could understand the incredulity, he was feeling it himself in spades.

"Guess she really is bulletproof," Adrian commented idly, looking impressed, pleased, and shocked all at the same time. Both of his colleagues stared at him for a moment.

"Ready to try again?" Aiko called. Akane nodded, flexing her hand a couple of times with a wince, then poising it.

"Go ahead," she replied, a look of concentration on her face. The brunette fired again. Once more, the Tendo woman's hand moved so fast it was only visible as an after-image. "Damn. Missed it."

"Don't worry, I've got lots of shots left," Aiko snickered. At Akane's nod she fired yet again. This time the martial artist grinned as her hand flew back and she half-turned. Bringing her closed fist around she opened it over her other hand, watching as did everyone else as the bullet dropped into her palm.

"Very well done, Akane," Aiko congratulated her, grinning as well. "Very well done indeed."

"Un-fucking-believable," Aaron breathed in stunned awe. Matt and Adrian couldn't even manage that. They watched as the two repeated the operation, then did it a few more times for good luck. By the time the slide locked back on an empty gun Akane had caught the last five in a row, three with her left hand. She looked extremely pleased.

"Weapon clear," Aiko said, removing the magazine and checking the pistol before returning both to Aaron. "Thanks."

"No problem," he managed to say.

She grinned at him, patting him on the shoulder, "Used to it yet?"

"No," he replied honestly, making her laugh. She turned to Shampoo who was looking eager.

"Want to try?"

"Yes," the Amazon laughed.

"You're not quite as tough as Akane is so it'll probably sting, but you're a bit faster from what I've
seen so you shouldn't have too much trouble." Aiko looked at Aaron. "You can shoot at her this time if you want."

After a long moment he nodded abruptly, picking up the last full magazine and loading the gun. Shampoo looked pleased, hopping over the table to take Akane's position, the Tendo woman rejoining the others with a handful of bullets which she was rolling around in her palm. She showed them to Adrian, the director staring for a moment before gingerly picking one up and looking at it with an awed smile.


Looking dubious, although fascinated, Aaron took aim, then at her nod, fired one shot.

"Aagh!" the Amazon yelped, shaking her hand and swearing in Mandarin, which for some reason made Aiko giggle. "Stings much!"

"Too slow, Shampoo," the magical girl commented. "But close. Try again."

After a moment during which she massaged her palm, Shampoo took up the approved bullet-catching stance and nodded to Aaron, who had politely waited for her to recover before trying the impossible again. He fired another shot. She winced but held up the bullet proudly in her left hand, flexing the right one uncomfortably. "Still hurts. Use other hand for next shot."

Sighing in mild disbelief the arms master fired off the entire magazine, as Aiko had done with Akane, Shampoo missing two and catching the rest. When she hopped over the table again she was grinning from ear to ear.

"Well, that's not something you see every day," he commented mildly, making the weapon safe then sitting down to recover. Matt stared at him for a long time.

Adrian was almost cackling to himself, obviously working out how to use this unexpected new skill in a movie. His colleagues exchanged glances and left him to his dreams while they got back to the training work, Aiko sitting at the back of the room and watching with interest, a small smile on her face.

Relaxing in the car as they left LA, Akane leaned back and smiled to herself. She was having the time of her life so far she thought. Glancing to the side she met Shampoo's eyes, seeing a look in them which made her sure the Amazon was thinking much the same.

In the front of the vehicle Matt and Adrian were having a conversation about the stunt trials tomorrow, which she listened to for a while, before going back to her thoughts. Looking out the back window she could see the studio truck with a camera crew in it, the director having decided he wanted to film the next training session due to how well everything was going. In front of them was another truck, this one containing two cars and some motorcycles, with Greg and a couple of his people as well. The instructor had greeted them with a look that showed he was still having trouble with what had happened the previous afternoon but even so he seemed to gradually be getting to grips with it all.

Aiko had vanished off somewhere just before they'd finished at the armoury, saying she'd meet them at the old airfield the studio owned for outside work before disappearing to deal with another minor emergency. The youngest Tendo wondered what it was this time. Knowing Aiko and her friends it could be almost anything, she mused with mild amusement.

"That was a lot of fun," Shampoo commented in a low voice, turning to her with a grin. "I don't
know that I'd want to do it every day but I really enjoyed shooting holes in things for a few hours."

"It was amusing," Akane agreed, smiling at her friend. "So was poor Aaron's face when Aiko tricked him like that. I thought he was going to fall over."

Giggling, Shampoo nodded. "Adrian was even worse. But at least this time he didn't faint like he did yesterday when we ran into the pig."

The comment provoked a mild frown from the Tendo woman, along with a sigh. "Damn Ryoga. Why did he have to pick right that minute to pop up out of nowhere?" She shook her head in irritation. "It ruined a perfectly good car and caused all sorts of confusion."

"He looked pretty scared when you yelled at him, though," Shampoo replied, laughing. Akane also chuckled at the memory of the event. "But I'll agree the boy has a knack for turning up at the wrong moment. At least this time you didn't destroy half the neighbourhood trying to kill him."

"He looked pretty scared when you yelled at him, though," Shampoo replied, laughing. Akane also chuckled at the memory of the event. "But I'll agree the boy has a knack for turning up at the wrong moment. At least this time you didn't destroy half the neighbourhood trying to kill him." She shook her head in irritation. "It ruined a perfectly good car and caused all sorts of confusion."

"He looked pretty scared when you yelled at him, though," Shampoo replied, laughing. Akane also chuckled at the memory of the event. "But I'll agree the boy has a knack for turning up at the wrong moment. At least this time you didn't destroy half the neighbourhood trying to kill him." She nudged her friend in the ribs when Akane flushed, embarrassed at the reminder of her most spectacular sense of humour failure. "Cheer up, Akane, it shows you've really come on a lot with your therapy."

"I guess you're right. I wanted to hit the idiot but I also didn't want to disappoint everyone here and at home. Especially... her." She shivered for a moment, her voice lowering, while Shampoo looked momentarily worried.

"You held it together very well," the Chinese woman said after a few seconds. "I don't think that even she would be annoyed that you shouted at the fool."

"I hope not." They sat in silence for a while, thinking their own thoughts, which had a certain amount of cold women with sunglasses prominent amongst them.

"It's a shame that Ryoga is the way he is," Shampoo mused out loud after a minute or two, making Akane glance at her. "If he wasn't so dishonourable he'd be a lot easier to get along with. He's a very good martial artist, but..." She shrugged.

Akane nodded tiredly. "I know what you mean. He's not actually stupid, I don't think, but he's got huge gaps in his common sense and holds a grudge like no one I've ever met."

"Other than you?" Shampoo snickered. Akane glared for a moment, then reluctantly agreed.

"I guess I deserve that. I certainly didn't act in the right way for years, did I?" She didn't like to admit it but she was honest enough to realise it was the truth. The Amazon beside her sighed a bit.

"No, but then none of us did, really. We were young and foolish, that's part of it. Even... him." Akane knew they weren't talking about Ryoga any more. "But the way we all behaved is not right, definitely. Even people like Nodoka and Great-Grandmother, who should have known better."

"No, but then none of us did, really. We were young and foolish, that's part of it. Even... him." Akane knew they weren't talking about Ryoga any more. "But the way we all behaved is not right, definitely. Even people like Nodoka and Great-Grandmother, who should have known better." Shampoo shook her head sadly, leaning it on one fist, her elbow on the door. "I think about it every now and then and wish I could somehow go back and fix things. I know that can't happen, but..." She gestured slightly with her other hand, before dropping it to her leg, sighing again. "Too late now. What's done is done."

They sat in silence for another minute or two. "I miss him," the Chinese woman added eventually, in a low voice.

"So do I," Akane responded, looking out the window at the dry scenery they were passing. "I wish I could apologise as well, to both him and Kasumi. It was mostly my fault."

She sighed again, closing her eyes for a moment.
"Hopefully one day we'll be able to," Shampoo said, turning to look at her friend. "I still think Kasumi at least will come back eventually, if only to let you and your family know she's all right. He probably wouldn't. It's not like there's much reason for him to do so."

The Tendo sister nodded sadly. "I would give anything to speak to Kasumi again even for five minutes."

"I wonder what she's doing?" the lilac-haired woman asked. Akane shrugged helplessly, wiping a tear from her eye.

"I have no idea at all. But I hope she's having fun doing it. I really hope that."

Shampoo put her arm around her friend's shoulders, the two women falling silent for the rest of the drive.

Getting out of the car and stretching, Shampoo looked around curiously, before glancing at Akane who had gotten out the other side. She was regretting bringing up the lost sister during the drive, it had obviously had a strong affect on the other woman who still looked mildly melancholy, but now they'd arrived she seemed to be cheering up. Adrian was heading for the truck with the camera crew and equipment in it, the same people who had filmed their demonstration, while Matt was talking to Greg, the driving expert having jumped down from the huge articulated truck that had the vehicles in it.

"I think this is going to be even more fun than yesterday," she said to the other woman, who looked over from where she'd been studying the surroundings. Akane smiled, following her eyes as two of Greg's assistants opened the back of the vehicle transporter and pulled out a ramp, then went inside. Shortly a car backed slowly down the ramp, parking off to one side, soon being joined by another one and three motorcycles. They watched the unloading from the car, until Adrian came back looking pleased.

Stopping beside Shampoo he briefly studied her, then Akane, before saying "I'm looking forward to all this. You're both doing spectacularly well, ladies, I wanted to make sure you knew that." The two exchanged glances then grinned.

"Thanks, Adrian," Akane replied, cheering up noticeably. He nodded, a look on his face that made Shampoo sure that had been at least part of why he'd said it, although he definitely seemed to be serious. "That means a lot."

"Good." Grinning back he waved for them to follow as he walked off towards the various buildings they could see a couple of hundred metres away. Matt joined them half-way to the first, looking thoughtful and pleased in equal quantities. Shampoo studied the surroundings as they walked.

They'd driven for some fifteen minutes across near-desert terrain to finally arrive at a gate in a two-metre tall chain link fence that stretched out of sight in both directions across the barren land, the road being blocked by a locked metal gate. One of the people from the lead truck had jumped out, unlocked it, waited for the small convoy to enter, then closed and locked it again before getting back into his vehicle. Another couple of minutes drive had brought them to what was obviously one end of an old runway, markings still faintly visible in badly faded paint that had been bleached by time and the sun. The tarmac was in surprisingly good condition under the blown sand and dust, although it had innumerable tiny cracks in it that made it apparent that it hadn't been seriously maintained for a long time.
The airfield buildings proper consisted of a pair of somewhat rusty rounded metal buildings perhaps twenty metres wide by three times that long, with huge sliding doors at one end, and a concrete control tower with windows all around it at the top, fifteen metres up. There was an ancient and tattered wind-sock, bleached completely white, waving lazily in the light breeze on a pole on top of the tower, surrounded by a forest of antennae, several of which were badly bent.

Overall, it looked like exactly what it was, an airfield that had fallen out of use as a place for aircraft to land at a considerable time ago.

The noticeable difference from just an abandoned airfield were the other buildings they were approaching. These were much newer, a number of prefabricated concrete and steel rectangular structures that, while not as large as the old hangars, were much more solidly built and probably a lot more secure. There were a couple of pick-ups full of tools and equipment parked next to one of them which had the large roller door at the front open, sounds coming from inside it that made it clear people were doing mechanical things.

Some way further down the runway itself, there was something much weirder. They walked a little way past the new buildings and stopped, Adrian turning to them and pointing. Shampoo and Akane stared, impressed, then looked at the director.

"Looks like city street," Shampoo commented. He grinned.

"That's the point. Those are sets from a crime thriller movie we did a while ago, which we used with some modifications in another one a bit later as well. That one was a pain to shoot." The director looked mildly annoyed as Matt nodded, sighing.

"Don't remind me. So many stupid little problems. Cars that broke down, actors that forgot their lines, stunt people who slipped and broke their damn ankles of all things." He sighed again, when Akane and Shampoo both laughed a little. "Trust me, it was cursed. Two separate broken ankles in ridiculously contrived accidents. And a broken collarbone, two sprained wrists, and a broken rib. That last one was one of the fucking cameramen of all things."

Shaking his head, Adrian seemed both amused and annoyed. Shampoo snickered, glancing at Akane who was smiling a little. "What happen to cameraman?" she asked curiously.

"Tripped over the stuntman who broke his damn ankle and the camera landed on him." Adrian grumbled under his breath as both woman laughed once more. "Idiot. Anyway, enough of that."

Waving his hand at the prop buildings, he continued, "The end result is we've still got all this up. Normally it would have been torn down by now to make way for something else but it's ideal for our purposes. The basic plan is that it's a scene from a potential upcoming bank robbery movie. The bad guys, who are actually bad girls, that's sort of the hook as there aren't a lot of crimes like that committed by women, are escaping the scene, one in a stolen car and one on a motorcycle. The cops chase them, of course, there are a number of crashes, near misses, everyone is shooting at everyone, all the sort of things that the public seems to like, then it culminates in an amazing stunt."

"The cops shoot out the tires on one side of the car," Matt said, taking up the explanation, "So the woman in the car thinks fast, hits a curb, then gets the car on two wheels. She keeps going, with her partner coming up behind on a bike, but a lucky shot from the pursuing cops causes the car to catch fire. She scrambles out the window and jumps onto the back of the bike, they roar off into the distance, while the car hits a truck, flips, and explodes. Money all over the street from what was in the trunk, total chaos, the cops can't keep going and they get away."

Shampoo exchanged a look of excited interest with Akane, who was listening with a huge smile.
"That sound... very difficult to do," she commented.

"Oh, hell, yes," Matt agreed, nodding. "That's the problem. It's an amazing scene on paper but it's damn near impossible to actually pull off. Normally you'd do it with a lot of CGI mixed with live action, which would take serious effort and cost a fortune. But, just maybe, with you two we can do it for real."

"Which would not only look incredible but save the studio a lot of time and effort, get them totally behind all of us in this whole project, and make you girls the hottest property in the Hollywood stunt scene overnight," Adrian put in, appearing very pleased. The two women exchanged glances again.

"Sounds like something we should have a go at," Akane laughed. Shampoo nodded vigorously.

"Agree with Akane. Sounds fun. Dangerous, but fun."

"Greg doesn't think that it can be done," Matt confessed. "Even after yesterday. None of his people are nuts enough to even try, he said." They both laughed at the comment. "But Adrian and I think that if it can be done, you two can pull it off."

"And we are nuts enough to try?" Akane asked, giggling. He grinned at her.

"Pretty much, yes. But, that said, if you have any doubts, tell us. We're not going to push you into it if you feel it's too dangerous. You know your own limits better than we do, after all."

They both considered the stunt for a moment, the Tendo woman turning to the Amazon. "What do you think?" she asked, switching back to Japanese. "Are we nuts enough?"

"Oh, we're definitely nuts enough," Shampoo laughed, "the question is more whether we can actually succeed or not. It probably wouldn't kill us if we miss, but I'll bet it would hurt." She thought for a moment more. "I'm up for it, if you are."

"Why not?" Akane grinned. "That's what we're here for in the first place. If it all goes horribly wrong, I guess Aiko could get Yori or Chou here quick enough to fix us up, anyway. We're in a lot less danger than most people would be."

"True." Shampoo nodded. "Actually, that might explain why Great-Grandmother gave me something before we left." Akane looked intrigued.

"What did she give you?"

"A little box with instructions to open it if we did anything involving fire."

Shampoo could see her friend was puzzled. She herself wasn't completely certain, but she had an idea what the box contained. "We'll have a look, it's in my bag in the trunk of Adrian's car."

"OK." They turned to the director who was listening to the, to him, incomprehensible language with a mild smile. "We'd like to try it, Adrian," Akane told the man, who grinned back at them, appearing very pleased.

"Great. I was hoping you'd say that. OK, then, today we'll do some more driving instruction, Greg wants to take you both onto the skid pan for some high-speed sliding around, faster than we could do back at the studio, then some fast runs along the runway as well. After that there's some motorcycle practice as well." He looked at the Amazon. "You're the one with some experience so hopefully you'll pick it up quickly. Akane might take longer, which doesn't matter at the moment,
only one of you needs to handle the bike, the other one will be in the car."

"The stunt is involved enough that we only need one good take," Matt added. "We'll do the other driving parts first, then edit everything together into a single scene. It should look pretty impressive." They began walking back to the trucks as he talked. "One of Greg's people, Karen Jorgenson, is the motorcycle instructor. She's a damn good rider, she practically grew up on a bike. She was prepared to do the motorcycle part of the stunt but no one thought anyone would be crazy enough to drive the car." He chuckled as both young women laughed.

"We'll go over the scene notes after the training," Adrian continued as they walked past the buildings they'd passed on the way out. "Matt will explain how we'll make the car flip, how the fire effects will be done, all the technical parts like that, then we can do some dry runs. We won't be doing any car exploding today, though, it takes quite a lot of effort to set up for it and we only have two vehicles currently rigged for the stunt. Hopefully that will be enough." He shrugged a little. "If it turns out that we can't pull it off there's no harm done, we tried, but if we can..."

Shampoo laughed to herself. "We get much praise?"

"Exactly." The man looked at her with a grin. "Much praise indeed."

"So what are those?" the voice of Aiko came from behind them, making Akane look over her shoulder and smile at the magical girl, who was peering curiously at the small box in Shampoo's hands. "They're magical, for sure."

Shampoo plucked one of the small round objects out of the container and held it up, looking at it with mild wonder and considerable awe. "Phoenix pills. Very expensive, but very effective. Only a few have been made over the years, Great-Grandmother and four other Elders are the only ones who know the secret to making them." She turned to look at Aiko, who was listening with interest. "They're a magical spell in pill form that gives an enormous resistance to heat to anyone who takes one. It's permanent as far as I know." She smiled at the brunette, looking pleased. "Great-Grandmother obviously thought ahead and decided that we'd need them if we ended up doing stunts with fire."

"We'll definitely have to thank the Elder when we get home," Akane laughed, taking the other pill when Shampoo held out the box. "These could end up being very useful if anything goes wrong with the stunt." Aiko watched as both the other women popped a pill each into their mouths, swallowing, then coughing a little. With a grin she produced two bottles of water and handed them over. Opening hers and swilling the fairly large pill down, Akane spluttered a little then weakly added, "Assuming they don't choke us first, of course."

Snickering their friend took the empty bottles back and made them go away. "They were a bit big to try taking dry," she commented with an amused look. "So. What did I miss?"

"Not too much so far," the Tendo sister told her. "Adrian and Matt explained the stunt they have in mind which sounds awesome if we can actually pull it off."

"And very painful if we can't," Shampoo grinned. "We were hoping that if it all goes horribly wrong you can bring some medical help in a hurry."

Laughing, Aiko replied, "I'll notify Chou to be ready."

"Thanks."

"Hopefully we won't need to be put back together," Akane said wryly. "But it's nice to know it's an
option." They took turns explaining the stunt to the brunette woman, who listened with a small smile on her face.

"Wow. That will look amazing," she finally said when they finished. "Try not to fall off the bike, or miss it entirely, though, that would just be silly. Very funny, but silly."

"Thanks a lot," Shampoo giggled.

"No problem. I'll enjoy watching whichever way it goes," Aiko replied with a smirk. They turned around at a call from Adrian, who was waving to them from beside the truck Greg had been in, the driving instructor and Matt standing next to him. "Looks like you're wanted."

"Hi, Aiko," Matt greeted her. "Another emergency dealt with?"

"Yep." The brunette casually vaporised the apple core in her hand with a flash of deep blue light, making Greg twitch and stare at her with shock. No one else paid any attention. "Another medical problem. Had to hop Yori and Chou down south to deal with it, a friend of ours called for help. Nothing too serious."

"You lot are better than the normal emergency services anywhere I can think of," the stunt director chuckled. She grinned at him.

"I like to think so. It's nice to be able to help."

Shaking his head slightly, Greg seemed to be trying to ignore the conversation in favour of sanity and normality, making Adrian glance at the magical girl and smile a little. The man turned to Akane and Shampoo who were also looking amused. "All right, then, this is what we're going to do. Over there, behind the control tower, is what used to be the car park when this was an airport. We set up sprinklers around it, and the surface is also very greasy, so when it gets wet it's slippery as hell. Right now it's very wet. So the idea is that I'm going to show you how to drive in slippery conditions, do high-speed slides, spins, that sort of thing. Who wants to go first?"

Glancing at Shampoo, who stepped back a pace and gestured her forward with a small grin, Akane held her hand up. "Me, I think," she replied.

"OK, great. You know the drill. There's a new helmet in the car, put it on along with the neck protector. And this time, please try not to throw it at anyone. For me?" He looked pleadingly at her.

Giggling she nodded.

"I'll try. Hopefully that idiot Ryoga won't pop up today." As Shampoo and Aiko began laughing, she headed for the car that Greg had pointed to, the stunt driver following with a look of mild worry on his face, a look he seemed to get a lot at the moment.

"Four complete turns. That's the best one yet," Matt commented, taking the bottle of water Aiko handed him with a nod of thanks as they watched the car finally stop spinning in the middle of the skid pan. "She's getting faster."

Adrian nodded, laughing. "The young Ms Tendo seems to be getting to grips with driving at a very impressive rate," he agreed. "She's going to be very good indeed at it, I think." They watched as the car drove fairly slowly and carefully off the slippery surface, turning around a few hundred yards away, then hurtled towards the skid pan again with dust spewing up from the rear wheels. As the vehicle reached the wet area it slewed sideways, travelling at a good sixty miles an hour, then went into a series of spins that looked pretty nauseating. Eventually it stopped, Greg suddenly getting out
and leaning on the car, ripping off his helmet in the process and throwing up violently.

"Six turns. Wow."

"Poor Greg," Aiko snickered, sipping her own water.

"He'll get over it," Matt replied, grinning. "Sooner or later."

Laughing, they exchanged a glance, before the brunette went back to reading the scene notes for the stunt that Adrian had given her when she'd asked about it. The stunt director looked at the other man, who was leaning against the wall of the control tower with a small smile on his face, watching the lesson with great amusement. "It's going really well," he said, causing his colleague to nod happily.

"Oh, yes, so well I'm almost worried," Adrian replied, laughing a little. "I keep waiting for something horrible to go wrong."

"It probably won't," Aiko responded, still reading the documents. She glanced up as he looked over. "The crazy goes after people like me a lot more than it does people like you. Or even Akane and Shampoo." She giggled for a moment. "I'm the decoy in this case. Anything weird that happens will probably happen to me."

"You say that, but I've got a DVD that shows weird things happen to Shampoo as well," he replied, grinning.

"True, I suppose," the woman allowed, shaking her head a little and laughing. "But try not to think about that. The crazy can hear you and it gets ideas." He looked abruptly worried, causing her to snicker before going back to the paperwork.

"It'll be fine, Adrian," Matt reassured his friend. "Don't worry too much. You're doing so well at the moment."

"Now I'm beginning to wonder if I need another pill," the director sighed, making both his companions laugh. "Ah. Looks like Akane is done."

The car was moving slowly over to where the Amazon was waiting impatiently near the camera truck, which had the crew and cameras on the roof filming the training, her lilac hair blowing in the breeze. Stopping beside her, both the occupants got out, Greg exchanging a few words with Akane as she removed the helmet and handed it to her friend who immediately put it on while listening as well. The neck protector changed hands as well, then the other woman climbed into the car. Shortly it drove off, heading for the skid pan. Akane watched it for a moment before looking around, spotting the other three, and making her way over to them. She was grinning widely, looking very pleased with herself.

"That was a lot of fun," she commented when she was near enough.

Handing the paperwork back to Adrian, who put it in a folder under his arm, Aiko chuckled. "You did seem be enjoying yourself out there," the magical girl replied, "although I think Greg was having a hard time at one point."

"He must have a weak stomach or something." Akane appeared mildly puzzled, causing the others to exchange looks of amusement. "It wasn't that bad."

"Hmm. I suppose not." Adrian inspected her, glancing at Matt who was trying not to laugh. "Oh well. What did he say about how it went?"

"He seemed pleased overall," the Japanese woman replied, smiling. "After he's gone over the same
lesson with Shampoo we're going to do the high-speed driving on the runway, then some two car exercises as well. He's going to drive one and we'll be in the other one." She leaned against the building next to the others, taking the bottle of water Aiko handed her with a nod of thanks. "Then I guess it's the motorcycle training. I'm a little nervous about that, I've never been on a bike before."

"I doubt you'll have too much trouble, Akane," Matt assured her. "It's not horrendously difficult although it takes some practice, which is the entire point of what we're doing here today after all. You can ride a bicycle, right?"

"Yes, although not as well as Shampoo can," the woman replied. "She's had a lot of practice for years. I haven't been on a bicycle much since I was about twelve."

"Well, it's a lot like that, except much faster, and you get hurt a lot more if you come off," he chuckled, making her give him a dark look.

"Oh, thanks a lot," she growled.

"Don't worry, you'll bounce if you fall off unless you're really going fast," Aiko said, laughing. "Although you might get a nasty case of road rash."

"The riding leathers should help in that case," Adrian added. She nodded, turning to watch her friend go through the driving lesson on the skid pan. Currently the Amazon was up to three turns. Matt laughed at the sight, wondering when Greg was going to puke again.

"She's catching up," Matt commented, looking out the back window, to see Akane grinning like a maniac through her helmet faceplate in the car a hundred feet behind them, Shampoo next to her apparently laughing her head off. He glanced at Greg, who was concentrating on driving, looking in the rear-view mirror intermittently. The driving expert nodded briefly.

"I know. That girl can seriously drive. I still can't believe she's only ever had less than half a dozen lessons before yesterday," he muttered, loud enough to be heard over the engine, as he spun the wheel and wildly slewed the vehicle between two of the set buildings, the car bumping across the dusty ground once it left the tarmac runway surface. Akane overshot the turn, making him laugh for a second. "Ah. Still haven't learned all my tricks, eh, Ms Tendo?" he chuckled. Matt grinned, then pointed to his left.

"No, but she learns fast," he said. The car the Japanese woman was driving came around the next fake building along, turning in a power slide with a huge tail of dust shooting up from behind it, then heading towards them.

"Shit." Greg manoeuvred wildly to avoid the oncoming vehicle, then went back the way he'd come, handbrake-turning onto the runway then flooring it. Seconds later Akane was behind them again.

"This would be amazing if we had more obstructions," Matt observed, enjoying the somewhat exhilarating driving. Greg laughed again.

"It's pretty amazing right now," he replied. "In my racing days it would have been a lot of fun to go up against someone as good as Akane is going to be. She's already better than a lot of people I know who have been doing this for years. Shampoo is damned impressive but Akane is just a little better, even though her reflexes aren't quite as fast. She seems to anticipate the moves just that small amount sooner."

"They're both remarkably good," the stunt director noted, grabbing for a handhold again as the car
swerved violently, spinning into a quick flip then slowing hard. Akane's vehicle shot past as they began going back the way they'd come, quickly reaching a very high speed again. "Think they can pull it off?"

"This insane stunt you and Adrian came up with?" Greg thought for a moment, driving with automatic skill. "If anyone can, they probably stand a good chance. They seem tough enough to take it if it all goes tits up, at any rate." He looked in the mirror again, his eyes widening, due to the fact that Akane was now only five feet behind them at nearly eighty miles an hour. "Shit. Again."

"Akane really is getting very good and has no sense of self-preservation," Matt chuckled. "OK, then. See if you can deal with this," Greg muttered, barely audible over the sound of the engine and the road noise. Swerving to the side he suddenly applied the brakes, just as they passed the last of the simulated buildings, dropping behind the other vehicle before the driver could compensate. Accelerating again, grinning manically, he came up behind the Japanese woman's car, then drifted over until his front right bumper was almost touching her left rear one. Matt could see Shampoo looking over her shoulder, apparently reporting on what was going on. Before the two young women could think what to do, Greg gave the wheel a sharp twist to the right, pushing the rear of the front car to one side, which caused it to fishtail violently, Akane sawing at the wheel in an attempt to straighten up.

Backing off a little Greg watched carefully, then nudged the car again at exactly the right point, before slamming on the brakes and steering out of the way. Akane's car spun out, sliding across the dry ground beside the runway in a huge cloud of dust, eventually stopping two hundred yards away. Laughing, Greg followed in a much more controlled manner, stopping next to the other vehicle, which disgorged two young women who looked simultaneously amused and annoyed. Coughing slightly Akane stomped over, wiping dust off the visor of her helmet, then tapped politely on the window. The driving instructor lowered it. "Yes?" he enquired calmly. "Can I help you?"

"That was a mean trick," Akane grumbled, staring at him. He nodded. "But very effective." Beside him, Matt was snickering to himself. "Show me how to do it," she replied after several seconds, suddenly grinning.

"OK," he laughed, getting out of the car and beginning the explanation, drawing diagrams in the dust on the hood of her car. Matt watched with amusement, while both young women listened carefully, asking sensible questions. It seemed to him that the other man was indeed getting to grips with the situation, apparently enjoying himself nearly as much as the women were.

"Looks like Karen's here," Adrian noted, nodding in the direction of a small SUV that was bouncing across the rough access road towards them. He took another bite of the pizza that Aiko had popped away and retrieved twenty minutes earlier, finishing his slice off, then stood up, walking over to meet the vehicle as it stopped twenty metres away. Akane watched for a moment, before glancing at Shampoo, who was sitting on the other side of one of the folding tables the camera crew had pulled out of their truck and set up so everyone could have a break.

"I think you're going to get the most benefit out of this," the Tendo woman commented. Shampoo nodded, looking interested, as she turned in her folding chair to watch Adrian greet the tall tanned good-looking mid twenties woman who got out of the SUV and looked around, her shoulder-length
deep red hair, a similar shade to Nodoka's, held out of her eyes with a pair of mirrored sunglasses that were perched on the top of her head. The two shook hands, had a brief conversation, then walked back.

"I'd like to introduce Karen Jorgenson, one of the best motorcycle stunt riders and instructors I've ever met," Adrian said, smiling at them. "Karen, this is Akane Tendo and Xian Pu, or Shampoo to her friends, our prospective stunt women, and a mutual friend, Aiko. They're the ones I told you about. You know everyone else, of course."

Karen inspected Akane and Shampoo, both of whom stood, then nodded with a wide smile. "It's nice to meet you," she said, shaking their hands. "There aren't enough women in this game, I'm glad to see two more who want in."

"Thanks, Karen," Akane smiled, glancing at Shampoo for a moment then back to the other woman. "We're both looking forward to this. Being in the movies was a dream of mine from a long way back and Shampoo has gotten very interested in it as well since we met Adrian."

"Want some pizza, Karen?" Matt asked, waving to the table and the food still on it. The red-head looked over, nodding after a second or two.

"Sure. I had lunch, but that was a while back now." They all headed back to the tables and the various chairs arranged around them under a couple of large pop-up sun-shades, taking a seat each. The new arrival inspected the fare available, taking a slice of pepperoni pizza and trying it, before nodding appreciatively. "Not bad. Damn good, actually. Where's it from?" Aiko held up an empty box.

"It's a place called Zolnerowich's in Brooklyn. Best pizza I've ever found."

"A Russian pizzeria?" Karen looked surprised, raising an eyebrow, which made Aiko chuckle.

"Russian-Italian, with some Portuguese thrown in for luck. It's named after the owner's grandfather who came to the US after the first world war."

"OK." The woman ate some more, looking thoughtful. "I'd probably agree, it's certainly at least in the top three I've ever had." After a second or two, she stopped chewing, staring at the brunette. "Hey, hang on. New York? How on earth did it get here, then?"

Grinning, Aiko vanished from her chair, making Karen blink wildly at the flash, then stare in shock. "Holy fuck. What happened?" She almost shouted, looking around frantically. Twenty seconds later the Japanese woman reappeared next to the chair she'd vanished from, sitting down again and dropping a small box on the table.

"Forgot the garlic bread," she snickered, making the red-headed motorcycle instructor gape. Akane reached out and opened the box, handing Shampoo and Adrian a piece of the contents, before trying some herself, trying to make it look completely casual while inside she was laughing wildly.

"Aiko has some unusual abilities," Matt explained gently, helping himself to some garlic bread as well, then sipping from a bottle of water. Karen stared at him, then the box, then Aiko, who picked it up and held it out. After a very long pause she reached out and took a piece.

"You need to tell me more, I think, Adrian," she requested, sounding stunned. Grinning, he filled her in. When he finished the background story she slowly shook her head, inspecting the three Japanese women, before leaning back in her chair and thinking for a while. "Weird," was her final summation.
"Pretty much, yes," Adrian agreed. "Still want to help out?"

Karen thought some more, a smile growing on her face, then eventually nodded. "Why not? It sounds interesting, and anyway, like I said, we need more of the sisterhood involved in this industry." For some reason Aiko suddenly coughed, choking a little on her garlic bread, before slumping in her seat giggling to herself furiously. Everyone stared, making her wave her hand weakly at their concerned expressions.

"Don't worry, thought of something funny, that's all. Continue with what you were doing, I'll be fine," she gasped, shaking her head with humour.

"Hmm." Adrian studied her, shrugged, then went back to Karen who was looking puzzled again. "OK. Sorry about all that, it's not the sort of thing that you can easily explain without a demonstration," he said, smiling a little. "If it's any consolation Greg took a lot more convincing." Everyone now turned their attention to the driving instructor, who flushed a little with embarrassment, which he covered up by taking a drink.

"It was a shock, OK?" he growled under his breath.

Grinning, Karen looked at him for a moment longer. "I want to hear that story, Greg," she said slyly. He mumbled something too faint to make out, although Aiko collapsed in gales of laughter again. Picking up another slice of pizza, she turned her attention to Akane and Shampoo, who were watching her with interest. "Do either of you have any experience with motorcycles?" she asked, before taking a bite.

"She does," Akane replied, nodding to Shampoo beside her. "I don't."

"Out of practice," Shampoo added, "Not been on motorcycle for long time, but was not too bad when tried."

"OK. We can build on that, I think," the woman said after swallowing. "We'll start with you, Shampoo, in that case, then when you're up to speed I can concentrate on Akane while you practice." She looked at Adrian. "Did you bring the stuff I asked for?"

He nodded, indicating the truck from the motor depot. "They both have riding leathers we sorted out earlier in wardrobe, and there are three new Kawasaki Ninja 500R bikes parked over behind the truck. Greg's people have checked them over, tuned them up, run them in, and they're ready to go. We've got radio equipped helmets as well. We're planning on using those bikes in the stunt."

"Great. Good bike, the 500R. Not too powerful but more than enough to get you going damn quick." She smiled happily as she finished her pizza, then cleaner her fingers with a piece of paper towel. "OK, let's go and have a look." She hopped athletically to her feet then waited for everyone else to join her before heading off in the direction of the truck. Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances, the Tendo woman smiling at her friend, who looked excited, as they followed the instructor.

"Got it, Akane?" Karen asked. "Clutch there on the left, front brake on the other side with the throttle, rear brake under your right foot, shifter under your left. Don't worry about the indicators and so on for the moment. You remember how to change gear?"

The Tendo woman nodded, thinking back to the instructions. "Throttle down, clutch in, change gear, clutch out, apply power."

"Good. Don't let the clutch out too fast when you're pulling away or you'll either wheelie it or get
wheelspin. Just concentrate on riding for now. Keep it below say 40 miles per hour, go about half a mile down the runway, turn around, and come back." Stepping back the woman smiled. "Try not to fall off."

"I'll do my best," Akane laughed, pressing the engine start button. The twin cylinder engine caught immediately as she blipped the throttle, settling down to a rumble. Flipping her visor down she pulled the clutch in with her left hand, slipped the bike into first gear, then gently let the clutch out, which had the immediate effect that the engine stopped dead. "Shit," she mumbled to herself in Japanese. Glancing sideways at the instructor, who was looking amused, she added more loudly while she restarted it, "Forgot to add power."

Karen chuckled, watching as the younger woman tried again. This time she got moving without too much trouble although with a considerable amount of wobbling, which steadied out as the speed increased. Keeping an eye on the speedometer she clicked up through the gears, reaching third, then tried to keep the speed constant through the rest of the distance. It was tricky, the bike really wanted to go faster, the slightest twist of the throttle made it leap ahead instantly. Suppressing the urge to see what happened if she went for it, the youngest Tendo reached the point she estimated was about the right distance, slowed gently, then turned in a wide right hand circle to end up going back the way she'd come, accelerating again. Smiling to herself, she thought, 'This is fun, nearly as much as the driving is. Not too hard either, at least at this speed, but I'm not sure I could do as well as Shampoo.'

A rising scream of high-revving internal combustion made her look in the rear-view mirror as the Amazon she was thinking of approached from the other end of the runway at a very high speed, crouched down on the bike with her long hair whipping wildly behind her, then roared past twenty metres away and dwindled into the distance. She could almost feel her friend laughing with delight, grinning to herself at the thought. 'She's really enjoying this part,' Akane mused, watching as the other woman braked hard half a kilometre down the runway, before turning around and coming roaring back even faster. Once more Shampoo zoomed past, this time allowing Akane to see her grinning like a lunatic as she did so. Shaking her head a little, she concentrated on her own skills, braking smoothly beside Karen, who looked approving. Putting her feet on the ground after slipping the machine into neutral, she turned the engine off and lifted her visor.

"Good, very good, Akane. Any problems this time?"

"I'm still wobbling when I pull away but it's getting better," she replied.

"You're not lifting your feet at the same time, that's the problem," her instructor advised. "As soon as you start moving lift your feet and put them on the footpegs. You won't tip over, trust me, but if you keep one on the ground you'll wobble like that. Try it."

With a nod the Tendo woman restarted the machine, then did as instructed. Sure enough, this time she pulled away smoothly, smiling with satisfaction. A voice crackled in her helmet's built-in radio, making her twitch slightly, then look in the mirror to see Karen had put her own helmet on.

"That's much better, Akane. Turn around at the same point you did last time and come back, then I'll ride with you and we can try some higher speed work."

"OK," she replied, with a small nod, keeping one eye on the speed and the other on her friend who was once more approaching very fast indeed on the other side of the runway. Risking a quick wave as the Chinese woman rocketed past, she laughed, shaking her head a little, then went on her way.

Two hours later she was riding in formation with Shampoo a couple of metres off her right side, Karen in the middle in front, all three of them doing close to a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour down the runway. "Good. Akane, tighten it up a little, get a bit closer to Shampoo, you're drifting."
A quick glance showed her she had indeed drifted from the imaginary line she was following, dropping a little behind. Applying a touch more power she carefully regrouped, glancing at the bike in front and the one to her side, until she was satisfied she was in the right place. "Great. OK, both of you keep that position, we'll start slowing in three... two... one..." Karen's brake light came on as she spoke, both Akane and Shampoo slowing simultaneously.

"Fantastic, much better than the last time. Keep it tight, turning to the right then back to the other end." The red-head followed her own words with a wide turn, both the others staying with her in the triangular formation, all three of the applying power and accelerating hard. "Very good indeed. You're certainly improving, Akane," the woman said with a pleased note in her voice. "Shampoo, I'm amazed how good you are at this. Are you sure you haven't done much riding before?"

"Thank you but telling truth," the Amazon's voice came, also sounding pleased, and a little amused. "But had many years doing stunts on bicycle. This much the same, little faster and much less work." Karen laughed for a moment at Shampoo's words.

"You must pedal really damn quick if this is only a little faster," she commented, which made both Akane and Shampoo giggle.

"You should see her when she gets going," Akane noted, grinning, but not taking her eyes from the runway. She was keeping Shampoo in her peripheral vision to make sure she didn't drift off course. "I've personally seen her hit about eighty kilometres an hour along a roof on a pedal bike, with two boxes of ramen balanced on the handlebars in the process." Karen made an impressed noise.

"That I have to see one day. OK, we'll begin slowing now, then head for Adrian at the truck. I could do with a drink and some of that pizza if there's any left."

"OK." "OK." Both the other women spoke at once, glancing at each other in amusement, then began braking, before turning towards the small group of people watching near the camera truck.

"What do you think?" Adrian asked Karen quietly, both of them watching as Akane and Shampoo talked with Aiko and Matt. The two young women looked very good in the motorcycle leathers, Akane wearing dark blue and Shampoo in a light grey set. They seemed pleased and relaxed. The motorcycle instructor lowered the bottle of water from her mouth, swallowed, then shrugged, following his gaze.

"Shampoo is very good. She picked it up instantly, she's got incredibly quick reactions, and amazing balance. Give her another day and she'll be doing stunts most people would kill themselves even trying. I'm kind of jealous, she's got it in her to be better than I am eventually." Karen laughed a little when he glanced at her with a grin. "She looks amazingly good in that suit as well."

"They both do," he noted, laughing himself. "Greg was watching them quite a lot as they were walking back from parking the bikes."

"So was I," she snickered. Knowing her preferences, he wasn't surprised. They shared a look then both laughed.

"And Akane?" he asked after a few seconds.

"She's not at all bad herself. Shampoo is better and I suspect always will be, she has the right instincts without even trying, but Akane will be much better than ninety-nine percent of people on a motorcycle. To be honest, both of them will do very well at it but I think Shampoo will have the
"Interesting. Greg said about the same with the driving, but the other way around. He thought that Akane had the edge there even though Shampoo's reaction time was less. They're both insanely quick but Akane seems to have a better instinctive knowledge of what the car will do."

"A good match for the stunt, then. Akane in the car and Shampoo on the bike." The red-head looked at him with a small smile. "Although I'd still like to try the bike part myself."

Laughing, he asked, "Not the car part?"

"Of course not. I may be nuts, but I'm not crazy. That part is hideously dangerous!" She shook her head, grinning. "You'd need to be some sort of martial arts superwoman to survive it if it all goes wrong."

"Oh. I wonder where I could get one of those?" Adrian stroked his chin, putting on a thoughtful face, while Karen laughed.

"I can still barely believe some of what Matt and Greg told me about those two," she added, shaking her head. "Did Akane really roll one of the cars back onto its wheels single-handed?"

"Indeed she did," he chuckled. "It was quite impressive. At least, Greg seemed to think so." He recounted the tale, causing her to collapse in laughter.

"Oh, god. Poor Greg. He's not used to having his world-view shaken like that, he doesn't like sudden change." She slumped into a folding chair, still giggling. Adrian shrugged.

"He'll probably get used to it in the end. He seems happy enough at the moment."

"True." Sitting beside her, they watched as Akane said something that had the other three roaring with laughter. Looking over to the vehicle support truck Adrian could see Greg talking to one of his mechanics, both of them doing something to one of the cars.

"He's not sure that the stunt can be done even now," he said. Karen followed his eyes, then rolled her own.

"Greg is a pessimist. Good thing most of the time, he's usually right about the risks of a stunt, but sometimes he's just too cautious. I'm pretty sure those girls can pull it off. That said, we need to practice. At least jumping onto the back of the bike from a moving vehicle. Shampoo will need to get accustomed to how it will react before we do it for real."

Adrian nodded slowly. "I was thinking that we could use one of the mechanic's pickups to test the procedure, it'll be a lot easier to jump off the back onto the bike than get out the window of the car. Do it slowly to start with, and work our way up to higher speeds if everyone is happy it's going to work."

"Sounds like a workable plan, Adrian," the woman said, nodding slowly as she thought it through. "Let's run it past Greg and see what he thinks. I should probably ride the bike for the first few times until Akane has it down, with Shampoo watching, then she can try."

"You're not fooling me, you just want to do the stunt, don't you?" the director laughed. She grinned, shrugging.

"It sounds like fun. Come on, let's go and talk about it, it's nearly five now and I have plans for this
evening. We've got an hour and a half or so until the light goes, this will be difficult enough when we can see what we're doing. I don't want to try it in the dark."

"True," he responded, following as she headed for Greg, waving for Akane and the others to join them. Shortly they were deep in a discussion of the mechanics of the stunt test runs.

"OK, we're at twenty miles an hour. That's about as slow as I can go and not have problems when you jump on, Akane. Ready?" Matt listened to the radio in the cab, glancing over his shoulder after a quick look at the speedometer. Greg was carefully matching the speed of the motorcycle that had drawn up a couple of feet away from the back of the pickup, which they'd removed everything else from. Akane was standing on the tailgate facing in the direction of travel, Shampoo in the bed steadying her, both of them in their riding leathers and wearing the helmets as well. Akane nodded.

"I'm ready, Karen."

"Good. When I tell you, jump onto the back of the bike like we practised, then grab hold, relax, and let me deal with keeping us balanced, got it? Don't try to lean or anything like that, or we'll both be sliding down the runway on our asses."

"Got it." The Tendo sister sounded slightly nervous and very excited, making Matt grin. The stationary trials had shown them all the right technique to land on the back of the bike, but this was the first test with both vehicles moving. Hopefully, it would go smoothly, but he was relieved that if it went wrong the Japanese woman, at least, would probably bounce based on what he'd seen of her to date. Karen wouldn't, of course, but she knew how to take a fall and would be fine at low speeds. He looked over his other shoulder to check the camera truck was pacing them at a safe distance filming the test, which it was, Aiko and Adrian in the back beside the camera crew. The camera equipment was pointing through the side which folded out of the way to allow this.

"OK. Jump in three... two... now!"

Akane stepped forward a little then hopped off the tailgate, aiming for the back of the bike. Everything went swimmingly.

Right up to the point she neatly overshot the bike and missed her landing.

"Aargh! OW! Ow ow ow shit ow ow fuck ow..." Matt winced, watching the young woman roll over and over along the road, cries of irritated pain being supplanted by what he suspected was a stream of vicious obscenities in Japanese as she slid to a halt on her back after about sixty yards. Karen braked, pulling away from the truck and circling back, while Greg did the same rather more slowly, with Shampoo in the back rolling around laughing wildly. She said something in Japanese, provoking more swearing from Akane, who didn't seem to see the funny side.

"She sounds more or less undamaged," Greg commented as they slowed down beside the annoyed martial artist, who was being helped to her feet by Karen.

"But really pissed," Matt chuckled.

"Yep."

Getting out of the pickup he walked over to the two women, Shampoo vaulting out of the back and coming with him, still giggling. "You OK there, Akane?" he asked as she took her helmet off, handing it to the Chinese woman then shaking her head a couple of times. Her leather riding suit was scuffed in a few places but more or less intact, while the helmet had a nasty scrape down the
She looked at him, frowning. "That hurt," she complained. "More my pride than anything else but it stung."

"Jump too hard, Akane," Shampoo laughed, which provoked a somewhat unfriendly look. "Like when learning to jump over wall at home. Try again."

"Easy for you to say, you didn't roll fifty metres along a tarmac runway," Akane groused, running her fingers through her hair while her friend giggled. Karen exchanged a look with Matt, who shrugged.

"She looks and sounds OK to me," he commented.

"True. Remarkably enough." The red-head inspected Akane, shaking her head in wonder. "I know I'd be feeling that if it had happened to me. Even at twenty miles an hour you got some impressive distance."

Joining them, Aiko and Adrian looked the martial artist over, the petite brunette studying her carefully for a moment before announcing with certainty, "No broken bones, a little bruising, nothing serious. It's going to take a much faster impact than that to do any real harm." Everyone looked at her, then back at Akane, who sighed a little.

"Right. Let's try again, then." She turned and headed for the pickup, Shampoo beside her, the Chinese woman laughing about something she said. Matt watched them for a moment before glancing at Adrian.

"Back to work, I guess. She seems up for it."

"OK." Looking at the camera truck, where the operator was panning to follow the two women, Adrian suddenly grinned. "We can have a bloopers disk as well," he chuckled, which made Aiko start laughing loudly. Matt and Karen grinned.

"I want a copy of that," the magical girl snickered.

"So do I," Karen smiled, before getting back on her bike and starting the engine. Laughing, Matt headed back to the pickup.

Gritting her teeth, Akane shot Shampoo a quick look, the other woman nodding slightly, then stepped sideways off the tailgate again with a slight jump added. Landing neatly astride the back of the bike she smiled triumphantly, grabbing for Karen's waist and relaxing to allow the other woman to control the inevitable wobble her impact with the seat caused. A moment later they accelerated hard, passing the pickup and hearing Shampoo yell in triumph. "Well done, Akane," Karen said from in front of her, sounding pleased and impressed. "Sixty miles an hour. That's remarkable."

"And only missed four times," Shampoo's voice came, sounding amused. Akane snarled a little under her breath. Her elbow was still numb from the last fall at over sixty kilometres an hour, the resulting extremely impressive slide having removed several patches of the leather riding gear, which was starting to look somewhat tired. As was she.

"Ignore the girl in the truck," Karen laughed. "I think you did very well. I wouldn't like to try it myself, that last fall would definitely have broken something."
"It still hurt," Akane admitted. "Quite a lot."

"You OK, though?"

"I think so. Nothing serious, only a few more bruises. But I'm definitely going to need a soak in the hot tub at the hotel tonight," she replied. Karen nodded, slowing and turning back towards the camera truck and the pickup, both of which had stopped half-way down the runway.

"That always helps." Stopping beside Adrian and the others, she flipped the stand down then turned the bike off, both of them getting off and removing their helmets. "I think that's about all we can do on this tonight," she said to the other people, glancing at Akane for a moment, then concentrating on Matt and Adrian. "It's getting too dark to do any more safely. Shampoo needs to practice the bike part but I don't think she'll have too much trouble, Akane's role is the hard bit."

"OK." Adrian studied the Tendo woman for a few seconds, then nodded, pleased. "It's gone very well in my opinion. My plan is that we'll do the bar fight and the spy movie scene tomorrow at the studio, then I think probably come back out here in the afternoon and finish up the training for this stunt, get Shampoo up to speed on her part. Do a few runs through as well with the real car, everything except the finale, so we all know what we're supposed to be doing and can work out the timing." He glanced at Matt and Greg, both of whom nodded.

"We'll run the stunt for real on Thursday. I think we should do the running fight scene first, it will be through the buildings on that side of the runway." He pointed across the wide paved strip to the other side. Akane followed his finger, nodding. "It shouldn't take more than an hour or two to practice it, then run it live. After that we run this stunt. Assuming everything goes to plan we'll be finished before lunch."

"Which might leave time for that military scene in the afternoon," Matt added.

Glancing at him, Adrian thought for a moment. "Yes, I think it probably will. Can your friend get us the helicopter on short notice if we do that?"

"Yes, I was talking to him last night, if we give him an hour's warning he can be here any time in the next two days. He's just sitting on his ass at Universal with the thing parked there, ready to go. I think he's getting bored, he's a real adrenaline junky." Matt chuckled for a second or two. "Greg and I and Aaron are up for the part of the guards in the tower assault as well. It looks like it could be amusing."

"What does it involve?" Aiko asked curiously.

"Basically it's a helicopter assault on a guarded facility, which we can use the old control tower for. The chopper flies in at low altitude, the attackers slide down ropes onto the roof then we have a nice loud gun battle, all the defenders get killed, victory ensues for the good guys. Not very realistic but with the right editing it would look amazing." He grinned as she looked over at the old control tower, a smile on her face as she nodded slowly. Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances and grins.

"Sounds like fun," Shampoo noted. He nodded.

"That it does."

"Need another guard?" Aiko enquired, smirking a bit. Matt inspected her, before shrugging.

"Why not? The more the merrier, I guess."
"No teleporting, though," Akane instructed firmly.

"Aww." Aiko giggled. "You take all the fun out of it."

Smiling, Adrian listened, before saying, "All right, then, if we can work it in, we should do that. I agree, it does sound like a very good exercise and it will certainly be a useful addition to the footage. But I want to make sure we get the other four scenes in the can first."

"Fine by me," Matt agreed.

"I got a text from Anton saying he's going to be around tomorrow definitely and possibly Thursday as well, so he'll want to watch." Adrian pulled out his folder and made a few notes, before putting it back under his arm. "Well, I think we're done for today, in that case. Thanks, everyone, you've all worked very hard and done some excellent work. Akane, you especially have gone all out." He studied her, shaking his head while she smiled, feeling pleased by the praise. "I hope you're OK in the morning."

"I'll be fine, Adrian," she assured him. "I've had much worse than this in training. All her fault, of course." She indicated Shampoo, who bowed slightly as all eyes turned to her.

"Much fun hurting friend in good cause," the Amazon laughed, making Aiko grin.

"Yori thinks the same way," she joked. "Only a lot worse."

They laughed, then Adrian added, "Let's pack up and go home. Karen, I'll call you tomorrow and let you know when we finish up at the studio so you can meet us back here, OK?"

"Sure, Adrian." The red-headed woman grinned at them all. "I'm going to have to get back, I have a dinner date tonight in about two hours, but it's been a lot of fun and a real eye-opener in more than one way." She held out her hand to Akane and Shampoo, both of whom shook it. "I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Thanks for the training, Karen," Akane replied. "It was very useful and interesting."

"No problem, Akane." Karen put her helmet back on. "I'll leave the bike at the truck, OK, Greg?"

"Thanks, Karen." The tall man smiled at his colleague, who hopped back on the machine, started it, then roared off. The rest of the group of people got back into the two remaining vehicles and returned to the far end of the runway, soon packing up everything they'd used and heading back to LA.

"I'm going to have to leave," Aiko told them, "Minor emergency at home, nothing serious but it's all hands on deck again." She sighed a little. "Stupid little demons. I wish that girl would learn to shoot straight," she mumbled to herself. Akane and Shampoo exchanged a glance, shrugging. "I probably won't be able to get back until sometime mid-morning tomorrow, but I'll come back as soon as I can. I want to see what happens."

"OK, Aiko. Thanks for all the help today." Akane flexed her hand a little, looking at it. "Still aching a little."

"You did catch over a dozen bullets in it," Adrian noted with a wide grin. "A normal person wouldn't even have a hand by now." She laughed, nodding thoughtfully.

"True, I guess." Shaking her head she added, "I still can't believe I can do that."
"Is good trick," Shampoo commented, snickering. "May come in handy one day."

"I hope not," she replied with asperity. "I'm not planning on getting shot at on a regular basis."

"If you move to the US, you may have to get accustomed to it," Aiko giggled. "It's a hobby here based on the news." Sighing, Akane just looked at the brunette, who laughed more loudly at her expression. "Right, I'm off, I'll see you tomorrow morning." With a wave she vanished.

"I wonder what the problem is?" Adrian remarked.

"It might be those little demons that Shampoo had an encounter with, but bearing in mind it's Minato, it could also be almost anything you can think of," Akane replied with a shrug. "It's a weird place."

"So I'm told," he laughed. "Come on, I'll take you back to the hotel. I'd suggest the hot tub, a good meal, and an early night, because tomorrow is going to be pretty full. Matt is going back with Greg."

When they pulled up outside the hotel, he got out and came around the car to join them. "You two really did do very well today," he told them sincerely. "Even better than I hoped for. I think everything is going to work out very well, when Mitch and the board see the footage they're going to faint. Then start signing contracts as fast as they can." He grinned, while Shampoo and the Tendo woman exchanged smiles of their own.

"Thanks, Adrian," the Amazon replied, Akane nodding beside her. "Was great fun and very interesting. Looking forward to next two days."

"I think we'll be ready for Richard's barbecue after tomorrow," Akane added. "I'm starving right now, for that matter." She thought for a moment, then looked up. "Oh, I forgot about this earlier, but Aiko suggested that we see if Serena and Sophie would like to see any of the stunts. Would that be OK?"

Adrian looked mildly surprised at the question, but after a moment's thought, nodded. "I don't see why not. They'd need to keep quiet about it for a while, but knowing both girls, I think we could trust them. If their parents are OK with it I am."

"I'll call Richard later and ask, he can ask Sophie's parents." Akane smiled at him. "Thanks. I like both those girls."

"They're decent young women," he agreed. "I guess Aiko would probably be OK with bringing them over, either here or the airfield, depending on what they want to see."

"I'm sure she would, it was her idea in the first place." Casting a quick look at Shampoo, Akane nodded to the director. "We'll see you in the morning."

"Indeed you will. Earlier than normal, I think, I'll try to get here for about eight, so we can get a full day in."

"See you then." Both women waved as he got back into the car, then went into the hotel, smiling at the staff they passed. Three hours later Akane was lying in bed, relaxed and well fed, musing on the events of the day.

Glancing at her watch, she reached out and picked her phone off the bedside table, finding the number for Lieutenant Harrison and pressing the connect button. A few rings later and it was answered.
"Hello, Akane. How did things go recently?"

"Very well, thank you, Richard," she replied. "We learned a lot about cars, motorcycles, and firearms in the last two days, not to mention a very successful demonstration for the various studio people. Adrian and Matt are very pleased. So are the both of us. It's been a lot of fun as well."

The policeman chuckled. "The fun extends to the evenings as well based on the report I read this morning. Turning a mugging around like that is pretty impressive."

Slightly embarrassed, she giggled. "Whoops. You heard about it, then."

"I did. The Captain was laughing his head off. Your driver dropped the two young men and a bag of their loot off with the station late last night, saying it had been a privilege to watch you three in action. He seemed very amused." Harrison laughed. "I suspect those boys will be very careful about who they mug in future."

"I would hope so," Akane laughed. "Trying to mug martial artists and worse, a magical girl, is just silly."

"Very true. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"Aiko suggested that Serena and Sophie might be interested in seeing one or two of our stunt trials," she explained. "Adrian says he's fine with it assuming you and Sophie's parents are. They'd have to keep quiet about it for a while, but if they want to watch, they're welcome to."

"That's a very generous offer, Akane," he replied after a moment. "I think they'd definitely be interested. Serena is in bed now but I'll ask her first thing tomorrow morning. She can call Sophie and ask, if her mother has any questions I'll give her your number, is that OK?"

"Yes, that's fine. I think Aiko can provide transportation, she's normally fine with that."

"It sounds interesting. Thanks for thinking of the girls." Harrison laughed for a second or two. "I'd like to see it myself but I'll be at work."

Giggling, she said, "I'll make sure Adrian gives you a copy of the DVD when it's done."

"That would be nice. Thanks." They chatted for a minute more, then wished each other good night. Putting the phone back on the bedside table, she lay there thinking about things for a while. Finally, feeling very pleased with the way everything had worked out, and hoping that tomorrow would be as successful, she turned out the light, rolled onto her side, and was gently snoring less than a minute later.
Hollywood meets Ms Aoyama

"On the way in this morning I just need to make a short detour," Adrian commented as they got into his car at just after half past seven. "Some paperwork I need to sign in person. It's not far out of the way and shouldn't take long. Sorry about the delay."

"We don't mind," Akane replied, with a look at Shampoo, who shrugged slightly, finishing off the apple she'd taken from breakfast.

"Thanks. We'll be there in about fifteen minutes assuming the traffic stays like this." They discussed the upcoming stunt trials as they drove, Akane feeling nervous all over again at the thought of what she and Shampoo were going to do, which made the time pass quickly. "Here we are, the bank is over there. Good timing as well, it's just opening." There was a small crowd of people outside the building, who began entering as he spoke. The director looked around, making a small sound of triumph when he spotted a car pull away from a parking meter just across from the large building he'd indicated. "And there's a free place. That's lucky." Quickly pulling in, he grinned as someone else made a go for the same spot, not quite fast enough, sounding his horn and making a rude gesture before driving off scowling. "Too slow, my friend."

Laughing, Akane asked, "Should we wait or come in?"

"It's up to you," he told her. She looked over her shoulder at Shampoo, who looked back.

"May as well go in and wait in there," she said.

Shampoo nodded. "OK."

Both of them got out of the car, Adrian waiting until they were standing next to him before locking it, then all three walked across the street and into the bank through the glass doors which slid open as they approached. Inside the Tendo woman looked curiously at the armed guard who watched them come in, nodding politely at him, then studied the interior. It was a sea of chrome, glass, and marble, more elaborate than she'd expected. "It's very high end," she whispered to Shampoo, feeling like she should be quiet in the echoing lobby for some reason. Their footsteps on the marble floor were quite loud.

"I know what you mean," the other woman replied in a low voice, looking around with an impressed expression. "I wonder if all American banks are like this." Akane shrugged, watching as a middle-aged man came out from behind the security glass when he spotted Adrian coming towards him, a smile on his face.

"Ah, that's the investment manager," the director noted. He nodded at the man, then indicated some comfortable seats to one side of the lobby area, turning to the two with him. "I won't be long, I just need to deal with this paperwork. Help yourselves to a coffee, that machine over there does a very good one, and I'll be back soon."

"OK, Adrian," Akane answered, both she and Shampoo watching as he walked over and greeted
the other man, both of them disappearing into an office to one side of the lobby and closing the door. "Coffee?" she asked her friend.

"Why not?" Shampoo replied, both of them going over to the machine in the waiting area and inspecting it. Akane took a cup from the pile of them neatly stacked to one side, put it into the machine, then experimentally prodded a button, which resulted in a surprisingly long and loud series of hissing and gurgling noises. "It sounds like it's trying pretty hard, whatever it's doing," Shampoo snickered.

Eventually there was a drawn out dribbling sound and the cup was filled with dark liquid, steaming a little. Taking it, Akane raised it to her mouth and tasted the contents, raising an eyebrow appreciatively. "Hey, that's not bad at all. In fact, it's probably the best coffee I've had from a machine."

"Based on what this place looks like, they're not exactly short of money," Shampoo commented, glancing around while she put her own cup in. "I guess they don't spare any expense on the machinery. It probably keeps their clients happy."

Shortly they were both sitting at the side of the large room sipping their coffee and watching customers come and go, one or two of them greeting the security guard by name and having a brief conversation before entering or leaving. Akane picked up a brochure from a pile of them in a holder and flicked through it, wondering if they should look into whether this particular bank was one she and the Amazon would find suitable. Reading the paperwork she looked up occasionally, noticing that there were a couple of dozen customers currently standing in lines or talking to tellers.

"Hmm."

Shampoo, beside her, made a thoughtful sound.

"That's a bit weird," she added a moment later.

"What is?" Akane asked, not looking up from the page she was reading.

"You noticed how this bank obviously caters to a pretty well-off group, right?"

The Tendo woman nodded absently, trying to work out in her head what the interest rate on a savings account would bring in based on the amount they'd been discussing and wishing she had Nabiki here to do it for her, which her sister could have done without even trying. "Yes," she muttered.

"Well, doesn't that guy over by the counter look a bit, I don't know, scruffy, perhaps? Not the sort of person you'd think would have an account in here, he doesn't fit in." Akane looked up, glancing at her friend, then turning her head to follow the direction Shampoo was looking. "And there's two more kind of rumpled looking guys standing around as well," the lilac-haired woman added slowly, gazing around. "Just sort of... standing there watching..."

They locked eyes, then looked around again.

"You know," Akane said conversationally, putting the brochure down and sipping her coffee, not acting out of character, "if this was in Mr Ito's shop back home I'd be getting ready to do something about now."

"I'm getting that feeling as well," the other woman noted, leaning back and looking relaxed, but tensing imperceptibly. "It feels like it does just before a battle when you know something's wrong but you're not sure where it's coming from."
The man in the line at the second teller station along, who was as Shampoo had noted, not quite the sort of person who seemed to fit the current demographic, looked over his shoulder at the two other men in the room they'd noticed, one of whom was standing quite close to the security guard, who seemed to also feel something was amiss judging by the way he was looking around with a small frown. The remaining suspicious character was apparently filling in a form on a desk in the middle of the room but they could see he was only going through the motions, glancing at his watch every now and then in a manner he seemed to think was inconspicuous. All three of them seemed to be waiting for something.

"We may be jumping to conclusions," Akane murmured, finishing her coffee and using the excuse of putting the cup down to quickly look around again. Shampoo nodded slightly, scratching an itch on her neck that allowed her to look to the side, out the window of the bank.

"True. But on the other hand, there's a large van parked out there on the other side of the road with someone in it watching the door, and the engine is still running, I think." They shared another glance. Pulling out her phone Akane toyed with it, not looking at the men. "The guy beside the guard noticed but didn't move," Shampoo reported quietly, picking up a magazine and flipping through it.

"OK." The Tendo sister thought for a moment, then picked a number and dialled it, holding the phone to her ear while apparently admiring her nail polish.

"Who are you calling, Aiko?"

"Lieutenant Harrison. Aiko said she'd be tied up so I might not be able to contact her. Probably only going to get one chance."

"True." Looking at the side of the coffee machine, Shampoo watched the scene outside the bank in the reflection it provided. "Interesting. A big armoured truck just pulled up outside."

Akane didn't react, waiting for the phone to be answered. After a few rings a familiar voice came to her ear.

"Harrison."

"Hi, Richard," she said in English, keeping her voice conversational and happy, but at a low enough volume it didn't stand out, as if she was being polite.

"Hello, Akane, what can I do for you? I asked Serena, she'd love to come, by the way."

"Great, that's nice, we'll work out a good time for her. Shampoo and I are waiting for Adrian in the bank, he's just filling out some paperwork. It's a bit boring here but we think it won't be for long."

There was a long pause. "Ah. Am I right in thinking that you're saying something is going on?"

"Yes, thanks, Richard, you're probably correct." She laughed lightly. He paused again.

"They can hear you?"

"Of course! Thanks for asking."

The man by the guard was watching her, she noted out of the corner of her eye, and keeping an eye on what was happening outside as well. Running her free hand through her hair she rolled her eyes the other way to check on the one at the desk, who was now going over the form he'd been fiddling with for at least the fourth time. He looked at his watch again, then over at the one in the queue,
who looked back casually.

"We'll probably be getting on with it soon," she added after a second or two.

"I assume you're telling me there's about to be a robbery? How many of them can you see?"

"Shampoo told me four, would you believe it? I'd told her three, but she's insisting on four. I guess one is an outside chance." The Tendo woman giggled, hoping desperately that her on the fly code was getting the message across.

"Three in the bank, then, and one outside? In a car or something?"

"Oh, Richard, you're so right about that. I think we should hire a van, though."

"OK, in a van. Are they armed?"

She looked more carefully at the one in the queue, then studied the one at the desk out of the corner of her eye. Shampoo got up and went to the coffee machine, refilling her cup and tapping her fingers on the top of it while she waited, idly looking out the window, then came back and sat down, blowing on her coffee. "The one outside in the van is watching the truck, there are two people unloading what looks like a lot of cash from it. They're both wearing body armour and carrying guns," she commented very quietly, speaking Japanese. "I'm pretty sure the one by the door has a small machine gun under his coat as well, I could see the end of it when he moved."

Without acknowledging her friend, Akane thought hard. Sooner or later whatever was going on would actually happen and at that point someone was going to get hurt. There were too many of them, too widely separated, for the pair of them to deal with before at least one got a shot off and too many bystanders to risk it anyway. The man at the desk straightened up, sighing theatrically, then crumpled up his form, disposed of it, and pulled another one out of the dispenser, beginning to fill it in again. She noted that he was definitely carrying a weapon, as she reached over she could see the outline of a handgun briefly in his jacket over his belt.

"Well, I'd say two, definitely, but you might have other ideas." Picking up the brochure, she made a production of reading it. She was aware that she was still being watched. "I'll have to go soon, Adrian will be finished in a minute, but it's been nice talking to you. I'm looking forward to the barbecue tonight."

"Thanks, Akane. We've traced your phone to the vicinity of Wiltshire Boulevard and Figueroa, which would mean you're either in Chase Manhattan or Calibank. Right?"

"Yes, thanks, I think the second one would be best."

"Got it. And there are three robbers in the bank itself, at least two armed, and one more in a van outside as well."

"That's great, Richard. Aiko said she might make it later as well."

"She's not available right now, got it. Good work, Akane."

Akane smiled, tossing the brochure to the table in front of her next to her coffee cup and nodding. "You're completely right. OK, I'll talk later." She could hear what sounded like a sack truck or something similar approaching the door, and could see the guard heading to hold it open, while all three men had tensed slightly.

"Try not to cause too much damage if you have to do anything, Akane," he said quickly. "I've
called it in, you'll have a lot of company soon. I'll be there as well."

Carefully not disconnecting the phone she flipped it shut and made to put it back in her pocket, glancing at the men they'd been watching and seeing they were now all paying more attention to the two people who had just entered than to her, although the one at the door was still glancing at her. One of the new arrivals was pushing a trolley with three large high-security containers on while the other one, who was holding a pump-action shotgun, was looking around alertly, ready for trouble. Taking the first opportunity that presented itself she quickly put the phone on the seat beside her then nudged it into the gap between the seat and the back rest.

Glancing at Shampoo she nodded very slightly, seeing her friend had noticed what she'd done, but hoping the other people hadn't. She was also hoping that they weren't jumping to conclusions. There was just something about the current situation that was putting her teeth on edge.

Getting up she moved to the coffee machine herself, getting a refill and looking out the window in the process. The man in the van was no longer in the van, he was coming across the street carrying a sports bag, the strap over his shoulder and one hand inside it. "Damn," she mumbled, casting a look at the Amazon, who was watching her.

Just as the trolley-pushing man reached the counter where another armed guard had opened an armoured door at the side and was waiting for him, several things happened at once.

The man in the queue pushed the woman who was in front of him to the floor somewhat viciously, pulled a short-barrelled pistol grip pump-action shotgun of his own from under his jacket with his other hand, then fired a shot into the ceiling, which made everyone except for his colleagues and the two women watching jump violently at the enormous boom. "Everyone down on the floor and stay there," he screamed at the top of his voice, working the action to chamber another shell.

The robber at the counter whipped a 9mm pistol from his belt, lunged at the armoured car man, then pushed the muzzle of the weapon into his armpit as he raised his arm and turned at the sound of the shot, firing one round into the unprotected area. As the man dropped, dead or dying, his assailant turned and pointed the pistol at the bank guard who was going for his gun with commendable, but ultimately insufficient, speed, making him stop dead.

The guard at the door wasted a second as his mouth dropped open, but recovered almost instantly, pulling his own weapon from its holster and firing a shot at the man with the shotgun, missing by millimetres, the bullet smacking into the security glass directly in front of one of the tellers, who stared with a white face then dropped in a dead faint.

The man who had been lurking near the door guard was suddenly holding a small submachine gun that Akane thought was probably an Uzi based on what they'd learned from Aaron the day before and movies she'd seen, the barrel finding itself in the left ear of the guard, who abruptly stopped moving.

The other armoured car guard had whipped his weapon up to fire at the assailant who had shot his partner, but before he could fire, the final man from the van outside who had come in just as everything kicked off raised the bag he was holding and a burst of machine-gun fire came from it, half a dozen rounds hurtling the length of the bank and leaving a line of holes in the wall, one missing where it struck the right arm of the guard. As the injured man yelled in agony and dropped his own weapon, the robber shook the remains of the bag off what turned out to be an AK-47. Moving back a couple of steps while still keeping the weapon pointed at the middle of the bank he popped open a panel on the wall beside the door and punched a short sequence of numbers into the keypad that was under it, with the immediate effect that the door slid shut and stayed that way.
Akane glanced at Shampoo again, both of them noting the action with interest.

The entire sequence of events had taken less than five seconds from start to finish. The various shots had overlapped so much that the majority of the people in the bank were still trying to work out what was going on, not even sure who had shot at who. Akane watched as everyone stopped dead, staring around in total shock. It went very quiet, allowing the sound of the first armoured car guard collapsing to the ground and his helmet hitting the floor to echo around the room.

"As you may have guessed, this is a robbery," the man with the Uzi stated surprisingly calmly, all eyes turning to him. "Please do as my colleague has asked, or we'll be forced to shoot more people. Lie down, put your phone if you have one on the floor in front of you, then cross your hands behind your backs. You've got thirty seconds then we start shooting again. I'd prefer not to kill anyone else but I'm not particularly worried about it."

Suppressing their rage, Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances, both of them shrugging very slightly. It was probably best to go along with it for the moment and see what happened. Both could easily take all four of them, but the chances of doing it without someone getting shot was too low at the moment to risk. At least the police were already aware of the situation and on the way. She hoped that Richard was still listening to the phone she'd left active. It was something of a struggle not to allow her battle aura to flare with the anger she was feeling at the likely death of the guard. A look at her friend showed she was watching the robbers with an expression she knew meant that given half a chance there were going to be more bodies. Even so, the Amazon was restraining herself admirably.

"Check the rooms and get everyone out here," the spokesman, who Akane dubbed robber number 1, ordered his colleague with the AK-47. The large dark-skinned man with the machine gun, robber number 2, nodded without saying anything, heading for the first door. The man who had shot the guard in cold blood knelt down beside the body, which wasn't moving, not taking his eyes from the bank guard who had his hands in the air, then felt around on the belt of the man he'd shot, coming up with a set of keys and another pistol which he put in his pocket before standing again. He was number 3.

Number 4, the man at the counter with the shotgun, was a tallish but quite skinny Hispanic man with somewhat wild eyes, noticeably younger than the other three, who was currently waving the muzzle of his weapon around in a slightly overexcited manner. The small crowd of customers were watching him nervously as they followed the instructions, laying down and putting their hands behind their backs. A dozen or so phones made an appearance. He walked along the line of people kicking the phones across the floor to the other side of the room. Soon there were twenty-eight terrified people on the floor including the four tellers who'd been ordered out from behind the security glass, two of them carrying their compatriot who had fainted.

Number 2 returned with the investment manager who had been dealing with Adrian, and the director as well, both of them walking in front of him with their hands up. Adrian glanced at Akane, who shook her head very slightly. He nodded just as minutely, looking worried but much less so that she'd have expected, bearing in mind how highly strung he could be. Seconds later he and the other man joined the rest on the floor. "That's everyone I could find," Number 2 told his leader. "All the other rooms are empty."

"Check the rest of the place, make sure the doors are rigged and we're isolated from the rest of the building," the other man replied. He looked at his watch. "Hurry up, we've only got twelve minutes left." He glanced at Number 3. "You go with him." Both men nodded, Number 3 pushing the bank guard to the floor after relieving him of his own weapon and keys, Number 4 taking position near him, still moving his shotgun around in a way that seemed somewhat hazardous. Both robbers
disappeared through the opened security door, 2 carrying a backpack he'd removed from the sports bag he'd brought in to the bank. Number 1 looked around with satisfaction, before turning to stare at the Tendo sister and her companion. He raised an eyebrow.

"I was including you in the lie on the floor part, ladies." He waved his weapon suggestively. "Now would be good." Looking at Akane, he added, "I know you have a phone, put it on the table there, please."

Sighing a little and glaring at him, keeping the building rage she felt bottled inside, she reached into her pocket and removed her Japanese phone, which she hadn't used since Adrian had given her the other one. Slowly and deliberately putting it where instructed then following Shampoo who also put her one of her phones down before being asked, both of them lying down near Adrian, she kept her attention on the man. Number 1 nodded satisfaction. "Thank you. Now, if everyone could stay calm, we'll go about our business and be out of your way very soon."

While the other two were gone, Number 4 went around the bank lobby and collected all the phones he'd kicked across the room, putting them into a bag he pulled from his pocket, then handing it to 1. He then did the same with the various weapons the guards had possessed. After that he went and poked around on the trolley from the armoured car, nodding after a moment. "It's all here," he said happily.

"Good. Stop talking," his apparent superior snapped. Looking slightly insulted he did as ordered, toying with his shotgun.

Everyone jumped when a few seconds later there was a muffled shot from somewhere deeper into the building, followed a moment later by two more. Both robbers listened carefully, then Number 1 turned to his companion. "Go see what that was," he instructed.

"What about them?" the other man queried, waving his weapon at the hostages, most of whom looked very nervous and tried to duck even further. The cavalier manner in which he was gesturing with the thing was something that would have annoyed Aaron a lot, Akane mused, watching carefully. She wasn't too concerned about herself or Shampoo, the trials in the gun range the day before had shown that the pair of them were much tougher vis-a-vis gunfire than she'd ever realised, but she certainly wasn't looking forward to being shot at. It might not kill her, but she was certain it would hurt a hell of a lot. The rest of the people in the bank, though, had none of their advantages and were at serious risk of injury or death.

She turned her head to inspect the armoured car guard, who was lying on the floor in a pool of blood, unmoving. It was almost certain that he'd died instantly. The other victim, the second armoured car guard, a short but heavily muscled man who looked like he was of Korean ancestry, was groaning quietly to himself next to the other hostages, one of the tellers holding a cloth against his arm where he'd been shot. He didn't seem in any immediate danger but certainly wasn't very happy about the situation.

"I've got it under control," the first man replied, looking around. "No one is going to try anything." He waved his machine-gun at them all. "Are you?" There was a round of head-shaking. Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances once. If there really was only going to be one armed robber in the lobby that would be a good moment to take him, then pick off the others as they came back.

Unfortunately, just as Number 4 got to the door to the back office area, it opened, 2 and 3 returning pushing three women and two men in front of them. "What the hell was the shooting about?"

"A guard in the back taking a piss, he tried to jump us," 3 replied in a voice that had a faint Eastern European or Russian accent, looking annoyed. "Didn't work."
"Dead?"

"Definitely."

"OK." The leader shrugged, while everyone else had their own reactions. Akane was feeling even angrier, the completely callous manner these people killed was beyond the pale.

'I have a feeling that at least two of them are ex-military,' she mused silently, watching carefully as they went about whatever it was they were doing. 'The way 1 and 3 talk sounds like they've done this before and know what they're doing and they move like people with some martial arts or combat training. 2 seems similar but not quite the same. They're all carrying their weapons like they're used to them, like Aaron and Matt do.' She looked at the remaining member of the gang who was walking back and forth in front of the rest of the hostages waving his gun from side to side as if he expected one of them to try something and was looking forward to it. 'Him, though, I don't know. He's too excitable. Younger as well.' She watched for a moment. 'Not a safe person, he's going to take any excuse to start shooting. An amateur, but a dangerous one.'

Glancing at Shampoo she could see the other woman was obviously also analysing the situation, quite likely in much more detail. Her friend had a lot more real combat experience than she did even if she was out of practice. Going back to observing the robbers, she saw that 1 and 3 were having a quiet conversation near the door to the back, the leader checking his watch repeatedly. Eventually he nodded.

"OK, that should be it. You two, get to it. You have five minutes." 2 and 3 both nodded, re-entering the back of the building and vanishing. Their leader turned back to the hostages. "A word of warning. Even if you managed to escape, we have rigged all the doors aside from that one over there with fragmentation charges which will detonate if anyone opens them. There's no way out. So I would ask that you just relax, lie back, and wait for us to finish. We'll be out of your hair soon and you can go back to what you were doing."

Silence fell except for a faint whimper from one of the younger women on the floor, who Akane could see was shaking with fear, being comforted by the man next to her. She kept observing the actions of the robbers, trying to build up some sort of plan. In many ways the simplest solution was just to let them get on with it and leave, but both the fact that Richard was aware what was going on and that they'd already killed two people left her reluctant to do that. It didn't seem all that likely that when the police turned up they'd merely surrender, so getting ready for something unpleasant to happen was only good sense. So was trying to make sure they concentrated on herself and Shampoo rather than hostages who could be much more easily hurt or killed.

Looking at Adrian she noticed he was watching her and Shampoo, not the robbers, a look in his eye that made her suspect he was waiting for them to do something. She tried to project calmness at him, even though she was herself feeling like she wanted to get up and start beating the robbers senseless. In the old days she'd probably already have begun that process but she was aware that now a more mature attitude had tempered the old, angry, Akane, in this case undoubtedly to good effect. The new calm and much more dangerous Tendo sister was still waiting for an excuse to deal out a certain amount of painful karma to the men, even so. She didn't like sitting back and letting criminals rob something even without the two murders thrown into the mix.

The two other men came back in just under the five minutes they'd been allocated, pushing another clearly extremely heavy trolley which was piled a good metre deep with stacks of cash, more banknotes than Akane had ever seen in one place before. One of the bank staff produced a noise of surprise which made number 4 point his weapon at the man threateningly, causing him to flinch back and go silent. I walked over and quickly inspected the haul, nodding his satisfaction. "Good.
OK, unlock the door and load the van, we're out of here."

Number 2 walked over to the door, looking carefully through the glass both ways, before turning to the keypad and tapping in another code, while the Tendo woman watched and pondered what she'd seen. There was something very odd going on, leaving aside the actual robbery, these men seemed to have far too much information on the working of this place. Some of it could undoubtedly come from careful observation of the staff, like the door code, but assuming the bank worked in much the same way as back home, the vault where presumably the cash had come from should have been closed and locked for most of the time. It would have taken them far more than the less than five minutes it actually did to break in and steal the cash on that trolley. They had somehow timed things to pick a point when it was open.

Thinking about it she realised that the armoured car delivery could be an explanation for that, it could be that the staff had opened the vault in preparation for it and the robbers had worked this fact out and capitalised on it. The leader certainly gave the impression of being very competent, she wouldn't have put it past him based on what she'd seen so far. Even so, there was still something not quite right about the whole thing she was still wondering about.

There was also the slightly worrying fact that they were making no attempt to hide their faces, even glancing occasionally at the cameras which were scattered around the place, feeding their pictures to some remote recording facility. Again, based on what she knew from dealing with banks for Mr Ito, and from his own shop, that facility might be in a back room somewhere in the building but was also just as likely to be another building. It made the chances of them disabling it from the outside fairly low unless they'd prepared by digging up the cables and cutting them, which in itself would require more information than should be easily available to the public.

If one used the movies as a guide, the lack of disguise could be taken as a very bad thing, because it might mean that despite their words they didn't intend to leave witnesses behind. Although eliminating nearly three dozen people in the process of robbing a bank seemed more bloodthirsty than was likely even in the US. No, she felt something else was going on but couldn't quite work out what it was. Glancing at Shampoo beside her she saw the Amazon was watching everything carefully as well and seemed thoughtful, a very small frown furrowing her brow as she followed the motions of the robbers with her eyes. Her friend had obviously picked up on something too.

Number 2 waited for the door to slide open then stepped outside and looked around again, before turning to his leader and opening his mouth to say something. Just as he began to speak a loud voice shouted, "Police! Drop your weapon and get on the ground!"

Akane sighed as the man instead after a very briefly startled expression dived back into the bank and rolled to a crouch beside the door, cautiously peering outside as the two halves slid shut, his weapon raised. The other robbers with the exception of number 4 all took cover, the skinny man looking around wildly for a couple of seconds before hiding behind the desk in the middle of the room. She watched with annoyed amusement. 'Oh, yes, definitely an amateur. Those guys, though, they know what they're doing. Unlike the police, who should have waited until they were all outside.'

"How many?" 1 called to 4, who risked another look.

"I can see two cars that are probably unmarked cop vehicles," the man reported, "And there's an LAPD cruiser trying to hide down an an alley across the street."

"More than trying," 3 said sourly, "You missed it when you opened the door." 2 gave his colleague an unfriendly look.
"OK, so sue me. I made a mistake."

"Pretty fucking big mistake," 3 muttered, subsiding when 1 glared at him.

"Shut up." He turned to the other man. "How many cops?"

Looking again, then pulling a small mirror from his pocket and holding it above his head to see out the window above him, 2 was silent for a moment. "Three or four plain-clothes, half a dozen uniforms." He paused, then swore nastily. "Two more cruisers just came around the corner."

Looking both ways he muttered to himself for a second or two, then lowered the mirror, turning to his leader. "The road is suspiciously empty as well. I think they've blocked it off out of sight."

"That's too damn competent," 1 replied, looking thoughtful. "We should have been gone before they reacted, but to close the road without us noticing they'd practically have had to be waiting for us. Someone told them what was going on." He scanned the faces of the hostages, most of whom refused to meet his gaze. Akane met his eyes wearing an innocent expression, not flinching, an inner grin widening as he moved on.

"Now what do we do?" 4 called from his hiding place, sounding slightly scared and very annoyed, not a good combination in someone holding a firearm. "You said we'd be in and out without any trouble, now we're trapped in here. Damn it, Joe, what the hell do we do next?"

"No names, you idiot," 1, or 'Joe' snarled to his companion, who grumbled to himself but fell silent. "Let me think."

He glanced over at 2 who was staring in the direction of his hidden colleague looking disgusted and shaking his head sadly. A significant look passed between the two men and 2 nodded slightly. "Lock the door again," Joe commanded. With a small sigh, 2 quickly checked the view, then darted across the doorway to a protected position on the other side, where the guard would normally stand, before standing up and quickly punching in the lock code. Once more the door slid shut.

After a moment's thought he put another code in, which immediately produced a rumbling sound from somewhere inside the wall. Everyone watched as steel roller shutters slowly slid down over the door and windows, stopping with a clunk at the bottom. They were clearly much more solid than the normal anti-theft shutters a lot of stores had, Akane noticed. She was familiar with them as Mr Ito's shop was fitted with the things.

"Good," Joe said, as his colleague walked over to him, glancing at the doors with a frown.

"That'll keep them out for a while, but now we're locked inside. What do we do?" his compatriot asked in a low voice. Akane could just hear them as they began discussing their next move, while keeping a close eye on the hostages, many of whom were looking much more worried now. She met Shampoo's eyes, sighing a little. It didn't look like they were going to be on time for the stunt work today after all.

"Who did that?" Harrison shouted, glaring around at the various cops hiding behind vehicles and in the second floor windows of the office block across the road from the bank. He was steaming, their entire ambush had just been wrecked by some over-zealous idiot. Rojas, beside him, sighed and pointed, the uniformed sergeant he was indicating looking embarrassed from his position a couple of vehicles away as everyone stared at him. "Michaels, you idiotic ass, we could have got them all outside the bank," the lieutenant carried on in an angry voice, "but now they're locked in with a bunch of hostages. Well fucking done." The man lowered his eyes to the ground and flushed red.

"Damn it," Harrison grumbled, glaring at the other cop for a little longer before turning back to his
"Get him out of here before I shoot him myself." Rojas nodded silently, going over to the man while keeping under cover and talking to him in a heated low voice, the sergeant eventually escaping the dressing down and leaving the scene. Returning to his co-lieutenant Rojas smirked slightly.

"He's an idiot, but I think that was genuinely a mistake," he said.

"Doesn't fix it, though, does it?" Harrison muttered. Raising a hand for silence, he cupped the other one over the earpiece he was wearing, the cable going to a cell-phone in his pocket which had the call from Akane's still-active phone forwarded to it, as well as to a number of other places including a recorder back at the station. "Quiet, they're talking again."

He listened intently to as much of the conversation as he could make out. "Well, we have at least one name, Joe. That seems to be the guy in charge."

"Doesn't help much without a last name," Rojas commented idly, peering around the truck they were crouched behind to watch the building carefully.

"True, but we managed to get a couple of photos of three of them through the window. With those and the name we might get somewhere." Harrison listened some more. "They're talking too quietly to make out the words," he reported, irritated.

"We can't go in through the back door with those charges in place." Rojas sighed a little. "This is a weird one. They seem to have a lot of inside information."

"I was thinking the same thing," Harrison mused. "The door codes are one thing, but from what I could hear they knew exactly when to attack, which is a little more than I'd have thought they'd work out from watching, unless they've been setting it up for months. Which is possible, I guess, but it's a lot of work to go to for one fairly small bank branch. Not to mention they seem to have times allocated for each stage." He risked another look at the door of the bank with a pair of binoculars he had around his neck, trying to see if any of the people inside were visible. Unfortunately the security shutters had blocked the view completely except for a couple of small viewing slots. "That's annoyingly good security as well, it's going to be a pain to get through."

"Someone on the inside is working for them, I think," his colleague said slowly. Harrison nodded.

"That's my guess."

A couple of minutes passed while everyone watched the bank, until Rojas tapped his co-officer on the shoulder. "The regional bank manager is here, so is SWAT." Looking around, Harrison noticed a late-middle-aged white man with obviously dyed hair nervously approaching wearing a borrowed LAPD flak jacket, a couple of heavily armed officers beside him carrying transparent riot shields they were keeping between themselves and the bank to provide cover. Stopping behind the van the robbers had arrived in, which several forensics officers were ransacking, the three men waited for Harrison and Rojas to join them.

"Lieutenant Richard Harrison, LAPD," Harrison said as he arrived, holding out his hand. The bank representative shook it quickly.

"Wilson Jefferson, I'm the regional manager for Calibank."

"OK, Mr Jefferson, can you give us any more information on this whole thing? What was being delivered in that armoured car? Who knew about it?"

The manager looked worried for a moment, obviously unwilling to say anything, but at a hard look
from both lieutenants finally sighed. "It's actually a collection, not a delivery. There was a very large amount of cash paid into the bank yesterday from a client who purchased a property downtown. Much more than a branch like this would normally hold. We arranged to have it collected by the armoured car company, but in a way that looked like a normal cash delivery for security reasons, then it was to be transferred to the main branch."

"Who knew about it?" Rojas asked.

"Myself, the branch manager Arthur Steiner, the senior teller Paul Bouchard, and the head of security for the branch David Lemann."

"That's it?"

"Yes. And the client, of course."

"Who is?"

Jefferson looked even more worried. "I'm not at liberty to say," he eventually replied.

Both cops exchanged glances, then looked back at the man, who was sweating slightly. "We need to know," Harrison told him fairly sharply. "There's obviously an information leak, those robbers know way too much about all this for it to be an accident, so we need to check everyone who might have any knowledge about the transaction. It's clearly not a coincidence that this happened right at the point there was all that cash ready to go."

Sweating harder, Jefferson looked unconvinced and now really quite worried. Harrison stared at him. Glancing from side to side the man looked at the two SWAT officers, who met his gaze evenly, then looked back to the lieutenant. After several more seconds of internal debate, he sighed heavily. "I'm going to get in trouble for this," he muttered.

"Who was it?" Harrison asked once more, feeling that there was something funny going on. "Organised crime?" That was his top guess based on the information they currently had. The manager looked momentarily surprised, then slightly affronted, before laughing for a moment and shaking his head.

"Not exactly," he replied, "depending on your definition." He shrugged, sighing again. "The CIA."

Harrison and the other three cops all stared at him for some moments.

"The CIA," Rojas said in a flat tone.

"Yes."

"The Central Intelligence Agency of the USA," he clarified.

"Yes."

"Bought something and paid in cash. Into that bank." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Yes." The manager ran his hand through his hair. "From what we were told, which wasn't very much, they're doing some sort of deep undercover operation which involved purchasing a small office block in a manner that couldn't be traced back to them through the normal methods, or something along those lines. I don't have the details and most of what I do know I worked out from the paper trail. It's all very black ops, hush hush spy stuff. Right out of a TV show. They went through the head office and arranged it."
"I'd have thought they'd have done it in such a way no one knew," Harrison commented. "Through dummy corporations and that sort of thing."

"The amount of cash was large enough that they had to tell us something because of money laundering regulations, or it could have been held up for weeks while everything was investigated," Jefferson replied. "That would have eventually involved the FBI, which they seem to want to avoid. I don't think they were very happy about it but apparently it was a rush job that needed to be completed in something like twenty-four hours. I have no idea why. The money was counted and credited to an overseas account, the seller transferred it out of that immediately, everyone went away happy, and we're left with a huge amount of cash lying around in a bank that isn't rated for it."

"Why did they use a branch office rather than the main one, in that case?"

"Again, I have no idea, we weren't told. They insisted on this branch."

"OK." Harrison sighed slightly. "I hate getting involved with jobs involving those guys, they're a pain in the ass at the best of times. Damn it." He looked at the manager. "So I suppose the big question is how much are we dealing with?"

After a second or two, the man replied quietly, "Forty-three million dollars." Harrison nearly stopped breathing and Rojas said something extremely rude in Spanish. Both SWAT officers coughed a little in surprise.

"Fuck me," Harrison finally said. "Forty-three million? In cash?"

"Yes, new hundred dollar bills in stacks of one hundred, ten thousand dollars per stack. Four thousand three hundred stacks. It weighs nearly half a ton."

"That's a lot of cash," Rojas said in a stunned voice.

Jefferson nodded with a small sigh. "It is. Much more than we'd ever store in a branch like this under normal circumstances. You can understand why we wanted to transfer it as fast as possible."

"I certainly can," Harrison replied, shaking his head in wonder. "Christ. OK, then, we know what they were after. Now we have to get them out of there before anyone else dies."


"We have... let's say we have a way to listen in on what's going on inside. There was a lot of shooting when they arrived and some more shots later. From what we can gather at least one guard was killed."

The manager looked appalled. "Do you know who it was?"

"No. But we're dealing with some very ruthless people, that much is certain. And much better informed than they should be." Harrison looked back at the bank for a few seconds, before returning his attention to the other man. "Where is the CCTV feed for the bank recorded?"

"Internally in the security office, and in the central branch security facility."

"We'll need to be able to tap into that."

Jefferson shook his head. "You can't. I've checked already, the feed from the bank went dead about
thirty seconds before all this started." Everyone looked at him, then each other.

"Well, that settles it, they have someone on the inside," Rojas remarked. "There's no way that's a coincidence."

"No, it isn't." Harrison thought for a moment. "All right, Mr Jefferson, I want you to go with Lieutenant Rojas here and get every scrap of information you can on the people who work in there, this transaction, the armoured car company, and the security and communications of the branch." Jefferson nodded, not looking happy about the whole situation, but complying. The two men left, disappearing into an LAPD truck that had pulled up while they were talking. "You guys, is the robot ready?" the officer asked, turning to the SWAT men.

"Nearly, we're setting it up now. We've also blocked outgoing phone lines to the building and we're ready to cut the power whenever you want, sir," the sergeant on the right replied.

"Hold off on that for the moment. Get the robot over to the door and get me some images of the inside of that place first," Harrison said, thinking hard.

"OK. We'll have something in about five minutes."

Nodding absently, Harrison raised a hand to his ear as he heard something through Akane's phone.

"Is even that amount of money worth the lives of two people and injuring another one?" Akane asked quietly, looking at the trolley heaped with plastic-wrapped blocks of banknotes, then at the man they knew as Joe. He looked back at her for a moment.

"Truthfully, miss, yes it is," he finally replied with a tiny smile. "And more besides. People have died for a lot less than forty-three million dollars, believe me."

A couple of people gasped, whether due to his attitude or the figure mentioned. The Tendo sister shook her head sadly. "You seem like a very bad person," she told him. He shrugged.

"Possibly. I don't know or care to be honest. I just want this money."

"Do you intend to kill us all?" She met his eyes calmly, although inside she was furious.

"I don't intend to do that, certainly. I've got better things to do with my time, but what happens depends on the cops." He smiled at her. "I'm not saying it's not going to happen, though. So be a good girl and just lie there quietly, that way you have a better chance of coming through this." Three of the female hostages started crying as he finished speaking.

After a moment, Akane stated, "I don't think they're going to let you just walk out with all that."

"We'll see," he smirked. "You'd be amazed what happens when you shoot a few people then threaten to shoot the rest." She stared at him, as did everyone else.

"A very cold blooded approach to life. Did you learn that in the military?" Joe looked slightly surprised then inspected her more carefully.

"You're very perceptive and taking this a lot more calmly than I'd expect, girl. I wonder why?" She said nothing, merely kept watching him. Beside her, Shampoo had tensed almost unnoticeably, ready to act if it became necessary. "Enough questions." He raised his weapon and gestured meaningfully with it. She fell silent, hoping Richard had heard all that. It might help.
"Clever," Harrison muttered. "She's told us the casualties and got us some information on their motivation. The military comment is useful as well." He turned to Rojas as the other lieutenant came back with a clipboard in his hand. "Check military ID databases first for that name. Akane more or less got him to admit he's ex-military, or even active. The others might be as well." His colleague nodded, handing him the clipboard and hurrying back to the truck.

"Sir?" One of the SWAT men tapped him on the shoulder, then indicated a vehicle that had pulled up down the street and was disgorging men in suits.

"Shit. I was hoping they'd hold off a little longer," Harrison groaned. Another car pulled up behind the SUV that was clearly full of FBI agents, his own captain getting out and talking to one of the dark-suited men, before both of them came over. "Captain," he said politely, nodding to the older man.

"Lieutenant, this is Senior Special Agent Mark Tinnin of the FBI, from the Los Angeles department." The FBI man shook hands with him, then turned to look at the bank across the street.

"Fill me in on what's going on, please, Lieutenant," he requested. With a small inner sigh Harrison did so, quickly bringing them both up to speed on the current situation. Both men looked somewhat shocked at the amount of money involved, the FBI agent sighing heavily when the involvement of the CIA was brought up. "Oh, for god's sake, those idiots are a damn liability sometimes," he muttered grumpily. "They're not supposed to be screwing around inside the US. We're always having to clean up after them." Looking sharply at Harrison, who was suppressing a grin, he added sharply, "I didn't say that."

"Of course not, Agent Tinnin," the police officer agreed blandly.

"So this Akane Tendo you mentioned. She gave the alarm that the place was going to get hit?"

Harrison nodded. "Yes. Akane is a clever young woman with very good instincts. She's managed to get a surprising amount of information to us, including an audio tap into the bank via her cell-phone. If it hadn't been for her in all likelihood the suspects would have been long gone before we got to hear about it. From what we've been able to find out they had a very good idea of the normal response time. There's also a very strong probability that they had inside help."

The FBI agent turned to one of his own people who had approached them. "Get me background information on one Akane Tendo, Japanese citizen," he ordered. "From..." He turned to Harrison.

"Nerima, Tokyo," the policeman filled in. The other agent nodded and pulled out a phone, dialling and moving off to have a conversation. "Why do you want that information?" Harrison asked curiously.

"I like to know who I'm dealing with," Tinnin replied absently, inspecting the bank through a pair of binoculars. "Can she be trusted to keep her head in a crisis?" Harrison snickered, making the man look at him.

"Oh, I think that's a given. She's not the one I'd be worried about, believe me." The agent raised an eyebrow. "She's one of the most dangerous martial artists I've ever even heard of," he went on, "along with her friend Shampoo. Those idiots in there seem to think they've locked us out. What they're really done is lock themselves in with two young women who could take them apart without even trying, if they get annoyed enough. Hopefully it won't come to that but if they need to take the gloves off, well..." He shrugged. "We may need to get some mops."

Tinnin stared at him, then the bank. "I find that hard to believe," he said slowly. "Two young
women against four armed men who are obviously not worried about collateral damage?"

Harrison sighed, smiling at the same time as he thought back to what he'd seen at their first demonstration and a conversation he'd had last night with Adrian. "I think the risk of collateral damage is the only reason this whole event hasn't come to an end yet."

They were interrupted by the other agent, who came back holding a few pages of fax paper. "This is what we've got so far on Tendo, Akane, of Nerima, Tokyo," he reported, handing them over.

Agent Tinnin began reading, going slightly pale in the process, before looking up. "Are you sure about this?" he asked. The other man nodded.

"It's been verified."

"Fuck," Tinnin said quietly.

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# Nabiki, we seem to have a problem, # Jun said quietly in her head. The middle Tendo sister was sitting in a seat near the front of the train from Kobe, her head leaning against the window, a few minutes away from the station in Nerima.

Without opening her eyes she asked, 'What sort of problem, Jun?'

The SI gave the impression of almost sighing. #Your sister has managed to get caught up in a bank robbery in Los Angeles,# it replied.

'What?' Nabiki opened her eyes at that, looking out into the darkness lit by street lights from the outskirts of Tokyo as they passed through. 'How the hell did that happen?'

# It would appear to be purely accidental,# Jun said. It hesitated for a moment. #I intercepted a request from the FBI in Los Angeles to the PSIA for background information on Akane. They passed along the requested data derived from both their own records and those collated from the police in Nerima. It would seem that they have only sent the bare rudiments of information on your sister, but I would expect that even so this will cause a certain amount of interest to the FBI. As you're aware Akane has a certain reputation...# Nabiki sighed very faintly, although she smiled a little.

'True enough. You seem to be becoming very proactive in your information gathering recently, Jun.' She felt it was slightly embarrassed but also pleased.

# It is a matter of your security, and therefore my duty to keep you informed of anything that might cause you issues. That includes problems involving your family.#

'You've been keeping an eye on them?'

# Essentially, yes. I hope you aren't annoyed about it. I felt it was best to be discreet, I'll stop if you want me to.#

'No, Jun, I trust your judgement,' she replied, snickering a bit. 'I suspect the authorities might have other ideas but they're not going to find out, are they?'

# I have no intention of letting them, certainly,# it told her with a dry tone which caused her to laugh again.

'So, what's going on with Akane? Is Shampoo involved as well?'
Yes. Both of them apparently accompanied Adrian Stewart into the bank in question, which was involved in a robbery mere minutes later. It seems that Akane in fact raised the alarm, calling Lieutenant Harrison slightly before the criminals began their crime. She has arranged to leave her cell-phone active and hidden so the police are able to listen in on what's going on inside. The bank is locked down, explosive charges have been rigged on all the entrances except the front door, and there are currently four gunmen and thirty-three living hostages inside, with two fatalities. One of the hostages is apparently injured, the seriousness of their injuries is unknown. LAPD and FBI personnel are surrounding the building with SWAT teams deployed.

Nabiki listened to the report from the SI with some shock, and a certain amount of pride. 'Clever Akane,' she thought to herself with a small smile mixed with worry for her sister and Shampoo. 'What are they planning to do?' she asked.

The police are currently deploying a bomb-disposal robot to investigate the facility. They don't yet seem to have a specific plan of attack. I would assume that they will bring in a hostage negotiator as per standard practice, then attempt to talk the suspects into releasing the people in the bank. The information I have so far gathered suggest that this is unlikely to work. There is an extremely large amount of cash involved which is apparently the driving motive and it is also probable that at least some of the perpetrators are military trained. The LAPD hasn't yet scanned the photographs they've managed to take of the people in the bank into their computers. As soon as they do I will have access to them and will probably be able to give identities on all four people involved very soon after that. Most likely much faster than the LAPD can manage. It sounded slightly smug about this last point.

'I would expect nothing else, Jun,' she told it.

Thank you, Nabiki, the machine replied in a pleased tone.

As the train slowed to a halt at the station, she got up and headed for the door, calling Kasumi and the others on the way. "Guys? You busy? We may need to go to LA..."

"This Tendo woman apparently knows both Yori and Chou," Agent Tinnin said with a slight tremor in his voice for a moment. He cleared his throat, coughing a little. The other FBI agent looked mildly puzzled.

"Who are they?" he asked curiously. "Both those names are vaguely familiar..."

"They're seriously bad news that the Japanese have enormous respect for," Tinnin replied, still reading the fax. "There was a bulletin circulated just after the New Year to all department heads about them. Basically it's 'Try hard not to annoy them if they turn up and really try not to give them a reason to turn up in the first place.'" He looked up, glancing at both LAPD officers, then his own colleague. "The New York Special Agent In Charge apparently met Chou during that operation in Times Square. He doesn't want to meet her again. From what the bulletin said her friend Yori is even worse."

"They're not that bad," Harrison chuckled, suddenly hugely amused about the whole thing. "I thought they were very nice people when they came to my house for a barbecue." Agent Tinnin stared at him while Captain Martinez grinned. "I know both of them quite well, Agent. They're good people."

"Appallingly dangerous good people," the FBI man replied after a moment. Harrison nodded happily.
"Oh, yes, more than you could believe, but still very polite and helpful."

"And this Akane Tendo is a friend of theirs?" the man asked carefully. Harrison nodded again.

"Yes, Yori was actually the one who started the whole thing that led to both Akane and Shampoo meeting Adrian, the film director whose studio is probably going to hire them both. He's a friend as well. They're here for stunt training and martial arts demonstrations in a really complicated job interview."

"Damn it," Tinnin mumbled. "And now they're trapped in that damn bank with four killers and a lot of other hostages. This could get messy if they get hurt. I'm not going to get a lot of praise if we end up with some sort of international incident over the whole situation."

"It's not Akane or Shampoo who are going to get hurt, Agent, trust me," Harrison assured Tinnin, who didn't look any happier at the comment.

"Sorry, Nabiki, I was helping my mother with some family business for hours today so I haven't been in LA," Aiko said apologetically. "I should have left a drone shadowing Akane and Shampoo, maybe we could have stepped in before it got to this point, but I didn't think they were likely to have anything weird happen." She sighed slightly. "Silly mistake, especially after the other night. They don't attract the crazy as much as we do but they still get a lot more of it than most people."

"Don't worry, Aiko, you had no way of knowing," Nabiki reassured her friend. "Akane and Shampoo can take care of themselves and you've been helping them out a lot over the last few days as well. I'm grateful you've put so much time in on it. Thanks."

The petite brunette smiled at her friend. "It's no trouble, really. I like both of them, you're family anyway, of course I was going to help. It's been a lot of fun. I've got some amazing recordings from LA to show you all later, but I took my drones with me when I came back."

"What do think we should do?" Fumiko asked the room at large. Everyone present looked at each other for a few seconds.

"The obvious thing is to teleport into the bank while shielded, set up a ward around the hostages, then deal with the robbers," Ranma slowly mused. "But..."

"But it's not going to do Akane much good in the long term if we come flying in to save her every time. We don't want her feeling she's dependent on us, or that we're interfering too much," Kasumi finished for him. He nodded.

"Especially since we are to a degree. We can't risk the hostages, we'll need to shield them anyway, but I think it might be best to see how it plays out for the moment. Shampoo and Akane aren't in any real danger from what Nabiki says. It'll take more than some handguns and a couple of small machine guns to seriously hurt either of them, although if they do get shot they'll certainly have a lot of bruises." Ranma looked amused when the others laughed, although the two remaining Tendo sisters exchanged glances then gave him a hard look. "What? They'll live and it will be good training about moving more quickly."

"They both did pretty well in the bullet catching exercises," Aiko snickered, "Although we weren't trying it with an AK-47. Those sting a bit the first couple of times." Everyone looked at her curiously.

"When did you get shot with an AK-47?" Misaki asked slowly.
"You know. Around. It happens," the brunette replied slightly evasively. Her team-mates gave her a look, then Fumiko glanced at her sister, the two of them obviously deciding to get the story out of their friend at some point soon. Tamiko watched with a grin before turning to Ranma and the two Tendo women who were also studying the brunette with interested expressions.

"So we go and give some very discreet backup if it's needed, but otherwise stay in the background?" she asked. Ranma looked at her, then Nabiki, before nodding.

"I think that's a good idea." He turned to the middle sister. "We've had half a dozen small incursions this last week not including Chiyoko and her little friends, nothing too serious but it's caused a few medical problems. I think I should probably stay here with Misaki and Fumiko just in case. You go with Kas, Tamiko, and Aiko. Kas can provide medical help and shielding at least as well as I can."

Nabiki thought for a moment then shrugged. "Why not, it's not like I was looking forward to bed or anything." She laughed when he snickered.

"The life of a magical girl is fraught with late nights," he chuckled.

"All too true, I've found out over the last year or so," she sighed. Standing, she shimmered and changed. "However, Mr Saotome, I believe a small modification to your suggestion is in order. I will be accompanying Ms Tendo and her companions to the incident in Los Angeles. Ms Akane Tendo and Ms Xian Pu are of interest to both myself and my employers and it would be remiss of me not to observe their current interactions with the forces of criminal mischief personally. I take my responsibilities covering such matters seriously, as you are aware." The icy woman gave a very small smile.

Ranma grinned. "Of course, Ms Aoyama. As you say."

The green-haired alter-ego of Nabiki cocked her head slightly, then stated, "The LAPD has uploaded their photographs of the perpetrators to their computer system. Jun has established identities for all four of the men in question, in addition to other intriguing data."

Ranma looked amused then turned to the others, who were also grinning, Tamiko slightly uncertainly. "Have fun. Try not to break LA, we'd never hear the end of it."

"Should we tell Agent Naito, see if he wants to come?" Tamiko asked. Ranma nodded again.

"I'll let him know about it. Aiko, if he needs to come over, can you come and get him, please?"

"Of course." The petite woman smiled. "I've always got time for Masao. OK, then, shall we go?" She turned to the others who were coming with her. 'Ms Aoyama' inclined her head slightly in agreement, making Tamiko shake her own as she got up and moved to stand next to her. Kasumi stepped forward as well, becoming 'Chou' in the process.

"You're getting far too good at that, Nabiki," the red-head said with admiring horror. A quick grin quite atypical of the cold woman flashed across 'Ms Aoyama's' face for a second then smoothed out into the normal expressionless gaze.

"Thank you, Ms Arai. Your comments are noted and appreciated." The voice was chilly enough to freeze mercury at ten paces.

"Far too good," Tamiko muttered in a low voice. Laughing, Aiko did her thing and the four women disappeared in a rainbow flash. Shaking his head with amusement, Ranma turned to his remaining friends.
"I'll call Masao, then we should probably run a quick sweep to see if anything weird is happening," he said, shimmering into 'Yori' as he spoke. Misaki tossed the resulting female an apple, handed her sister another one, then bit into a third. All three of them left the room.

"Oh, hell, who's that?" Naito mumbled as the phone beside the bed beeped, rolling over and extracting his arm from beneath his wife, who muttered sleepily to herself, then raised his head to look at the clock. "Half past too damn late."

"You know who it's going to be, dear," his wife said in a tired voice, before dropping off again. Blinking, he smiled a little, then answered the phone without looking at the display.

"Hello, Yori. I assume things are hitting the fan again?"

The voice of the martial artist came to him over the device with a note of amusement in it. "Afraid so, Masao, although with any luck not too badly. You're aware of Akane Tendo, I assume?"

"I am," he replied, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with the heel of his free hand. "Dangerous martial artist from Nerima, cause of a significant percentage of the various serious incidents there for some years, although she's much less active in that respect since you did something medical to her."

"That's the one," Yori laughed. "Although to be fair to her, she's not actually the cause of a lot of it, even though she was certainly involved quite often. And the medical thing was a nasty one that was the heart of a lot of her issues, now it's fixed she's becoming a very decent person. Always was, really, just had a lot of other things causing problems."

"The last I heard she was travelling to and from from LA, something about breaking into the movies? Some studio director was very taken with her and her friend Shampoo, that Chinese Amazon girl who's even more dangerous than Ms Tendo is." Naito yawned widely, blinking a few times, then got out of bed and wandered into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

"Correct, yet again. Yes, I introduced her to Adrian Stewart, you remember, from Richard's barbecue after that problem we had around New Years?"

"Ah. All becomes clear," Naito laughed, filling the kettle and turning it on. "Yes, I remember Adrian well. He seemed like a decent man."

"He is, very much so. She and Shampoo have been in LA for several days doing demonstrations and stunt training, Aiko's been there for a lot of it and she says it's going very well indeed. The pair of them are certainly going to get jobs out of it from what I hear, something I'm kind of pleased about. Anyway, the reason I'm calling you is to let you know that something happened."

Naito sighed, sitting at the kitchen table and watching the kettle start to rumble. "Something nice and easy to deal with that won't cause any long term issues?" he asked hopefully.

"Sort of." The young woman sounded simultaneously amused and slightly worried. "But not quite. She and Shampoo somehow found themselves in the middle of a rather nasty bank robbery."

There was silence for a moment, broken by the sound of the kettle boiling, then a loud click as it turned off. "Damn," he finally said.

"It's not ideal, certainly. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time as far as we know. Akane was the one who raised the alarm, she called Richard since Aiko wasn't available, and was very clever about it, she left her phone on and hid it so the police can listen in on the robbers without
them knowing. But it's not very good even so. They've already shot and apparently killed two guards and wounded another one, and are now barricaded in the bank with something like forty-three million dollars in cash, thirty-three hostages, and an unknown amount of weapons and explosives."

"Fuck." Naito shook his head, before filling a cup with boiling water and adding instant coffee, stirring it while he thought. "I suppose Akane and Shampoo aren't actually the ones in danger. If the reports I've seen are anything like accurate the robbers are playing with fire." He sighed heavily. "That's all we need, Akane Tendo demolishing a bank in a fit of super-powered rage."

Yori snickered. "I doubt that will happen without extreme provocation. She's a vastly calmer person nowadays, and not even close to stupid. Untrained, certainly, in the sort of things we do, but she's got potential. Her current employer in Nerima thinks very highly of her security skills. But I agree we need to keep an eye on things. Aiko, Chou, and Tamiko have gone to provide any backup and medical oversight that might be needed, just in case. The others and I are staying here because of all the little things that seem to have been happening recently, we didn't think it was a good idea to leave en masse."

"Probably for the best, in both cases," Naito said, relaxing slightly. He sipped his coffee, wincing as it scorched his tongue. "I suppose I should probably look into it."

"The FBI already requested background information on Akane from your lot, who provided just enough to keep them happy," Yori told him. "I'd guess that the PSIA was going to call you at some point soon, I just beat them to it."

With a momentarily curious look he asked, "How do you know that?" before realising the likely answer. "Don't tell me. Ms Aoyama."

"Yep. She's quite interested in Akane for some reason, and Shampoo," the magical girl laughed. "Any idea why?" He was morbidly curious, shivering a little at the thought of the alien woman.

"I believe the answer is That information is unavailable," she replied, doing a worryingly accurate impression of the other woman's voice. He shivered again, harder.

"Please don't do that," he begged, "The real thing is bad enough."

"Sorry. She's gone with Aiko and the others to see what's going on."

Shaking his head, Naito tried the coffee again, finding it was now drinkable. "I almost pity the robbers, now." He quickly finished the drink, rinsing out the cup and putting it on the side of the sink. "Can Aiko hop me over?"

"Sure. She can be outside your building in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks. Let me get dressed again, I'll meet her as soon as I do. Thanks for letting me know, Yori."

"Any time, Masao. Say hi to Akane and Shampoo for me when you see them, OK? And have fun." She snickered again as he groaned slightly.

"Fun. Yes, let's go with that. Good-bye, Yori." He disconnected and dropped the cell-phone to the table, scrubbing his face with his hands, before heading off to get dressed and check in with the office.
Everyone in the bank, even the robbers, twitched a little when the phone behind the tellers desk rang, the trilling sound echoing in the large room. "Ah. I was wondering when that would happen," Joe commented, although Akane had noticed him jump slightly even so. He walked over to the opened security door, disappearing through it and reappearing behind the glass, then waited a few more rings before picking up the receiver. "Calibank, how may I direct your call?" he asked politely, grinning at them all. Number 2 gave him a look of resigned irritation while 4 giggled a little, 3 simply stoically covering the hostages with his weapon.

He listened for a few seconds, a look of surprise going across his face, before it cleared and he looked carefully around, then up at the cameras. Covering the receiver he motioned to 2, who came over and leaned down so they could converse through the shielded gap in the bullet-proof glass.

"You're certain the cameras are off?" he asked quietly, although Akane could hear him easily enough over the low background noise. The other man nodded.

"Yes, the recording system is disabled and the external link is cut," he reported. Joe looked mildly puzzled but waved his colleague away, removing the hand covering the phone.

"Good trick," he commented. "OK, here are our demands. We want our van parked outside with a full tank of gas, the back doors open and the ramp down, within two hours. Two of my men will load the money into it. My guys will check the van very carefully, if it's tampered with, or a tracking device is put in it, or anything else seems wrong, we will shoot four hostages. If you take more than two hours we shoot a hostage every fifteen minutes until we get what we want. Do you understand?" He listened to the response, shaking his head sadly.

"No. We're not letting anyone go until we're out of your reach. Now, assuming you do as you're told, we will then proceed to take six hostages and place them in the van as well. We will get into it and drive, with a police escort, to the Mexican border, where you will let us cross. No one will enter the bank until we tell you it's safe, or the booby-traps kill everyone in it. If we are stopped or delayed, we execute a hostage every half hour until we're moving again. Do you understand that part as well?" Once more he listened. A few seconds passed as everyone in the bank tried to hear what was going on.

"If at any point we decide that you have made it impossible for us to escape, we will remote-detonate the charges we have laid around the building, killing every hostage here. We have the capability to perform this action right up to the time we're in Mexico. If anyone attempts to enter the bank or leave the bank the same thing will happen. On the other hand, if we are allowed to leave as I have just outlined, we will disable the charges, hand the detonator to one of the hostages we take with us, then let them go. Everyone lives and all it costs you is forty-three million dollars which is all covered by insurance anyway. I'd think that was a small price to pay. Just think of the headlines tomorrow otherwise."

Akane noticed number 4 was looking puzzled, about to say something when 3 caught his attention and mimed zipping his mouth shut. The younger man seemed annoyed but complied. Joe listened to the other end, presumably a cop or some sort of professional negotiator, then shook his head again. "No. Like I said, you get something from us after you do something for us. Not before." He sighed slightly at whatever he was hearing. "You seem to fail to realise that we're holding all the cards here."

Whatever the other person said made him grin maliciously. "You go off and talk about it with your superiors, that's a good boy, and get back to me when they see sense. Don't worry, we're not that trigger-happy, no one is going to kill anyone else unless you do something stupid. We're professionals, I hope you realise?" Snickering at the response he hung up, coming back into the
"What the hell was that about, Joe?" 4 erupted, looking very confused. The other three glared at him but he didn't seem to notice. "We don't have any remote detonator for the explosives and there aren't enough there to destroy the building anyway."

"For fuck's sake, you idiot, will you at least try to remember, no names!" Joe looked irritated. "And they have no idea what we have or don't have. As long as they think we can kill everyone in the bank at any moment they'll do what we say. We'll let them think about it for a while."

"They're never going to go for it," 2 said quietly. Joe looked at him, shrugging a little.

"Of course not. But it gives us some breathing room."

"What do you intend to do if they refuse?" Akane asked, making everyone look at her. "Will you start killing people?"

"I could start with you, girl," Joe commented idly, waving his weapon at her carelessly. She just watched him. Something in her eyes seemed to make him slightly uncomfortable and he stopped waving the gun around, instead unconsciously pointing it more directly at her, which was fine by her. She was much less likely to get killed than most of the others were. After a few seconds, he shrugged. "I might follow through on it, to keep them guessing. I don't have any particular problem with it, if that's what you're trying to work out. So, for the last time, will you please shut up?"

Looking at him for a moment longer she let a small hard smile cross her face, before dropping her forehead to the cool marble floor, watching out of the corner of her eye as he relaxed a very small amount. 'I seem to worry him, the poor thing,' she thought to herself, winking at Shampoo who was watching as well. The Amazon winked back. 'I really hope that Richard is listening to all this.'

After apparently thinking something over, Joe nodded to himself, pulling an odd-looking phone from his pocket. Dialling one-handed, he held it to his ear, waiting for an answer. A few seconds later he said "Porcupine Anvil Cactus Seven Two." All the hostages exchanged puzzled looks. There was a pause, then he began talking.

"Problem, I'm afraid," he said. There was another pause, longer this time. "It wasn't our fault. Either you have a leak or somehow someone got a message out. They were practically waiting for us. I would like to very politely ask how the FUCK that happened?" He nearly shouted the obscenity. Once again, he waited, looking angry, as whoever he was talking to replied.

"No, I'm telling you, everything was going exactly to plan. But by the time we were ready to leave, three minutes ahead of schedule I'd like to mention, there were cops everywhere. I assume the Feds have probably dropped in by now as well."

He listened to the response. "Two dead, one injured, thirty three captured," he reported, looking around the room. "All communications confiscated. The cargo is in hand. All we need is an exit strategy. I've got them running in circles, I can probably keep it up for a few hours, especially if we give them some more bodies to think about, but eventually either they're going to get tired of waiting or something else will go wrong. This was supposed to be a quick in and out mission not a siege."

Akane wondered who he was talking to. She looked over to Adrian, seeing the director was listening intently while keeping an eye on both her and Shampoo. The Amazon was resting in a state of alert stillness, ready to leap into action much as she was, but until they could either pick them off one by one or somehow get the hostages to safety they couldn't do much, the risk was still...
"I have no idea. Don't put this on me. The ball is in your court right now. Do whatever you need to do or you'll never see your money." Joe looked even more angry at whatever the other person said. "I don't care. We held up our end of the deal, you hold up yours, or I'll find you wherever you go."

After a few more seconds, he nodded, calming down. "Fine. One hour, we can manage that. Don't be late." He pressed a button then dropped the phone into his pocket. Turning to his colleagues he smiled. "Everything is back on track, gentlemen."

"That's extremely interesting," Special Agent Tinnin said, glancing at Harrison. They, along with Captain Martinez, Lieutenant Rojas, and a couple of other FBI personnel, were all gathered around the back of the LAPD truck listening to the output from Akane's phone, which had been routed to a set of speakers. "It's a damn good thing this Tendo girl of yours was smart enough to give us a way to listen in."

"She's an intelligent and quick-thinking young woman," he agreed. "We've certainly learned some useful things as a result. I'm very curious as to why these men seem completely unconcerned about the hostages seeing their faces. It's something I'd be worried about in most cases, that normally means they don't intend to leave witnesses."

"True," the FBI agent mused. "Very true. But offing thirty-three people, even for over forty million, seems excessive. They must know they'd never get away if they did that."

"I'm more interested in who this 'Joe' character is and who he was just talking to," Captain Martinez noted. "He's ex-military for sure, or possibly even serving military. That identification code he used, the encrypted communications, it all points to that." He looked over at the technician manning a console connected to a huge array of radio equipment. "Any luck with that call?"

"No, Captain, it's encrypted very heavily and didn't use standard cellphone frequencies. I've never seen anything like it. You're probably right, it's most likely some sort of military phone or something like that." The woman looked annoyed. "If he uses it again I'll try to work out where the other end is but I can't promise anything. I can't break the encryption though, that I am sure of."

"Do what you can, corporal," he responded. Turning to the others, he added, "I would be very interested indeed to know who he was calling. The way he was talking he's expecting whoever it is to be able to get them out of all this. I can't see that happening right now."

"We've got an hour before whatever it is happens," Harrison commented, glancing at his watch. "We'll have to wait, I suppose." Rojas looked annoyed about this. "But what are we going to do in the mean time?"

"Keep acting as if we don't know about them, just go through the normal negotiation process, it's the safest thing at the moment," Harrison suggested. Tinnin and Martinez exchanged a glance and both nodded.

"It's all we can do for the moment." Tinnin didn't look happy about it. "Did your robot get us anything new?" Harrison waved to the leader of the SWAT team, who was leaning on their truck talking to one of his men. Seeing the lieutenant beckoning he nodded, said something to the other man, then jogged over.

"What's the current status with the robot, Sergeant?" he asked. The SWAT man pulled a folder from under his arm, opening it and scanning the contents.
"We've got some better photos from inside, we've just uploaded them to the computer for an ID trace, and we can confirm that there are four visible suspects, all armed. One pump action shotgun, an Uzi, an AK-47, and at least one hand gun from what we can see. They may have other weapons plus they'll have all the ones the bank guards and armoured car guys had. There are two apparent casualties, one body surrounded by too much blood to give much hope he's still alive and one wounded guard. Thirty-three people other than the apparent fatality."

"What about the explosives?" Tinnin asked. The sergeant sighed faintly.

"That much is true. We checked all the other doors, they're wired with proximity alarms and tripwires at the minimum. A very professional job. The best we can determine is that there is a substantial quantity of C4 on the other side of the doors, based on chemical sampling. We could probably disarm it given enough time but I wouldn't want to guarantee there wouldn't be a detonation. It would take several hours at least."

"And we have no idea about any other booby-traps either," Rojas said with a scowl.

"No. I doubt, based on what we can see, that it's all of it. They're using military explosives, military techniques, so it's entirely possible they had access to other antipersonnel weapons. For all I can tell the area inside the door could be full of claymores or something worse." The sergeant shrugged. "It's not something you want to rush into, certainly."

"Damn it. I hate competent criminals," Rojas replied sourly.

"They're certainly not making it easy," Harrison agreed. He looked at his captain. "It might be time we called on some friends ourselves," he added. His superior officer looked thoughtful, while beside him Tinnin seemed puzzled, then worried as he worked out what the officer meant.

"If you're thinking about asking Yori or Chou to come over, I'm not entirely in favour of that idea," the alarmed FBI agent said, shaking his head. "I know how much help they were over the last holiday period, both here and in New York, but I won't exactly get thanked about it if..."

"Don't worry, Agent, they're nice people. You seem to have some sort of mental picture that's making them out to be much worse than they are." Harrison grinned at him. "I'm damn sure that they and their friends could bring this to an end pretty quickly and with no further casualties. Just Aiko could probably stop it by herself."

Tinnin thought for a moment. "That's their teleporting girl isn't it?" he asked. The agent who had initially brought him the information on Akane looked puzzled, turning to the other more junior agent and raising his eyebrows. He merely got a shrug in reply.

"Yes. She's a nice girl, very smart, and also incredibly good at what she does. I'm proud to call her a friend." Harrison grinned. "She sorted out a small problem we had here with some gang warfare a couple of days ago in a remarkably short time." Rojas glanced at Martinez, the captain looking slightly less pleased, but saying nothing. "Unfortunately I'm not sure she's available, Akane told me she called me first because Aiko wasn't around."

"I'm still not sure..." Tinnin looked undecided. "The FBI isn't too happy about these people suddenly popping up and walking all over normal procedure, despite the fact that the LAPD seems fine with it." He looked hard at Captain Martinez, who smiled faintly at him.

"The position of the LAPD and the City of Los Angeles is that we have no issues with any of the young ladies in question although there have been a number of irregularities when they're around. Certain allowances have been made after consultation with the State Department, the Justice
Department, and the PSIA in Japan." It had the ring of a formal statement, as if he'd practised it. "As long as they keep the collateral damage to a minimum the Mayor is fine with it as well." Harrison looked curiously at his superior, not having been privy to any of this before. It did explain a few things, though.

"It is gratifying to hear that your authorities are taking a sensibly pragmatic approach to the issues surrounding certain enhanced individuals, Captain Martinez," a terrifyingly cold voice suddenly said from behind them, making all of them jump and whirl around, Rojas and one of the FBI men reaching for their weapons. "The Japanese government has utilised such an approach for a considerable period of time which has resulted in a mutually beneficial series of events." They all stared at the green-haired woman in the expensive suit and incredibly dark glasses who was standing a few feet away watching them expressionlessly. Several cops were looking puzzled as they couldn't work out how she'd gotten past them, three of them heading over to her.

"Who the hell are you?" Tinnin demanded, looking startled and angry.

"Greetings. My apologies for any distress caused by my sudden appearance, Special Agent Tinnin. I am Ms Aoyama."

Harrison was interested to note that both Captain Martinez and Agent Tinnin went pale at the name. He recognised it himself, Laura Deveraux had told him something about some weird occurrence involving this woman and the University of Manitoba during her last email, although he didn't have any details.

"Ms Aoyama?" Tinnin managed to ask after a couple of seconds. The woman nodded once.

"Correct. It is agreeable to make your acquaintance." She gestured to the Japanese man standing next to her who looked mildly uncomfortable, as if he really wanted to step a few feet further away. "This is Agent Masao Naito of the PSIA, who is representing that agency on behalf of the Japanese government. His organisation has an interest in both Ms Tendo and Ms Pu, as do my own employers. We are here to observe the proceedings and provide aid where required."

"Hi, Masao," Harrison said quietly. The Japanese security agent nodded to him with a quick, unusually nervous smile, but said nothing for the moment.

"And who are your employers?" Tinnin managed to ask. "I've heard of you but no one seems to have an answer to that."

"That information is unavailable," she replied with cold calm.

He sighed. "I've heard about that as well."

"Indeed." The woman appeared, somehow without changing her expression, very slightly amused for a second or two. Slowly looking around at the people gathered around the vehicle, and at the technician staring out of the back of it at her, she nodded again. "We have made our own enquiries as to the identities of the criminals barricaded in the financial institution in question." As she began to add to this statement, there was a shout from behind her, one of the policemen who was manning the barricades preventing anyone from approaching pointing at her angrily as he came closer, one hand on a weapon on his belt.

"Who the hell are you? You're not supposed to be here, you need to get back behind the barriers right n..." His voice died with a gurgle as she turned very slowly and looked at him, the alien aura suddenly becoming much worse, almost oppressive. Stopping dead a few feet away and staring in horror, along with his two companions, he watched wide-eyed as she lowered her sunglasses and
looked over them at him, paling considerably. Harrison thought it was particularly impressive bearing in mind he was black.

"As I already stated, I am Ms Aoyama, Officer Zamora. I am not enamoured of interruptions, I find them impolite. Please cease your activities and return to your post."

The man stared in shock, while the green-haired woman replaced her sunglasses then turned back to the people she'd been speaking with, dismissing him completely. "My apologies," she said to them. "To continue, we have established the identity and background of the four criminals involved in the current enterprise. The information is somewhat intriguing."

Harrison listened to her, but kept an eye on Zamora, based on previous interactions. The cop was fairly good at his job but in Harrison's judgement somewhat too quick to anger and prone to overreaction. Proved nicely by the fact that as soon as his colour resumed something approaching normality, he took a step back and pulled out his taser, pointing it at Ms Aoyama's back. Before anyone else could say anything, the woman sighed very slightly, still with her back to him, then said, "Officer, it would be in your best interests to cease your current action and return to your post. Your weapon will have none of the effects you are desirous of."

"I don't know who the hell you are, lady, but I don't like you," he shouted, ignoring his colleagues who were trying to get him to calm down.

"Zamora, stand down," Harrison snapped, not at all keen on seeing what would happen if the idiot managed to upset the 'woman' he was pointing a weapon at. Agent Naito was looking worried, while Tinnin seemed both curious and annoyed. "Go back to your post."

"Lieutenant, this woman just turned up out of nowhere, she hasn't shown any ID, and this is supposed to be a secure area," the officer said in return, not lowering his taser. Harrison was grateful that the man had at least remembered enough of his training not to pull his firearm instead. "Plus she knows my name! How did she do that?"

"It's on your name tag," Harrison sighed. Zamora looked down at his shirt for a moment, then looked embarrassed.

"Oh. Right." He still didn't lower the taser, though. "But, even so, she's not supposed to be here. All we have is a name, and a last name at that. Who is she really?"

Turning around again Ms Aoyama inspected the officer carefully. He flinched again when he apparently noticed her pointed ears for the first time, fixing his gaze on them for a few seconds, before looking around wildly. "And what is she?" he squeaked. "Her ears... her eyes... Lieutenant, something weird is going on."

"Please do as your superior requests, Officer Zamora," Ms Aoyama asked, surprisingly gently. "I am not a threat that you need to concern yourself with."

Zamora took another step back, looking even more worried. Captain Martinez, who up until now had remained silent, apparently content to let Harrison handle it, finally shook his head in irritation. "Officer, put your weapon away and go back to your post before I relieve you of duty." Seeming both flustered and slightly pissed off, Zamora finally nodded, putting his taser back into its holster and moving back with a sour expression. The captain looked at Ms Aoyama who was watching emotionlessly. "My apologies, Ms Aoyama," he said. "I'm also aware of you, your name came up in a recent briefing. While I'll admit to a very large amount of curiosity, at the moment I'm more interested in your information."
Turning back to the original group, she nodded once. "Then we shall proceed." She looked to the side where to Harrison's complete shock, and that of everyone else except possibly Naito, an image suddenly appeared floating in mid-air, solid and three dimensional. It was the head of a man, one Harrison recognised from looking into the bank with binoculars earlier. "This is Joseph Mitchells, Captain, US Army." A dossier of information from both civilian and military records appeared beside the image, insubstantial text slowly scrolling upwards. "He is thirty-seven years of age, born in Memphis, Tennessee, to Edna and Ryan Mitchells. Entered the United States Army in 1984, specialised in small arms and urban warfare techniques. He has a number of commendations on file for actions during battle, most recently in the conflict known locally as the Gulf War."

Everyone listened carefully, watching the data scroll past. It ended in a final entry highlighted in red. "Declared killed in action during the final days of Operation Desert Storm, February twentieth, 1991. No body was recovered." She looked around at them for a moment as everyone thought about that little fact.

"He looks pretty alive to me," Rojas commented.

"Indeed, Lieutenant Rojas," she agreed. "Reports of his demise would appear to be erroneous. However, there is a pattern present as I will demonstrate." The image and data changed to another man, this one black and slightly younger-looking than Mitchells. "This is Mr Julius Harris, former field agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. Thirty-five years of age, born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Veteran of a number of undercover operations in Central America where he specialised in what is somewhat euphemistically termed 'wet-works', more accurately described as assassination, at which he was quite skilled. Mr Harris disappeared during an operation in Nicaragua in 1989, being declared dead six months later when certain evidence came to light. No body recovered, once again."

Harrison studied the textual data beside the image, exchanging a glance with the Captain and Agent Tinnin. There was quite a lot of it, most of which he suspected was extremely classified. How this woman had got hold of it was something to ponder. Once more, the final entry was highlighted in red, showing the date of apparent death of the man in question.

The image and text changed again. "Vadim Yefremov, Major, Spetsnaz GRU, Russia. Thirty-nine years of age, born in Vladivostok. Specialist in electronic countermeasures, explosives, and intelligence operations. Also trained in hand to hand combat and anti-personnel techniques. Notes in his file suggest Major Yefremov is unconcerned about eliminating those he deems an obstruction, with thirty-four confirmed kills to his name. Disappeared and presumed dead in the aftermath of the events surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991." The cold voice paused for a moment. "I trust you can determine the commonality between these three men."

"They're all dead, apparently," Tinnin said slowly, intently studying the image floating a few feet away. "And they all 'died' fairly close to each other in time, nearly ten years ago."

"Indeed." Ms Aoyama looked satisfied, somehow without changing her expression.

"What about the fourth suspect?" Tinnin asked. Without moving she somehow changed the image and data again.

"He is the outlier in the data. Mr Erico Soria, twenty-six years of age, born in Tucson, Arizona. Formerly employed by a number of Central American drugs cartels as an enforcer and hit-man. Mr Soria is implicated in some eighteen murders both in Mexico and the United States during the last nine years. He disappeared in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in July 1997, immediately following a major firefight between two competing factions, both of whom he had performed various functions for at
different times over the previous five years. Again, presumed dead, although it must be said that there seems to have been little true interest in locating his remains." The woman raised an eyebrow for a moment, studying her own information. "It would appear that the majority of Mr Soria's acquaintances expressed small regret at his apparent demise."

"And now these 'dead' people are robbing banks in LA?" Rojas remarked, looking puzzled yet interested. "How the hell did that happen?"

"An intriguing question, Lieutenant Rojas," Ms Aoyama replied. "It is under investigation as we speak. However, at this precise point in time it seems somewhat more important to resolve the current stand-off with these individuals than to delve further into their background and motivations." She made a gesture to the bank across the road. "I have taken the liberty to ensure that the hostages are protected from the actions of their captors in the eventuality the situation deteriorates to the point of violence. Ms Chou has surrounded them with a ward of sufficient strength to prevent injuries."

"Chou's here?" Harrison asked, suddenly feeling much better about the whole issue. His fear of a bloodbath disappeared.

"She is, Lieutenant Harrison, as are Ms Tamiko and Ms Aiko. They are currently discreetly observing the hostages and their captors to prevent further bloodshed. We did not wish to step in until you, as the local authorities, were informed, since there is now no threat to life. However, as that task has now been completed, I believe that it might be best to bring the situation to a prompt end." Ms Aoyama produced a horrifying little smile that made everyone wince, chills running through them. "I wish to observe Ms Tendo's actions first hand. To that end I have requested that Ms Chou and her associates provide backup only in the case that it is required."

None of the gathered law enforcement people could think of any good reason, or indeed method, to stop her as she nodded to them, then turned and headed towards the bank. Harrison watched her go, shivering a little, before glancing at Naito, who also had his eyes on the woman. "Who the hell is she?" he asked quietly.

"In some ways your guess is as good as mine," the Japanese man replied, not looking away from the female figure as it stalked down the street. "I've been wondering myself for quite a while. No one can work it out, not with any degree of certainty. Our best guess is that she is an intelligence agent for an agency that isn't on this planet. Probably from one of the demon realities, I'd guess. They seem fairly friendly but based on her don't take kindly to anyone interfering with people they have an interest in, which seems to be anything to do with the magical girls specifically or the magical world in general. Why they're interested in Akane Tendo and Shampoo I have no idea."

He finally looked around. "We decided it was best not to interfere. Not that we can do much in any case, I suspect. Ms Aoyama has actually been very helpful several times in the past, she's one of the main reasons the Halleckton thing wasn't much worse than it was for example. She's certainly saved a lot of lives for us. I think she's friendly, in her terms at least, but I'm certainly never going to invite her out for a drink. The woman creeps the shit out of me."

"Human?" Harrison asked after mulling it over. Naito shrugged.

"Not as such, would be my guess, but I have no idea really."

"Weird."

"That's putting it mildly."
Special Agent Tinnin and his people were listening to their conversation, as were the SWAT personnel, all of whom were wearing peculiar expressions. "What does he mean, she's not human?" one of the FBI agents mumbled to his colleague. The other one shrugged, bemused. Naito smiled slightly, glancing back at them.

"Surely you've heard that the truth is out there, Agent?" he asked, making the man stare at him quite hard.

"Yes. I'm not sure I believe it though. I mean, space aliens and magic? Is that what you're talking about?"

"More or less, yes. Trust me, whatever you're thinking, I can practically guarantee it's actually weirder." Naito smiled a little more widely then went back to watching Ms Aoyama, who had reached the bank. She stopped in front of the door, then politely knocked on the security shutter. Everyone waited to see what would happen, dozens of law enforcement people going quiet. Harrison cupped a hand over his earpiece, listening to the phone in the bank which was broadcasting everything.

Deciding that it might be time to stir the pot a little, to keep the attention of the robbers on her and Shampoo rather than the other, more vulnerable hostages, Akane lifted her head and focussed on Joe, watching closely as he walked around the bank talking quietly to 2 and 3. 4 was standing pressed against the wall next to the window, alternately looking out at the limited view available with a nervous expression, and keeping an eye on the hostages, holding his shotgun in a manner that didn't leave anyone feeling too secure. The lead intruder glanced at her a few times, once he noticed what she was doing, looking more and more irritated each time. 'He's starting to look really annoyed,' she thought with amusement, her anger at the men somewhat muted by it for the moment..

Eventually her gaze seemed to get to him and he stopped chatting with 2, who noticed the direction his colleague was looking, a slightly amused expression passing over his face, then came over, pointing his weapon in her general direction. Squatting down safely out of reach he inspected her. "What?" the man finally asked in exasperation.

"I'm sorry?" she asked in return, very politely and with a tone of puzzlement. He sighed heavily.

"You're not acting at all like I would expect of someone in your position," he elaborated. "You do realise that you're a hostage, right?" Tapping his Uzi with his free hand meaningfully he watched her. She looked at it for a moment.

"9mm micro Uzi submachine gun, 20 round magazine, muzzle velocity three hundred and fifty metres per second, 1200 rounds per minute firing rate. Military specification, not legal in the US for civilians." Smiling sweetly at his sudden gape, she added, "Manufactured in Israel by IMI Ltd since 1986. Yours seems to have a suppressor fitted. It works quite well, the noise level was surprisingly low." Grateful for the information that Aaron had taught her and Shampoo during the session in the firing range, she enjoyed his expression while privately slightly surprised she'd remembered all that.

"Yes," he replied slowly, once he got over the shock. Studying her more closely he raised an eyebrow. "Now I'm even more interested in you, young lady. Who are you, I wonder? A bit young for a security operative of some sort."

"Oh, I'm no one special, just a martial artist training to be a stunt woman. And you? I'd say you were certainly military trained. You obviously have experience in, hmm, two martial arts I'd say?"
She smirked as he looked surprised again. "Karate and... something more specialised. What's that one that the US Marines use?"

"Think it called LINE," Shampoo said from beside her, looking amused and relaxed. "Mix of several martial arts made for military use. Like simple version of Anything Goes. Not bad if used right but basic." Joe looked at her, then back to Akane, before shaking his head.

"Your friend is also a martial artist, I assume?"

"Amazon warrior, in fact," the purple-haired young woman replied, smiling at him. "Like martial artist but better."

"I wouldn't say you're better, Shampoo," Akane protested, turning her head to her friend. "More bloodthirsty, sure, and you're incredible with a bow, but..."

"Still beat you nineteen times out of twenty," the Chinese girl laughed. "Akane improving but needs work."

"Dad can kick your ass, though," Akane snickered, making Shampoo look irritated at the memory. "For that matter, Genma was throwing you all around the Dojo for two hours the last time." Shampoo opened her mouth to retort when Joe, who was alternating looking between them like a man at a tennis match, held up his hand.

"Hey, shut up, both of you," he snapped, an annoyed expression on his face. "This isn't the way hostages are supposed to act. Get with the program or I might pick one of you to use for target practice."

"Ooh, pick me," Akane grinned, holding up her hand. He stared, then looked back at his colleagues who were smirking at him. 2 shrugged while 3 just shook his head in amusement.

"Don't tempt me, girl," he growled, standing up again and backing away, watching them both warily as if he was concerned about their sanity. Most of the hostages were doing much the same. Adrian was smiling a little to himself, though, so Akane winked at him.

The three robbers gathered together and had a conversation in quiet tones, Joe motioning back at the two young women while 2 laughed at something, then went quiet again. The leader glared at his colleagues for a moment, turned and gave Akane a filthy look that made her grin inside, then deliberately ignored her, turning to inspect the huge pile of cash on the trolley. A sort of scared silence descended on the bank, a couple of the hostages whispering quietly until 4 pointed his shotgun at them and shook his head.

A few minutes later, somewhat bored, Akane raised her hand again. Joe twitched, seeing it out of the corner of his eye, but ignored her. The other three exchanged glances although they seemed to be content to leave it up to him to deal with. After another minute she began waving her hand back and forth like a school child who needed the toilet. Eventually he sighed heavily, turned, and stared at her. "What now?" he growled.

"Is this going to take much longer, Joe?" she asked in a deliberately care-free tone, putting a mildly irritated expression on and checking her watch. "Only Shampoo and I are in the middle of a job interview we came all the way from Japan for and we're already late for today." The criminal pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes with a sigh, looking like someone developing a migraine, before opening them again and shooting 3, who was snickering, a nasty look.

"Are all Japanese women as annoying as you are?" he asked. She thought for a moment then
shrugged.

"I really couldn't say. I could check and let you know if you want, later."

He glared at her. "No, thanks all the same, I don't want to know. Now, will you please be QUIET!"
The last word was at rather more than normal volume. Pointing his weapon directly at her he waited until she nodded complacently. "Thank you."

Silence fell once more. The other hostages with the exception of Adrian, who was looking very amused when the robbers weren't looking at him, were staring at Akane as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing. She smiled back at them all then rolled over onto her back, crossing her hands behind her head and studying the ceiling. Annoying the man seemed both quite fun and a good way of keeping his attention on her. Joe turned and glared at her, opened his mouth for a moment, then shook his head and closed it again, obviously not wanting to get sucked into yet another conversation. Sighing and seemingly deciding it was best to just ignore her he went back to inspecting the cash, apparently counting it, making notes on a pad and occasionally checking his watch.

Wondering what the police were planning to do, Akane smiled to herself. Her ploy was certainly working, Joe was now pretending she didn't exist and the other three were watching either him or her pretty much exclusively.

A few minutes later Shampoo peered around curiously, appearing puzzled, then glanced at her. She turned her head towards her friend, raising an eyebrow. The Chinese warrior shrugged slightly, a thoughtful expression on her face, before looking very carefully around the bank lobby for a couple of minutes. Akane could see she thought something had changed but wasn't certain what. Glancing at Joe, she decided it was probably best not to wind him up too much by talking to the other woman, just in case he decided to do something silly. She wanted him off-balance, not homicidal.

The sudden firm knock on the security door shortly thereafter made everyone jump, even Joe. All four robbers whirled and pointed their guns in the direction of the sound. Shampoo stared at the door and paled noticeably. Looking in the same direction, Akane was abruptly aware that there was a sensation present that there hadn't been before, one that was horrifyingly familiar.

A very cold presence, one that wasn't exactly human.

And it was right on the other side of the door.

"Oh dear," she said quietly in Japanese. Joe looked at her, then the door again, which seemed to be much more interesting.

"Who is it?" he asked 4, who was peering out the slots in the shutters trying to catch a glimpse of the person who had knocked, while clutching his weapon across his chest, his finger on the trigger.

"I think it's a woman," he reported, squinting. "In a suit. A Fed, maybe?" Turning to his superior he asked, "What do we do?"

Joe looked at his other colleagues for a moment, a somewhat puzzled look on his face. "A Fed? That's not normal procedure. What the hell are they trying?" he muttered. Momentarily wearing an undecided expression he checked his watch again. The knock sounded once more. "Ignore her. It's some sort of trick," he finally stated.

A couple of minutes passed quietly, everyone watching the door, the robbers with nervous annoyance, the hostages with hopeful looks, and Akane and Shampoo with a certain amount of
trepidation. The sound of the phone ringing abruptly made them all jump again.

Joe stared at it, then looked at 2, who looked back blankly. As the phone kept ringing he eventually went back through to the secure area and picked it up, a disgruntled expression on his face. "Have you decided to do what we demanded?" he asked. A look of complete shock appeared as he listened to the answer. "What the hell... How the fuck do you know that?" he asked, almost involuntarily, before his face hardened. "I don't care who you are, we've told you what you need to do. You've got...," he checked his watch, "...an hour and a half left to comply before we execute the first hostage. I even know which one I'm going to start with." Akane waved at him when he glared at her. "To be honest I'd be doing the world a favour. Now get on with it." He slammed the phone down and stomped back into the main lobby looking annoyed and slightly worried.

"Who was it?" number 3 asked.

"She said her name was Ms Aoyama," Joe replied. "She sounded like a cold bitch." Akane and Shampoo exchanged a nervous wince, then looked around carefully, just in case.

Moments later, Akane's Japanese cell phone rang. Everyone looked at it where it lay on the table next to Shampoo's phone. Seconds later the Chinese woman's phone rang as well, followed by all the other confiscated ones in the bag Joe had put on the bank counter. The four robbers looked extremely confused, exchanging glances. When Joe's odd military device started beeping he twitched, pulled it out, then stared at it in shock. 2 leaned over and inspected the display on it. "Ms Aoyama," he read out loud.

Joe continued to watch his device like it had suddenly decided to bite him. A short while later the mass ringing stopped suddenly, replaced with a weird silence, although Akane could swear that she could hear a very faint high pitched hum coming from somewhere in the room.

"Captain Mitchells, I find your reluctance to enter into conversation with me quite rude and somewhat inefficient with regard to my time." The icy voice echoed around the dead silent room, emanating from all the phones present at once as they somehow went into hands-free mode by themselves. Joe yelped and dropped his own communications device. "In the interests of minimising potential violence I am giving you, Mr Harris, Major Yefremov, and Mr Soria one chance to relinquish your weapons and submit to arrest by the LAPD, who are awaiting this eventuality with considerable interest. This offer expires thirty seconds from the moment I cease speaking. Please decide on your response with alacrity."

The four men in question looked at each other in complete shock. "How the fuck does she know who we are?" 2 asked slowly.

"Ms Aoyama knows everything," Akane snickered, half-amused and half-terrified. They stared at her, before Joe came over and pointed his gun at her from a metre away, an ugly expression on his face.

"Who the hell is she?" he demanded. "FBI? CIA? Do you work for her?"

"Oh, no, I don't work for her," she replied, shuddering. "She scares the hell out of me. But I really think you should answer her. You don't want to annoy her, trust me."

Shampoo nodded vigorously. "Akane right. Ms Aoyama very bad news." She looked at her watch. "Got ten seconds make up mind."

Seeming unnerved by their responses Joe looked back and forth between them, then turned to his colleagues, who seemed seriously worried for the first time since they'd stormed the bank. Even
the police arriving had only irritated them.

"Five seconds," Shampoo announced helpfully.

"Shut up," he snarled, looking down at her, then at the door. A few seconds passed while he thought.

"The offer is now invalid, Captain Mitchells. My apologies for any injuries you or your compatriots incur as you are incapacitated. I would suggest, however, that such injuries were wholly avoidable on your part. You have decided on an unwise career path."

"Anyone tries to break in here and we start shooting," Joe shouted, pointing his weapon at Akane.

"I regret to inform you that you are labouring under a misunderstanding, Captain Mitchells," Ms Aoyama stated calmly. "Incapacitating yourself and your fellow miscreants will not require any individual from outside the institution you have seized to enter. You have most cleverly managed to ensure that the agents of your own undoing are already present. I merely need to say one short phrase and the outcome is assured. Unfortunately it is highly likely that this will involve a certain amount of physical trauma, although it is my hope that this will be minimised."

Joe was a little wild-eyed by now, looking suspiciously around the room, as were his fellows, their weapons slowly panning around searching for a threat. "You're bluffing," he said loudly and scoffingly after a moment. "You're trying to psych us out."

"I never bluff, Captain Mitchells," the icy voice assured him, somehow sounding even colder. "It is now time to bring this to an end."

There was a pregnant pause, during which time everyone looked around nervously, the four robbers most of all, Joe's calmly competent attitude cracking completely as he spun in a circle looking for anything out of place.

The voice came once more. "Ms Tendo, Ms Pu, the hostages are protected. You may act."

"Thank you, Ms Aoyama," Akane replied very politely and carefully, glancing at Shampoo, who was now wearing a vicious grin. Both of them rolled easily to their feet. Joe and his men immediately aimed their weapons at the two women.

"Get back on the floor," Joe, or as they now knew, Captain Mitchells, demanded harshly.

The Tendo sister looked at her friend, then both of them returned their attention to the robbers. "No, I don't think so," Akane smiled. "I don't like you, Captain Mitchells. You're a very unpleasant man and you and your friends have already killed two people in cold blood. I think we need to stop you."

"We're the ones with the guns, girl," he replied, raising his weapon and ostentatiously flicking the safety off.

"True," she nodded, "but that's not going to stop us." He stared at her as she took a step forward, before glancing at his colleagues, who looked puzzled and somewhat worried by the fact that neither young women seemed worried.

"You think?" he asked after a moment, pulling the trigger with the weapon aimed at the middle of her chest. He'd clearly selected single shot, because one loud bang sounded. Her hand blurred out of sight, then reappeared holding a shiny copper-jacketed bullet between thumb and forefinger. Everyone except Adrian gaped in complete disbelief.
"Yes, actually, I do," she replied with a hard smile. "My turn."

From the point of view of almost everyone in the lobby she moved so fast she was almost impossible to track. He opened fire on full auto, having time only for half a dozen shots, all of which lagged by far too much to have any chance at all of hitting her, before she was on him. One high kick and his Uzi slammed into the wall to the right, leaving him staggering back with a hand that was obviously crushed. "Fuck!" he screamed, his cool missing completely. "Don't just stand there, you idiots," he shouted to his compatriots, all of whom were still gaping in shock, "shoot those bitches!"

A couple of stunned seconds later, 2 and 3 opened up on the blue-haired girl, who was still moving. They missed completely, the AK-47 wielded by number 2 leaving pock-marks in the walls following behind her, clicking on an empty chamber a second or two later. Fumbling for another magazine in his pocket, 2 took his eyes off the scene for a bit too long, looking up to find Shampoo grinning at him from the other end of the weapon which she was holding by the barrel. As he watched in horror she put her other hand on the receiver then twisted sideways, the gun distorting with a cracking noise, small parts dropping from it to the floor. He let go and stepped back, his eyes wide, then reached into his other pocket. Before he could remove the pistol he apparently had as a backup weapon her hand snapped out, one finger extended and poked him on the side of the neck, the pressure point attack making his arm immediately go limp as he lost sensation in it.

He swore unpleasantly, jabbing at her with his other arm, which she grabbed, then used for leverage to throw him across her hip and half-way across the lobby into the wall, before turning and diving at number 3, who was swearing in Russian while trying to follow both Akane and herself, shooting at each of them in turn. Deflecting one round with her palm, not bothering to catch it, she reached him at the same time Akane did, both women striking from opposite sides. A pair of cracks sounded and he screamed in agony, dropping to the floor with both his arms broken. Shampoo reached down and prodded him in a couple of places on his back which instantly made him stop screaming and lapse into unconsciousness.

"I really have to learn some of those pressure points," Akane commented, impressed. Shampoo laughed.

"Ask Great-grandmother when we get home. I'm sure she'd teach you. You need some ki ability to do it properly but you'll get there sooner or later." The pair smiled at each other then turned to look at the two still-standing criminals, who were staring in total horror at what had happened in mere seconds.

"Captain, would you like to give up now, or do we keep going?" Akane asked. Mitchells looked at her like he'd seen a ghost, cradling his broken hand with his other arm. He didn't seem to know what to do next, the entire situation had devolved so rapidly and completely it had obviously thrown him totally. "I don't mind either way, this is still good training, but the problem is there aren't any cameras so I can't use it for my resúme."

"I can provide visual recordings for that purpose if required, Ms Tendo," the voice of Ms Aoyama sounded, making everyone jump a little. The chilly tones sounded somehow approving. "Please continue with your actions. Your restraint in handling the situation has been noted."

Shivering a little, Akane nonetheless replied, "Thank you, Ms Aoyama," while wondering how the hell the woman could possibly be recording any of this. Deciding that it probably didn't matter, although somewhat worried and quite curious to know how much else she'd recorded, the Tendo woman kept looking at Mitchells, who was pale and sweating. "Well?"

"Get down or I'll shoot a hostage!" Everyone looked at number 4, who was standing with his
shotgun pointing into the crowd of people, appearing nearly as worried as they were, but determined. "I mean it," he yelled slightly more quietly. "Lie down on the floor right fucking now." Several of the hostages began crying, the ones who the gun was pointing at, both men and women.

"That's a really bad idea," Akane said slowly, trusting Ms Aoyama's word that the hostages were safe. "I doubt it will work anyway, and if it does I'll unscrew your head and use it like a football."

"Then I get nasty with what's left," Shampoo growled, producing her chúi from her small ki pocket and spinning them in her hands. She glared at the man who swallowed hard. Both of them took a step forward.

"Stay back," he demanded, raising the gun to point at them, then lowering it again when some of the hostages took the opportunity to scramble back a little. "And you idiots stay still."

"I'm not kidding," he shouted as everyone froze again. "One more step and I shoot."

Akane and Shampoo shared a look, then glanced at Adrian. He looked back seeming unconcerned and very interested to see what happened, not appearing worried. The investment manager who was lying next to him had his eyes shut and was apparently going through as many prayers to several deities as he could remember, very quickly. Both young women grinned and took one more step at the same time.

The thunderous boom of the shotgun was instantly followed by a scream of agony as the buckshot bounced off something invisible, several lead balls going back to where they'd come from at high velocity. Leaking blood from a number of small holes across his chest, number 4 staggered, then somewhat stupidly tried again with very similar results. Akane sighed, watching as he dropped the weapon with a clatter then slid down the wall, leaving a couple of bloody hand-prints on the way. He didn't seem mortally wounded but it was certain that his interest was no longer on resisting. The hostages, all of whom with one exception had screamed at the two shots, stared in shock at what had happened before exchanging disbelieving gazes.

"Who the hell are you two?" The horrified and wondering voice came from behind them. Both girls turned around and looked at Mitchells, who was staring in awed terror at them. Off to the side the figure of number 2 was stirring, slowly sitting up and holding his head in his hands. Akane shrugged.

"Like I said, just a couple of martial artists here on a job interview." She grinned at him.

"They're doing incredibly well," Adrian put in from the floor, looking pleased. Everyone looked at him, then went back to watching the two women and Captain Mitchells.

"How are you doing all this?" he asked, taking a step back as she took one towards him.

"A lot of hard work and training, mostly," she replied happily. "It's a family thing. You know, it's good for you that some friends fixed my anger issues, if it was a year ago you'd probably all be in intensive care by now if you were lucky." She giggled as he stared, paling at the sound. "I used to be really dangerous."

"Not exactly safe now," Shampoo told her.

"No, but now it's carefully aimed danger," Akane said. She took another step forward, he took one back, maintaining the five metres or so between them. "Are you ready to give up, Captain?"

Wincing in pain, he very carefully slid his damaged hand into his pocket, then reached around to the back of his belt and pulled out a revolver, a small thirty-eight calibre short-barrelled pistol,
pointing it at her with a shaking hand. "No," he said, not sounding persuaded by his own words.

"Really?" Akane put on a surprised expression. "You're very hard to convince." She stepped forward again. Holding up the gun he aimed at her chest then fired, the report echoing around the room.

She held up the bullet and showed it to him. "That's impossible," he gasped.

"No, but I'll admit it stings a little," she laughed.

He fired again, then twice more. The fourth bullet she caught left handed. "One left, that's a five shot revolver," the Tendo woman said pleasantly, spreading her arms wide. "Try again."

His hand shaking violently, he fired his last shot. Akane winced, then rubbed her chest between her breasts, where a small hole showed in her shirt. "Ow. That one really stung," she commented. Glancing over her shoulder at Shampoo who was watching with amusement, she added, "Remind me to catch the damn things next time, it hurts if you miss. That's going to leave a bruise."

"OK, Akane," Shampoo said equably. Returning her attention to the captain, the blue-haired woman walked slowly closer as he retreated until he ran into the wall. Closing the remaining distance she stopped a metre away, studying him carefully.

"It's been fun and everything but we really need to get to work. We're already nearly two hours late because of you guys and I'm losing patience. Give me the gun or I'll punch you through the face."

"You... How..." He looked wildly around, sweating even more, then focussed on her. A puzzled expression appeared past the horror. "...through the face?"

Without changing her mildly irritated expression, Akane lashed out with a fist moving far too fast for him to follow, sinking it wrist deep into the marble-faced wall beside his head and spraying him with little chips of stone. He went very, very still for a long moment as every eye in the bank fixed on her fist, then slowly rolled his head to the left and watched wide-eyed as she pulled it out and held it up in front of him, dust and gravel falling from it. "Through the face, yes," she replied cheerfully.

His eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out, dropping limply to the floor.

Catching the pistol on the way past she squeezed hard, reducing it to twisted metal, then dropped the remains on top of his unconscious body. Slapping her hands together in a cloud of marble dust she turned around, satisfied, inspecting the inside of the bank lobby and all the people gaping at her. Shampoo walked over, stopping en route to poke number 2 into unconsciousness, then looked at the hole in the wall. "Bank going to be annoyed, was nice marble," she commented lightly.

Akane shrugged with a grin.

"It seemed to impress him," she chuckled.

"My thanks, Ms Tendo, and Ms Pu, for the minimal damage caused." The voice came from all the phones again. A moment later the security shutters activated, rolling up into the walls, then the front door slid open and stayed that way. The green-haired woman in the suit and sun-glasses strolled casually in, looking around with interest, before heading over. "I am quite impressed with your handling of this unfortunate situation. My employers will remunerate the financial institution for the minor structural damage in recompense for your actions," she added. Akane nodded, not sure she could trust her voice face to face with the alien woman.

Turning to the former hostages, Ms Aoyama looked them over. "My apologies for any emotional
distress caused during the recent events. I regret that we were unable to prevent this situation entirely. The local law enforcement authorities are waiting outside and now that everything has been resolved satisfactorily I would ask that you cooperate with them." She pulled out a notebook from somewhere, studying the damage to the walls from the bullet-holes and making a few notes, before walking over and carefully inspecting the hole Akane's fist had made. A few more words were written, then the notebook and pen vanished. "Most comical, Ms Tendo. An intimidating demonstration indeed. Would you have followed through on your threat of lethal bodily harm?" She looked down at the unconscious Mitchells, then back to Akane, who sighed, shaking her head.

"No. I couldn't kill him even with what he and the others have done. I'd just have broken his arms a little." She thought for a moment. "Maybe his legs as well."

"Interesting." The woman reappeared her notebook, wrote something in it, then put it away again. "An effective bluff, certainly." She looked at the odd watch she was wearing and made a small annoyed sound. "My time here is limited. Please excuse me, I must return to Lieutenant Harrison and his colleagues. It is my hope that your continued employment efforts are successful. Until we meet again, Ms Tendo, Ms Pu." She nodded politely with one of her almost-but-horrifyingly-not-quite-a-smile smiles, turned, then headed back to the door, pausing on the way to momentarily study Adrian, who was helping the investment manager to his feet. "Mr Stewart. I will arrange to have a visual record of this event delivered to you shortly." He nodded, apparently not sure what to say and finding her somewhat forbidding. After a couple of seconds she resumed walking, disappearing out the main entrance.

"God, she still creeps me out like nothing else I've ever experienced," Akane told Shampoo in a low voice. The Chinese woman nodded soberly.

"Me too. She scares the crap out of me. But maybe Aiko was right and she's OK with us. She certainly helped a lot and she seemed pleased, or what passes for pleased for her anyway."

"If that's pleased I wouldn't want to see angry," Akane replied, shivering.

"She can be a little intense," Aiko announced, appearing out of thin air next to them with a broad smile. Both young women recoiled away from her, instinctively taking defensive positions, before realising who it was.

"For god's sake, Aiko, give us some warning before you do that, will you?" Shampoo demanded, shaking her head.

Aiko snickered. "Sorry, bad habit. I blame Yori and Chou, they're a bad influence on me, always appearing out of nowhere and making people jump. It's kind of fun."

"I'd hardly say we were always doing it, Aiko," Chou commented calmly, fading into view on their other side, a grinning Tamiko next to her. "But is fun, yes. Hello, Akane, Shampoo. Well done, by the way, very well done." She smiled warmly at them both.

Akane laughed, shaking her head. "Thank you, Chou. I'm glad to see you. And you as well, Tamiko. I guess you were who was protecting the hostages?"

"Yes, I put a ward over them all as soon as we got here," the blonde confirmed with a nod. "That was a few minutes before Ms Aoyama arrived at the door. She was briefing the authorities on the data she had on these nasty people." Chou looked disapprovingly at the disabled and unconscious robbers. "I'm very displeased with them."

"So am I," Akane agreed, following her eyes, then looking over at the dead guard. She sighed
"I've never seen anyone die before. He just walked up and shot the poor man like it was nothing."

"To some people, life is cheap," Chou replied, looking over at the body sympathetically. "Especially someone else's life. There's nothing you could have done as far as I know, though, so please don't dwell on it too much. You both did very well to bring everything to a halt without any more injuries. I'd better heal that other poor man over there, then I'll patch these criminals up so the police can deal with them." Glancing at her red-headed companion, she asked, "Can you check on the other one in the back? I'm certain he's dead based on what we could detect from the outside but I'd like to be completely sure."

"OK." Tamiko nodded, then headed through the door at the rear of the bank lobby, while Chou walked over and knelt next to the injured guard who had been shot in the arm. Akane followed her over, curious to see her work up close.

Naito and Harrison watched with the others as Ms Aoyama waited, then knocked again. Even from where they were they could feel a sort of chilly irritation from the woman, conveyed more by body language than anything else.

"Think they'll open up for her?" Harrison asked. Naito shook his head.

"I doubt it. I'm curious to see what happens when they don't."

"What about the hostages? I'm not happy about letting them be pawns in some sort of game between her and those idiots in there." Naito looked at the LAPD officer for a second before returning his attention to the bank.

"I doubt very much that any harm will come to them, Richard, whatever else she is the woman does genuinely seem to dislike causing injury or letting it happen without good reason. I know Chou is providing magical protection for the hostages, I doubt even a grenade could cause any problems for them right now. It will be over soon." He looked mildly amused for a moment. "But Captain Mitchells and his friends are about to have a very bad day."

"Good," the policeman said with a hard grin. He listened with grim amusement to the interactions between Akane, Ms Aoyama, and the gang in the bank. Once again he wondered what weird magic allowed her to do what she was doing. He was getting the distinct impression that anything electronic basically bent over with its hands around its ankles and cooperated with the alien woman, a mental image that made him giggle to himself for some reason.

The sound of a gunshot echoed across the street. All the law enforcement personnel twitched, quite a large number of firearms suddenly appearing and being pointed in the relevant direction. "Hold your fire," Captain Martinez called in a commanding voice. "Anyone who shoots is in a world of hurt."

"And probably not from him," Naito snickered in a very quiet voice, making Harrison grin, then look guiltily over his shoulder at his superior, who didn't seem to have heard. Beside the captain, Special Agent Tinnin was on his cell-phone, holding a pair of binoculars to his eyes with his free hand. Seconds later there was a short burst of automatic gunfire, a pause, then a much longer burst with a distinctive sound to it that most of those present recognised.

"That's the AK-47," Harrison sighed.

"Sounds like it, yes," Naito agreed.
Harrison looked worried. "Will those two girls be OK against something that heavy?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid, I know Akane is capable of catching a 9mm bullet, she proved that a couple of weeks ago during a robbery of the jewellery shop she works at, but a rifle bullet...?" Naito shrugged. "That said, they have to actually hit her in the first place and according to the records both she and Shampoo are nearly as fast as some of the lower-powered magical girls. I doubt it would kill either of them anyway, but I also doubt they stood there and waited to be shot." A few pistol shots sounded, then everything went quiet.

"Is that it?"

The question from Rojas, standing behind them, was answered by the loud boom of a shotgun blast, which was repeated a few seconds later. Everything went quiet once more. A longer pause of nearly thirty seconds was followed by five small calibre pistol shots one after another, the last one coming with some delay. Half a minute later the security grates over the windows and the doors began to slowly retract.

"No, but I think that is," Naito commented, as they watched the doors slide open. Ms Aoyama walked inside like she owned the place. He and the others relaxed.

"Not a normal end to a bank siege," Captain Martinez remarked, coming to stand next to them with Agent Tinnin.

"Really, Captain?" Naito looked at him and smiled a little. "It's not all that unusual where I come from." He chuckled as the other man sighed slightly. "Admittedly, Ms Aoyama is a fairly recent addition to the whole scene but you have to admit she's quite efficient at her job. Terrifying, creepy as hell, but good at what she does."

"I'd love to know what that actually was," Tinnin muttered, putting his phone away. He turned to his colleagues. "Stay alert, whoever Captain Mitchells was relying on for backup is due in ten minutes or so. I want to talk to them very much." The other FBI agents all nodded, one of them pulling out his handgun and checking it before tucking it back inside his jacket.

Captain Martinez turned to the SWAT leader. "Back them up, if anything odd happens." The sergeant hefted the MP5 he was holding, smiling grimly. "And get your men in there to disarm those bombs. Rojas, get the crime scene guys in there. Harrison, come with me, I want to see what all this was about. And someone get some ambulances over here as well." The small crowd of people began crossing the street, while others rushed around sorting out the various orders.

As they approached the bank, Ms Aoyama walked out, looked slowly around with a slightly raised eyebrow, then met them half-way. "Gentlemen," she said with emotionless politeness. "The situation is now contained. Ms Tendo and Ms Pu efficiently dealt with the intruders, all of whom are unconscious. There are some minor injuries to all of them which Ms Chou is in the process of healing. She is also repairing the damage to the hostage who was fired upon. There is minor structural damage to the building. Please have the owners contact the Magical Girl reparations fund in Tokyo for assistance in rectifying the damage. My employers have arranged to have the fund treat this occurrence as they do the regrettable frequent equivalent in Minato."

"I've got the number, Ms Aoyama," Harrison volunteered. She seemed pleased by his answer.

"Excellent. I have uploaded the relevant data I have located on the four perpetrators of this crime to the LAPD computer system marked for the attention of yourself, Lieutenant Harrison, and also to the FBI system for the attention of Special Agent Tinnin. I would expect that you will be able to utilise it in your respective cases. Should you require further aid I may be contacted via Ms Chou..."
who has my details. Subject to the limitations imposed by my employers I will give what help I can."

"Irregular, but thanks anyway," Tinnin replied. She nodded once to him.

"You are most welcome, Special Agent Tinnin." A very small and extremely unsettling near-smile crossed her lips, making almost everyone shiver slightly. "Should I locate any further data during the investigation into the background of these people I will pass it to you in a similar manner." Cocking her head a little she paused, then added, "I have just become aware of an item of interest. You may wish to interdict this individual." As had happened previously, a solid projection of a man's head appeared to the side, with text beside it. "This is Mr Paul Bouchard, senior teller at this institution."

"He's one of the four people who knew about the cash," Harrison remarked with interest. She nodded.

"Indeed, Lieutenant Harrison. His own bank account records show that a deposit of exactly one hundred thousand US dollars was transferred into it from an international source three days ago. This does not match anything in his financial history. Tracking the payment source to its ultimate origin is in process but initial indications suggest that it was routed through a series of accounts in multiple financial institutions that have been associated with three different United States intelligence agencies, two Russian ones, and one from the United Kingdom, in addition to one which belongs to a now defunct Columbian narcotics group. From the evidence available I suspect that none of the original account holders are directly involved although it does raise some intriguing questions."

"That it does," Tinnin mused thoughtfully, glancing at Captain Martinez who looked fascinated. "As does how the hell you are doing all this."

"Unfortunately, all information on the methods utilised by myself or my employers is unavailable to you, Special Agent Tinnin. My apologies." She looked at him through her dark glasses, somehow producing a feeling of slight amusement. He sighed.

"Somehow I thought you'd say that," he mumbled.

"I am pleased to meet your expectations so precisely, Special Agent Tinnin," Ms Aoyama replied politely, making Naito cover a smile of his own. It was almost a joke, something he'd never have expected from the woman. She glanced at him for a moment and he could swear that she'd practically winked at him.

"Better get on with it, then," Harrison said, looking past her for a moment to the door of the bank. He beckoned to one of the uniformed police officers standing near it who hurried over, the woman staring at both Ms Aoyama and the projected data with an expression of slightly horrified awe. "Remember that face, please, we need to grab Mr Bouchard."

"Yes, Lieutenant," she replied, inspecting the image closely.

"We knew they had an inside man, I expect that's him," he added to the others. "There's a very interesting point, which is that the district manager said that the money was only paid in yesterday on very little notice, less than twenty four hours. So who knew two days before that enough about it to set all this up?"

"Again, something well worth investigating, Lieutenant Harrison," Ms Aoyama remarked. "I would suggest that at the minimum the Central Intelligence Agency would appear to have an information
"Not for the first time," Tinnin said in an annoyed voice. "I'll start looking into it."

"I would like to request a small consideration on behalf of Ms Tendo and Ms Pu, Lieutenant Harrison," Ms Aoyama said, making the projection vanish when the officer turned away from it and headed towards the bank. Everyone looked at her.

"Which is?" he asked curiously.

"The two young women in question are, as you are undoubtedly aware, currently engaged in training and demonstrations for a local entertainment generation business as represented by Mr Adrian Stewart. I would request that you allow them to leave immediately to continue this activity without delay. They have a limited time available for it and I would be distressed to see their endeavours unnecessarily impeded by the actions of the criminals responsible for today's excitement. I have uploaded an audio and visual recording of their performance in dealing with those criminals which should provide the requisite information for your case. Should an interview be required I am assured that Ms Aiko is quite prepared to transport the two young women here, or you to them, as needed." Ms Aoyama waited for the response as the LAPD and FBI people looked at each other.

"Again, very irregular," Agent Tinnin commented, rubbing his chin. "We need to talk to them sooner rather than later."

"But they did between them manage to stop the robbery dead with minimum casualties, and it was Akane who raised the alarm in the first place," Harrison noted. "If she hadn't called me we probably wouldn't have known about it until that bunch were half-way to Mexico at least."

"True."

Naito listened quietly, glancing at the various people involved. Tinnin seemed reluctant, while Harrison didn't seem to be worried about it. Captain Martinez was half-way between the two viewpoints. "How about this?" Harrison suggested after a moment. "I'm having a barbecue at my house tonight, they'll both be there as will Adrian. Why don't you come over, we can both interview them there, then you can have a couple of beers and a burger. We're going to have our hands full for the rest of the day dealing with everyone else anyway."

The FBI agent thought for a few more seconds, then finally nodded. "OK. This whole case has gone totally twilight zone in the first place so I suppose it won't make any difference." He grinned briefly. "I haven't had time for a barbecue for weeks."

"Excellent. My gratitude, gentlemen." Ms Aoyama nodded in satisfaction.

"Do you want to come, Masao?" Harrison asked, turning to Naito, who regretfully shook his head.

"I'd love to, Richard, but it's about one in the morning from my point of view already and I've had a long day. Tomorrow is going to be hectic as well, we're in the middle of a case I can't leave. Perhaps another time."

"Sure. No problem." Harrison looked at Ms Aoyama, who made her little smile-like expression again.

He looked relieved when she said, "I must return to my work as well. It has been most agreeable dealing with you all." On the verge of turning away, she stopped, then looked to the side.

"Gentlemen, you may wish to be ready to intervene. A new actor would appear to be entering the
scene." Everyone turned to look in the direction she was, to see an obviously government issued SUV coming down the street towards the bank followed by a medium-sized truck in olive-drab paint, no markings on it to identify it. "They are utilising encrypted communications with identical security techniques to those employed by Captain Mitchells. The hardware is military issue, specifically a system currently in development for secure battlefield communications for the United States military, although an interesting side-note is that it has not yet been deployed outside the companies designing it."

She glanced at Agent Tinnin. "You will wish to add those companies to your investigatory list, I suspect. I have sent you the details required."

"Thanks," he replied, watching curiously as the truck stopped behind the SUV, two men getting out of each one. The ones from the SUV were wearing dark suits and looked like Secret Service or something similar, while the two from the truck were in military fatigues and carrying M-16s slung over their shoulders. All four men looked around alertly, before they headed towards the group of people on the sidewalk.

"There are two more personnel in the rear of the second vehicle with a tripod mounted crew-served heavy weapon currently directed at us," Ms Aoyama told them, inspecting it. No one asked how she knew but no one disbelieved her.

"This should be interesting," Harrison muttered. He looked at Captain Martinez, who had a neutral expression on his face but also had one hand discreetly inside his jacket.

"Be ready for anything," Agent Tinnin warned, his hand drifting towards his own weapon just enough to allow him to grab it quickly. "I don't like this and I'm pretty sure that whoever they say they are, they aren't."

Watching the men approach, Naito suddenly became aware that Ms Aoyama was nowhere to be seen. Idly wondering where she'd gone, he put his own hand near his service pistol. "I'm going to get into trouble if I shoot anyone in the US," he whispered to Harrison.

"If you have to, I'll authorise it," Tinnin replied just as quietly from behind him. "But let's hear them out first."

Stopping a few feet from them, the four men looked around, the two apparent soldiers each with their M-16s not quite ready to fire but making it obvious that they could bring them into play quickly. Naito couldn't help but notice that all of them were very carefully staying well out of a direct line between the truck and the people they'd approached.

Stepping forward, the suited man on the right, an older man with greying hair over a dark complexion, his hair in a military cut, held out an ID folder which everyone looked at, before he flipped it shut and put it away again. "Special Agent Hank Briley, US Army Counterintelligence. This is my colleague Special Agent Jason Hamilton. We've been monitoring the situation, we have an interest in two of the people you are about to arrest, I'm afraid we're going to need to take them off your hands."

"I see." Agent Tinnin exchanged a look with Captain Martinez. "May I see your authorisation for this request?"

Briley looked mildly irritated but pulled a folded sheet of paper from his inside jacket pocket, making everyone tense slightly, then handed it to the FBI man, who unfolded it and read it carefully. He showed it to Martinez who also read it. "Interesting," the captain commented.
"Yes, it is," Tinnin replied, refolding it and handing it back. "The most interesting part of all is why you have a document date-stamped two days ago with the names of two people on it, Captain Mitchells and Mr Harris, both of whom apparently died nearly ten years back and whose true identity we only found out less than an hour ago. How did you manage that?" He looked curious, although calm, waiting for an answer. The purported CI man seemed insulted.

"We are very good at our job, Special Agent Tinnin," he said in a superior tone, making Naito glance at Harrison, who nodded slightly, having also picked up on the fact that they knew the name of the FBI agent, who hadn't introduced himself. "We've been looking for these men for a considerable amount of time, ever since we suspected that their deaths had been faked. Mr Harris is wanted for espionage on behalf of a foreign power, Captain Mitchells for aiding and abetting that crime. We were alerted when you uploaded their pictures to the LAPD computer system and ran an ID check on them. We got here as fast as we could."

"Ah. I see." Tinnin nodded slowly. "That explains a few things."

Behind them, Naito noticed a very brief golden-yellow glow form a wall around the truck before fading into invisibility, his eyes widening a little then narrowing in thought. A quick look at Harrison showed he'd seen it as well judging by his expression, as had Tinnin and Martinez, although the three Americans probably didn't know what it was for sure. He did. Carefully looking around he spotted Tamiko perched comfortably on a third story ledge of the building on the other side of the street, looking right at him. He nodded to her and was rewarded with a small wave and a smile.

Discreetly nudging Harrison he indicated the magical girl with a tiny movement of his head, the LAPD officer following his gaze then twitching one hand in a quick gesture to indicate he'd seen her as well. They both knew that if the red-head was watching, Chou and Aiko were as well, which meant that if it all went badly, the likelihood of anything serious happening had suddenly plummeted. It made both of them much happier about the situation.

"So what exactly is it that you want to do here, Special Agent Briley?" Tinnin asked, making the name sound slightly dirty. "Briley' looked more insulted for a moment. Behind him one of the uniformed men changed his grip on his weapon a little.

"As our orders say, we are to take Captain Mitchells and Mr Harris into custody, and if we judge it required we have the authority to do likewise with any co-conspirators of theirs. We will also need their weapons and equipment as evidence, along with any of the proceeds of the crime they were in the process of committing when they were stopped. How did you manage that, by the way?" He seemed quite intent on learning the answer.

"So, what you're saying," Tinnin began, ignoring the question, "is that you want to take all the suspects, all the evidence, and forty-three million dollars in cash away with you? That seems... somewhat ambitious." He glanced at Martinez who was listening intently. "Leaving aside the interest the FBI has in this case, the LAPD would appear to have primary jurisdiction. You sound like you're intending to take everything they need to prosecute a serious bank robbery which resulted in two murders even if it wasn't ultimately successful."

"We regret any interference with the LAPD and the FBI but there is a national security interest that overrides both of you," 'Hamilton' put in, speaking for the first time.

"Oh, I agree that there's probably a serious national security problem," Agent Tinnin responded after a couple of seconds. "One I intend to get to the bottom of."

"I'm sure we can cooperate on the case as soon as we have interrogated these men, Agent," 'Briley'
said, smiling slightly. "But we need to be the first to talk to them. We'll accompany you into the bank to arrest them if you don't mind."

There was a long pause. Naito and Harrison kept one eye on the truck, the other on the four men, both of them certain that something was about to happen. There was an unpleasant feeling in the air. Naito noticed that off to the side, across the street, the SWAT men and the remaining FBI agents were watching closely, several of them with a look that suggested they felt the same. One of the FBI agents was on the phone while another one was watching them through the binoculars that Tinnin had left on top of his vehicle, saying something to his colleague.

"As it happens I think I do mind, Agent Briley," Tinnin finally replied. "There are a number of peculiarities about this case I'm not happy about, even despite the fact that the entire case is very strange in the first place. I'm particularly interested in finding out who you really are."

"I'm sorry, Agent?" Briley looked affronted. "Are you saying you don't believe me?"

"I am."

Producing his ID again 'Briley' opened it and held it up. "You do see this, don't you?"

"I do. But I'm damn sure that whoever you are, you're not actually military counterintelligence, or at least, not officially. I'll be very interested indeed in finding out who you really are and who you work for."

The pause this time was very tense. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist, Agent," 'Briley' said in a hard voice. Both alleged soldiers brought their M-16s around to a firing position. The instant response was all the other people sprouting a collection of hand-guns and aiming them.

"Lower your weapons immediately," Tinnin ordered, the barrel of his gun unwaveringly pointed at 'Briley's' chest.

"This is a mistake, Agent. Let's just calmly talk it out, I'm sure we can come to an agreement," 'Hamilton' said, looking over his shoulder at the two soldiers and making a small gesture that made them very slightly relax.

"I don't think we can." Tinnin looked annoyed. "But I have a lot of questions. Who are you, who do you work for, why are you using unreleased military communications equipment, and why do you have a fucking tripod-mounted machine gun in the back of that truck? Those should do for the moment but trust me, there are more."

All four men looked startled, 'Briley' involuntarily looking at the truck for a moment, then turning back to them. His expression went stony. "I don't know what you're implying, Agent. Now, are you going to cooperate or do I have to make a call and go over your head?"

"Go ahead," Tinnin replied. "I'd be very interested to see who you called. But as soon as you're done you and your friends are under arrest."

Sighing, 'Briley' slowly pulled a cell-phone out of his pocket and flipped it open, dialling a number one-handed. None of the people facing off against his little group were terribly surprised when, instead of holding it to his ear, he looked smug as the side of the truck behind them swung up to reveal a fifty-calibre machine gun on a powered mount pointing directly at them.

"Hello," the blonde magical girl said in a kind tone, "I'm Chou. I'm a healer, if you'll let me I'll fix that for you." The man, who was pale and sweating, stared at her for a moment then nodded
weakly. Chou gently removed the hands of the female teller who was still staunching the bleeding with a cloth, something that seemed to be a scarf, revealing a clean puncture wound in his upper arm which immediately began oozing blood.

"Clean shot right through," she muttered mainly to herself. Smiling at him, she added more loudly, "It missed the bone, so that's good, and the bullet isn't in there." Placing one hand on his shoulder she concentrated slightly, a brief golden glow forming, then he abruptly relaxed with a look of surprise.

"What did you do?" he asked faintly. "It doesn't hurt any more."

"I just turned off the pain receptors and motor control for the moment. Please stay still and I'll have you back to healthy very soon." She looked amused as he stared at her face, then down at his arm. The teller beside him had a look of wondering astonishment on her face. "I'm quite good at this sort of thing."

The glow came again, more strongly, as she moved her hand over the wound, vanishing a few seconds later. She inspected her work visually then nodded in satisfaction. "That should do it. It might ache slightly for a couple of hours or so, there was quite a lot of trauma to your muscles from the hydrostatic shock caused by the bullet, but there shouldn't be any long term problems. You've lost a fair amount of blood though so I'd suggest drinking plenty of water then resting for a day." Touching his shoulder again as he nodded numbly she undid whatever she'd done in the first place. His hand twitched, then he made a fist, slowly the first time then faster, before moving his arm carefully. Reaching over with his other hand he felt the former wound in shock.

"Holy... How did you do that?"

Chou smiled happily. "It's basically an extremely advanced martial arts technique that a very good friend of mine and I have developed over the last few years. It comes in handy more often than you'd expect." Standing, she looked around at the people watching her closely. Several of the former hostages were talking together, a few heading over to the first of the police who were just now entering the bank, but most of them had stared in shock as she'd healed the man. "Does anyone else have any injuries that require treatment?" she asked the room at large. After a short pause, one woman held up her hand.

"I hit my head when I fainted," she said, rubbing a spot on the back of her skull and wincing a little.

"All right, let's get that fixed," the blonde woman smiled. Shortly there was another person looking stunned and grateful. One or two more minor injuries caused in the bank takeover were easily dealt with, until everyone seemed happy.

"Akane, you've got a quite nasty bruise there on your chest," Chou noted, looking at the Tendo woman closely for a moment. "Would you like me to deal with it for you?"

Surprise, then the lack of it, went through Akane as she wondered how the other woman had managed to detect her minor injury through her clothes. Reaching up she prodded herself, wincing slightly at the ache. "If it's not too much trouble, yes please," she replied. Smiling a little she added, "I shouldn't have let him just shoot me but I was making a point."

Giggling, Chou put her fingertips on the blue-haired woman's chest for a moment, a glow building around them momentarily before it faded. "I would imagine he found it impressive. Eventually you'll probably be able to shrug off a direct shot like that but I'd recommend either ducking or catching them at the moment to prevent bruising." She ran her hands over the other woman's side
and back briefly. "Those other bruises were already fading but they must have been quite painful yesterday. Were they caused by your training?"

Akane stretched and twisted, smiling when she found the residual aches from the stunt work the day before were missing entirely. "Yes. Coming off a motorcycle at sixty kilometres an hour makes you bounce a remarkably long way which isn't really very comfortable. Mind you, you should see the riding suit I was wearing, we're going to need a new one now."

Laughing a little Chou smiled at her. "Hopefully you'll manage to stay on the bike today." Akane shrugged, grinning.

Turning to look at the still unconscious robbers, Chou shook her head a little sadly. "Now for you gentlemen," she commented, heading towards number 4. "Mr Soria, I fear that the police are going to be very annoyed with you," she muttered quietly as she began repairing the buckshot wounds in his chest and stomach after putting her hand on his head for a moment, pulling a pair of tweezers from nowhere and carefully removing the pellets before healing the holes.

Aiko, Shampoo and Akane carefully moved the other three to lie beside Soria. A few minutes later all four robbers were healed and rendered deeply unconscious. Several crime scene technicians were in the process of fingerprinting and photographing them, another two were collecting and logging all the weapons and shell cases, while several SWAT EOD technicians had vanished into the rear of the bank to deal with the booby-traps.

Tamiko returned as these last people were going about their business, stopping the lead EOD man and talking to him for a moment before coming and joining the rest of the women. "He's extremely dead, I'm afraid, Chou," she said soberly. "Two shots in the chest, one in the back of the head to finish him off, poor guy." Akane fumed, turning to glare at the Russian criminal, Yefremov.

"Would it be OK if I broke his arms and legs a couple of times?" she asked through gritted teeth. "You can heal him again, right?"

Chou smiled gently, although there was a stillness to her eyes that suggested she was half-tempted. "It's best not to give in to such feelings, Akane, although I'll admit sometimes it's very hard. Let the police deal with these men. You've done your part very effectively and certainly saved a number of lives." The youngest Tendo sister sighed slightly, but eventually nodded, relaxing a little.

"I guess you're right. Sorry, Chou, it's really hard to just stand by and let people like that do what they did."

"I do understand, believe me," the blonde woman said soberly. "But sometimes you have no choice." She looked up as Adrian walked over having been talking to one of the policemen, who trailed behind him taking notes. "Oh, hello, Adrian. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks, Chou, thanks to you and the others. And of course to Akane and Shampoo." He grinned at the two young women who looked pleased. "They're remarkable."

"Indeed they are," she agreed, smiling a little. A slightly distant look crossed her face for a moment. "Ms Aoyama has talked to the police and FBI I believe, she requested that you three be allowed to leave so you can get on with your day's work. Are you going to be up to it?"

Adrian and the two martial artists exchanged glances. "I'm fine, I think, although I'm certainly going to need a stiff drink this evening. Most of these poor people are still terrified, but oddly enough I wasn't too worried." Looking at Akane and Shampoo he added, "I was pretty sure that we'd come through it all right. I have to admit I wasn't expecting the rest of you although I guess I
should have done so. You tend to look after your friends, don't you?"

With a small smile Chou nodded. "We like to help where we can, yes. Luckily Ms Aoyama became aware of this incident fairly shortly after it started and contacted us." Looking at Akane, she said, "Aiko was involved with her family today which is why she was unavailable. She's feeling a little guilty about it."

"There's no reason for her to," Akane protested, "She's not our protector even if she's a very good friend. We don't expect her to come running every time something weird happens."

"Not saying mind, though," Shampoo giggled. Akane grinned at her friend.

"No, all things considered I'm grateful that you guys turned up when you did." Adrian and Chou both laughed at the comment.

"As am I, Chou, very much so. This could have dragged on for hours, assuming those idiots didn't just start shooting people again," the director commented, giving the four robbers a nasty glare. Several police personnel were now handcuffing them and lifting them onto stretchers brought in by ambulance staff. The body on the floor had been discreetly covered at some point in the last few minutes without them noticing, Akane saw.

"It could have been a lot worse," the police officer standing to one side noted, putting his notebook and pen away. "I'd like to add my own thanks, ladies. This sort of crime is always difficult to deal with, I can't remember the last one like this that ended so quickly and cleanly."

"Thank you, Officer," Chou replied. She suddenly went still, then turned her head to look out the window of the bank. "Oh, dear," she added in a soft voice. "This is irritating." Looking at the others she said, "It would appear that the dramatics aren't over just yet. I'd suggest that everyone stay inside the bank for now. Please excuse us." Aiko hurried over from where she'd been talking to one of the crime scene techs and both Chou and Tamiko stepped closer to her, all three of them vanishing in a bright flash.

The officer blinked several times, shocked. Turning to the remaining three people he asked, "Does that happen a lot where you come from?"

Akane nodded, while wondering what on earth was happening now. "It does, in fact. We're sort of used to it by now."

Shaking his head slightly the officer pulled out his notebook and wrote in it for a moment, before putting it away and wandering off to talk with his colleagues, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Is that supposed to impress us?" Tinnin growled. 'Briley' smiled at him.

"I was hoping it would, certainly. My men will open fire unless you all lay down your weapons and stand aside, Agent. We're taking what we came for."

"You realise there are about fifty guns pointed at you from the other side of the street, right?" Harrison asked the man, who looked over his shoulder at the massed police presence.

'Briley' shrugged, returning his attention to them. "I do, but it doesn't matter. If they open fire so do we and I can guarantee that you will all die first. It's in your best interests to stand aside."

Captain Martinez said, "I have to admit I admire your sheer balls, Briley, or whoever you are, this is the most bold-faced attempted hijacking I've ever heard of." The 'Agent' looked amused at his
"Thank you, Captain. Now are you going to do the sensible thing and let us do what we came for?"

"Even if we do, how do you think you're going to get away?"

'Briley' tapped the side of his nose. "That's for us to know. It's a good surprise, though."

Naito, studying them, suddenly asked, "This is all about the money, isn't it? That's what you're really after, whoever your group is, they need funds." All four men looked at him. 'Briley' and 'Hamilton' exchanged glances.

"I'm afraid I can neither confirm or deny that speculation," the older man replied with a grin.

"I believe Agent Naito is most likely correct, Mr Briley," the cold voice of Ms Aoyama said from off to the side. Everyone looked at where she was suddenly visible, no one having heard her approach until she spoke. "Or, more precisely, Lieutenant Solomon Webb, formerly of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, declared missing, presumed dead after a light aircraft crash off the coast of Miami on September fifteenth, 1986, with your colleague, Mr Eric Palmer, who is standing beside you. Neither body was located despite a significant search effort. Some time after your apparent demise it was discovered you had in fact been accepting large bribes from at least two different narcotics cartels to be less vigilant about your duties than your superiors might have wished. There is also the matter of some one and a half million dollars in confiscated cash that was misplaced immediately before you both disappeared."

Everyone stared, then most of them turned to look at the four men who were looking absolutely stunned. "How the..." the newly named Lieutenant Webb asked in a faint voice. She made one of her smile emulations at him, which made him pale noticeably. There was an aura of danger coming from her that made Naito and Harrison sidle away slightly, just in case.

"Your parents, Earl and Alma Webb, died without knowing you were in fact still alive. That may have been for the best, they would have been most disappointed that once you left the Marine Corps you achieved a second career as a criminal." He kept staring, paler further. "Your two compatriots consist of Chief Petty Officer Carl Patterson, formerly of the United States Navy, who was declared missing at sea during routine operations off the coast of Hawaii in May 1994, and Sergeant Bruce Mullins, dishonourably discharged from the United States Army 1st Armoured Division at Fort Bliss Texas in March 1995 due to theft of weapons, then allegedly drowned as a result of suicide two years later. CPO Patterson and Sergeant Mullins also fit the pattern we are discerning." She turned to look at Tinnin, who was watching the effect her words had on the four men, all of whom looked very surprised and quite worried, with a grin on his face.

"I have forwarded you complete dossiers on these individuals and the two others in the vehicle across the street, Agent Tinnin. It is my hope that it will provide you with enough data to build a case."

"Thank you, Ms Aoyama," he replied with satisfaction.

"You are most welcome." Returning her attention to the four fake agents, she raised an eyebrow. "It would appear to be your move, gentlemen. I would strongly recommend that you take the opportunity to relinquish your weapons and submit to arrest as I suspect that both the LAPD and the FBI are losing patience with you all. It is not impossible that to do otherwise will invite considerable personal peril."

There was a silence that stretched on for several tens of seconds. Eventually, Webb glanced back at
the truck which still contained two men and a very big gun. "I could order them to open fire," he said slowly.

"You could, indeed, Lieutenant Webb. However I suspect the results would be somewhat at variance from those which you are expecting." She waited while he thought. "I hesitate to suggest that you increase the pace of your deliberations due to the risk of appearing impolite, but I do have other appointments today that I would be remiss to delay more than the minimum necessary. May we have an answer?"

Webb looked at Palmer, then the two of them looked over their shoulders at the two men with M-16s, both of whom looked worried but resolute, not lowering their guns. Finally, Ms Aoyama sighed very faintly. "Perhaps a small demonstration would suffice to convince you. Ms Chou? You may proceed."

Everyone looked as there was a cry from the truck, followed by a couple of meaty thumps, after which both the men in the back of it dropped out of sight. A few seconds later the rear door opened to reveal Tamiko and Aiko exiting each with a soldier in fatigues slumped across their shoulders. Webb and his men gaped slightly. Walking away from the vehicle without any sign of effort both young women waved to the small group. "Hi, Richard!" Tamiko shouted happily.

Harrison waved back, grinning. He grinned even more when the next weird thing happened. A glowing golden box formed around the truck, confining it from all sides, then began to slowly contract. There were some metallic screeching noises accompanied by a crunching sound as the vehicle gradually crushed evenly down to a cube less than two metres on a side. A small quantity of fluids ran out from under it, a slight smell of diesel fuel drifting over to them then the box vanished. Naito watched in astonishment before he also started grinning. Tinnin swore under his breath, making the PSIA man look at him to see he was staring in shock. The four fake agents, though, had gone white.

"Do you still wish to resist or will you comply with Agent Tinnin's request, Lieutenant Webb?" Ms Aoyama asked evenly. He looked at her, then back at the truck, then at her again, before sagging. The other three very carefully handed over their weapons as soon as he did. "Most gratifying. My thanks." Ms Aoyama gave off an air of satisfaction. "Now, as the situation would appear to finally be appropriately contained, I will take my leave. It has been most interesting. Agent Naito, I have no doubt we will meet again." She nodded to him. "I may indeed meet the rest of you gentlemen at some future date. We will see. I wish you good fortune with your respective cases and will forward the results of my own investigation as previously stated. Farewell." She turned on her heel and strode off, Aiko appearing beside her after half a dozen metres, then both women vanishing again almost instantly. Everyone blinked at the flash for a second or two.

"That was pretty strange," Harrison said after moment. Turning to Webb he held out his handcuffs. "Would you like to turn around, please?" Shortly all four men were in custody and in the capable hands of a number of LAPD people who had come over when Martinez called for them.

"Who are these guys?" Adrian asked curiously as Aiko and Tamiko deposited two more men inside the front door of the bank, both of them wearing military fatigues and currently very much unconscious. The red-head laughed.

"Friends of Captain Mitchells," she replied. "They were in that truck over there manning a very big machine gun." She indicated over her shoulder. He stared as the vehicle in question was somehow crushed into a cube by a glowing golden forcefield or something like that, a better special effect than the studio's SFX people could produce.
"Holy crap," he muttered. "What was that?"

"Chou making a point," Aiko snickered. "These guys had some company who take a lot of convincing. I think that did it, though." They all looked out the window to see a remarkably large quantity of armed police surround four men who were quickly lying face down on the ground. "Yep, I'd say so." She sounded amused and pleased. "Oh, hang on, Ms Aoyama needs a lift. See you in a minute." She stepped back and flashed out of existence.

Shaking his head in renewed wonder Adrian exchanged a look with Akane and Shampoo. "You have some interesting friends," he laughed.

"Yes, I think we do," the Tendo woman replied, smiling. "Oh, look, there's Richard." They watched Harrison approach, several other people following him. All of them entered the bank, the police officer looking around before spotting them and coming over, smiling a little.

"Hello, Akane," he said, greeting Shampoo and Adrian as well. "I'm glad to see you're all OK. Akane, thanks, you did a damn fine job there. That trick with the phone was inspired."

"Oh, damn, I forgot about my phone," the Tendo woman said, looking around, then dashing over to the seating near the coffee machine, rummaging around for the device which she finally found. Flipping it open she looked at the display. "Two hours and eighteen minutes. That's going to cost." Pressing the disconnect button she put it away in her pocket, then retrieved her Japanese one from the table where it was still sitting next to Shampoo's, Soria having neglecting to confiscate them both at the beginning of the robbery. The Chinese woman picked up her own phone and pocketed it.

Adrian laughed. "Don't worry, Akane, the studio is paying for it. We get a ridiculously good discount aside from anything else."

Chuckling, Harrison turned to his companions. "This is, as you've probably guessed, Akane Tendo and Xian Pu, or Shampoo to her friends. Ladies, I'd like to introduce my boss Captain Martinez, Special Agent Tinnin of the FBI, and Agent Naito of your own PSIA."

"Masao is a good and trusted friend," Chou said as she faded into view beside Harrison, making him twitch a little then sigh. She giggled at the look on his face. "Sorry Richard, I couldn't resist," she added. Shaking his head he shrugged good-naturedly. Looking back at the two martial artists and Adrian, she added, "He's here because the PSIA keeps track of magical girl and certain martial artist activities, much like Ms Aoyama and her employers do I believe. When we were contacted by her earlier we called him so he could come and observe what was happening."

"And now I get to write a long detailed report on it for my own boss," Naito said, sighing heavily. "As if I didn't have enough work."

Chou laughed, making him smile slightly. "I and the girls will help if you like, we'll send you the usual information."

"Thanks, that will certainly make it easier." Naito inspected both Akane and Shampoo, then bowed slightly to them, before holding out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. I've heard quite a lot about you in the past from a number of sources."

Akane shook his hand after a small bow of her own, as did Shampoo. Both young women looked slightly nervous. "I'm not sure how I should feel knowing that the government is interested in what we do," Akane replied. He smiled at her.
"Don't worry, there's nothing nefarious about it, my department just likes to keep up to date on the various people with special talents that live in Japan. On the whole the vast majority of you are fairly well behaved and the benefits normally far outweigh the problems. Admittedly the various magical girls are both more effective when things go sideways than most of the high-powered martial artists, but on the other hand they can cause a damn sight more chaos when it gets out of control." He laughed at their expressions. "I'll also say that we're very grateful that Nerima has calmed down so much in the last few years. It was getting a reputation that tended to make people want to move to Minato."

Akane snickered. Shampoo shook her head, giggling. "Have been to Minato twice. Place insane, make Nerima look normal."

"Oddly enough that's exactly what people from Minato say about Nerima," he chuckled. "Often fairly forcefully."

"Both wards are quite exciting," Tamiko said with a grin. "I prefer living in Minato but Nerima is interesting as well. Less demons but more lunatics."

"Probably a fairly good description," Naito agreed, amused. "Anyway, don't be worried about the PSIA, we keep our distance and normally let you people sort things out between yourselves, we're not your enemies. If you want to be worried about anything I'd concentrate on why Ms Aoyama and her people seems so interested in you both." The look that the two young women got, complete with widening eyes and momentarily ashen faces made him, Chou, and the other two magical girls grin a little.

"Believe me, we're more than aware that she's watching," Akane almost whispered, looking around nervously. "She's... terrifying."

"Oh, yes, indeed she is, but on the other hand she seems to be on our side. More or less." Naito shrugged. "As far as we can tell, she's not exactly forthcoming about pretty much anything except what she wants us to know. But I can say that she's most definitely been responsible for a large number of people not dying horribly, so on balance I think it's a good thing she's around."

"Although she certainly can creep you out like nothing I've ever seen before," Tamiko put in, smiling but looking mildly unnerved at the same time.

"She is... gone... isn't she?" Akane asked in a low voice, her eyes scanning the room. Adrian could well understand her feelings, the very brief contact he'd had with the green-haired woman had made him think he was mere inches from something horrible the entire time despite her otherwise helpful demeanour.

"Probably," Aiko replied, grinning as everyone else except Chou involuntarily took a quick look about. "Relax, I took her back to Japan a few minutes ago."

"Thank god for that," Akane sighed in relief. A sudden expression of panic crossed her face. "Please don't tell her I said that!"

"We won't," Tamiko assured her with a smile.

Agent Tinnin, who had been listening quietly with Captain Martinez, stepped forward, holding out his own hand, which both young women and Adrian shook. "I'm pleased to meet you both, ladies," he said. "I understand from Lieutenant Harrison that it was your quick thinking, Miss Tendo, that led to the LAPD being so rapidly on the scene. We owe you thanks for that. And for the information you managed to get to us." He looked at Chou and the other two women for a moment.
"Even without the... special talent, I believe the Japanese government refers to it as, your efforts would have helped enormously. Of course, Chou here and her friends turning up brought things to a halt a damn sight faster than we expected."

"We do what we can, Agent," Tamiko laughed. He smiled at the red-head.

"So I understand," he replied. "Although there is a department chief in New York who would prefer that you do it somewhere else. I think you worried him quite a lot, Chou."

"Oh, yes, I remember him well," the blonde said with a small smile. "He was a little difficult at first, I have to say. In the end everything worked out quite well. I do like Special Agent Foster, though, I really must drop in and say hello one day."

"I've met Cameron Foster, he's a good man," Tinnin responded. "Very open-minded. Too much, some people have said in the past, but his record is excellent despite that." The man looked back to the two martial artists. "Ms Aoyama asked that we let you get on with your day, apparently you're in the middle of some sort of job interview?"

"Yes, they're doing a series of stunt demonstrations and a lot of training," Adrian put in. He glanced at his watch. "Which we're now two and a half hours late for."

"We agreed that we could let you leave, although we still need to have an interview at some point. Lieutenant Harrison says you're going to be at his house for a party later tonight and suggested that we could do it there. I'm fine with that if you are. I don't think it will take more than about forty minutes or so. If we need any further information later Miss Aiko here is willing to provide transportation as needed, I'm told." The brunette nodded and smiled.

"Of course. It's no problem."

Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances, then looked at Adrian. He shrugged. "It's fine with me. We'll all be there anyway, taking less than an hour out to talk to you guys isn't much of an issue."

"Am also fine with it," Shampoo added, Akane nodding as well.

"Great. In that case, you're free to go. Good luck with your Job interview, ladies."

"Thank you, Agent Tinnin," Akane replied. Turning to Chou and her friends she said, "And thank you all as well for everything. I'm sorry we ended up dragging you all out of bed."

"It wasn't your fault in any way, Akane, don't worry about it," the blonde woman told her, smiling gently. "We're always ready to help a friend and none of us were in bed yet anyway."

"I was," Naito grumbled, making her laugh a little.

"All right, one of us was. Poor Masao, we do seem to cause you sleeping problems, don't we?"

The PSIA man chuckled. "I don't mind, although sooner or later my wife may want to talk to you about the timing of your little field trips."

They all turned around when a loud argument broke out on the other side of the lobby where the former hostages were having an initial debriefing. A female police officer was apparently in the process of arresting one of them, who was being very loudly uncooperative. Harrison walked over, the others following mainly out of curiosity. As he reached them, the officer executed a neat judo throw when the man tried punching her, ending up kneeling on his back while she fastened her handcuffs around his wrists. "Problem, Officer Frazier?"
"No, Lieutenant, Mr Bouchard and I seem to have come to an arrangement." She smiled up at him, picking her hat from the floor where her captive had knocked it and putting it back on, before hopping to her feet and hauling the man she had arrested to his. "Paul Bouchard, as you requested, sir."

"Thank you, Frazier," he replied. Inspecting the man, who was fairly short, mid-thirties, with longish dark-brown hair in a ponytail and a furious expression on his face, he added, "We would like to talk to you about a certain payment you received two days ago." Bouchard looked shifty quite suddenly, his eyes flicking from side to side evasively.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he blustered. "I'm going to sue for police brutality. You have no right to arrest me, I'm a victim here as much as anyone."

"Oh, I think you might be wrong there, Mr Bouchard," Harrison smiled. "And you know very well what I'm referring to. One hundred thousand dollars into your bank account from a source overseas. I have it on very good authority that there are a number of irregularities about that payment. We feel you may help us clear up some oddities about this whole affair."

"It was him!" Akane looked hard at the man. "He's the one that gave them the codes for the door." Harrison glanced at her.

"Ah, you picked up on that, I take it?"

"Yes, both of us did. We were wondering how those men had all the access codes for the security system, including the lock-down code, and also how they managed to arrive at exactly the right moment to both grab the armoured car delivery and find the vault open. I'm sure it would normally be closed, but they must have walked right in, they were only in the back for about three or four minutes before they came back with that." She pointed to the trolley piled with bricks of cash which four armed officers were guarding.

"That's what we think as well." Tinnin studied the man who was sweating by now. "As a result we're very interested indeed in talking to Mr Bouchard about many things. There are a lot of peculiarities about all this I want to get to the bottom of. Lieutenant, when you've finished with him, the FBI will take him off your hands."

"Of course, Agent. Happy to help," Harrison said with a cold smile almost worthy of Ms Aoyama herself. "Officer Frazier, if you would read Mr Bouchard his rights then make sure he finds a good seat in the back of a cruiser, please?"

"Certainly, sir," the woman replied, amusement on her face. She turned to her captive and began doing as requested. Seconds later he kicked her in the knee rather unexpectedly and awkwardly bolted for the door with his hands behind his back.

With a slight sigh Chou took aim, then flicked a small ball of golden energy at him, which struck him in the middle of the back. There was a sharp pop like a balloon bursting and the running man went limp, dropping to his knees and sliding a short distance along the polished floor before he came to a stop on his face. Everyone in the bank watched in a mix of shock and mild amusement as she retrieved him, his body limp in her arms as she picked him up easily. "Where would you like him, Officer?" she asked politely.

"Is he OK?" the female officer asked curiously, limping a little and wincing as she rubbed her knee.

"He'll be fine, he'll wake up in about ten minutes. Let me take him to a vehicle and I'll sort out that leg for you as well."
"Thanks." Both women left the bank while the various people inside it got back to what they were doing.

"She's very effective," Captain Martinez chuckled.

"You wouldn't believe how effective," Naito told him sincerely.

Grinning, Aiko turned to Adrian and the two women next to him. "Come on, guys, let's get you to the studio. I want to see what happens today." She looked back at Tamiko. "I'll come back in a little while to take you all home."

"OK," the red-head said. She grinned at the three people with her friend. "Good luck, you two. I'm waiting to see the final result, we all are."

"I'll make sure they have a DVD before they leave," Adrian chuckled.

"We can watch it at Nodoka's party," Tamiko laughed. She waved as they headed out of the bank, nearly three hours after they'd entered it.

Adrian pulled his phone, which he'd had returned by the police earlier, from his pocket and flipped it open. "Three texts from Matt wondering where we are, two from Aaron, and four from Karen," he reported, prodding buttons. Shrugging he put it back in his pocket as they arrived at his car. "I'll tell them in person."

"I'd like to try something," Aiko said, leaning on his vehicle as he unlocked it. He looked curiously at her.

"What would that be?"

"I think I can probably teleport your entire vehicle to the studio, which should save some time." She grinned at his look of surprise. "I've never tried it before but I'm pretty sure it will work. If it doesn't, nothing will happen, so it's safe enough."

Adrian studied her for several seconds before looking at Akane and Shampoo, who looked back with blank expressions. "I guess that it's worth a try." After a moment he added slightly plaintively, "You're sure it won't damage my car? I like my car."

Laughing, Aiko shook her head. "No, it won't cause any problems, whether it works or not. Go on, get in and let's see what happens."

Slightly nervously he opened the door and slid into the driver's seat, Aiko getting into the front passenger one while the others entered the back. "Right. Let's see what happens," the brunette said with a bright smile. Closing her eyes for a moment she concentrated, then nodded. "OK. Yes, this should work, I just need to expand the pattern a little..." There was a pause then she opened her eyes. "Easy. I can't believe I've never tried this before." With a grin she snapped her fingers.

Everyone on the street blinked at the large rainbow flash as the Mercedes vanished.

"You're back," Naito's wife mumbled as he slid into bed beside her. "How did it go?"

"I think it went reasonably well although there are some unusual aspects to the entire case that will probably take a while to resolve," he said sleepily, closing his eyes and rolling over to hold her.

"Where was it this time?" she asked almost unintelligibly, yawning widely half-way through the
"That's nice, dear." The voice was very quiet, and followed shortly by a faint snore. He smiled to himself and was shortly asleep as well.

"That was interesting," Kasumi noted as she handed out several cups of tea. Her younger sister nodded, taking one with a smile of thanks.

"It was. The whole thing was peculiar from start to finish. I'm damn proud of Akane, I have to say, they way she handled everything was really good. She thought it through carefully and quickly, came up with a sensible plan, then carried it out perfectly. I'm pretty sure we only speeded things up, she and Shampoo would have probably sorted it out eventually." Nabiki laughed a little. "I can't believe she just let that idiot shoot her in the chest like that though. That's taking a lot on faith."

"It worked brilliantly," Tamiko giggled, sipping her own tea. "The expression on his face was amazing."

"When she threatened to punch him and made a hole in the wall he looked like he was going to piss himself." Fumiko laughed as she recalled the feed from the drone Kasumi had inserted into the bank through a hole discreetly cut in the outer wall. "That was hysterical. Your sister has a way with words, Nabiki."

Snickering, Ranma shook his head a little. "She's come on a hell of a long way in the last year or so. A different way than you have, Nabs, but just as far." He grinned as Nabiki sighed at the name. "I know, I know, don't call you Nabs." Laughing now she nodded.

"I'm more than happy with Kas as you know, but if I'd met that Akane years ago, who knows...?" he mused, his eyes meeting his wife's over his teacup. She looked at him serenely.

"We both know it would have ended much like it did, although possibly with less angst to go around," she murmured. Putting one arm around her the martial artist chuckled, leaning on her shoulder.

"Most likely, love," he replied happily. The other people in the living room all laughed a little at the contented look he had on his face.

"I wonder who all those people work for?" Misaki asked thoughtfully, nibbling a chocolate bar. Nabiki shook her head.

"I'm not entirely sure yet, Jun and I are still looking into the whole thing and trying to trace it back to a source. There are certainly several more of them out there somewhere, I don't think we got all of them at all. Immediately after Webb and his friends were arrested several bank accounts that were linked to him were closed and the funds transferred out through the most amazing collection of cut-outs you've ever seen. Whoever is behind this knows their financial way around for certain." She sighed slightly. "We'll keep at it and I'll make sure that both the FBI and the LAPD get copies of the relevant details. I'll send Masao the same information as well."

"It seems to me, sister, that you are becoming a forensic accountant even before graduating," Kasumi laughed.

Nabiki grinned. "It looks that way. Not exactly how I thought it would go, but you could say that about the last two years in their entirety."
"Do you regret any of it?" Tamiko asked.

"No, not at all," she replied, smiling contentedly. "There have been a few bad parts but they're more than made up for by everything else. I'm happy where I am, thanks."

"Good."

They sipped their tea for a few minutes in silence, ruminating on the events of the last couple of hours. #Nabiki, I have made an interesting discovery,# Jun told her abruptly. It sounded slightly puzzled.

’Which is?’ she replied curiously.

#I have so far been unable to trace the definitive origin of the entire financial tangle, parts of it don't seem to exist on a connected computer network and it will take time to locate and penetrate isolated sections, although it's certainly possible, but one thing does stand out.# The machine paused again. She began to think it was doing it on purpose to build tension.

'Spit it out, then, Jun,' she laughed silently.

#It would appear that the source of the payment to Mr Bouchard for his inside knowledge of the bank security is most likely also the destination that the forty-three million dollars paid by the CIA were ultimately credited to.#

Nabiki stopped mid-sip, shocked. After a moment, she asked, 'Hang on. You mean that whoever the CIA paid, at least two days before they got their money, set up a bank robbery to steal the cash itself which they already had credited to them?'

#Yes, it would appear that is exactly what happened. It's quite clever, they would appear to have been able to use the fact that they knew exactly where the cash was, or would be, stored, to arrange to have their operatives then take possession of it, thereby doubling their income from one transaction. It may prove fruitful to investigate whether this was a one off experiment or whether something similar has been successfully pulled off in the past.#

'Wow. That's... that's actually damn clever,' she said numbly. 'If it wasn't for Akane and Shampoo noticing something odd going on they'd probably have gotten away with it too.'

#My simulations suggest an eighty-seven percent probability of success based on the information we currently have available,# Jun agreed. #It could rise higher if they had other assets in place as well. I assume they did, there is still the issue of how Webb and his men were expecting to make a clean exit. We don't know what they had planned although I expect the FBI will be looking very carefully into that problem.#

'Agerent Tinnin didn't seem happy about it, definitely.' Nabiki thought hard for a while. The others had noticed the signs they knew meant someone talking to their SI and were watching curiously. 'Keep digging, let me know if you find anything else.'

#I will of course do so. There is one other item that is worth mentioning so far. Three of the more than two dozen accounts the funds were shuffled through belong to the company one Anthony Murray ran. They would appear to be private accounts, which in all likelihood very few people other than himself knew about. The records indicate that they have been used several times over the last few years for what would appear to be somewhat similar activities, although so far I can't say by whom. But it raises some questions that we should look into.#

Everyone stared as the crushed tea-cup dribbled through her fingers. Nabiki looked embarrassed at
her momentary lapse of anger at the name Jun had mentioned. "Sorry, sis. Jun told me something that made me a bit annoyed," she apologised quietly, before relating what the SI had told her, sending them all the data it had so far acquired. Ranma inspected it with a frown, radiating a degree of rage that although well-suppressed was still apparent to them all. No one blamed him for it, they all felt the same.

"Murray. Or, someone he was involved with. I wonder who that might be?" the young man growled.

"We know he was apparently linked to a number of quite influential people one way or another," Kasumi noted. "At least a couple of FBI agents, someone high up in the US Navy, Masao mentioned a while ago that there was some possible link to the CIA that was still unclear, and so on. It's certainly possible that the people he was working for or with are still at large, I doubt that the FBI has managed to round them all up yet."

"It suggests that there is still a well-organised group out there somewhere who are tied in somehow to quite a lot of American intelligence agencies, if not further afield than that," Misaki said thoughtfully. "Russia is a possibility based on Agent Yefremov, for example. It might explain how they managed to use CIA, NSA, and DEA accounts, not to mention the Russian and British ones."

"I wouldn't think it's anything that the agencies in question are doing on purpose, though," Tamiko mused, closing her eyes and thinking. "Except possibly the CIA, they have a reputation for doing stupid things they're not really allowed to."

"Based on what you read on the internet practically every secret agency on the planet does things they're not really allowed to," Fumiko laughed. "So do we. But, that said, this feels more like a criminal thing than an overenthusiastic covert ops thing, somehow."

"Whatever it is, I think we need to keep an eye on it," Ranma said after a moment. "Hopefully the FBI and so on will get to the bottom of it, but if there's even the slightest chance it's something to do with that bastard Murray, I want to know what."

"He's not your favourite person on the planet, is he, dear?" Kasumi asked with a smile. He sighed, shaking his head.

"Not even close." Putting his cup down, he stood up, pulling his wife to her feet. "We're going to bed. See you guys in the morning." Kasumi giggled as he picked her up and carried her off, waving to the others as the door to the bedroom shut. Grinning, everyone else finished their tea and also stood.

"Come on, guys, let's leave them to it. Nabiki, you staying here tonight?" Fumiko looked at her friend, who nodded, still smiling at the antics of her brother-in-law and her sister.

"May as well, I can't be bothered to go back to Nerima right now and Aiko is still in LA. I let Nodoka know I was delayed so I'm going to bed as well."

"See you in the morning, then." The three women waved then left the apartment as she entered her own room, pulling her bag from ki space and poking through it for a toothbrush.

'Murray. I can't see anything to do with that bastard being a good thing,' she thought to herself, resolving to keep looking until she and Jun got to the bottom of everything, if only for her own peace of mind. 'Oh well, at least Akane still got to work without any more delay. Hopefully things are going well for her.' She smiled slightly then padded off to the bathroom.
Sorry about the delay, a combination of work and family, not to mention the vicious cold I've had for the last week, have conspired to slow my writing. On the other hand, you get nearly 52K words out of me this time, so there's that. I wanted to get this out for Christmas, but cold, as I said. So this is Happy New Year instead.

This concludes the Akane-centric part of the current story. While there will be other similar things in future they will be much shorter. I may well do spin-off stories to examine other parts of that direction at some point.

"Good lord," Adrian commented mildly, peering out the windscreen of the car. "That was the loudest obscenity I've ever heard." He was smirking a little. Aiko giggled, following his gaze. Behind them, Shampoo and Akane were laughing quite hard. They all stared at Matt and Aaron who were gaping back wide-eyed at where the Mercedes had abruptly appeared in the middle of the vehicle depot car park, which apparently Aiko had aimed at to give them space for the experimental teleportation.

Between the two other men, Greg was pointing at the car, his mouth moving but no words coming out after his shout of surprised shock. After several seconds, the other two turned to look at each other, then each one took an arm of their colleague and gently carried him back into the vehicle depot, probably aiming for his good whisky. Shaking his head a little, Adrian started the car and drove it over to beside the building where he parked it, then shut it down once more. "It still seems to work," he said to the magical girl beside him.

She looked pleased, nodding. "I told you it would be fine," she replied. "And I'm really happy that I worked out how to do that. It could be useful."

"Certainly beats pushing through the traffic at this time of day," he agreed, opening the door and getting out. The three women did likewise, all of them closing the doors and coming around to his side.

"How large a vehicle do you think you could do that with?" Akane asked curiously when she stopped beside Aiko, who glanced at her, then studied the car thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure," the other woman replied slowly. "It's not actually a matter of mass like you'd sort of expect. I can handle, oh, maybe a dozen people or so at once, before it gets... well, difficult isn't quite the right word but I can't explain it better than that." She shrugged. "The vocabulary isn't there for what I do to allow me to explain it simply, unless you know a lot about magical theory. Anyway, this experiment was very interesting, I modified the magic to allow a larger area to be teleported, which encompassed the car and everyone in it. It took a little more magical energy than teleporting only the four of us but nowhere near as much as I expected. I'm going to have to think about it for a while, and do some more experiments, but based on this one, I think I could probably handle something as big as a medium-sized truck without huge effort. Possibly larger, but I'm not sure without trying."

"Does it tire you out doing that?" Adrian inquired with a fascinated expression as he listened. "I mean, the energy has to come from somewhere, right?"

Aiko smiled at him. "When I first learned to do this it was quite tiring, yes," she said, nodding. "I didn't have very large magical reserves, nothing like as large as I do now, so I needed to sort of
recharge between teleports for a little while. And I could only manage myself and maybe two or three people as well at best. But I steadily improved as time went on, both in skill in doing it and power level as well. Yori says that's normal, it's like practising anything, the more you do it the better you tend to get, and also more efficient." She grinned for a moment. "Yori's very keen on efficiency. She's always been a little annoyed at some of the other girls who splash power around like it's going out of fashion but couldn't hit the ground with a brick."

Adrian snickered again. "I sort of got that impression when we met the first time. She struck me as a young woman who is very careful with what she does."

"She has to be," Aiko agreed soberly. "The power level she has is absolutely terrifying. If she wasn't careful, you wouldn't want to be around when she did anything. None of the rest of us are anywhere near her level yet, although Chou is the nearest right now."

"Is there an upper limit to this sort of ability?" he asked as they began heading into the garage through the opened vehicle door, Akane and Shampoo following and listening with interest. She shrugged a little.

"I assume there must be but if so none of us have found it yet. Everyone we know has different inherent power levels, and I do know that some, possibly most, people simply can't progress past various points without risking severe damage to themselves, but what the absolute limit is I have no idea. Neither does Yori and she's the de facto expert on most of the techniques we use. She and Chou between them invented half of them. Neither one is a mage in the traditional sense but they know more about magic itself than any mage I know. And ki, which is what we also use a lot of for various things." She looked over her shoulder at Akane for a moment.

"For example, Akane has a lot more ki ability than probably ninety-nine percent plus of the general population in Japan, but her raw power level will never reach anywhere near what even my friend Azumi has, and Azumi is still the lowest-powered of our little group. Sorry, Akane, I know how that sounds, but I'm not trying to be rude." She smiled at the youngest Tendo, who grinned and shrugged.

"I know you're not. Like I've said, I know my own limitations and I'm not too worried about it any more."

"Good," Aiko replied, looking pleased. She returned her attention to Adrian. "But that said, even without the power, Akane here can still learn to use what she has very efficiently with enough work, which will probably allow some interesting things. She's already using it subconsciously to improve her strength and speed, for example. That's the first thing advanced martial artists who reach this point, which isn't that many, believe me, end up doing. Most of them don't progress past that but the ones who learn conscious control can learn all sorts of techniques. You saw Genma, for example, and Soun knows a number of methods that use ki in various ways."

She nodded at Shampoo. "The Amazons have all sorts of techniques based around ki as well. The hidden weapons technique is an example. That needs a lot of control ability but not too much power, so most ki capable people could learn it to some extent if they were willing to practise enough. From what I know of Mousse, Shampoo's friend from her tribe, he's a master of it, although Cologne has vastly more ki and isn't as good at that particular technique."


With a small laugh, Akane nudge her friend. "You know you'd miss him if he vanished, though."
"Maybe," the Amazon snickered. "Maybe not. Is truth he not so annoying these days and is good sparring partner with weapons."

"It sounds very interesting but very complicated," Adrian remarked as they arrived at Greg's office, peering in to see the man himself sipping a small glass of the whisky he kept in his desk with a trembling hand, Aaron and Matt watching, each with their own tiny measure. All three of them looked up at his voice, Matt grinning, Aaron looking mildly amused yet otherwise unmoved, and poor Greg staring at them like he'd seen something from the pits of hell jump out at him.

"It is," Aiko agreed. Moving past him she stopped in front of Greg. "I'm sorry, Greg," she continued, directing her attention towards him and smiling gently. "I really am. I didn't mean to scare you or upset you, it was the largest space to aim for and I was trying something new because we were late."

He opened his mouth, paused, sighed and tipped the remainder of the spirits in, swallowing hard, then put the glass on his desk with a click. After a few seconds he shrugged. "It's OK, Aiko. I suppose I'll have to get accustomed to all my normal beliefs vanishing into thin air with you girls around." He sighed again, heavily. "But please try not to make cars appear out of nowhere twenty feet in front of me without any warning again, will you? I nearly had a coronary."

With a small laugh she bowed a little, nodding. "I will do my best, I promise."

"Thank you," he replied. Screwing the cap back on his expensive whisky he put it away in his desk. "You don't deserve any," he said darkly to Adrian when the director looked mildly disappointed. Everyone else grinned at his comment while Adrian sighed theatrically. "Where the hell have you all been anyway?" the stunt instructor asked, looking at his watch. "We were expecting you about three hours ago."

"Ah. There's a story there," Adrian chuckled. "I needed to stop in at the bank on the way here, and one thing led to another..." He and the three women took turns explaining the events of the last few hours to all three men, who listened with shock and interest. Finishing fifteen minutes later, he shrugged. "And that's more or less it. Then Aiko had the bright idea to save time and try a new trick. You know the rest."

Matt, Aaron, and Greg exchanged glances. "OK," Matt eventually drawled slowly, shaking his head. "You win, you guys had a more interesting morning than we did." Turning to Akane, he added wonderingly, "Through the face?"

She grinned with a nod. "It seemed appropriate and it certainly worked. You should have seen the look on his face before he fainted." Matt stared at her for a moment then burst out laughing.

"I can imagine," he finally managed, leaning weakly on the desk. "I'm almost sorry for the bastard."

"I'm not," Adrian growled, Shampoo nodding beside him with an annoyed expression. "He and his friends are complete assholes, and murdering ones at that. The cops are going to crucify them, then the FBI is going to burn what's left. That Agent Tinnin guy seemed in a pretty bad mood as far as those people were concerned. I certainly wouldn't like to be in their shoes. He struck me as someone you didn't want to get on the wrong side of." After a moment, he thoughtfully added, "And if the LAPD or the FBI miss anything, that Ms Aoyama woman will do something horrible to them. She was absolutely horrific."

Beside him, Akane and Shampoo both shivered, looking pale. The other three men studied them with curiosity. "Who is she?" the director asked after a moment. "She's obviously met you before,
she seems to know a lot about both of you."

"You have no idea," Akane replied in a low voice, shivering again. Looking up, she shook her head slightly. "No one seems to know for sure. Or, at least, I'm sure Yori and the others know, but they're not telling." Everyone's gaze switched to Aiko, who was looking faintly amused.

"Trust me, you don't really want to know," the brunette said lightly. "But there are a few important things you should realise about Ms Aoyama. One, she is a good person but at the same time she's very definitely not someone you should ever get on the wrong side of. Two, she knows more about everything than you'd believe. Three, she never, or at least hardly ever, gives second chances."

Aiko smiled unnervingly. "So far no one has pushed her far enough to see what would happen if she got irritated. We're all quite interested to see what happens if that ever occurs, but we'll be watching from a safe distance if it does. Probably the moon."

The petite woman stopped speaking, while Akane and Shampoo had paled even more. "Who the hell does she work for?" Matt asked almost in a whisper. The young woman's words, even delivered in her cheerful voice, or perhaps because of that, somehow made them all feel worried.

Aiko chuckled. "No one is sure and she's not saying. Assume they can reach anyone, anywhere, and you're probably on the right path, though." She looked quite amused by their reactions. "Oh, calm down, guys. She's not going to come and get you in the middle of the night."

"No, Ms Aoyama would take you in middle of day when you thought were safe," Shampoo said darkly, her eyes looking in to the corners of the room with rapid movements. "She most creepy person in world."

"True," Aiko grinned. "She'd probably enjoy you saying that, I think she's amused by the reactions most people have to her. In her own weird way, I mean."

"She sounds pretty scary," Greg commented, looking puzzled when Akane and Shampoo both made frantic shushing noises while looking around again. "Oh, come on, girls, she can't be..."

The phone on his desk rang.

Everyone looked at it.

Akane went white.

"Oh, god, now you've annoyed her," she said quietly, backing away. Adrian looked at her, then Shampoo who appeared nearly as worried, then Aiko who had a blank expression on her face although he felt she was somehow still amused.

"Perhaps you should answer it, Greg," he suggested as the phone rang again. The driving instructor looked at him, then reached out to the phone. Just before his hand reached it the ringing stopped.

"There, you see, nothing to worry about," he said, even so looking rather relieved. The atmosphere in the room had begun getting to him despite his best efforts, the genuine fear in the eyes of the two martial artists was unnerving.

"Indeed, Mr Crossley," a chillingly cold voice sounded, coming from the phone speaker, which had somehow turned itself on. Everyone but Aiko jumped violently. "I merely wished to suggest that it would be prudent for Ms Pu and Ms Tendo to proceed with their tasks for today as expeditiously as possible since several hours were lost during the unfortunate events of this morning, despite Ms Aiko's investigations into advanced teleportation manipulation. My compliments, by the way, Ms Aiko, your achievement has been noted with interest. May I also
suggest that you utilise this new skill in the transportation of Mr Stewart and his colleagues to the secondary site at the appropriate juncture?"

There was dead silence in the room, most of those present almost having stopped breathing. The voice really was that creepy. After a second or two, it continued, "Additionally, Mr Stewart, I wish to inform you that you will find a visual and audio record of Ms Tendo's and Ms Pu's actions today on your computer system in a format that your equipment can utilise. My employers would like me to pass on their expectations for a fruitful demonstration. We await the results with considerable curiosity."

After a long, horrified pause, Akane managed to choke out, "Thank you, Ms Aoyama. We were just getting ready to get to work."

"As you say, Ms Tendo. I have no doubt that your considerable talents will stand you in good stead, as in the case of Ms Pu, during the career opportunity you have been offered. I must return to my own work, but I wish you good fortune. Farewell." The line went dead.

Several thousand kilometres away in a comfortable bed in an apartment in Minato, Nabiki giggled to herself, sent Aiko a quick thank you, then fell asleep feeling content.

"Well, that was weird, wasn't it?" Aiko commented brightly, clapping her hands together and making everyone jump, tearing their fascinated and horrified gazes from the innocent telephone and directing them to her. "Shall we get on with it? She's right, we're wasting time here."

"Holy crap." Matt managed after a moment. He'd edged away from the phone the whole time the woman on the other end, wherever that really was, was speaking, and was now leaning against the wall of the office as far from the device as he could get.

"See? See?!" Akane pointed dramatically at the phone with a trembling finger. "She knows everything we do!"

"Relax, Akane," Aiko reassured her, smiling. "I told you, she seems to like both of you. That was her in an unusually nice mood. I think she was being friendly if anything." The brunette thought for a moment, raising an eyebrow. "Well, for her definition of friendly at any rate." She shrugged. "I'll admit, it takes getting used to but she means well. Trust me, you'd know it if she was annoyed." After more thought, she grinned in a worrying manner. "Or perhaps you wouldn't. It would be quick, though."

"Oh, thanks a hell of a lot, Aiko, that makes me feel so much better," Akane snapped, glaring at the brunette woman, who started giggling.

"Come on, Akane, it's kind of funny in a weird way. Don't let it bother you. Let's get you guys to work and forget about terrifying alien women and bank robberies for the moment. Don't forget, there's one of Richard's barbecues to look forward to later."

It took a little while, but eventually with a deliberate act of will Akane forced her worry down and nodded. "OK." Breathing deeply a few times and closing her eyes for a moment, she nodded again. "OK. Right. How are we going to do this, Adrian?" Opening her eyes she turned to the director who was looking at the phone again, but turned to her when she spoke.

"You know some very scary people," he muttered then seemed to get hold of himself. Looking at his watch he thought for a few seconds. "All right, let's see. We're running, hmm, three hours and
twenty minutes or so behind schedule. That's annoying. But..." He turned to Aiko. "Is it possible
for you to teleport the vehicles to the airfield? If you could, that would save at least two, maybe
three hours of driving, depending on traffic, which would put us more or less back on track. The
airfield is the problem, we'll run out of light if we wait too long and that will lose us a day."

Aiko thoughtfully nodded. "I think I might be able to. I can certainly give it a try." She looked at
Greg. "Mind if I borrow one of your trucks for a few minutes?" The stunt instructor stared at her,
before nodding slowly.

"Why not? If you're going to break the laws of the universe you might as well do it right, I
suppose." He stood up, then paused. "You'll bring it back, right? Only I'm responsible for it and
those things aren't cheap."

She laughed momentarily, nodding. "Don't worry, I'm not going to steal your truck. I'll just pop it
out to the airfield and back to make sure I actually can. I think it's possible but I won't know for
sure until I try."

"OK. Use the one parked around the side. It's the one with the bikes in."

The brunette smiled at him. "Thanks." She headed out of the office, the others exchanging looks
then following curiously. Going around to the side of the large garage she opened the door of the
medium-duty truck and climbed in, sitting in the drivers seat. Rolling down the window, she
leaned out. "The flash will probably be pretty intense so I'd suggest looking away."

They all nodded like a row of dolls, then obediently turned around. Several seconds passed, broken
only by the young woman muttering to herself, then there was a triumphant, "Got it." The flash that
followed was dazzling even reflected off the walls of the buildings. Turning back they all stared at
the absence of over ten tons of vehicle.

Aaron whistled. "Impressive," he said in a low voice. "Very impressive."

Moments later the vehicle reappeared soundlessly, making them twitch despite themselves. "And
so is that," he added softly. Aiko opened the door and dropped lightly to the ground, a broad smile
on her face.

"It's close to the limit of what I can do at the moment, I think, but it's not too hard. It sort of gets...
more complex... I guess, the larger the payload, there's all sorts of things to keep track of, but I can
handle something this size OK. I'm going to have to practice with big loads. I'm curious to see how
large an item I can learn to transport. I have to see if I can work out how to get rid of the flash as
well, sooner or later." She looked very pleased with herself.

"That's incredible," Adrian told her, looking a little startled, but also pleased. "And if you don't
mind transporting us, it will save a lot of time."

"Sure, I don't mind at all," she assured him. "Although I should probably hop everyone who's going
and hasn't teleported before across the yard first so they can get over the initial sickness outside the
vehicles. No reason to have the seats covered in vomit." She snickered as he looked faintly
disgusted, obviously remembering his own first teleport.

"No, I can certainly go along with that," he agreed. After a few seconds he smiled. "Well, we
should try and get back to our schedule, then. With you able to transport us, we're not more than
about half an hour behind where I was hoping to be now, so I think we can still get things together
and do what we planned to do." He looked at his watch and made a quick mental calculation,
nodding to himself. "Yes, it should all work out nicely. Good." He looked up as Jim came around
the corner of the garage and headed towards them with a curious expression. "Hi, Jim."

"Hi, guys," the other man replied, nodding to them all. "I was wondering where you all got to. Anton is wandering around asking if you're going to be ready soon. He wants to watch the stunts in Stage One, he's got a look on his face like a ten year old at Christmas." Adrian grinned, as did most of the others.

"We ran into a few snags earlier on but we're back on track now," he explained. "I'll tell you about it later." Turning to the rest of the little group, he addressed Akane and Shampoo. "If you two would like to head over to Stage One with Matt, I'll go and make sure everything's in place, then we can go over the notes for the first scene again. Did you read the paperwork last night?"

Akane nodded, as did Shampoo. "Yes, we went over everything before we went to bed and again at breakfast. It looks like fun."

"It's going to be pretty good," he chuckled. "Aaron will get you outfitted with the weapons, there will be someone from wardrobe with the clothes, and the extras and camera guys should all be set up by now." He glanced at Matt, who made an affirmative gesture.

"My guys are all ready and sitting around drinking coffee waiting," the stunt coordinator replied to the unasked question.

"Great. OK, you guys head over and I'll go and talk to Anton. We'll meet you there in about twenty minutes." Jim followed as he left, both of them talking. Greg watched the two men leave then turned to Matt.

"Mind if I come over later and watch?" he enquired. Matt grinned at him.

"No problem."

"Thanks. I've got some paperwork to finish but that will only take about forty minutes." He nodded to his colleague, then the others, before looking at the truck and Aiko, who smiled at him. Shaking his head a little he also left, going back into the vehicle depot. Matt chuckled at his actions before turning to the women.

"Poor guy. Greg is a very good man and a friend but it always takes him a little while to get comfortable with new ideas. You lot count as very new ideas."

Akane snickered. "I can understand that." Shampoo and Aiko grinned as well. "I like him, though. He's a very good driver and an excellent teacher."

"He is that," Matt agreed. Waving in the direction of the relevant part of the studio, he added, "Shall we?"

"Certainly," she replied politely, before smiling again. The three women and two men headed off across the parking lot.

Looking around at the complex set in the huge building, Akane smiled to herself, before turning to Shampoo, who was also looking excited. Two camera crews were setting up their equipment, the same ones who had filmed the demonstration, one or two of them nodding to the two women as they entered the sound stage. "This is going to be fun," she commented, the Amazon nodding in glee.

"Damn right," the other woman replied with a small giggle of joy. Aiko reappeared next to her as
she returned from taking Chou, Tamiko, and Agent Naito back home, looking around with interest but saying nothing.

"OK, this is the set for scene eighteen," Adrian announced, looking around with satisfaction as he entered with Anton next to him. "It was a damn nuisance to shoot for the movie, but it looks really impressive." Everyone gathered around him as he pulled a clipboard from under his arm and flipped through some papers on it, then pulled several sheets off and handed them around. "These are the scene notes for reference." Anton read his handout with interest, looking up at the set as a number of grips made the final adjustments on it.

"I remember what a pain this was. But you're right, it came out very well in the end. How many takes was it?"

Adrian sighed. "Something like sixteen. I'm hoping this will be a little more straightforward." Matt patted him on the shoulder comfortingly while Aaron grinned a little.

"Make sure you've taken a pill first. You know what you get like when you're directing." Pushing the hand off his shoulder Adrian looked mildly annoyed as the others snickered at his expression.

"Yes, thank you. I took a pill. All right, let's go over the plan. Akane, we'll start with you in the role of the spy, and you'll be the bad guy, Shampoo. Once you're sure you've got it, we'll swap roles and do it again. Does that sound OK?" Both young women nodded. "Let's get you in costume."

The group walked over to the side of the cavernous room to where several people, mostly women, were sorting through a pile of clothing. The elderly woman who was clearly in charge smiled at them all. "Hi, Gladys. Doing this yourself?" the director chuckled as he greeted her.

"Of course, that way I can watch," the old woman replied with a smile. She turned to Akane and Shampoo. "It's nice to see you both again," she added. They'd been introduced a couple of days earlier during their tour of the studio.

"Hello, Gladys," Akane smiled. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, dear. How are you? Based on what you did to my motorcycle suit you must have spent some time sliding around on your back." The wardrobe manager looked concerned. "Are you all right?"

Laughing slightly, the youngest Tendo nodded. "I'm completely fine, don't worry. I bounce."


Shaking her head in amused wonder, Gladys stepped back and looked at them both up and down for a moment. "Very impressive. All right, let's get you both in costume." She picked up a shirt, holding it against Akane and studying it closely with an expert eye. "Good, we got your measurements right. Let me see, you'll need this... and this... and one of these..." She piled half a dozen garments in Akane's arms. "The changing room is just over there, dear. Put all that on and we'll see how it looks." As the Tendo sister went off to change, she could hear the costumer start again with Shampoo, who soon joined her in the next room.

Quickly divesting herself of her clothes, she neatly folded them on a chair in the room she was using, then changed into the clothing Gladys had given her. Adjusting the thin but tight top slightly she looked at herself in the mirror. 'Wow,' she thought in mild shock. 'Not exactly my normal look, but it's not bad.' Turning slightly she ran her hands down her sides smoothing out the fabric. She was now wearing a dark blue, nearly skin tight top with a leather jacket over it, black pants, and a
A pair of boots not unlike the ones Yori and her friends wore, which had velcro straps. They gave very good traction while being flexible and light.

The top exposed her arms from about halfway down her upper arm, clinging tightly but still allowing free movement and apparently breathing well. Taking the jacket off again, she stepped back from the mirror and went through a couple of katas, checking how everything fitted and finding it didn't restrict her at all. "Not bad at all," she mumbled out loud, smiling. She dug a hairbrush out of her bag and quickly sorted out her hair, before putting the jacket back on and the brush away. "Not bad at all. Akane Tendo, Super Spy." Posing, she began giggling at the absurdity of it all. "How the hell did I end up here?" she asked herself, shaking her head in amusement. Turning from the mirror she opened the door, just as Shampoo came out of the next room.

Both young women looked at each other and grinned. The Amazon was dressed in a similar manner, although her top was black and cut differently. She had tied her hair back in a somewhat modified version of her normal ponytail, which exposed her face slightly more than normal, without the bangs she usually had on each side. "That look suits you," Akane noted. Shampoo looked down at herself, then back at her friend.

"I could say the same. Are you going to dress like that at home?" she asked with a grin. "Nodoka might find it a little showy."

Posing, Akane laughed for a moment. "Perhaps the motorcycle suit would be better. That's even tighter." They stood next to each other and studied their reflections in the large mirror the changing area had on the wall. "You know, we make this look good, don't you think?" she asked with a snicker.

"I do. So, Ms Tendo, shall we go and see what happens in our first real stunt scene?"

"I believe we should, Ms Pu." Grinning, they both left the changing area.

"Wow," Matt muttered, making Adrian turn away from where he was going over some notes with Jim and Aaron, Anton listening quietly, to follow his eyes. Both the young women who were the centre of the day's activities approached from the changing rooms, dressed in their costumes for the stunt, talking together in Japanese and laughing about something. "Those two look amazing."

"Damn right they do," Anton exclaimed with a smile of glee. "This is going to be incredible to watch."

"It that what spies really wear on a job in the US?" Aiko asked, amusement in her voice. "None of the ones I know do." Everyone looked at her as she grinned at them.

"How many spies do you know?" Aaron asked curiously. She winked at him.

"A few."

Looking intrigued, he stared at her for a moment, then turned to the approaching women, shaking his head. Adrian smiled a little as Aiko chuckled slightly. "You both look very good," he said to Akane and Shampoo, who smiled back.

"It's not the sort of thing I'm used to wearing but it all seems to fit well," she replied. Gladys came over and walked around them studying them intently, nodding to herself, before making a couple of adjustments.

"Good, good, everything fits. All right, Akane, these are yours, and Shampoo, these are for you."
She handed them each a pair of mirrored sunglasses, which they took and put on. "They're safety glasses, mainly, disguised as sunglasses."

Aiko laughed for a moment as they looked at each other. "You look like you're going to work for Ms Aoyama," she giggled. Akane paled a little and took the glasses off again, which made the brunette giggle harder.

Shaking his head in amusement, Adrian turned to Aaron. "They're in your hands now," he said. With a nod the armourer waved the two over to a table next to the wardrobe people. On it were several hand-guns and a pair of shoulder holsters.

"Put this on," he said, handing one to Akane, then showing her how to adjust it. When he was satisfied it was correctly set up, he picked up one of the Glock 17's, checked it quickly, then handed it to her butt first, along with a suppressor. He nodded in satisfaction when she repeated the checks. "Good. You remembered."

She smiled at him. "You made it very clear what we had to do and you're a good teacher," she replied. Smiling, he watched as she put the weapon into the holster then practised drawing it a few times.

"OK, that all looks good. Shampoo, you're next." Shortly both women were outfitted with similar rigs. Shampoo put her leather jacket back on and practised whipping her gun out from under it smoothly, making Akane grin at her. Snickering, he watched, then handed them each half a dozen magazines, which they accepted then carefully checked, making him look approving. "Blanks, of course. Remember what we talked about yesterday. They might not hurt you two, even point blank, considering what I saw you do, but don't shoot anyone else in the face close up with them, OK?"

Both nodded soberly. "Good. Load your weapons." Once they had inserted the first magazine, then reholstered the guns and put the spare ammunition in their jacket pockets, he turned to Adrian who had been quietly watching from the side. "They're good to go."

"Great." The director looked pleased. "OK, ladies, lets go over the scene. It's pretty short, only about three minutes when edited, but I'd expect around five minutes of action to get to that point." He led them over to the set, the others following but staying out of the way. "The spy comes in this door over here. She goes down this corridor, stops here, the first guard comes around the corner, she shoots him. He goes down, then she heads over to this point. Up the stairs, another two guards, which she avoids by pulling herself into this air vent. Once they're gone, back out of the vent, down that hallway, over the partition wall, and into the server room here." They followed as he walked along the set, which had all the appropriate fittings but one side open to the rest of the building allowing the cameras to film everything.

"She plugs the bug into that socket, then leaves the room. Going back, the bad guy is hiding up here, near the ceiling, and drops down behind her. She hears the bad guy, dives over this desk, then they shoot at each other. Five more guards come running in from there and there. Three of them get shot, one by the bad guy by mistake, then the spy loses her gun. She kicks the weapon out of the hand of the bad guy, they start hand to hand combat. Half the room gets wrecked in the process, the last two guards are taken out with the scenery, before the spy manages to dive out the window. She uses that flagpole there to break her fall, spins around it, lands on that awning, then slides to the ground, before escaping, the bad guy following her." He pointed at the various sections of the set.

"The next scene would have a motorcycle chase, and so on, but we're not going to bother with that part." Turning to the two women, who were studying the set carefully, he asked, "Does that all sound good?"

"The actors would get cut into the action sequences in the appropriate places, like close ups of their faces, but for these purposes it's easier if you do the entire sequence in one go, I think. When we did it for real we had to shoot it in several takes, leaving aside all the reshoots because something went wrong. Don't worry about the acting part, that's not what we're concentrating on at the moment, so it doesn't really matter. The action is what counts. It's a good mix of acrobatics, weapons usage, and combat. Not very realistic but the public seems to like it." The Amazon woman nodded with a grin.

Adrian led them over to a group of six men who were dressed in dark green uniforms with blue logos on, looking like some sort of security personnel, also wearing the mirrored safety glasses. "OK. These guys over here are the guards. Try not to kill them, they're expensive to replace." One or two of the men looked slightly worried as both Akane and Shampoo snickered in a dark fashion.

Matt, who was standing with them, laughed for a moment. "He's kidding, guys." Waving at the stuntmen, he added, "Some of my people. Guys, you've seen the recording of the demonstration, so you know how good Akane and Shampoo are." All the men nodded at once, staring at the two young women, who looked fairly harmless. "Make it look good but don't get carried away," he advised. "Don't worry about hurting them."

"I'm not sure we could if we tried," one of the men, a tall Nordic-looking blond, said with an expression of awe on his face. "I still can't believe what I saw."

"It's all real, Gunnar, believe me," Matt assured him. "OK, normally we'd practice the stunts for days before a scene like this," he carried on, turning back to Akane and Shampoo. "But I have no doubt you can do it on the first try. Go easy on the guys here, they're pretty tough, but not like you are."

"We'll be careful, Matt," Akane assured him. "We both know how to pull a punch and make it look good."

"Great. OK, let's get everyone in position and do a slow run through. Akane, you're over there, Shampoo, you're up here." Adrian quickly got everyone into their places. "We won't bother filming this part." He explained exactly what he wanted, Akane listening carefully, then stepped back to rejoin the others. "Everyone in place?" A chorus of affirmative calls came back. "OK. Scene eighteen, practice run one, take one. Action!"

Pulling her gun out, Akane quickly screwed the suppressor on, before cocking it and easing the door open, slipping inside and creeping along the corridor to the first marked point, sidling along the wall. Adrian called for her to halt at that spot. Freezing, she waited for the guard to come around the corner, which he did seconds later, spotting her and whipping up his own weapon which he was carrying openly. Three muffled shots sounded and he dropped. "Good. Now, over to the next point." They proceeded in this fashion to slowly go over the entire scene, taking about fifteen minutes, until Adrian called out, "Cut."

Approaching the Tendo woman, who was running her hand through her hair to one side of the set, he waited for Shampoo to join them. "That's harder than I thought it would be," Akane told him, looking mildly surprised. Shampoo nodded.

"Is much to remember," she said.

Adrian smiled. "It's a fairly long scene, like I said, normally we'd do it in shorter sections, but that went pretty well. You missed a cue twice, Akane, but for a first attempt I'm very impressed."
Shampoo, you need to come in a little earlier next time." Both women nodded, listening. "OK, let's reset and try again. A couple more times and we can run it for real." Everyone went back to their places, various grips putting the scenery and props back to their marks. When they were ready, he restarted the whole thing again.

The female spy eased the door open, peering inside quickly, then slipped into the building, her gun ready. Sliding along the wall she froze at a corner, hearing footsteps. Seconds later a uniformed armed security guard came around the same corner in the other direction, almost walking past her, but sensing something amiss at the last moment, spinning around and raising his weapon. He was too late, as the spy put three rounds into his chest with her silenced handgun. Staggering back against the opposite wall as he dropped his own gun he slid down it into a heap on the floor. Quickly checking him she nodded, then made her way in the direction he'd come from.

Ascending a flight of stairs, gun ready for action, she stopped at the top, crouching and listening carefully. Again, footsteps could be heard, at least two sets. Looking around she spotted an air vent on the wall across from her near the ceiling. Quickly darting across to it she reached up, pulling the hinged cover open and swinging it to the side, then grabbing the edges of the conveniently person-sized hole. Smoothly and silently pulling herself into the exposed vent with no signs of effort she closed the cover behind her, only barely visible in the darkness behind it. Two more guards approached and walked past, talking quietly to each other and looking around alertly.

Ten seconds after they'd disappeared down the stairs, the vent cover eased open, a head of dark blue hair popping out and looking quickly about. Seeing nothing, she slid out of the vent and closed the cover, before heading in the direction she'd been going. Entering a large room at the end of another corridor she paused, listening, before turning left and creeping along the outside of the room. Arriving at a partition that split the room into two sections, she looked around, holstered her weapon under her jacket, before jumping up and grabbing the top of the wall, quickly peering about again, then pulling herself up.

Flipping over the wall in a remarkable display of acrobatics she landed on the other side in a crouch, pulling her weapon in the process. Another pause to listen for guards, then she headed quickly for a door on the other side of the area she was in, next to a large laser printer. Seconds later she was inside, closing the door behind her. She pulled a small device from her pocket and snapped it into a socket on the front of one of the server racks, looking satisfied when a small green light illuminated, then moved a few cables to cover it, before returning to the door and putting her ear to it.

After a couple of seconds she opened the door a crack and looked out. Seeing nothing she slipped out, closing the door behind her, then headed back the way she'd come, once more flipping over the partition without any trouble.

Everything went horribly wrong as she reached the hallway she'd come down when she entered. Despite her caution, she missed the fact that a woman with long purple hair was somehow holding herself near the ceiling against the wall, dropping lightly to the floor behind her as she moved past underneath. Hearing a faint sound, the spy whirled, firing half a dozen shots in the process. The new arrival moved too fast to hit, diving under the path the bullets would take and knocking the spy into a spin with a quick punch on the way past.

Recovering quickly the blue-haired agent darted back into the large room, taking cover behind a desk. The other woman leapt around the corner of the corridor into the same room, firing half a magazine at the spy in a rippling roar of gunfire, the spy returning fire. Diving under another desk the counter-agent fired a few more shots over the top of it blindly, before dropping the magazine.
from her weapon one-handed and slamming in another one.

The spy took the time to reload as well, removing the suppressor rapidly and pocketing it, before peeking around the side of the desk, only to duck quickly as more gunfire came from several guards who entered the room from two directions. Returning fire she moved from desk to desk trying to stay behind cover as two guards dropped to the floor. A guard she missed jumped her from behind a support column, grabbing her gun hand and slamming it against the column a couple of times, causing her to drop her weapon, before throwing her sideways through a cubicle partition, which exploded into fragments. Rolling to her feet she picked up a monitor and ripped it from its cables, tossing it at him and knocking him down, before diving head first over another partition as the rest of the guards fired at her.

Rolling a couple of times she ended up behind a photocopier, looking around for an exit. Another guard came around the corner behind her, only to scream and fall to his face as several more shots sounded. Looking mildly puzzled the agent shook her head, but took the opportunity to make a run for the door she saw on the other side of the room.

Half-way there she was intercepted by a lilac and black blur, the counter agent slamming into her, then recoiling and aiming her weapon. A sudden high kick and the gun went flying, the agent spinning on her other foot and redirecting the next kick into the midsection of the other woman, who grunted and flew backwards.

As they exchanged blows in a dazzling display of martial arts, the guard who had been hit with a monitor staggered to his feet, blinking, then took aim. Spotting him in the nick of time the spy dived forwards, between the legs of her opponent, rolled to her feet, grabbed a paperweight from the nearest desk, then threw it at the guard, bouncing it off his head and knocking him unconscious. Deflecting a return blow from the lilac-haired woman, she jumped over another desk, looked wildly around, then dashed for the nearest window.

On the way the last guard shot three times at her, missing with each shot, before she kicked a metal wastebasket into the air with one foot then slammed it half-way across the room with the other one in one smooth sequence, barely breaking stride in the process. He went down after taking a wastebasket to the head, she crossed her arms over her face and dove head-first through the glass, which exploded out over the street below.

Falling in an arc, the spy reached out and grabbed a horizontal flag-pole halfway to the ground, spun around it like a gymnast, flipped twice, bounced from the awning of the entrance to the next building on the street, then rolled several times when she met the ground. Jumping to her feet she looked up at the window she'd exited so dramatically, waving to the lilac-haired woman who was looking out of it with an annoyed expression, then darted into an alleyway as the other woman shot at her and missed. The counter-agent dived out of the window after her, taking a similar path to the ground, before following.

"Cut!"

"That looks pretty damn good." Aiko commented, looking at the monitor for the high definition playback system which was replaying the video footage shot in parallel with the film cameras. Adrian nodded, studying it critically with an expert eye.

"It's very impressive," he replied happily. "Not perfect, Akane missed one mark there a little, but not enough to matter, and the sequence with the monitor wasn't quite right. But that's fine, it would all get edited down anyway in real life, so little issues like that can be cut out. It certainly went a damn sight better than the actual movie did." He grinned at Akane, who was standing next to the
magical girl with Shampoo by her side, both of them watching with interest and the Tendo woman still picking small pieces of fake glass from her hair. "I liked the wave at the end. Not in the script, but it looked good."

She smiled for a moment. "It seemed a good idea at the time."

Looking over at the stunt people, who were talking to each other, one of them holding an ice pack to his head and shrugging while his companions laughed, the director smiled little. "You might need to recalibrate your strength, though. You nearly knocked poor Nunzio over there out for real."

She blushed, nodding.

"I said sorry."

"He doesn't seem too upset." Chuckling, Adrian watched as Matt talked to his people, before turning back to the three women. "I think that's the final take for you, Akane. Shampoo, you're up next. Get a couple of sandwiches and some water, then we'll do a dry run. I don't think you'll need more than one, you both already know what to do, but we just need to check your positioning in the opposite roles."

Both women nodded, heading to the catering table. Adrian and Aiko watched them go.

"They certainly seem to be enjoying themselves," the petite brunette said, glancing at him. He nodded, smiling.

"Indeed they do. I'm pleased to see that the initial nervousness seems to have gone away. Akane was looking a little unsure of herself at first but by the end of it she was having a lot of fun. Shampoo seemed more confident."

Aiko nodded a little, thoughtfully. "I think Shampoo is quite extroverted from what I've picked up over the years. Some of the stories I've heard make it obvious that she's not concerned what other people think about her. Akane, although she sometimes really stood out, a lot of the time was rather shy." She shrugged slightly. "It's a good thing she's finding something she can do, and do well, that other people admire. Her self-confidence has been helped a lot, I suspect."

"Well, I have to say that based on that, I think in the long run she's got what it takes to act as well as do the stunts," he replied, watching as Akane and Shampoo picked through the food on offer, talking to Jim who was grinning and waving at the set, also with a sandwich in hand. "It'll be interesting to see how it goes with Shampoo."

"What did Anton think?" she asked, glancing over to where the producer was talking to Matt and one of the stunt men, while Greg, who had come in half-way through the last practice run, listened with interest while still wearing a somewhat startled expression.

"He seemed very happy indeed," Adrian chuckled. "He was having trouble keeping quiet during the take, he nearly bust a gut not laughing when Akane did that thing with the wastebasket. It was pretty impressive."

"She's good at improvising," Aiko agreed, also laughing a little. "Like a really hardcore version of Jackie Chan. If she'd put more effort into the kick she could have taken that guy's head off."

"I'm glad she didn't," Adrian replied, "Stuntmen are expensive and the paperwork would be a nightmare." They shared a smile then Aiko went off to get some food for herself. Turning to the VT operator, Adrian had a word with him, before heading towards the coffee. Half-way there he was met by Anton, accompanied by Matt. "So?" he asked the producer as they filled their cups from the machine, looking over it at the other man and raising an eyebrow enquiringly. Anton
dropped a sugar-cube into his own cup and stirred it with a pen he pulled from his pocket as he seemed to think about the one word question, making Matt and Adrian exchange an amused glance. Suddenly noticing what he was doing the producer flicked coffee from the pen, grumbling slightly, dried it on his sleeve, and put it away.

"I'll bet that improves the taste a lot," Matt chuckled. Anton shrugged, smiling a little, then sipped.

"Not as such," he commented wryly, pouring himself a fresh cup. "So. Indeed. Overall, I'm very impressed. There were a few minor mistakes, true, but this is essentially the first time in front of a camera for either of them and they've had, what, about forty-five minutes or so of instruction and three dry runs? That's pretty impressive by anyone's standards."

"I'd have to agree," Matt said, nabbing a sandwich from the nearby table and biting off a large part. Chewing and swallowing he waved at the set with the remainder. "Most of the people I've trained over the years wouldn't do anywhere near as well with so little time to learn. We've dropped them in at the deep end but so far they're both swimming very well."

"Very true," Anton nodded. "The actual action is first rate, of course. The martial arts part was very good, as I would have expected based on the first day, the gun-play and other action sequences were pretty damned impressive as well. With some more practice they're both going to be extremely good. And, of course, we can have things like that incredible dive through the window without any safety equipment required, which is just insane. It opens up some amazing possibilities." He turned to look at the set which was in the process of being repaired and restocked for the next run through. "I mean, normally that would have been about six separate stunts, a week's worth of planning, air bags, the whole nine yards. We just showed them what we wanted and they did the entire thing in one take. Which is something I've never seen before, not even close."

Smiling happily, he sipped some coffee. "If we can teach them both to act as well as they do the physical stuff we're going to put everyone else in this sector out of business inside three years."

Adrian started laughing, shaking his head. When he calmed down, he looked at the other man, whose twinkling eyes showed his own amusement. "I doubt we'll be able to quite manage that but I do think we have the beginnings of something truly remarkable here. I doubt that Mitch will have any trouble convincing the board when we show them the final cut of all the sequences. Hell, Akane just did a better job on her first try, in under an hour and a half, than several very famous actors did in a freaking week of shooting!" He shook his head in mixed wonder and irritation, making Matt and Anton smile. "I wish I'd had those two a couple of years ago, that damn movie would have been a lot less trouble to make."

"It still came out pretty well, so I wouldn't worry, Adrian," Anton assured him. "Everyone is very pleased with the result. They'll be more pleased in a year or two when we have something with those girls in it."

"Once we've got them up and running with the stunts, we're going to have to experiment with some speaking parts, and ease them into acting," Matt mused, looking at the other two, Anton nodding thoughtfully while Adrian turned to watch Akane and Shampoo talking to Aiko, who was giggling at something the violet-haired Amazon had just said. "I have a feeling Akane will pick it up quickly once she has some camera time. She can be a little hesitant until she gets into it, I've noticed, although Shampoo doesn't have any self-confidence issues at all from what I can see."

Adrian grinned, watching the young women chat. "No, she's pretty self assured. You're right about Akane, she's always started off nervous but once she's sure she can do what she needs to, seems to just go for it. Probably good, over-confidence is much more of a problem than being a little unsure."
Both of them sure learn fast, and actually listen really well. Greg said as much during the driving training, so did Aaron and Karen. Aaron was really impressed, actually, he said he's never taught anyone who learned as well."

"Something to do with the martial arts, I guess?" Anton wondered out loud. "Or just being Japanese? Or Chinese, in Shampoo's case."

"They both seem to recognise experience and have a hell of a lot of respect for it in a teacher," Matt nodded. "That certainly helps. There might be an element of respect for your elders there as well."

"Hey, I'm hardly an elder, I'm only forty-six," Adrian protested, smirking. Matt shrugged at him, finishing his coffee. Snickering a little Anton did the same. "OK. Let's get them set up again and see what Shampoo does in the lead role." Putting his now empty cup down next to the other empties, Adrian led his little group over to the young women in question, joining them, Aaron, who was explaining something esoteric about the gun Shampoo still had in her holster, and Jim, who was listening with interest.

"Back to work, everyone," he stated, clapping his hands. "Let's see how it goes with the roles reversed. Shampoo, we'll go through the same dry run again to get you sure of your marks then we'll run the scene for real, OK?"

"Sure, Adrian," she agreed, following eagerly as he went back to the set, Akane beside him. The others moved off to stand next to the primary camera dolly which was filming most of the action and watched with interest. Soon they were finished, everyone taking their places. Once more, cameras rolling and everyone in their places, the small audience silent, he called, "Action!"

Matt watched quietly as the sequence ran, expertly assessing the two young women as they bounced around the main room in the set exchanging shots, shaking his head a little in respect. 'Incredible,' he thought, wincing as Gunnar caught the monitor to the chest again, rather harder than completely necessary. 'Bet that hurt.' Watching as the 'guard' slumped to the floor groaning in not entirely simulated pain he snickered a bit. Beside him, Aiko did much the same, smiling a little. He noticed a little later as Shampoo dived through the window and did an even more elaborate spin around the flagpole before bouncing around the front of the fake building onto the ground that the brunette was now looking in a different direction, off to the side and up. Puzzled, he followed her eyes. As soon Adrian called "Cut!" loudly he turned to her.

"What's up?" he asked. She glanced at him, then back into the rigging at the side of the studio.

"We appear to have someone not on the guest list," she said quietly. Following her eyes he squinted, finally making out a shape in the shadows above the lights that looked not entirely unlike a person in dark clothing lurking on a catwalk thirty feet up.

"Ah. Yes, I see him. Or her."

"Him. About fifteen." She sounded confident. "Caucasian, brown hair, blue eyes, perhaps a hundred and seventy-five centimetres tall." Matt couldn't make out any of these details but took her at her word. Thinking, he sighed after a moment.

"Damn. I know who that is," he muttered. She grinned.

"So do I. Want me to go get him for you?"

"Please. I'll call Security." He pulled out his phone and dialled.
"We should probably go easy on the kid, he's just overenthusiastic." Aiko looked amused.

"And a damn nuisance. That's the third time in the last month." Matt quickly explained the situation when the phone was answered, then hung up. "I wish I could figure out how the hell he keeps getting back in here. It's driving Security insane."

Laughing for a moment, she looked around, then up, before winking at him and vanishing. Blinking at the flash he stared up again as most of the people in the studio looked over curiously.

"Hello," the amused-sounding female voice said in his ear. The teenager nearly fell out of the rigging he'd climbed into a few minutes ago, startled at the sound, especially since he was sure he was alone. A hand clamped on his shoulder steadying him while another one neatly relieved him of the camcorder he was holding, so quickly he had no chance to prevent it. Turning huge eyes over his shoulder he stared at the young Japanese woman grinning widely from immediately behind him, hanging from the truss directly above him by her ankles and making it look as easy as standing on a level floor. "I'm fairly sure you weren't invited, Mr Goodner."

"Oh, shit," he muttered. More loudly, he asked resignedly, "How do you know my name?"

"I have a very good memory for faces and an interesting way of getting information," she chuckled. "Come on, let's go and face the music before you fall."

Sighing, he wriggled back onto the catwalk he was half hanging off the edge of to get the angle he'd wanted with his camcorder. "Hey, I recognise you, you're not Security, you were with those other stunt women in Australia!" Stunned, he watched as she dropped onto the catwalk, somehow ending up standing on it without either making it wobble or showing any effort. "Are you in this movie? What's it called? How did you vanish like that at Ayer's Rock? What's your name? Are you really from Japan? Are those other women here as well? Who are those people down there? How did they do all those incredible things? Are they martial artists? Where..." He cut off abruptly as she smirked at him then the world jumped, a horrible feeling of incredible nausea going through him. Vaguely realising something weird had happened he dropped to his knees and tried not to throw up, finally succeeding after a minute or two and much effort of will.

"...are we?" he finished weakly, looking around. She helped him to his feet, still smirking. Several people were looking at him in a way that made his head droop, including the two young women who had been doing the stunts, the man who had been calling the commands who he recognised as the director, and two unpleasantly familiar people in studio security department uniforms, the latter pair not looking pleased. He looked around wildly trying to work out how the hell they had come to be standing on the floor of the building rather than the catwalk.

"Hello, Danny," the female security guard on the right said, sighing a little as she accepted his camcorder which the Japanese brunette handed her. "How did you get in this time?"

"There's a hole in the fence at the back of the studio next to the alleyway by the pawn shop, behind the dumpster," he reluctantly admitted. "I figured out I could climb up the fire escape onto the roof and come in through the ventilation system, the second unit from the front has a loose cover."

Shaking her head with a slightly admiring expression, she glanced at her companion, who shrugged. "You should use some of that ingenuity to do something legal, not trespass," she told him, although the corner of her mouth was twitching slightly. The male guard didn't look nearly as amused.

"But I want to know when the movie is coming out!" he protested. Didn't anyone understand? This
was much more important than paying attention to 'Keep Out' signs.

The director, Mr Stewart, sighed loudly. "Danny, I've told you, over and over, there is no movie!"

"But..." Danny pointed at the two women who had been doing the stunt, then the elaborate set. "I've just seen you shooting a scene from it. When is it coming out? What's the plot? Who else is in it? What's it called?"

The director massaged his forehead, glancing at the tall man beside him, who he knew was something to do with the stunt department. This person seemed amused, snickering a little, although he was also somewhat irritated.

"Oh, for god's..." The director sighed again. "Look, firstly, this isn't a shoot, it's a job interview. Secondly, even if it was a shoot, you're not supposed to be here. Aside from anything else if Aiko hadn't retrieved you from the catwalk you could well have splattered yourself all over my floor, from what she says. I'd prefer not to have to stop and get some mops." Danny felt somewhat ill at this summation, although the woman, Aiko, seemed to find it funny. So did the other two girls. "Thirdly, this is the fifth time in two months we've caught you where you shouldn't be. To be honest it's getting a little annoying. Enthusiasm for what we do is fine, but breaking and entering to illegally tape it is going a bit too far."

Danny's heart sank at the words. "Breaking and entering?" he sputtered. "I didn't break anything."

"So, Entering, then," the brunette chuckled. "Still not ideal."

"Not to mention criminal trespass," the male security guard put in somewhat sourly. Danny closed his eyes for a moment. That sounded bad, his mom was going to kill him. "Should I call the police, Sir?" he asked after letting his words sink in.

The director was looking thoughtfully at Danny when he opened his eyes again, returning the gaze pleadingly. He waited to find out his fate. After a very long few seconds, and a glance at his colleague who shrugged a little, the director shook his head. "No, not yet. Look, Danny, I'm going to make you a deal. You will stop sneaking in here like this, if nothing else so you don't end up killing yourself and causing me any more headaches. In return, I'll let you come and watch one of the stunts tomorrow, all the way through, assuming your mother allows it, and I'll give you some tickets to the premier of my next movie." Danny's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth, the director holding up a hand before he spoke. "But..." There was a warning tone in his voice, making the young man close his mouth again.

"But?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"But, I'm serious about this. You agree to this, I'll let you go this time, but if we catch you sneaking in again, the police will definitely be involved. You're a good kid, I think, so don't let me down, OK? It would be a shame to let your enthusiasm get you a criminal record." The man looked at him, waiting for an answer. For once in his life, the teenager thought things through carefully.

"OK. I'll stop."

With a small smile the director nodded, turning to the security guards. "Call his mother to come and pick him up. Again. Tell her the deal, get her permission, and let her know I'll call with directions and a time tomorrow morning." The female guard nodded while the male guard kept his eyes on Danny, not looking entirely pleased.

"Yes, Sir. OK, Danny, come on."
As they were about to leave, the director said, "Give him back his camcorder but keep the tape," making her nod, then gesture to the exit, standing aside. Sighing a little the teenager headed in the indicated direction, both security guards accompanying him.

His mom was going to go nuts.

By the time he reached the door he was puzzling once more about how he couldn't remember what the woman who had caught him looked or sounded like. It was very weird.

Akane watched the two guards and the worried-looking teenager leave, the door closing behind them, then glanced at Adrian, who shook his head with a small sigh. "There's such a thing as being too enthusiastic," the director mumbled.

She grinned at him. "That was very nice of you," Adrian shrugged slightly.

"He's not a bad kid really, just doesn't think things through very well. He could have killed himself if he'd fallen off that catwalk, he's not like you guys. He wouldn't have bounced."

"Splashed, perhaps," Aiko chuckled. He gave her a look.

"Thanks for that mental image, Aiko," he said.

She bowed slightly. "You're welcome."

Shaking his head in amusement, the man looked around the room. Most of the people in it were getting on with their jobs now the small drama was over. "Well, hopefully he'll keep to his side of the deal. Let's get on with it. It'll take about half an hour to change the set for the bar fight scene, so grab some coffee and we'll go over the notes while that's going on."

Shortly they were sitting in a side room off the main studio, sounds of heavy objects being moved coming faintly through the wall, reading the paperwork carefully. "It looks quite straightforward," Akane said, putting her coffee cup down on the table and picking up her clipboard again.

"Everything is in one room, we just fight for a while with swords, while the other stunt guys are running around breaking things."

"Pretty much," Adrian grinned. "You two are the main action focus, the extras are for background fill in, but you'll interact with them when they go past. Try not to remove any heads." Shampoo giggled, reading her notes intently.

"Stunt swords too blunt to remove heads unless hit very hard," she said, looking up and smiling at him for a moment. "Just break neck."

"Well, try not to do that either," he chuckled. "If you kill or maim too many co-workers you get a bad reputation."

"Then no one wants to work with you," Matt snickered, making Aiko, who was sitting beside him also reading the notes with interest, laugh for a moment.

"If you want to improvise some things, like you did with that wastebasket, go ahead, but keep it fairly simple for the moment," Adrian noted, scribbling something on one of the pages he was reading. "It looks pretty good but we're mainly interested in the sword-fight."

"OK," Akane nodded. Flipping the rest of the pages back into place after finishing going through the notes, she put the clipboard down and rolled her head a few times, producing some clicking
sounds from her neck. He winced a little at the sound, making her smile.

After another twenty minutes of discussion they had a decent idea of what they needed to do. Matt brought the other stunt people in for the last half of the discussion so everyone knew what was expected of them. Eventually, Jim opened the door and leaned in, saying, "The set is ready, guys."

"Thanks, Jim," Adrian replied, standing up and stretching for a moment. "Let's go and do a dry run, then." He checked his watch. "If we can get this wrapped up in under an hour we can get a quick late lunch then get out to the airfield and still be pretty much on schedule."

Everyone trooped out into the cavernous main room, looking at the set, which had undergone a remarkable transformation. The open-plan office was now a western saloon bar, all the interior details having changed completely. "Wow," she muttered. "That's impressive."

"Our set guys are very good and have a lot of practice," Adrian smiled. "It's all modular and can be moved around pretty fast. This isn't nearly as detailed as a real set for a movie would be so it doesn't take long to rearrange things." Walking over they inspected the set. "All right, since all the action is in this one room, the camera doesn't need to do any tracking shots. We'll start with you all on your marks. Akane, you're there, Shampoo, that's yours." He pointed. "Gunnar, over there with Bill, Zach and Nunzio over by the piano, Jeff at the top of the stairs, Remy behind the bar." Everyone nodded, heading to their spots. "We won't bother with different costumes for this sequence, we don't have time right now and it's not important." He watched critically as everyone took their spots.

"OK, Nunzio, move a little to the left. Good. Akane, try about two feet back." Stepping back he studied the scene for a moment. "Yes. That looks better."

Matt chuckled. "We don't need to get it perfect, Adrian, this isn't going in a movie."

The director looked insulted. "I take pride in my work, you know that, Matt," he said archly. Matt grinned, as did everyone else. "OK, fine, perhaps I'm getting carried away." Shaking his head in amusement the director's attention went back to the set. "That looks good. Mark those new positions." Several grips moved the tape marks on the floor while the others left the set for the moment. "Aaron, your turn," he added.

Shortly the arms master had everyone outfitted with swords and a couple of clubs. The various stunt people were practising their moves while Aiko and Aaron watched critically, the magical girl commenting in a low voice to the compact man, who was looking interested. Akane watched for a moment then hefted her own sword, a traditional katana, with a very dull edge.

"I'd get in trouble if Mousse ever saw me with a sword like this," Shampoo noted, smiling, as she ran her thumb down the blunt edge. "He'd say it was unworthy of an Amazon."

Akane snickered. "I can imagine. He likes his blades razor sharp." She took a couple of practice swings with the stunt sword, raising her eyebrows a little. "It's pretty well balanced, though." Shampoo nodded, watching, then spun her own sword a few times one-handed.

"Not too bad. For a fake, anyway."

Adrian came over from where he'd been talking to the camera crew, smiling as he watched the Chinese woman go through a few kata moves with the blade. "You guys all ready?"

"Yes, Adrian," Akane replied, smiling.

"Great. OK, let's get back in the set and do a dry run." They both nodded, walking back to the fake
bar and resuming their positions. The stunt extras did the same, looking eager to get to work. "All right, you all know what to do." He waited for a few seconds while they all took up their starting stances. "Practice scene two, take one. Action!"

He stopped and started the scene half a dozen times, calling instructions, until he was happy with it. "That looked pretty good. Let's do it again, with those changes." They did the run twice more until he looked satisfied. "Great. OK, take a five minute break then we'll run it for real." Matt handed him a bottle of water and a sandwich. "Thanks."

Once everyone had done anything they needed to do, they retook their positions. He studied the scene, nodded, and made the appropriate calls. Shortly the large room echoed to the sounds of a major fight, swords clashing together and wood and glass shattering. Akane grinned slightly, deflecting a blow from her friend, who ducked as a bottle flew through where her head had been, shattering in a spray of tiny shards as the youngest Tendo woman sliced it out of the air with her weapon. Back-flipping a couple of times as Shampoo followed, swinging at her much more slowly that she was capable of, although a damn sight faster than most people could do, she dived under the piano, then popped up behind it, flicking another bottle that was sitting on top of it into Shampoo's face with the tip of her sword.

The Amazon didn't flinch, jumping up onto the piano and slicing down at her, while Nunzio, who was in the process of hitting Zach with a breakaway chair, threw the remains at her. She kicked them right back at him, then chased Akane, who had seized the opportunity afforded by her momentary inattention to scramble up the wall onto the stairs, across the room when the Japanese woman leaped down over her head.

Gunnar ducked Akane's blade when she swung at him on the way, deflecting it with his own and making sparks fly, then rolled sideways as Remy, still behind the bar, started throwing shot glasses at him. Shampoo intercepted and redirected a couple of them as she passed through the target zone, one of them flying through a window and shattering a pane of glass, the other one catching him squarely between the eyes and bouncing off. He dropped behind the bar as she kept going.

The fight went on for another couple of minutes, ending up with only Akane and Shampoo standing, facing each other more or less where they'd started, swords raised for one last blow, when Adrian called "Cut!" They lowered their weapons then began laughing.

"That was fun," the Tendo woman grinned.

"It looked impressive, definitely," Adrian chuckled as he joined them.

"It hurts, though," Remy groaned as he pulled himself up from behind the bar, rubbing a red mark on his forehead. Shampoo blushed a little.

"Sorry. Hit glass too hard."

"Don't worry about it," he said, smiling a little. "I've had worse. Good shot as well."

"Thanks," she grinned.

"Let's see the playback, but I think that went as well as we could hope for," Adrian told them, waving them over to the VT desk. Everyone gathered around the monitor while the operator prodded a few buttons. When the playback was finished, he smiled. "Very good. A little editing and an audio track and that will look excellent. Well done everyone and thanks."

The Tendo sister smiled, pleased at the way the first two stunts had gone. "That really was a lot of
"fun," she said happily.

"Very much," Shampoo agreed.

"I'm glad you two enjoyed yourselves," Adrian smiled, waving to Anton as he left the sound stage with Jim and Aaron. "Go and have a quick shower, change, and we'll go over to the cafeteria."

"OK," she replied, heading off with Shampoo, thinking over what they'd done so far and finding it good.

"So far I'm very pleased and impressed," Anton stated as he wiped his mouth, leaning back in his seat. He looked over to the next table where Aiko, Akane, and Shampoo were talking to Matt, the stunt coordinator explaining something with broad gestures and the three women listening intently, looking amused. "Those girls are remarkable. Leaving aside the martial arts they both seem to have a good feel for what works in front of a camera."

"I'd have to agree," Adrian replied, sipping a glass of apple juice. "Do you think Mitch will be pleased?"

"Oh, definitely, yes," the producer grinned. "He's going to love it. Jennifer should be happy as well, or at least stop worrying after all of this. We've got plenty of footage showing those two are practically indestructible under normal circumstances so she shouldn't be worried about signing off on any more stunts."

"She did finally give in on the car chase," Jim snickered. "Although it took a lot of talking even after the demonstration."

"I wish I'd had a camera in the firing range," Aaron noted, watching the three women, who were now all grinning as Matt apparently reached the punchline of whatever anecdote he was telling them about. "Watching them catch bullets was the most incredible thing I've ever seen in my life."

"It might be an idea not to mention that to her until we're done," Adrian giggled, remembering the look on the armourer's face after Aiko's little joke. He shook his head a little. "She might blow a fuse and start shouting at you for letting them stand in front of a live weapon."

Aaron shrugged, smiling a little. "Possibly. But yes, you might be right. No need to get her too excited just yet."

"I have to figure out how to use that in a movie," the director mused. "And Shampoo's... special talent."

"The cat thing?" Aaron looked thoughtful while Anton gained a slightly puzzled expression.

"Cat thing?" he asked curiously. Adrian exchanged a glance with the armourer, then explained, making the producer stare at him for some time rather incredulously.

"It's true," he said, spreading his hands. "All four of us saw it, not to mention Richard Harrison, his wife, and his daughter. She turns into a cat."

"Holy crap," Anton breathed. "You didn't mention that in your original interview notes."

"Would you have believed it without seeing all this other stuff?" Adrian asked. After a moment, the other man sighed, shaking his head.
"No, probably not. But I definitely want to see it at some point."

"She's probably up for it, but let's get all the other work out of the way first," Adrian replied. After a moment he grinned broadly. "In fact, we can leave it as a surprise for Mitch and Jennifer."

Anton gave him a look then started snickering. "Oh, yes, please let's do that. I want to see his face."

"You coming to Richard's barbecue tonight?" Adrian asked him. "He told me to invite anyone who wanted to come from the studio."

"I'd like that, thanks," the other man said, nodding. He checked his watch. "Half past two. We're going to have to hustle to get out to the airfield and still have light, we've only got about five hours of light left and it'll take half that to get there."

Adrian grinned. "I know a short cut," he chuckled. He pointed at Aiko, who looked over at him, making him think she had heard everything. The brunette winked. "She figured out an interesting new trick this morning."

"Ah." Anton looked thoughtful. "Even the equipment?"

"Yep. An entire truck in one shot. It's pretty damned impressive."

"I can imagine." The producer looked amused. "I'm looking forward to this."

"So, how do you want to do this?" Adrian asked Aiko, who was standing beside him looking at the three trucks parked outside the vehicle depot, one of which Greg and a couple of his people were just loading the last of the equipment into. All told there were a couple of dozen people to transport. Just as she was about to answer, Karen hurried around the corner of the building, looking apologetic.

"Sorry, guys, got caught up in a last minute meeting which just wouldn't stop," she explained, looking around at the various goings-on. "What's the plan. I got the message to come here rather than head out to the airfield."

"Aiko is helping us make up for lost time by teleporting the trucks to the site," Adrian explained. The stunt woman's eyes widened.

"Good grief. You can do that?" she asked incredulously. Aiko nodded, smiling.

"I worked it out this morning. I'll have to do them one at a time but it's not too hard." She looked at Adrian. "To answer your question, I was thinking about it and to stop anyone throwing up, I think it would be best if I quickly put them out for a moment then do the first jump with them unconscious." She grinned at his expression. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hit anyone on the head or anything like that. I know a neat trick Yori taught us which will let me render someone unconscious very quickly and safely then wake them up in the same way. No side effects at all."

"Hmm. This I have to see," the director mused. As she chuckled he stepped forward, calling for attention. Everyone stopped what they were doing and listened. After explaining the plans, and explaining again for people who didn't believe it which required a demonstration by Aiko who teleported across the yard and back, he quickly sorted everyone out into three groups, one for each vehicle.

"OK." Aiko approached the first group, mostly the camera crew, and looked them over. "I think if everyone sits down it would be best. You won't feel anything, and it will only take a few seconds. 
Once you've gone through it once you won't feel sick again, but the first time can be pretty unpleasant for most people." She waited as the group of eight people exchanged glances then slowly sat. Adrian watched with interest as she got them to lean forward with their arms on their knees, then quickly prodded each one in the back in a couple of places, a faint blue glow showing where her fingers touched. Each person slumped, clearly out of it. Satisfied, she stood in the middle of the group and they all vanished with a flash, reappearing on the other side of the car park momentarily before blinking out and ending up back where they'd started from.

Going around them all in turn once more the brunette quickly revived everyone, the men and women looking startled, then standing. "Everyone feel OK?" she asked, receiving several nods and affirmative answers. "All right, next group," she called, turning to the small audience, many of whom were staring in shock. Shortly everyone who was going had undergone the quick procedure. "All done," she reported to Adrian with a smile.

"Great." He looked around at the stunt people, grips, camera crew, and various other staff, who were wandering around looking startled. "Let's get on with it and see what happens."

Shortly he was sitting in the wide passenger seat of the camera truck, Aiko next to him, the crew in the back and Greg in the driver's position. "Ready?" the magical girl asked. He nodded. She concentrated momentarily, saying as an aside, "This takes a lot more effort at the moment so I have to think about it," then the world jumped, the buildings vanishing and being replaced instantly by a view of the control tower.

"Amazing," he breathed in wonder. She grinned at him, pleased at the comment. Opening the door he climbed down, the others following.

"I'll go and get the other trucks," she said. "Keep that area over there clear for them, all right?" She indicated a position fifty feet away.

"Got it." With a flash she vanished. Thirty seconds later the second vehicle blinked into existence, Karen leaning out of the window and grinning widely.

"This is unbelievable," the red-head shouted happily, jumping out and looking very impressed. Akane and Shampoo climbed out behind her, followed by Aiko, who immediately disappeared again. Walking over the stunt woman shook her head, looking around in wonder. "Just like that, a two and a half hour trip in less than a second."

"It's damned impressive and very useful," he chuckled. They watched as the last truck appeared next to the second one. "Saved a lot of time and effort."

Shortly everyone was running around setting things up. All three motorcycles were unloaded and prepared, Shampoo and Akane were dressed in their leather suits, which included a brand new one for the latter, and Greg's team were in the process of preparing one of the two stunt cars.

"Let's get the pickup out again and do the same runs as yesterday, with Shampoo on the bike," Adrian suggested having checked with the driving instructor. "Greg says the car will be ready in about forty-five minutes. Once we have you," he nodded to the Amazon, who was listening with her arms folded, her helmet dangling from one hand, "up to speed on your part of the stunt, we can start practising it properly with the right vehicle."

"OK, Adrian," she replied, smiling a little in anticipation.

"Akane, are you all right with jumping out of the pickup again like yesterday?" The Tendo woman nodded.
"Yes, I think I've got that part well in hand now." She looked down at herself, grimacing.
"Hopefully. I was getting a little tired of bouncing down the runway last night."

"Yes, I can imagine," he grinned, shaking his head a little, while Karen and Shampoo snickered.
"Hopefully you can refrain from such things today."

Giving him a look with a raised eyebrow, she laughed briefly, then headed over to the pickup which Matt was setting up, Karen and Shampoo going over to the bikes. Watching for a moment, he smiled then walked over to Greg. "They're ready to practice Shampoo's part," he said to the other man, who looked up watching one of the mechanics adjust the steering of the car, then over at the pickup which Akane was standing in the back of. "You want to drive, or is Matt going to do it?"

"Let Matt do it," Greg replied. "I want to be sure the car is right. He's a good driver and knows what needs to be done."

"OK. When we're sure Shampoo is ready, I want to practice the run fairly slowly to start with, up to the point the car goes up on two wheels, so everyone knows their cues. Once that part is done, I'd like a few runs just practising the launch manoeuvre. Does that sound reasonable?"

Greg thought, then nodded. "Yes. Akane will get that part fast but it's best to practice. When they're sure they know that part, we go over the bail-out move separately. I also want to make sure both of them know how the car flip and pyro effects will happen so they can be ready for it."

"Sounds good. All right, then, I'll be in the camera truck. See you in a while." The stunt driver waved absently as he went back to inspecting the work on the car, making Adrian smile slightly then head off to the relevant vehicle.

"Eeep!" Shampoo squeaked, the bike wobbling frantically as Akane landed on it, making Matt grin at the sound coming over the radio. He looked in the mirror to see her waver around for a moment then bring things back under control, accelerating past him with a whoop, her long hair flapping in the wind with Akane holding on to her firmly.

"You OK, Shampoo?" Karen's voice said, making him glance at the other woman who was riding about eighty feet to the left in a position that let her keep an eye on proceedings and give advice where necessary, something that had happened a number of times in the last twenty-five minutes. There was a couple of words of Mandarin that sounded happy, along with a laugh of triumph, then the Chinese girl replied, "Yes, think so. Nearly lost control when Akane landed but was able to get back. Need to try again to perfect move."

"That's fine," he said into the boom mic he had in front of his mouth, pressing the transmit button on the steering wheel. "I'll turn around and head back."

"OK, Matt," she replied, Akane and Karen saying much the same thing. He slowed and did a U-turn, both bikes tilting and doing the same before rocketing away. Watching them with a smile he looked to his right. Jim grinned back.

"They seem to be both enjoying themselves and learning fast," the other man said, pleased.

"Very much so in both cases," he agreed. "Sixty miles an hour is impressive. It's faster than we really need but it seems to be a good mark to aim for."

Jim made some notes on a clipboard, then put it back on the dashboard. "This is going to work out
well, I can feel it," he commented. "It's going to look amazing on film."

"That's my thought too." Reaching the start point, Matt turned the truck again to point back down the runway. The camera truck pulled up on the other side of the long tarmac strip and turned around as well, Adrian sitting in the back with Anton and the camera operators, both of them watching with interest and a smile. "He's enjoying this as well," the stunt coordinator added, motioning to the director with his thumb. Jim chuckled.

"He's been a lot happier since all this started, you know," the man mused. "The new pills helped a lot as well, of course, but meeting those girls seems to have given him a whole new outlook on all this work. He was starting to look kind of tired during the last shoot right up to the point that Yori and her friends turned up."

"Adrian is having the time of his life," Matt agreed, laughing for a moment. "Even getting mixed up in a bank robbery of all things only about six hours ago couldn't make him stop smiling." He shook his head in wonder. "Most people would be getting very drunk about now to forget being held hostage, he's basically just shrugged, said he wasn't worried because Akane and Shampoo were there, then got on with life."

"It's pretty impressive," Jim agreed. The vehicle rocked slightly as Akane climbed back into the back of it, having been talking to Karen and Shampoo for a minute or two, then put her helmet back on. She bent down to the open rear window.

"We're ready to go, Matt," the blue-haired woman said. He nodded, stuck his arm out the window and put his thumb up, then waited for the camera truck to start rolling before moving off, accelerating carefully to sixty again. Shampoo brought her bike into position beside the pickup.

"Am ready," her voice crackled over the radio. Keeping an eye on the young woman in the back of the truck via the rear-view mirror, he watched with half his attention as she got into position herself then jumped. Once more the truck rocked a little, and in the wing mirror he could see her make a perfect landing on the back of the bike, which this time didn't waver at all. Shampoo opened the throttle and shot past as soon as her friend was in place, making the whole thing look very simple.

"Damn." He whistled a little. "Not bad at all."

"Perfect, guys," Karen said, sounding pleased. "We should do it again a couple of times to be sure, but I think you're ready for the car."

In fact they made three more runs, but in the end everyone was satisfied that both young women had the basics of the stunt down to an art. The final one was so smooth it was as if Akane merely casually strolled off the bed of the pickup and the bike just collected her on the way past. Finally pulling off the runway back at the end where everyone else who wasn't busy was watching, Matt turned the engine off then got out, Jim following as they joined everyone else.

"Well, I'm impressed," he announced.

"I think we all are," Aaron laughed, having watched the practice runs from a comfortable folding chair on the side of the runway.

"Just that stunt is good enough to make Mitch very happy," Anton remarked, looking very pleased. "You two made it look easy."

"Wait until you see yesterday's runs before you say that," Karen snickered. Akane sighed a little, but was still smiling.
"Not my finest hour, certainly," she said, rubbing one elbow in memory of a certain amount of pain.

"It was very funny, though," Karen giggled, throwing her arm around the somewhat shorter woman's shoulders. "Come on, you know it was."

"All right, it was funny. I'm sure Dad and Nabiki will kill themselves laughing," the Tendo woman grinned. Karen stepped back, grinning widely herself.

"Well, the next part may well take us right back to you bouncing and swearing a lot," she said happily. Akane's smile diminished as she looked at the car Greg was driving towards them.

"Don't say that, please," she pleaded.

When he pulled up in the vehicle the stunt driver hopped out, then looked at her for a moment, before smiling with a nod. "Very good work, Akane." She nodded with an expression of slight pride.

"Thank you, Greg."

"OK, now for the hard part," he added, looking slightly amused when she groaned and glanced at Shampoo for a moment. "This car is one of the two we're going to use for the real stunt, we've got another one as a spare, but hopefully we can do it without needing that one." He waved her over to the open door. "It's outfitted with dual steering and controls, so we can practice with me driving and you climbing out the window. Once we have that part worked out you can drive and climb out, which is going to be a very good trick if you can pull it off." He grinned as she looked worried. "The throttle can be operated from the dash, using this lever, so you can set it and forget about it. In theory, once we're up on two wheels, it should be possible to keep it there by reaching in and just steering, but to be honest I wouldn't want to try it myself."

"That's what you're here for," Adrian put in helpfully, making her look at him with narrowed eyes, resulting in a chuckle.

"Indeed," she replied, sniffling haughtily and flipping her hair, before grinning back.

"Do you think you can do it?" the director asked more seriously. She studied the car, then Greg, who shrugged, before looking at Aiko and Shampoo who were standing to the side watching with the rest. Both the other woman gave encouraging smiles.

"I don't know," she replied with a look of honest mild worry, "but I'm certainly going to try."

"That's all we can ask," he assured her.

"Let's get on with it, then," Karen suggested, looking up at the sun for a second, then blinking. "We've only got about two and a half hours of good light left."

Everyone looked at her, then Akane, who swallowed slightly, then nodded firmly. "Yes. Come on, let's see what happens."

Fifteen minutes later she was slightly regretting her words, her hands flexing on the steering wheel while she waited for the signal that everything was ready. A glance to the right at Greg was met with an encouraging look. "Relax, you'll do it," he said quietly. "It may take a few practice runs but after what I've seen in the last few days I'm sure you can pull it off."
"Thanks, Greg," she replied, smiling a little, then started the engine.

"I'll drive the first run, you pay attention and make a note of your mark. As soon as we're up on two wheels, you go out the window, OK?" She nodded as she listened, watching Shampoo line up to the side, Karen a few metres further away and back, with the camera truck on the other side of the runway. Matt and Jim were in the pickup again, behind the camera truck. Returning her attention to straight ahead she waited for the word.

"OK, everything is a go," Adrian's voice came over the radio. "Cameras rolling. Action." The entire convoy began rolling, accelerating to a steady forty miles an hour then holding there.

"Five seconds," Greg warned, not looking away from the ramp in the distance that would heave the vehicle up onto two wheels. Akane braced herself. As they reached the correct point the left wheels hit the curved metal structure, the entire car jolting up to a forty-five degree angle, then balancing there neatly as Greg expertly moved the wheel in small increments. She looked at him for a moment, then released her harness when he nodded. Grabbing the window frame she slithered easily out, crouching on the side of the tilted car with the wind blowing in her face.

Shampoo moved the bike to a distance of about a metre, glancing up at her occasionally to make sure she was lined up properly. "Hold it there," the Tendo woman said when she was satisfied. The Amazon nodded slightly, keeping her position very well. With a deep breath, Akane stood almost erect, one hand on the window frame, then jumped, hoping everything would go smoothly.

Seconds later she was holding onto her friend as the Chinese girl opened the throttle and roared off, both of them yelling in glee. The actual jump was almost an anticlimax, it was barely harder than stepping off the back of the pickup, although the drop was about a metre further. Everything had lined up perfectly.

"Fantastic, both of you," Adrian's extremely satisfied voice came to them, sounding gleeful. "Absolutely fantastic. OK, let's reset and redo it a couple of times to be sure you've got that part locked in and we can move to the next routine."

"All right," she replied, a wide grin on her face. Shampoo slowed and did a U turn, speeding up when she was headed back. Karen pulled alongside them and gave them an upturned thumb. "That was incredible, Akane," the biker said, sounding very pleased. "It looked amazing."

"Thanks, Karen." Akane grinned again. "I hope I can do it and drive at the same time. That's the hard part."

"We won't know until we try, will we?" the redhead chuckled.

When they arrived back at the start, the Tendo sister jumped off the bike, then headed for the car. Aaron, who had been watching through binoculars, looked approving as she waved to him. Climbing back into the driver's side, she looked at Greg, who was smirking at her. "That looked easy enough," he commented wryly.

"Would you like to try?" she invited with a smirk. He grinned widely, shaking his head.

"Of course not. I'm not insane."

Giggling, she started the car again, then waited for everyone else to get into position.

"Now she's just showing off," Adrian chuckled, watching the young woman standing casually on
the side of the tilted car with her arms crossed, leaning a little into the wind, looking like she was out for a stroll on the deck of a sailing ship or something similar. Beside him, Anton shook his head in wondering respect.

"The reflexes and balance that girl must have are astounding," the producer said with awe in his voice. They watched as Shampoo brought the bike in far closer than strictly necessary, almost directly under the blue-haired woman, who stepped sideways and dropped neatly onto the seat, grabbing her friend's waist as soon as she was in position, the bike hurtling off into the distance as the car fell back onto all four wheels, then slowed and turned. Both the camera operators beside them panned their equipment to follow the bike even as the camera truck began slowing.

"Every time I watch either of them do anything like that I want to pinch myself," Adrian laughed, holding on as the vehicle made a wide turn and headed back. "It was the luckiest day of my life from a professional standpoint when Jim brought his friends to the studio over the holidays. I can hardly believe how well it's all going."

"I know what you mean," the other man replied, nodding soberly. "I've been lying in bed three nights running for hours thinking of all the things those two alone will let us do just with the stunt work. If they really can act as well, the sky's the limit." They exchanged a glance, then grinned. "It's certainly going to be fun seeing what happens, hmm?"

"Damn right," the director snorted with amusement. "Mitch is going to be pleased, I think."

"He won't have any trouble with the board, that much I am sure," Anton nodded. "Once he sees this, he won't have any choice. Anyone gives him trouble they're going to be looking for a new job."

"Good to know." Adrian smiled, then climbed out of the vehicle as it stopped, the producer following moments later. "Very impressive, Akane," he said as he reached the two girls, who had both taken their helmets off and were laughing about something with Karen. "Perhaps a little too... 'Titanic'... for this particular role, but I'll admit it looked good."

She giggled, looking at him. "Sorry, I couldn't resist," the young woman said. "I'll be good now."

"I think we can safely say that you have the jumping from the car onto the bike operation down to an art." He studied her, then looked over at Greg, who was leaning on the car a few feet away listening with a small smile. "You think you're ready to combine it with driving as well?"

"I think so," she replied thoughtfully, glancing at the driving instructor, who nodded slightly.

"Great. OK, then, let's move onto that now. At this rate we should have time left for practising the other parts of the stunt some more before we pack up, they're simple by comparison." He looked around for a moment, then nodded in satisfaction. "Very good indeed. Considering how the day started, it's coming together really well." He watched as she climbed back into the car with Greg, then headed back to the camera truck, a satisfied smile on his lips.

"Gahh!" Akane frantically moved the wheel she was holding in her extended right arm a little, taking a deep breath when the car stabilised again. It had nearly gone over too far, wobbling a little then settling back. She looked down into the vehicle to see Greg with his hands poised over the secondary steering system ready to take over as he'd had to several times so far. "I've got it, I think," she said slightly more comprehensibly.

"OK," he replied, keeping his hands ready but away from the wheel. Returning her attention to the
task in hand she risked a quick look in the other direction, to see Shampoo looking up at her from the bike a metre and a half away and down.

"Ready?" she asked.

Shampoo nodded. "I'm set. On five, then."

"Five... Four..." They both counted down, then on 'One' she let go of the wheel, slightly straightened from the crouch that allowed her to reach the wheel, and in one move leapt sideways away from the vehicle. Greg immediately took over, the car weaving slightly, as she landed on the back seat of the bike, moving more sideways than she'd intended and as a result forcing Shampoo to compensate wildly, the bike wobbling around manically for a moment before she got it back under control.

"Holy..." There was some muttering in Mandarin which made the Tendo sister grin a little, she was slowly learning the language and for some reason had ended up with a fairly good knowledge of obscenities in it. Shampoo was quite creative. "That was close," her friend said when she was riding straight again.

"Too much sideways push," she agreed. "Sorry. It's a bit awkward from that position, I probably need to stand up more first then jump."

"Let's try again," Shampoo replied, slowing and heading back once again. "We'll get it. This isn't any harder than roof hopping, really."

Akane snickered. "It's a little harder, there aren't nearly as many cars involved when we're running around Nerima on the roofs."

Shampoo giggled. "It would be a bit weird if there were."

Just over half an hour and five attempts later, the blue-haired Tendo woman raised one fist in triumph as the bike screamed away from the car, the jump finally having gone exactly as planned. "Perfect!" Adrian exulted over the radio link. "Totally perfect. Do that tomorrow and I couldn't ask for anything better."

"We should do it once more to make sure it wasn't a fluke, but I think we're done," Karen added, sounding equally pleased. "That was really amazing, both of you."

"Thanks, Karen," both Akane and Shampoo said simultaneously, then laughed a little, as they turned around yet again and headed back.

Shampoo listened with interest as Greg explained the way the stunt car worked to Akane, Matt and Aiko standing beside her also listening. "The nitrogen cannon here in the back will fire a piston at the ground when it's triggered by the switch in the front fender," he said, indicating a large cylinder where the rear seat should be normally. It was connected to a pair of high pressure gas bottles and some complex pipework and electronics. "It's running at nearly three thousand pounds per square inch, which with the size of the piston gives it about twenty tons of force. The piston comes out fast enough to flip the car end over end without any trouble." He gave the other woman a serious look. "I'd suggest you don't want to be in the car at that point."

Akane smiled, nodding. "I think we'll have parted company by then."

"Hopefully," he responded with amusement. "You sure would in a hurry when it fires, trust me."

Pointing at a pair of covered switches on the dashboard surrounded in black and yellow tape, with
'DANGER' written in large, unfriendly letters next to them, he added, "The one on the left arms the cannon, the one on the right arms the pyro effects. It's all sequenced so that as soon as the car hits the parked truck the piston will fire, one charge will go off underneath at the same time producing a nice big fireball, and a smaller one will blow the trunk lid about half a second later and push out all the fake money. It should look pretty impressive."

"So, the end result is that the car looks like it hits the truck, explodes, flips over it in a ball of fire, and sprays burning cash all over the road," Matt summed up. "Not very realistic, of course, in real life there would just be a loud crunch and a wrecked car, with perhaps a small fire eventually, but that's not as photogenic." He grinned as they looked at him, Aiko snickering a little.

"The public has certain expectations," Greg sighed, shaking his head. Akane smiled at his expression.

"What safety interlocks do you have?" Aiko asked curiously, making him glance at her. "To make sure it doesn't go off at the wrong time, I mean. I have to admit I was half expecting some sort of remote trigger."

"We have a remote abort, of course, so we can shut it down in case of an accident, but we tend to work on the basis that the person in the car is in the best place to know if it's safe to fire," Matt said, turning to her, while Shampoo and Akane listened with interest. "There are switches in the seats to stop it firing if someone is in the car, it will only fully arm if it's on four wheels, so it can't go while it's up on its side, and you have to manually arm it in the first place. It should be fairly fool-proof." He shrugged as Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances. "We haven't blown anybody up by accident yet," he finished, smiling slightly. "Our pyro guys know what they're doing."

"OK," the brunette replied, nodding. "That sounds pretty reasonable."

"The charges are fairly small," Greg put in. "And outside the vehicle. If they went off accidentally you'd probably be OK, more or less, assuming you got out of the thing fast enough. The fire effects are the dangerous part but they burn out in a few seconds. And the nitrogen cannon, of course, you'd pull about ten G when it fired."

"So, basically, don't arm it until you're ready," Akane suggested. He nodded slowly.

"Best not to."

"I'll try to remember that," she assured him seriously, before smiling a little.

"Good idea."

Exchanging small grins, they looked over with the others when Adrian called to them, waving them over to the camera truck. Joining him they watched the replay of the last run on the high def monitor with interest. When it was finished he turned around smiling widely. "That was amazingly good, everyone. The last three were damn near perfect even without the special effects. We can probably cut some of this footage in to the final sequence for the close-ups, which will make it look even better." He stepped back, looking around at the gathered people. "I for one am very pleased. Anyone got any issues or questions about anything?"

"I'd like to go over the other driving sequences again tomorrow just to be sure everything is correct," Greg said, looking at Akane for a moment, who nodded silently, "but on the whole I think we're about as ready as we'll ever be."

"Shampoo is very good and I don't have anything else to teach her at the moment," Karen added
proudly. "As far as I'm concerned it should all work out well."

The Amazon felt pleased, smiling at the tall red-head, who grinned at her in response. Adrian looked at them both, a satisfied look on his face. "Great. Anton and I are extremely happy and I'm certain Mitch will be as well when he sees the end result. Thanks for all the hard work. Let's pack up and get back to LA in that case."

Shampoo and Akane helped Karen park the bikes in one of the garages while Greg and Matt did the same with the cars, then everyone pitched in to pack up the rest of the equipment, most of it going back into the trucks. Half an hour later, as the sun was beginning to set, everyone was in the three vehicles they'd arrived in. Aiko teleported the first one back, then reappeared and hopped into the truck Shampoo and Akane were in, smiling at them.

"Looking forward to the barbecue?" she asked, casually making the entire vehicle blink out of existence and reappear fifty miles away instantly, which made the Chinese woman smile to herself.

"Yes, I am," she replied, nodding. Akane also nodded, as they disembarked, watching the people from the first truck begin unloading the film and video tapes. "I'm really pretty hungry, actually. It's been a lot of work but a lot of fun."

"I had a wonderful time," Akane grinned. "I can hardly wait for tomorrow."

"You looked very good standing on that car," Aiko snickered. "See you in a minute." She disappeared as they turned away and walked over to Adrian, who was talking to the lead cameraman, waiting until he'd finished and the other man was heading off with a stack of media.

"That went really well," the director said in satisfaction, looking at them. "Much better than even I was expecting and I had high hopes. You two are amazing."

"Thanks, Adrian," Shampoo replied, laughing slightly for a second or two. "Like to hear that."

"You'll give us an inflated sense of self-importance talking like that," the Tendo sister grinned. He smiled back.

"That's pretty normal in Hollywood, trust me." Chuckling, he turned to watch as the final vehicle appeared next to their one, Aiko hopping out followed by Matt. The stunt coordinator joined them along with the brunette, both of them smiling a little at something Aiko had said. Glancing at his watch, he said, "We've got about an hour and a half before we need to be at Richard's house. I'm going to go home and shower and change. I'll meet you guys there."

Matt nodded. "Sounds good. Aaron and his wife are coming with me, I'll drop him off and do the same thing, then pick them up again on the way." Jim joined them just in time to hear the last few words.

"I'll take Anton," he stated indicating the producer who was talking to Karen next to one of the trucks. "Karen is going to make her own way over, she said."

"What about Greg?" Akane asked.

"He's going to be a little late, he needs to meet a friend first for some reason, but he's coming around nine or so, he told me." Adrian waved to the stunt driver, who waved back as he went into the garage block and disappeared.

"I think that's everyone, then," Matt mused. "Sounds good. OK, then, I'll see you all later." He
walked off, nodding to Anton and Karen, before collecting Aaron and heading back to the car park.

"In that case, I'll take these two to their hotel then go home and change," Aiko put in, smiling. "I need to check in and make sure nothing weird is going on, or at least nothing unusually weird." The remaining people looked amused. "See you later, guys." Shampoo and Akane joined her, waved to Karen, then stepped a couple of metres away before the magical girl did her thing.

"Thanks for all the help, Aiko," Akane said sincerely, smiling at her friend. "This morning as well as all the stunt stuff. I can't say strongly enough how grateful we both are for everything you've done for us." Shampoo, beside her, nodded vigorously.

"It's no problem, Akane, as I've said before. It's been a lot of fun," the brunette smiled back. "I'll be back in about an hour or so, OK?"

"All right," she responded, turning her head a little as Aiko teleported out. "Well, I for one definitely need a shower," she laughed, plucking at her clothes, which were dusty and limp.

"Me too," Shampoo agreed, sniffing herself and making a face. They headed for the elevators, nodding to the reception desk person who was someone they hadn't seen before, the woman smiling at them in return. Once the youngest Tendo sister was in her room, she undressed and jumped in the shower, turning it up as hot as she could stand, leaning against the wall and letting the water run over her back for a couple of minutes while she went over the day's excitement in her mind with a small smile on her face. 'I still can't believe all this,' she thought to herself, shaking her head a little, then picking up a bottle of shampoo and squirting some into her hand.

'Considering how weird everything went this morning, I'm amazed how well it turned out in the end.' Quickly washing her hair, she shook it out, then rinsed it, before washing everything else. A few minutes later she was wrapped in a towel brushing her hair in front of the mirror and wondering how well everything would work out tomorrow. Deciding that the only sensible thing to do was wait and see, she quickly brushed her teeth, then dried herself and got dressed. Sitting on the bed, she thought for a moment, did a quick time conversion, then pulled out her phone and hit the appropriate speed dial.

"Hi, Auntie," she said when the older woman answered.

"Hello, Akane," the voice of the Saotome matriarch came to her, sounding pleased. "How nice to hear from you. How is everything going? Soun told me you called the other day and seemed to be enjoying yourself."

"It's going really well," she replied with a slight laugh. "A little weirdly in places but overall it's a huge amount of fun, Shampoo and I have met some really nice people, learned a lot of interesting things, and so far everyone seems extremely pleased with us."

"I'm very glad to hear that," the distant voice said. "We were concerned you two might run into difficulties but also fairly sure you'd overcome them. I'm proud of you, what you're doing can't be easy."

"It's a bit strange in some cases, although I have to say that it's helping my English a lot speaking it all the time. I'm slightly surprised how well that part is going, actually, I didn't realise how fluent I really am in it. At home I don't get a lot of practice." Akane smiled a little to herself.

Nodoka chuckled. "I'm sure you're very good, Akane. I know Nabiki is remarkably fluent but she's always been good with languages from what your father has told me. He also said you were slower
to learn at first but had ended up with very good marks in school for English, so I'm certain you'll have no problems there. Poor Shampoo, on the other hand..."

Akane giggled a little. "She's getting a lot better, but no, she's not gifted with languages. It took her years to learn Japanese properly. Mind you, she's very good now. She just learns languages slowly. She understands English pretty well, though, just can't speak it as well as she'd like."

"Has that caused any problems?" Nodoka sounded concerned.

"No, everyone here is fine with it," the Tendo sister replied. "She'll get better with time. Aiko is sure of that, so is Shampoo."

"Good." The older woman seemed pleased. "Elder Cologne stopped by last night for tea and we were discussing you girls. She was very pleased with what Soun told her about your conversation. I think she's proud of you both. The Elder has developed a considerable liking for you, you know."

"I sort of worked it out," Akane admitted, lying back on the bed and smiling at the ceiling. "After our past history it surprised me a little but I'm glad it's worked out the way it has. They're good friends now, even Mousse, and Shampoo is probably one of my best friends."

"The young lady is a good person despite her recent past," Nodoka agreed, giggling slightly. "Oh, hold on, Nabiki just came in. Would you like to talk to her?"

"Yes, please, Auntie," Akane said. There was a pause, a muffled conversation, then her older sister's voice came on the line.

"Hi, Akane. How's it going?"

"Pretty well, 'Biki," she laughed. "Some weird parts, of course, but on the whole, better than either of us expected."

"I didn't doubt it, sis," Nabiki replied with a grin in her voice. "You're not bad when you concentrate and you clean up well."

"Oh, thanks a lot," the younger sister replied archly. "I love you too."

"I know you do." Nabiki sounded confidently sure, making her sister snicker. "So, what's happened today? You were going to be doing some sort of fight scene, weren't you?"

"Yes, two of them, actually. And some driving practice." Akane grinned to herself. "The bank robbery was a bonus."

There was a pause, then her sister requested, "I think that part might need explanation, sis. " She sounded intrigued. Akane laughed, then gave a fairly brief explanation, at the end of which Nabiki snickered. The youngest sister could picture the older one's face, making her smile.

"Only you two, Akane. Have breakfast, get mixed up in a violent bank robbery, foil it without even trying very hard, then go to work." She snickered again. "You're taking Nerima-level strangeness with you. I pity LA."

"It should have known what it was getting into when it invited us over," Akane said mildly, sitting up again. Nabiki laughed for a moment.

"So, you're going to get interviewed by this FBI guy at a barbecue later?" she asked curiously. "That sounds a little different."
"Richard seemed to think it was a good idea and the agent went along with it. I think it was due to Ms Aoyama more than anything else," Akane replied. She shivered for a moment. "I'm grateful, but that woman still scares the crap out of me." Momentarily pausing and looking around nervously, she was rather relieved when nothing happened, aside from her sister laughing again.

"The tone of your voice when you say her name is amazing," Nabiki told her, making her frown slightly. "It's worse than Dad or Genma talking about Happosai."

"If you ever meet her you'll understand," Akane growled, making her sister break down in giggles.

"Probably not going to happen, but I look forward to it," the other young woman replied after a few seconds. "Anyway, I'm going to have to go, I need to help Auntie with something. You're going to be back for the party?"

"Of course, I wouldn't miss it," Akane assured her. "We'll have a full day tomorrow but I think we'll come home as soon as we're finished, so we should be back sometime on Friday afternoon, Tokyo time."

"Good. You'll need an early night to recover from the time zone difference, I would expect, then you can help set things up on Saturday morning." There was a muffled voice in the background and a few noises that made her think Nabiki was talking to at least two people. "Sorry, I'm really going to have to go now, Ukyo just turned up and wants a word. Give my best to Shampoo and Aiko, OK? And good luck with everything tomorrow."

"Thanks, 'Biki. See you soon, say hi to Dad and Ukyo."

"I'll make sure to," her sister replied. "Bye."

Smiling, she disconnected, then put the phone in her pocket and stood up. Checking her watch she saw it was about ten minutes before the point Aiko had said she'd be back, so she made sure she had all her things in her pockets then left the room. Tapping on the door to Shampoo's room, she smiled when the other woman opened it, towelling her long hair at the same time. "Not ready yet?" she teased as she entered. "I've been ready for half an hour."

"Hair this long takes a while to dry, you know," Shampoo grinned. "You modern girls with boy's haircuts have it easy."

Shaking her head in amusement Akane watched while her friend finished up, then they both left and headed for the elevators, finding Aiko standing in the lobby reading a brochure. The brunette looked up as the doors to the elevator opened, turning around as if she'd known they were there, which she undoubtedly had, Akane thought. "Hi, guys. All ready to go?" the other woman asked, putting the brochure back into the holder on the desk it had come from.

"Yes," Shampoo replied, nodding. "I'm looking forward to it."

They walked outside and disappeared, the reflected flash making the receptionist look up, slightly puzzled, before shrugging and going back to tapping on the computer keyboard she was sitting in front of.

"Hello, Sophie, Joan, how are you both?" Harrison asked as he opened the door to admit the latest arrivals. Both women entered, a tall dark-haired man behind them who was looking around with interest.

"We're both fine, Richard, thanks for asking," the elder Simpson woman replied, smiling. "This is
my husband David."

"Hi," David added, holding out his hand, which Harrison shook with a smile. "I've heard a lot about you from Sophie, it's nice to finally meet you. Call me Dave."

"Richard. Nice to meet you, Dave. Come on in, we're all out in the back yard." He led the way through the house and out the back, smiling at his wife who came over with their daughter, Serena quickly greeting her friend then the pair of them wandering off immediately. "This is my wife Emily, and that was our own daughter Serena. Dear, this is Dave, Sophie's father."

Emily shook hands with the man, then smiled at Joan, the two women exchanging greetings. "It's very nice to meet you finally, Dave," she said, leading them over to the table which was covered with food. "Please, help yourselves. There are plenty of burgers and hot dogs, some chicken is nearly ready, and there's salad and vegetarian things as well. Would either of you like a beer or a soft drink?"

"I'll have a beer, thanks," Dave smiled. His wife accepted one as well, both of them taking a drink, then looking around. "This is a very nice place, Richard," he added after a moment. Harrison followed his eyes then smiled a little.

"We like it. We've been here about ten years so far, it's a nice place to live." They watched as Serena picked up her compound bow and showed something on it to Sophie, who seemed fascinated.

"Ah, the famous bow." The Simpson husband grinned. "We've heard a lot about it from Sophie. And about various arrows being found all over the neighbourhood."

Harrison half snickered, half groaned, while Emily giggled a bit. "Don't remind me. It doesn't happen very often now, but our dear daughter did go through a period of losing the things all over the place. You wouldn't believe how far they go if she misses."

"I think I may be glad that Sophie is sticking to beating people up with martial arts for the moment," the other man laughed. "It causes less long range damage."

The sound of the doorbell going off again made Harrison put his own beer down and answer it, finding Akane, Shampoo, and Aiko waiting outside. As he admitted them, two cars drew up and parked on the street, Aaron, Naomi, and Matt getting out of one of them, Agent Tinnin climbing out of the other. All of them headed towards him. "Hi, girls," Harrison said, smiling at the first arrivals. "Go on through, you know the way."

"OK, Richard," Akane nodded, leading her friends into the house. He waited for the FBI man, who was in the lead, to reach him, shaking hands as soon as he was in range.

"Hello, Agent, it's nice to see you again. Come on in, if you want to wait in the living room just there on the left I'll be with you in a second."

"Hello, Lieutenant. Thank you." The FBI agent moved past him, following the directions, as Harrison greeted the other three, then closed the door.

"Go on through and help yourselves to beer," he told them, "I'll be out in a few minutes."

"OK, Richard," Matt replied, he and the other pair disappearing into the back of the house. Harrison headed into the living room to find the FBI man looking at a few pictures on the wall.

"How are your investigations coming along so far?" he asked, waving the other man to a seat.
Tinnin sat, sighing slightly.

"Slowly," he admitted. "Very slowly. There are some extremely weird things going on with this case which are making me kind of worried. It's going to take a lot of effort to dig it all out, and I have a nasty feeling that I'm not going to like what I find, but..." He shrugged. "It needs to be done."

"Are you any further forward in working out who they're working for?"

Tinnin shook his head. "No, we've had no luck on that point at all yet. There are a lot of people asking a lot of questions, it's going up the chain of command pretty fast, but so far we don't have any actual answers, just more questions. I assume you haven't got anywhere with questioning Captain Mitchells and his friends?"

"Nope. They've clammed up completely. Bouchard broke immediately but he doesn't have any information we didn't already have from Ms Aoyama. It was all arranged online, he never met any of them before today, and he's basically just a greedy idiot." Harrison waved a hand dismissively, leaning back in his seat and sighing. "We won't get anything useful from him I'm afraid."

"Damn. Not surprising, but it would have been useful." The other man looked thoughtful for a few seconds. "I'd still like to interview him."

"Help yourself. He's not going anywhere for the moment."

"I'll make arrangements to come over tomorrow afternoon." Tinnin looked satisfied. "We'll want to interview the others as well. We might have more luck than you." He grinned at Harrison's narrow look. "We're more badass than the LAPD."

"You think?" the other man replied, smiling after a moment. "I'll be interested to see that, then. I'll take notes." They both looked amused, then Harrison stood. "I'll go and get our interview subjects. Who do you want to start with?"

"Akane Tendo, I think, then her friend," Tinnin replied, pulling a small tape recorder out of his pocket. "We can leave Mr Stewart for last."

"OK. Back in a minute. Oh, do you want a coffee or something as well?"

The FBI man nodded. "Coffee would be great, thanks. Black, two sugars."

"OK." Harrison headed out to the back yard, looking around for a moment, then walking over to where Akane was talking to his wife, both of them smiling. "Hi, Akane. If you're ready, Agent Tinnin and I would like to debrief you about today. It shouldn't take long."

She looked slightly nervous, but nodded. "All right, Richard." Attracting Shampoo's attention from where she was listening to Jim explain something about his hot sauce, judging by the bottle of it he was waving around, she motioned to Harrison then the house. The Amazon nodded, waving back. Following him inside, she took a seat in the living room across from the FBI agent, Harrison quickly retrieving a tray with three coffee cups, sugar, and a pot of the brown liquid. Shortly he was sitting down as well, his own recorder running, listening to the young woman go over the abortive robbery from her own point of view.

"Then, at the end, he just fainted," she finally summed up, smiling a little. "I'm not sure why." Tinnin and Harrison exchanged glances, both of them amused and impressed.

"I have some idea," the FBI man noted. She grinned at the tone of his voice. "Thank you, Akane.
That clears up a few questions." He sipped his second cup of coffee, looking over the notes he'd made during her short recitation. "What was your impression of the suspects, overall?"

"Well, Captain Mitchells stuck me as a rather unpleasant man who didn't have any real interest in other people's lives," she replied, frowning a little in thought. "But he also seemed to be in most respects very competent in his own way. He seemed to be the brains behind the whole thing and definitely the leader. The Russian, Yefremov, he was a very cold and deliberate man, again not someone who would care if he had to kill anyone who got in the way. That Harris guy was different, still dangerous but not with the military training that the other two obviously had. I'd say both of them had some fairly serious martial arts training as well as the firearms experience, where he was more of a gun and knife man. A killer, definitely, but not a soldier." Harrison exchanged a glance with Tinnin, impressed by her summation, which was spot on.

"The younger man, Soria, he was just a murderer, an amateur, really. Some sort of assassin I'd guess but not very competent past that." She shrugged. "That's all I could get from watching them and listening to them talk. Soria was in over his head, he didn't have the discipline that the others had, if he didn't have that shotgun he'd have been no real threat. But he wasn't worried about using it."

"I see. Interesting, and well observed." Tinnin nodded slowly, making some notes. "It fits with what we know about them very well. If the hostages hadn't been present, only you and Miss Pu, what would you have done?" He looked up with a curious expression.

She laughed a little, shaking her head. "We'd probably have jumped them as soon as they came in, to be honest, we worked out pretty fast what was going on. But we couldn't risk it because of all the people. A stray shot could have killed one of the customers. We were basically trying to keep them concentrating on us until the police did something that would either end it or give us the opportunity to do so, but Ms Aoyama turning up was the critical thing."

"Ah. Yes, I understand. Well, Miss Tendo, I must say both I and the FBI are grateful for all the help you provided during this whole event, especially as you were the one to raise the alarm in the first place. I suspect that without you and your friend we would currently be investigating a successful robbery and multiple murder case, quite possibly without any real clues. These people seem to be annoyingly competent and could quite likely have escaped if they hadn't been detected so fast." Tinnin looked satisfied, closing his notebook. "That's all the questions I have for you at the moment. If we need more testimony I assume you're OK with providing it?"

"Of course," the young woman said, smiling. "Just let me know. Richard has my contact details and Aiko has already said she'd happy to bring me back, or bring you over to meet us at home, if that needs to be done. I hope you manage to prosecute these people, they need to be punished for what they did." She looked irritated and sad. "Those poor guards didn't deserve what happened to them."

"No, they didn't," he agreed, turning off his recorder. "Lieutenant, do you have any more questions?"

"I think I have everything I need for the moment," Harrison replied. He turned his own equipment off, smiling at the Tendo woman. "Thanks, Akane. I'll let you know if we need anything more but I don't think we will. Well done, and I hope your job interview wasn't too badly affected by this morning."

She grinned for a moment. "No, it all turned out to be fine, actually. The delay was annoying but one way or another everything worked out and Adrian is very pleased."
"Good. Could you ask Shampoo to come in, then, please?" She stood, nodding.

"Of course." Leaving the room both men watched her go.

"Wow. I have to admit, Lieutenant, I wouldn't want that girl pissed at me," Tinnin commented in a low voice when he was sure she was out of earshot. "I understand now why you weren't worried this morning. She's absolutely lethal."

"Oh, yes, that she is," he snickered. "Luckily she's no killer, she could have wiped all four of them out by herself but I don't think she would without incredible provocation. Shampoo, on the other hand, she'd snap your neck without a second thought if it was the only way." He shook his head slowly. "I've read up on these Chinese Amazons, they are not people to take lightly, believe me. They tend to keep to themselves but if you ever managed to get them angry enough to take action, it would be... well, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near, definitely."

"That fits with my own research," Tinnin nodded, looking slightly worried. "Hopefully, Miss Pu can reserve her more bloodthirsty urges for movie work rather than dealing with bank robbers."

Harrison chuckled, then looked up as the Amazon in question came into the living room, looking around with interest. "You want speak about bank?" she asked, sitting at his inviting wave.

"Indeed we do," he replied, smiling and turning his recorder back on.

Sophie watched and listened as Shampoo and Akane took turns explaining what they'd been doing for their practice stunt-work earlier today, sitting beside Serena, who was gaping at them open-mouthed, laughing with wonder occasionally. Glancing at her friend she grinned, then turned to look at her parents, who were also listening. That director guy, Adrian, was chuckling at Shampoo's wild gestures, looking contented and happy.

Biting into her burger she chewed thoughtfully, very glad she'd met Serena months back. It had turned into a deep friendship unlike anything she'd ever had before, making her wish she'd encountered the other girl years earlier. Her father reached past her for the ketchup, smiling at her as he picked the bottle up. "They seem interesting people," he muttered in a low voice to her as he put a little on his own burger then returned the bottle to its place.

"She's a magical girl, she does magic."

"Of course she does, dear," he said, smiling a little and patting her on the head with his free hand as he bit into his burger.

"Dad!" she snapped, smoothing her hair down and making him chuckle. "Stop it."

"You liked it when you were little," he laughed.
"I'm grown up now, it's undignified," the teenager haughtily sniffed, then ruined it by giggling.

"Of course it is." He gave her an affectionate look, then ruffled her hair again.

"Dad!"

Serena turned at her subdued yelp, grinning at her friend. She got up and came over, sitting beside the other girl, then pulled a handful of small rocks out of her pocket. "Hey, look at these," she said, displaying them proudly.

"They're rocks," Sophie said doubtfully after closely inspecting them, not sure why her friend was so pleased about the things. "I mean, some of them are pretty, but they're still rocks."

"This one is from Australia, near Uluru," Serena stated, picking up a bright red one with her other hand. "This is from a beach in Tasmania." That one was a zebra-striped black and white pebble.

"This came from a nickel mine in Canada, this one is from somewhere in the middle of Antarctica, this is from a volcano in Hawaii, and this one is from near a big lake in Africa."

Sophie and her father exchanged glances. "So they're from all over the world?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yep. Guess how I got them?" Serena had a smug look on her face.

"Mail order?" Sophie guessed. Her friend shook her head, grinning.

"Nope. I picked all of them up from the ground," she giggled. Pointing at Aiko, she added, "A couple of days ago when they all came over, Aiko teleported me to all those places. I've got some more inside as well." She laughed again as Sophie looked suitably impressed.

"Wow," the other girl replied slowly, looking at the collection with renewed respect. Her father studied the pile of unassuming stones as well, one eyebrow up a little and a tolerant smile on his face. He reached out and removed a small grey one, looking at it with interest.

"Where did this one come from?" he asked in a voice that suggested he didn't actually believe the story but was willing to play along.

"That one Aiko gave me, she said it was a piece of moon rock," Serena replied, frowning slightly. "It's not very interesting compared to most of these other ones, it's just a dull boring grey rock. I guess the moon isn't an interesting colour." She and Sophie looked up to where the nearly full moon was visible through a high level haze in the dark. "I mean, it just looks grey from here."

"It is mainly shades of grey," he replied absently, holding the pebble more in the illumination provided by one of the dozen or so garden lights on poles around the back yard, inspecting it closely. "There are a few colourful parts, the Apollo missions showed that, but it's mostly covered in pretty dark material, it only looks as bright as it is because of direct sunlight and no atmosphere to diffuse it." Rubbing the stone with his thumb, he sniffed it, both eyebrows going up thoughtfully. "That's... odd."

"What is, Dad?" Sophie asked curiously.

"I could swear this really is a piece of lunar breccia," he muttered, turning it in his hand for a moment, then handing it back to Serena. "It can't be, not fresh like that... Perhaps a lunar meteorite...?" His voice dropped to a mumble, making Sophie look at her friend and shrug. After a moment when he seemed lost in thought, something she was used to, she sighed slightly, smiled tolerantly, then went off with the other teenager to get Shampoo to show them something
"What on earth are you doing, Jim?" Emily asked curiously as she watched the man in question pull on some disposable gloves before removing a glass jar from a bag and putting it on the table with the rest of the food. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Taking precautions," he replied, carefully opening the lid while pointing the jar away from his face. When nothing happened he relaxed slightly, tilting the jar a little to look inside, then nodding. "Hey, Aiko!" he called, causing the magical girl who was currently talking to Tinnin the FBI agent to look over, then approach them with an expression of interest. "Try this," Jim said when she was close enough, holding out the jar with a dangerous smirk on his face.

She studied him, then inspected the jar. After a moment she stuck one finger in it, pulled it out, sniffed the orange goop on the end, then put it in her mouth. He winced a little and stepped back.

Emily watched with mild worry. Nothing much happened at first, the brunette licking her lips thoughtfully, until her eyes abruptly widened a few seconds later. "Wow," she whispered hoarsely as tears came to those eyes. She coughed a few times, then smiled. "That's great, Jim." Looking around the young woman found a burger, snagged the jar, then added a generous helping of the sauce to the food, replacing the top of the bun and biting in with a grin. Jim stared in shock as she chewed, her face going slightly red, then nodded happily. "Misaki and Yori will love it. Do you have any more?"

Mutely he indicated the bag which was next to the table, half a dozen jars of the same substance visible in it. He looked like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. She gave him a thumbs up before wandering off with her burger, still eating it happily. Emily watched her go then turned to the man who was still staring in shock. "Is it really that hot?" she asked, reaching for the jar which Aiko had put down on the table. He grabbed her wrist before it made contact.

"I really wouldn't, Emily," he warned. "It's unbelievably hot, I tried some and couldn't taste anything for six hours once the pain faded." Glancing at Aiko who was finishing off the burger with every sign of enjoyment, he shook his head in wondering respect. "Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable. Those girls must have cast titanium stomachs."

Giggling at his mildly disappointed expression, Emily asked, "You thought you'd made something she couldn't handle, didn't you?" He nodded, grinning.

"I had hopes. Oh well." His grin widened. "I'll just have to try harder. I wonder if I can get some pure capsaicin from somewhere...?" She left him mumbling to himself and taking notes, going into the house to look for a card and a marker so she could label the jar as "For Magical Girls Only".

The scream of pain from Greg about five minutes later showed the warning needed to be written in larger letters.

Wandering slowly around the brightly lit back yard, Adrian sipped his second beer, smiling to himself and nodding at various people. He stopped beside Emily and Richard, who were talking to Joan, Sophie's mother, next to the barbecue grill, the three people greeting him with their own smiles. "It sounds from what Akane was saying as if the day went very well after that unpleasant start," Emily said, offering him a plate of snacks, which he took a few of with a murmur of thanks.

"It did, actually," he replied, popping one of the little sausage rolls into his mouth and chewing appreciatively. Swallowing, he added, "Even better than we hoped for. Everyone involved had fun,
did their jobs very effectively, and we got some amazing footage. Mitch, the executive we're dealing with at the studio, will be extremely pleased."

"So you think those girls will get the job?" she asked, glancing at Akane and Shampoo, who were showing a few simple Judo throws to Serena and Sophie, with the latter's father watching while wearing the same slightly puzzled expression he'd had on for the last forty minutes or so. He followed her eyes, nodding.

"Oh, yes, definitely. I think it's in the bag. It's been a very likely thing since we saw that first demonstration, but the recent events sealed it as far as I'm concerned. It will probably take the board a few days to come to a final decision from what Anton has been saying but I don't think the outcome is in any doubt by this point." He grinned. "I'm really looking forward to working with them both. We'll probably be using them for real shoots sometime after Christmas, I'd think around February or so. There are a couple of movies in the pipeline that they'll be a good fit for."

"That's nice," she smiled. "I like them both and it sounds like they'd enjoy the job. Serena is very interested in seeing a stunt as well."

"Well, you're more than welcome to come along with her tomorrow," he told her. "I would have invited you today, but what with minor little irritations like idiots robbing banks and so forth it got sort of complicated." She laughed again, shaking her head, as Harrison rolled his eyes in annoyance.

"Tell me about it," the police officer muttered with a tone of disgust in his voice. "It's going to take weeks to sort all that out at the least." He sighed when his wife giggled yet again, looking at him with amusement.

"How are you doing after that ordeal, Adrian?" Joan asked, listening with interest and sounding sympathetic. "It must have been terrifying." He turned to her, thinking for a moment.

"Honestly, not too bad, really." He was almost surprised himself by his own words. "At the time, yes, it was scary, but..." He shrugged slightly, looking for the right words. "If Akane and Shampoo hadn't been there, I'd be getting very drunk by now, even assuming it had ended. But, oddly enough, knowing both those young women were in the bank made me sure everything was going to work out OK. I wasn't quite expecting the way it actually ended, I'll admit, but I was pretty certain nothing too serious would happen." He finished the last of the beer and tossed the empty bottle into a bin next to the grill with a clink. "They inspire confidence, once you've seen them at work. Their friends are even better at it, so all in all I wasn't too worried."

"Still, two people died, that must have been a shock," she said with a sad expression. He frowned, nodding.

"Yes, that part is terrible. There was nothing anyone could really do, though, it happened so quickly. By the time even those girls could have acted it was too late. I think they did the right thing, they could certainly have taken out those four robbers, but the collateral damage could have been very nasty. Keeping their heads, calling Richard, then attracting the attention of those idiots and keeping it away from the rest of us, that was all a clever and successful tactic that definitely saved lives." He glanced at Harrison for backup, the lieutenant nodding soberly.

"Adrian is right, Joan. Akane really did save the day. If it hadn't been for her quick thinking, and Shampoo's, we'd probably be looking for the suspects right now, and there could well have been more deaths. Those bastards weren't at all worried about shooting anyone who got in the way without a second thought. The girls are due a lot of thanks from everyone. I wouldn't be surprised if the bank gave them a reward as well."
"It's pretty amazing," Emily mused, watching as Shampoo balanced on her hands on Akane's head for some reason, both Sophie and Serena rolling around giggling at the sight. Agent Tinnin had joined the small group and was staring in shock. "They're so young, to be so good at what they do. Most people would have fallen to pieces in those circumstances."

"They're not most people," Adrian snickered. "Luckily."

He looked at Joan. "Do you want to come along tomorrow with Sophie as well?" he asked. "You're both welcome as well. It's a bit of a drive but I think you'd enjoy watching."

"I know Sophie is very interested," she smiled, "and I think I'd like to see it as well. Can I bring David?"

"Of course," he told her, poking through his pockets for a moment, then coming up with a couple of business cards and a pen. He wrote the address of the airfield on the back of them, then gave Joan and Emily one each. "Show that to the guard on the gate, he'll let you in. Just head towards the control tower and someone will meet you."

"There's no need for that, Adrian," Aiko's voice suddenly came from beside him, making him twitch violently, then sigh as she snickered. He cast the petite brunette an evil look, making the others all smile. She grinned at him unrepentantly. "I can pick them up and take them out to the airfield, it will save a lot of time."

"I wish you wouldn't do that," he growled. The magical girl smiled serenely back.

"I know," she giggled. Harrison made a noise that suggested he was suppressing a laugh of his own, making Emily poke him and frown lightly.

"Be nice, dear," she warned, as he nodded obediently.

"But seriously, I'm happy to do the transportation for you both," Aiko went on, turning her attention to Joan and Emily. "The first time is a bit rough, Joan, but I can do the same thing I did for Serena and Emily, just hop you around your yard a couple of times first. You'll feel a little unwell but it passes quickly." The elder Simpson woman looked slightly unsure, glancing at Emily, who nodded with a wry smile.

"'A little unwell' is something of an understatement, but Aiko is right, it doesn't last long." Emily looked both amused and like she was remembering something unpleasant, an interesting combination. "It's worth it, the experience is remarkable."

After a moment's thought, Joan nodded, smiling. "Thank you, then, Aiko, that's very generous of you."

"No problem," the brunette replied happily. "I like helping out and that's something I'm good at." She eyed up the grill, making Harrison grin and toss a few more burger patties on it.

"As is disposing of food in large quantities," he joked, causing her to grin.

"Indeed," she agreed. "Magical girls are generally like a plague of locusts, we eat a lot. But we're cute, which makes up for it." They all laughed as she smiled.

"How are Yori, Misaki, and Fumiko?" Harrison asked curiously. "The others all seemed in good spirits when we talked after the robbery."

Aiko picked up another bottle of beer and popped off the cap one-handed. "They're fine, Richard,"
she replied. "So is Azumi, you haven't met her yet, but I expect you will sooner or later. Things at home are fairly quiet at the moment, there have been quite a lot of little things going on but nothing major for a while, so we've all been taking the chance to relax a little. The last big problem worked out OK in the end and we're hoping that there won't be another one for some time." She sipped her beer as she exchanged a look with the policeman which suggested he had some idea of what she was talking about, Adrian noticed. Harrison nodded a little.

"I see." He busied himself making some more burgers for a moment, handing them out when he was done.

"I'm still amazed that you have so many strange things going on in Japan," Emily commented, accepting a burger with a smile to her husband, then turning back to the magical girl. "It all sounds very odd. Are there really demons of all things wandering around the place?" She looked both interested and worried.

Aiko giggled a little at her expression. "That's what they tend to get called, yes, Emily," she replied. "It's sort of traditional even though in many cases it's not particularly accurate. Visitors from other places do turn up a lot, though. Some of them are hostile, some are friendly, most of them are basically just tourists or traders these days." She took a seat on a nearby chair, the others moving to do the same and listening with interest.

"There's a lot of trade going back and forth between Minato and a number of other places at the moment, and it's steadily picking up. So much so that there are regular services bringing visitors in and taking them back, which took us by surprise when we first found out about it a while ago, but it's something we should have expected." The brunette smiled at their expressions. "We've been quite successful on bringing some of the more... excessive... girls around to being a little more thoughtful and selective about what they do and who they go after, which has had an interesting knock-on effect. It's mainly Yori's fault to be honest, she's always preferred to talk to the 'demons' rather than fight them wherever possible, which has recently really started to spread as an approach for various reasons."

She took a sip of her beer, looking around at the fascinated expressions of her small audience. "Word gets around, hostile visitors tend to stay away because they get stomped on hard, while the friendlies turn up more both because of exactly that, and because they themselves don't get shot at. There are still pretty regular problems, but overall it's getting a lot more interesting and safer at the same time." She shrugged, gesturing with the beer bottle. "It's going to be fun to see what happens over the next few years but I suspect it's also going to take a lot of people by surprise."

Adrian listened with a certain amount of incredulity, which was mirrored on the faces of most of the others. "So you're telling me that you have real aliens wandering around in Minato? Just walking around on the street buying things?"

She nodded with a grin. "Yep. A lot of them are disguised in various ways, especially outside our own area which is by far the most open to them, but they're around. Hundreds, probably, on a day to day basis." The girl smirked at his expression. "To be honest there have always been a fair number coming and going, mainly trading with various mages and other magic workers, but until recently it was a very hush-hush sort of thing mostly for self-defence. It's opened up a lot over the last couple of years."

"Why on earth doesn't that make the news in every country on the planet?" Emily wondered out loud, looking flabbergasted. "With all the people who come up with the most insane conspiracy stories and alien encounters on the flimsiest of evidence I'd have expected that this sort of thing would be front page news every day."
Aiko shrugged again, looking mildly puzzled. "I don't know. People in Japan are pretty well aware of it to one level or another, at least as a possibility, and have been so for a long time. In Tokyo specifically it's not that unusual even though most people outside Minato and possibly Nerima would tell you they're not entirely convinced, since most of them have never personally encountered someone from another world. But even then you probably wouldn't find many people who would say it was impossible. Other places in Japan don't run into it as much although it still happens sometimes. Minato is the hotbed of activity of course, that's where most of the girls are and a lot of the mages. Magic users are spread all over the world but you'd find them a lot more easily in Japan."

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't know why it isn't something people from other places really pay much attention to. We don't keep it a secret, not on purpose at any rate, and there certainly are other countries that are very well aware of it, and magic in general. The UK, for example, has a lot of mages, although they're mostly of a rather different type than ours. There are a lot in China as well, a number in Australia, a fair few in many European countries, things like that. They all have different systems and techniques, for various cultural reasons, but by and large they get on perfectly happily with the rest of the population even if they don't mix all that much. The weird part is how in the US specifically there aren't that many and the general population simply doesn't believe in magic for the most part." Taking another sip, she waved a hand at the people standing or sitting around in the back yard, talking to each other. "Most of the people I've met accept it even so, if you give them enough proof, but it still doesn't seem to get out into the wider world."

"It's actually really strange," Harrison put in thoughtfully. "I have to admit the first time I met Yori and Chou in Tokyo I didn't believe any of it, it sounded completely ridiculous." Everyone turned to listen to him, as Aiko fell silent. "Laura, my Canadian colleague, accepted it more or less immediately, in fact she had been mumbling something about magic being possible right back at the beginning of that particular case, which I just ignored." He smiled wryly as Aiko chuckled. "I owed her an apology, believe me. But, in the end, I was forced to agree that magic does exist, it can do incredible things, and that there are visitors from other places that could give you nightmares for life." He shivered slightly, as Adrian thought back to the story the police officer had told him some months ago, which had sounded horrific. "The government clearly knows about it as well, at least in part, because the whole thing about the other girls coming over during the holidays to help with the problem we had was backed by the State Department."

"But you certainly don't come across any stories about magic or aliens or whatever except in the made-up sections of the lower end tabloids or novels no one takes seriously," Emily said, looking intrigued.

Her husband nodded. "Very true. That's the part I find weird. I could almost believe some sort of cover-up except that I don't believe that it could be done so well. Never mind the fact that no one has ever told me not to talk about it, or any of the other people I know have run into this sort of thing recently. For example the FBI knows about Yori and the others, and to be honest are terrified of them, but it's not like they've gone around trying to hide it." Finishing his own burger, he swallowed the last bite as everyone thought about his words. "It's very odd but seems to be par for the course where magical things are concerned in this country. I've decided not to worry about it."

"It's something of a mystery," Aiko agreed, smiling a little but still looking mildly puzzled. "Magic is very peculiar even when you use it regularly and some of the side effects can make your brain ache. It's not impossible it's down to some weird spell, or it might just be a natural phenomenon. It might even be related to something specific about the general American mindset that causes them to dismiss it unless faced with absolute proof." She grinned as the others exchanged glances. "A cultural difference, again. But I don't know for sure one way or another. We may never know."
"Odd," Adrian summed up. She nodded.

"Quite." They exchanged an amused look.

"So, can you just hire a mage to do magic for you in the places they're known about?" Joan asked curiously.

Aiko smiled for a moment. "Pretty much, yes. I know a few at home who do a lot of commissioned work, while others are more in the research area for various reasons. They don't generally advertise, it's mostly word of mouth, but they tend to do pretty well for themselves. As far as I know it's much the same most places although they might be hard to track down in some cases. I suppose you could say they mainly deal with each other and visitors from more magically orientated worlds, but a lot of them are perfectly happy to accept commissions from anyone who's willing to pay them."

"How very strange," the elder Simpson woman mused. "I wonder if there are any in LA?"

"Definitely," Aiko replied, grinning at her when she looked surprised. "A couple of security mages, several warding experts, and at least one general purpose non-specialist, from what I know, although I've never met most of them. Yori knows one of the warding specialists, she used to live in Minato, but moved to LA about a year ago to do some work here for a couple of major clients. She's planning on going back to Japan when she's finished, apparently, she prefers it there even though she was born in Canada. Yori thinks very highly of her." Flipping her empty bottle into the bin she leaned back in her chair.

"What about magical criminals? Does that happen?" Joan looked somewhat worried.

"It's been known to but it's not that common," Aiko replied, frowning for a moment. "Interestingly enough, the magical world as a whole tends to come down on mages who get involved in serious crime like a ton of bricks. Mostly because they don't like the attention it would draw, which would be of the wrong type. In most places there isn't much regulation of magic workers, it tends to be a type of self-regulated system, although there are exceptions, and they like it that way. If you're a mage who, for example, started helping criminals to kidnap people or something serious like that, you would end up having a number of very powerful and extremely annoyed mages wanting a word. That would be... unpleasant." She grinned nastily. "By and large it works fairly well."

"What happens if it doesn't work?" Harrison asked curiously. She looked at him, then smirked in a way that made his blood run cold for a moment.

"Well, in the last few years, at least in Japan, Yori happens." She snickered. "There's never been a repeat offence after she's talked to them."

"Ah." He smiled at her in a way that made Adrian chuckle. "I can understand that, I think."

"Does she have any official power, then? I mean, as far as your government is concerned." Emily looked curious.

Aiko glanced at her, apparently thinking for a few seconds. Eventually she shrugged slightly. "I'm afraid I can't either confirm or deny that, Emily," she said quietly. Everyone thought about that for a few seconds.

"I see. Thank you, Aiko," the other woman said with a faint smile. The brunette returned it.

"You mentioned back after the last time Akane and Shampoo came over that you were going on holiday through a portal with the others," Harrison said, making Adrian stare at him, then Aiko.
The two women were doing the same. "Did that happen?"

"Oh, yes, it was a hell of a lot of fun," Aiko smiled widely as she looked at him. "We visited some very interesting places and met all sorts of people. I'd love to do it again at some point but we can't take too much time away from home at the moment."

"Did you get your trip into space?" he chuckled, obviously half-joking. Adrian and the other two stared even harder, then transferred their gapes to the brunette woman, who was grinning.

"Yep. That part was one of the highlights of the whole thing. It was enormous fun, everyone loved it."

"You... went into space?" the director choked, shocked more at that one statement than almost anything he'd heard so far. She nodded, looking very pleased.

"Yes, it was wonderful. We got a lift with a friend of Yori's, he's got quite a fleet of spacecraft. Nice guy, he owns an asteroid mining company on a world called K'nn Four. He took us out to an asteroid they're extracting minerals from for a few hours. Yori, Chou, and Azumi had been there before but still seemed to find it as much fun as the first time."

There was complete silence for some while as they all stared. She looked around, then added idly, "Fumiko is really wanting to get a small spacecraft but there are some practical issues with where to keep it," making Adrian's jaw drop.

"I..." He shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment, then tried again. "I find that probably one of the hardest things to believe so far," he managed to say after a little while. Aiko shrugged, looking amused, as he continued to stare at her.

"If you go to the right places there are all sorts of extremely high tech toys you can get hold of. K'nn Four is the centre of a network of very high tech, generally low magic worlds that are something like two centuries to perhaps a few centuries ahead of where we are in most fields. Very nice people, on the whole, lots of worlds trade with them and they have an enormous influence in technological and financial spheres all over the place. There are higher tech worlds, certainly, but they're way up there." She grinned as they exchanged glances.

"They have a very active space-based economy and some amazing antigravity drive systems which means that their spaceports are incredible. There are probably thousands of ships all around their main system at any one time, possibly tens of thousands. I haven't really looked into that yet. S'th'kx, Yori's friend, is a nice guy and has quite a few ships, he took us out in his personal mining scout. It's not enormous by comparison to a lot of them but it's not exactly small either. Around fifty metres across and maybe twenty-five metres tall, sort of conical. It looks a little like a much bigger version of the Apollo capsule but flatter. His species uses that overall design a lot." The brunette reached for another beer, popping it open and watching his face. "They're nothing like the ones you see in movies, mostly. Much more prosaic. But damn cool."

"Christ," he finally managed to whisper. "That's... that's just unbelievable."

"You should see their space suits," she giggled. "That's the most amazing part, it's completely SF novel territory and then some. Even in one of your movies people would probably consider it unrealistic."

"Why, are they some sort of high tech fabric or something like that?" Joan asked curiously, glancing at Adrian, who was in something of a trance by this point, with mild concern.
Aiko shook her head. "No, much better than that. It's all done with force fields." She looked around, seemed to consider the issue, then shrugged. "Look." Holding out her hand she showed them something she'd pulled out of nowhere. Adrian studied the curved piece of odd-looking black material which glinted in the subdued lighting as if it was some sort of ceramic. After a moment he transferred his curious gaze to her face, which was wearing a look of sly amusement.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I told you. A spacesuit." He stared at her, then glanced at Harrison, who was watching with interest, as were Joan and Emily.

"A spacesuit?"

"Yep."

"That little thing?"

"Oh, yes." She grinned at him, handing it to him when he held out his hand. He studied it for a while, running his fingers over the odd material, which actually felt more like polished metal and was much lighter than seemed plausible. "A genuine piece of alien technology, if you want to look at it from that viewpoint." The young woman smirked at his expression. "Mind you, from our point of view, we just went into a shop and bought a few of them, they're nothing special on K'nn Four. Not too pricey either although these are fairly basic models. You can get some really high end ones which cost an arm and a leg, but unless you're planning on spending a lot of time outside a ship or in a seriously hazardous environment there's not too much point in the extra money."

Not entirely sure he wasn't the butt of some weird magical girl practical joke, the director turned the thing over in his fingers again, then asked, "How does it work?"

Putting her beer down, she got up. "Stand up," she said, motioning him to hand it back. When he, somewhat nervously, did as requested, she moved around to a position where she could hold the device against his upper left arm. "You press here and slide like this to turn it on." Her finger made the appropriate motion and there was a weird visual effect that made him look around suspiciously and Joan raise a hand to her mouth with a slight gasp.

"So I'm wearing a spacesuit now, am I?" he asked sceptically.

She chuckled, nodding. "Indeed you are. Good for about three weeks of life support assuming you had enough water, down to absolute zero and up to a few hundred degrees centigrade, heavy radiation, most of the sorts of things you'd encounter in near space at a reasonable distance from a star. These ones are light duty, everyone wears something at least this good on a ship just in case something goes wrong, and of course you can wander around on the surface of an asteroid with one on for ages. It's good fun."

Experimentally poking one hand with the other he raised an eyebrow. "I can't feel anything and I can still touch myself."

"The force field is selective. It keeps air in, vacuum or toxic gasses out, and reflects dangerous radiation while staying at a sensible temperature, but a lot of other things will pass through it. That's convenient, it lets you keep things in your pockets." She was looking extremely amused by his expression and that of the other three who were watching and listening.

After a moment, she grinned. "You don't look like you believe me. Let me demonstrate."

Somewhat worried by her enthusiasm he stepped back a pace as she looked around, then picked up
an aerosol can of grill cleaner that Harrison had under the barbecue, quickly reading the label. "This should work," she said, looking pleased.

"That stuff is pretty nasty," Harrison warned while looking a little worried.

"I know, that's the point," she replied, levelling the can at the director, who nervously waited. "Don't worry, you won't feel a thing," the girl smirked, before depressing the nozzle. With a hiss the can disgorged a cloud of caustic solvents, which to everyone's surprise but hers simply stopped about four or five inches from his face, running down something invisible onto the ground, as if it had hit glass.

Adrian stared in disbelief. "Holy shit," he mumbled. He looked down at the puddle near his feet which was slightly bubbling as it etched the concrete patio tiles, making Harrison sigh slightly. Aiko glanced at the police officer with a guilty look.

"Oops. Sorry."

"Every time you lot turn up I need to do some sort of minor repair to my yard," Harrison commented, shaking his head but smiling a little. He returned to watching Adrian, who was still looking at the puddle.

"The suit processor knows that's toxic so it tunes the field to keep it out," she explained, putting the can down. "It does the same thing for anything that would injure you if it penetrated. It's no good against anything seriously quick like a bullet, it's not armour, but it would withstand quite a depth of water if necessary, smoke, fire if it's not too hot, poisonous gasses, all sorts of things other than a vacuum, which is the main use. They get used a lot on some worlds for fire fighters as well. On K'nn Four, not so much, they have better methods, and practically nothing there will burn in the first place."

"That's unbelievable," Emily commented wide-eyed.

"It's pretty good," Aiko agreed with a nod. "One of the more useful toys we picked up. We got one each and some spares plus the charging equipment. You never know when you might find yourself in space." She sat down again, looking amused.

"What else does it do?" Adrian asked in a wondering tone.

"Feel the outside surface of the generator," she instructed, which he did. "You feel several little bumps on it?"

"Yes."

"The top one is the power control. The next one down is the control to put it into standby. Just press it once to activate that function." He followed instructions, noticing the same slight ripple across his face. "It will automatically reactivate if conditions demand it, or you can turn it on manually with the same control," she told him. When he prodded the device he found it was sticking to his arm firmly, showing no signs of wanting to fall off. "It'll stay put under more or less any normal circumstances." She watched as he played with it, turning it on and off a few times.

"What does the last switch do?" he asked curiously.

"Try it," the brunette invited with a look that suggested something interesting would happen. After a moment he did so, then yelped.

"Fuck me," he breathed, staring at the translucent display that was now floating in front of him.
Everyone else was staring in shock.

"Good, isn't it?" Aiko sounded very amused. He nodded dumbly, working out that the thing was tracking what he was looking at as various icons became highlighted when his gaze stopped on them for a second or so. Weirdly, it somehow worked out when he was looking at the icon as distinct from past it, so he could look at Harrison's face and the part of the display that was in front of it did nothing. "It's voice activated, you can tell it what to do and you can get help from the bottom right icon if you say 'instructions'. 'Pause' and 'resume' will do the obvious. There are quite a few other instructions it understands as well."

Adrian played with the device for a few minutes, lost in his own world of wonder, feeling like he'd stepped into one of his own movies. When he finally turned it off and looked up he found his audience had swelled to include pretty much everyone at the party, most of whom were watching in astonishment. The expression on the face of Joan's husband David was particularly funny, he looked like someone who had seen heaven then been told he could look but not touch.

"This thing is... unbelievable," he said quietly, deactivating it, then as Aiko gestured, performing the push and slide manoeuvre that turned it off completely. It dropped into his hand obediently and he handed it back.

"As I said, cool toys. No magic required, just incredibly high tech that we're a long way behind at the moment." She flipped the suit generator in her hand, staring at it thoughtfully for a few seconds, before looking around at the others. "Eventually I expect some of this sort of thing will be imported to our world. There are trade treaties and regulations that prevent a lot of high tech past a certain point being sold to an 'unaligned world' which we're classified as except to specific authorised individuals for various reasons, but friends of mine are working on it right now."

"I assume you and your friends fall under the specific individual category?" Harrison asked knowingly. She gave him a small, wry smile.

"You could put it like that, yes."

Adrian looked sideways at David, who was standing beside him, staring at the device Aiko was holding. He could almost feel the questions the scientist had, making him smile internally. The director suddenly wondered why the young woman was being so open about things that seemed so strange even in her terms, developing a small suspicion that it might be a deliberate ploy to begin acclimating people to the changes that were certainly going to come sooner or later based on what she'd been saying. He looked at her for a moment, meeting her eyes, and was rewarded with a very faint smile of a type which suggested that she was quite aware of the direction of his thoughts and that those thoughts weren't entirely wrong. He nodded a little, making her smile widen, before she turned to answer a question from Sophie, who looked fascinated. Leaning back in his seat he began thinking of possibilities such technology could open up in his industry.

It seemed as if knowing various magical girls and incredible martial artists might bring opportunities far past those he'd already seen.

"I'm going to have to leave now, Richard, but thank you for the food and drink," Agent Tinnin said, shaking Harrison's hand with a smile. "I'll be in touch as soon as we have anything more to share and I'll make sure you're kept in the loop on the case."

"Thanks, I'll do the same, Mark," Harrison replied with a nod. "Hopefully we can get some useful information out of those idiots with some more questioning. They're staying quiet at the moment but we can probably break them eventually."
"If you run into difficulties, call me, we have some very good interrogators," Tinnin chuckled. "To be honest I'd like a crack at them myself but we're happy to allow you to try first. We're gathering background information right now, Ms Aoyama's info is leading us down all sorts of odd rabbit holes." He sighed slightly. "This is going to go on for months, I can feel it."

Harrison led the way back through the house to the front door, opening it and allowing the FBI agent to step out onto the front walkway. Tinnin looked around, then turned back. "I'm still very interested to find out what their exit strategy was," he said seriously. "The former Lieutenant Webb was much too confident that they could escape even in the face of a combined LAPD and FBI force of that size, which worries me. A lot. It implies either some serious high-up help, a lot of reinforcements, or most worrying, something we haven't thought of. I don't like any of those options one little bit."

"No, it's certainly something that we need to get to the bottom of," the police officer replied slowly, thinking. "I'd agree, up to the point Ms Aoyama popped his balloon he was looking very smug. Much too smug even with the machine gun in the truck to make me happy." He shrugged, sighing. "I'll make that part of the investigation a top priority."

"As will we. If you need anything, any help we can provide, let me know." Tinnin shook hands with him, then turned away and made his way to his car, while Harrison watched. As the FBI agent drove off he closed the door, returning to the back yard while pondering the conversation.

David Simpson was a very puzzled man at the moment. His daughter had told him on a number of occasions by phone call, email, and face to face on the unfortunately rare times he had been at home in the last few months about the 'magical girls' her new friend Serena knew, and she herself had met a couple of times although not under that description at the time. He'd put most of what she said down as well-meant hyperbole, as it was blatantly obvious magic didn't exist. He was more willing to believe that these young women were exceptionally gifted martial artists as he was well aware that Japan tended to produce people with significant skills in such matters, as did many Far East cultures, but even there some of the things he'd been told seemed somewhat far-fetched. The fact that his own wife had backed up some of the stories was a bit peculiar, but she swore blind that she'd seen some remarkable things the first time she'd visited the Harrison house for a barbecue, things that seemed... magical. He wasn't sure quite how to explain all that as Joan was an intelligent and generally clear-thinking woman who was most unlikely to make up stories of that nature.

All in all it was rather odd.

He'd decided in the end to reserve judgement until he actually saw some of these phenomena for himself, assuming such a day ever rolled around. Now, much to his surprise, it looked very much like today was that day. The sight of the director Adrian Stewart, who seemed like a decent and interesting person, walking around with a number of translucent displays hanging in space in front of him and with the weirdest expression he'd ever seen on his face had made him stare, then think very hard. He'd only caught some of the explanation that the petite brunette had given, having come in half way through the experience, but it sounded very much as if she'd said it was all the result of an 'alien spacesuit' which on the face of it was absurd.

That said, he couldn't think how the effect could have been produced using any technology he was currently aware of, which was making him very curious and slightly worried. Coupled with the small rock which Serena Harrison had shown him and his daughter, which was still bothering him, he was beginning to suspect he'd need to adjust his world view to one degree or another fairly soon.
"It hits everyone like that to begin with," an amused voice came from beside him, making him twitch and look to the side, to see the same petite brunette grinning at him. She'd approached without any warning she was there while he was sitting and thinking, staring off into the middle distance, a half-drunk beer in his hand.

"I'm sorry?" he said when he'd recovered from his momentary startlement. The young woman, Aiko, he remembered from what Sophie had said, smiled again.

"We tend to have that effect on people in general and Americans in particular," she replied, holding out her hand, which he shook after a second or two. "I'm Aiko, as Sophie has mentioned, I think. Professional Magical Girl and unofficial studio transportation expert." She looked amused as he stared, then slowly took a drink from his beer bottle. "Sophie mentioned you're a scientist? On the Lunar Prospector probe team, I heard."

He nodded, still inspecting her. "Yes, I've been involved with that project since its beginning. The last few months were kind of complicated so I was running around all over the place because of it. West coast, East coast, Australia, you name it. But the mission was a wild success so it was all worth it."

"That was the mapping of the moon, right?" she asked. "Looking for water, measuring the magnetic fields, that sort of thing."

"Yes." Dave inspected her curiously. "An interest of yours, then, space exploration?"

Aiko grinned again. "You might say that, yes. I find the whole concept fascinating. Recently I've been reading up on the state of the art for space travel and things like that, it's very interesting."

"I see." He finished his beer, putting the bottle down and deciding not to have another, three over the course of the evening was enough. "So what does being a magical girl entail, then? And how does it involve, um, 'alien spacesuits'?" He made the little finger quotes at the description, making her snicker.

"Ah, you heard my explanation."

"Some of it. I'm not sure I heard it right, though." He looked at her while she studied him thoughtfully in turn. After a few seconds she produced the small device that Adrian had been toying with earlier, showing it to him. He stared at her for a long moment, trying to work out where she'd pulled it from, then turned his attention to the thing in her hand.

"It's real, trust me. They work very well indeed." She handed it to him, watching with mild amusement as he examined it closely, rubbing it with his thumb, then experimentally scraping his nail over it.

"What's it made of?" he wondered out loud, holding it up to the light coming from the house behind them. The thing was matt black, too light for most metals even if it was hollow, and too heavy for many plastics. "Not titanium or aluminum, although it looks a bit like anodised aluminum." He tapped it against his beer bottle and listened to the sound, which was reminiscent of a ceramic of some sort.

"A type of cerametal alloy," she said, smiling when he looked up for a moment, frowning. "Sort of a hybrid metallic ceramic. Very tough and strong, light, and apparently quite cheap. It lasts almost forever from what I'm told. The stuff is harder than diamond as well."

"I've never heard of anything like that," he admitted slowly, intrigued.
"That doesn't surprise me," the brunette laughed. "It's not local."

"Alien, you claim?" He was still sceptical. She nodded, grinning.

"Back home people would mainly say it was made by demons, but that's just what most people call the inhabitants of other worlds. Sometimes it fits, sometimes it doesn't. The people who made that," she indicated the device with one finger, "are more accurately called aliens, I think, and they're actually very nice people as well. Very high tech indeed. All sorts of cool toys are pretty much commonplace where that comes from."

Dave stared, listening as the young woman matter-of-factly destroyed much of what he'd believed for most of his professional life, complete with proof, then decided he needed another beer after all. Or two.

"Thanks for the food, Richard," Akane smiled, looking around the back garden and seeing most of the guests had either left or were heading out. Harrison smiled back, his arm around his wife, both of them looking pleased and somewhat sleepy. It was nearly midnight and everyone left was definitely beginning to flag, except for Aiko who looked like she could go on all night. The brunette was near the barbecue talking quietly to Shampoo and Serena, with Karen listening from a couple of metres away and snacking on the last of the potato chips.

"You're welcome, Akane, as always. It was nice having you guys over. A good way to unwind after a long day."

"It was a bit excessive in parts," she giggled, nodding. "It certainly started off slightly oddly."

"That's one way to put it," he replied wryly. Glancing over to the side, he looked at Sophie, who was half asleep leaning on her father, who in turn was staring up at the moon with a somewhat peculiar expression on his face. "I think poor Dave might have had a weirder day than most of us, though," he added. "He's been looking kind of shocked since Aiko had a long talk with him."

"He'll get used to it," Akane commented, then grinned as the policeman began chuckling manically. Emily poked him hard in the ribs, sighing.

"Probably," Harrison mumbled, still snickering. They all turned as Matt, Aaron, and Naomi approached, the arms master looking slightly inebriated and in a very good mood, leaning slightly on his wife who appeared mildly amused and simultaneously exasperated.

"We're going now," Matt stated, holding out his hand and shaking Harrison's. "Great party. We'll have to do one at my place sometime, OK?"

"That would be nice, thanks, Matt," Harrison replied, smiling a little. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Good luck tomorrow with your work."

"Thanks, Richard," the other man replied. Aaron nodded to them all without saying anything then followed his colleague into the house, Naomi propping him up and waving at them having also said goodbye, the front door opening and closing moments later. The sound of a car starting then driving off followed.

"I'm going to get Serena and head inside," Emily told her husband, yawning widely in the process. "It was very nice to see you again, Akane. I'm looking forward to tomorrow and I know Serena is as well."

"We'll see you there, Emily," the youngest Tendo smiled. She watched as the woman collected her
daughter, who looked almost ready to drop but forcing herself to stay awake, talking quietly to the
girl for a moment then both of them going into the house. Serena smiled at Akane on the way past
and waved a little but didn't say anything, looking instead very tired suddenly.

"Do you want a hand tidying up before we leave?" Akane asked, turning back to Harrison, who
looked around, then shrugged slightly.

"You could help me find all the beer bottles and get rid of them, and stack up the plates, but I'll
leave everything else to the morning. Thanks." The two of them moved around the garden
retrieving wayward bottles, Shampoo and Aiko helping when they saw what was going on. Soon
everything obvious was either piled up next to the barbecue or in the bin. Eventually, the few
remaining people congregated near the back door.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening, Richard," Joan said, kissing the police officer on the cheek
briefly, then stepping back and smiling. Sophie was standing next to her looking dead on her feet,
with her father's arm around her shoulders, the man in question still apparently deep in thought.

"You're welcome, all of you. Have fun at the stunt shoot tomorrow."

"I suspect we will," she replied, smiling tiredly. "Come on, dear, we still have to get home." She
led her family through the house, Dave bringing up the rear after a final somewhat worried glance
at Aiko, who waved with a grin.

With only Karen, Adrian, the three from Japan, and Harrison left in the garden, it suddenly looked
much emptier after the number of people who had been present earlier. Adrian glanced around for
a moment. "Did Anton and the others leave already?" he asked.

"About half an hour ago," Harrison nodded. "Jim said he was going to take Anton back to his
house as it was too much effort to drive him home and they were both drunk anyway. Greg left just
after that." He chuckled wryly. "He still can't taste anything properly."

"Ah. All right, in that case I'm heading home myself. Thanks for all the food and drink, Richard, it
was a good evening." The director turned to the remaining people. "I'll see you tomorrow morning,
hopefully without any side projects involving banks and criminals," he continued with a small
smile, making Akane chuckle, while Shampoo looked amused. Glancing at Aiko, he asked, "Any
chance you could bring them to the studio? I think I'm going to need an extra hour in bed."

The brunette smiled with a nod. "Sure, no problem, Adrian."

"Great. OK, then, see you all tomorrow." He looked at his watch, raising an eyebrow. "Well, later
today, in fact. Anyway, later." Waving he wandered off looking tired and happy.

"Are you all right to get home, Karen, or do you want me to pop you over?" Aiko asked the red-
headed biker who was putting her leather jacket on having retrieved it from a nearby chair.

"I'm fine, thanks, Aiko," the other woman replied. "I didn't drink much and my last beer was a
couple of hours ago. Thanks for the offer, though."

"No problem."

Karen smiled at them all, then left, the sound of her bike starting coming over the fence a moment
later. As engine sounds disappeared into the distance, Akane yawned. "I'm looking forward to bed,
that's for sure," she commented, making the others nod in agreement.

"Also very tired but happy," Shampoo noted.
"Right, then, I guess we'll be on our way." Aiko smiled at Harrison. "See you later, Richard. Good luck with your case, if you need any help for anything just let me know."

"Thanks, Aiko. Have fun, you guys." He watched as they grouped together, then vanished, blinking a little at the flash, before going indoors with a contented look on his face.

Accepting the paper cup of coffee with a New York address on it, Akane cautiously tested it, finding it hot but not too hot to drink. Gulping down a few mouthfuls she sighed in relief, smiling at Aiko who was sipping her own, looking amused. "Thanks," she said. "Nabiki is the one who needs coffee to get going normally, but after yesterday I definitely needed some caffeine."

"I'm not surprised," the brunette smiled back. "It was a long day. All worked out well in the end though."

"It did, which is nice." They shared a look then turned to watch as the various crews from the same three trucks as yesterday ran around setting things up. The disused airfield was a suddenly very busy place since they'd arrived ten minutes earlier, just after nine in the morning thanks to Aiko and heavy goods teleportation. "You could probably earn a fortune popping trucks full of equipment around the place for the studio," Akane laughed, watching as the camera truck was opened out into its operational format and the cameras set up.

Aiko snickered. "Quite likely. But I don't think I have time to do this as a full time job although I'm happy to help out." They turned at a call from Adrian, walking over to where he was standing with Karen and Shampoo next to the primary stunt car.

"I'd like to get the rooftop scene done first," the director said when they were all grouped together. He pointed at the fake buildings lining the first part of the runway. "Those eight ones there have real roofs, the rest are just shells, so the plan is to run around on top of them for a while and just more or less do what you did at the demo in the sound stage. There's no real set plan for it, just some basic guidelines. Is that OK?"

Shampoo exchanged a look with her then they both inspected the buildings in question, which ranged from one to three stories high. "Is simple enough," the Amazon replied after a few seconds of thought. "Can go up there over porch at front, run to left over that one, then jump up to one next to it. Straight run for next four, drop onto last one, then to ground. Easy."

Akane nodded thoughtfully. "I agree," she put in, studying the target buildings. "It's not too hard at all. We can do pretty much what we did before. Does it matter if the buildings get slightly damaged?"

Shaking his head, Adrian smiled. "No, not really. If you can avoid destroying them completely until after the driving stunt that would be ideal, but after today they're going to get torn down anyway. We only kept them up because of you guys coming over and since we didn't have any shoots out here recently."

"OK. We should be able to make it look good, then," the Tendo woman grinned.

"Great. We'll be ready to roll the cameras in about half an hour, so why don't you head over to Gladys and get your clothing sorted out? We were thinking a sort of ninja theme this time, just to make it look interesting." Adrian chuckled when Akane raised an eyebrow, glancing at Shampoo, then Aiko, both of whom were smiling.

"That could be fun. OK, we'll be waiting." She looked around, spotted the costumer, then headed in
the right direction, Shampoo beside her and Aiko trailing along behind watching with interest, still sipping her coffee.

"Action!"

At the call, Akane ran towards the first building, leaping four metres up and landing on the roof of the first story of the smaller building they were starting with, then scrambling up the side of it rapidly with Shampoo close behind, both of them reaching the roof at the same time a couple of metres apart. The Amazon took a swing at the other woman with one of the chúi she was wielding, which Akane avoided by back-flipping a couple of times, then ducking under another blow. Matt watched with a grin from beside Adrian, picturing the look the young woman was probably wearing under the mask covering her head, the black cloth flapping slightly as she moved.

The 'ninja' with the long violet ponytail coming out from her own hooded head chased the other one over the roof of the building, the girl in front leaping into space then rolling when she landed on the slightly lower next roof along, bouncing to her feet, before shooting up the side of the third building like it was a ladder. A club shot past her head and vanished through the wall just above her as she reached the roof, making him wince, the sound of the impact coming a fraction of a second later. Akane disappeared over the edge then reappeared holding the chúi, which she returned to Shampoo at high speed.

Catching it without really straining herself the Amazon vanished both clubs then hurled herself up the side of the building, only to fly back when she took a hard blow to the chin as soon as she cleared the roof line, flipping a couple of times on her way back down. By the time she was heading up again Akane was leaping off the other side of the roof, landing lightly along the peak of the next one and charging across at a dead run.

"They seem to be enjoying themselves," he commented in a low voice to Aiko, who was watching with amused concentration from next to him. She nodded, saying nothing for the moment. The fight progressed along the next two roofs until the Tendo woman suddenly popped up holding a staff, which she used to turn the action around, quickly ending up pursuing Shampoo in turn, slicing at her with the staff and yelling.

"Ah. She found it." Aiko sounded pleased. Matt glanced at her with a raised eyebrow, provoking a slight chuckle. "I popped up there just before they started and left a few weapons around the place to give them something to work with," she explained quietly. He snickered, returning his attention to the fight. Shampoo was now wielding a bokken she'd found, the pair standing on the fifth building along and swiping at each other, wooden clacking sounds coming down to them on the other side of the runway. Every now and then shingles flew from a missed blow, and at least one balcony was soon lying on the ground in pieces.

By the time Akane finally led her friend down the side of the last building they'd found, used, and discarded three more staffs, two bokken, a sword, and a huge mallet, which for some reason made Aiko mutter in Japanese then laugh. "I didn't leave that one there," she said, giggling. Matt stared at her, then at Akane, who was looking at the thing she was holding in one hand with a slightly puzzled air, before shrugging and flipping it over her shoulder as she walked back to the camera vehicle beside Shampoo. He didn't see where it landed.

"Cut!" Adrian sounded pleased. "Very good. I think that's all we need for that sequence. Well done, both of you, it looked fantastic."

"Thanks, Adrian," Shampoo replied, Akane smiling as well as she pulled off her hood. "Was good warm up."
"I find the way you two consider something that most people would have to practice for weeks just a warm up for the main effort more than a little intimidating," Matt joked as the two women reached them. Akane glanced at Shampoo, both of them grinning.

"Thanks, I think," the Tendo woman said, shaking her head a little. With a smile he moved to watch the playback over Adrian's shoulder, the director muttering to himself and making notes as he inspected the footage critically. When it was finished, he nodded absently a few times while scribbling on his clipboard, then turned around to them all.

"That was excellent. We should be able to use the entire thing as is, it shows off a number of important skills very neatly. Great. We're ahead of schedule today, which is a relief. Let's get set up for the car stunt." He waved Greg over from where the driving instructor had been standing beside Anton, chatting to him, near the cars off to one side. Both men looked up then headed over. "We'll do the bank exit, the police chase, and the main action as three separate sequences," he continued as they reached the small group near the camera truck. "Greg, is everything ready from your end?"

"Yes, we're all set. Both the main and backup cars are good to go, the nitrogen cannon and pyro charges are set in the main vehicle, and we only need to arm them for the stunt. If we need the backup we can have it armed in about twenty minutes."

"Good. Hopefully we won't need it, but..." Adrian shrugged, Greg nodding his understanding.

"All right. I'd like to do a couple of dry runs first, just going over what we covered yesterday but in sequence, then we can break for coffee and a snack." He checked his watch. "That should let us start it for real about eleven. Wonderful." The director smiled happily. "We should have time for the helicopter if this goes well."

"I'll call Rob and let him know it's likely to happen," Matt commented. "He said last night he was still up for it so there shouldn't be any trouble."

"OK. Thanks, Matt." Adrian looked pleased.

"I'll go and pick up the Harrisons and Simpsons," Aiko stated. "I should be back in about twenty minutes or less, I'll just have to hop Joan and the others around a little to get them over the first jump."

"OK, Aiko. That should all work out well." Adrian looked around at the various people, before turning back to them. "Danny Goodner and his mother should be here before eleven as well. She called me last night to make sure I was serious about my offer. She wasn't happy about Danny sneaking in again. I think she probably gave him a pretty hard time."

"That kid has some impressive skills in covert entry," the stunt coordinator snickered. "Pity about the movie fixation and the lack of thinking things through from end to end, though."

"Hopefully he'll learn before he kills himself," Adrian nodded, sighing a little. "Well, let's get on with it." Aiko flashed out of existence as the others headed towards the cars and bikes, where Karen was waiting for them and making some adjustments to Shampoo's machine.

Dropping her Playstation controller to the carpet and jumping to her feet at the sound of the doorbell, Sophie yelled, "I'll get it," then headed into the hall. Opening the door she grinned at Serena, then at Aiko and Serena's mother, who were standing behind her. "Hi. Come in, Mom's in the kitchen and Dad's outside in the yard." She stepped aside as the three entered, then led them
through the house into the kitchen at the back.

"Hello, Emily," her mother said, smiling widely, as she dried her hands on a cloth before dropping it next to the sink. "It's nice to see you again. And both of you as well, of course," she added, looking at Serena and Aiko. "Does anyone want something to drink?"

"Can I have some orange juice?" Serena asked politely. Joan nodded, glancing at her daughter who was already heading for the refrigerator. When she'd poured a glass of juice for her friend, and herself, she sat at the kitchen table with Serena while listening to Aiko who was explaining what she was going to do.

"The first time through a teleport makes most people pretty sick for a few seconds," the magical girl noted, Serena nodding vigorously and her mother sighing a bit. "It passes quickly and doesn't come back, at worst you might feel a little disorientated the second time, then you're fine. So I was planning on jumping you three from one side of the garden to the other and back to get it over with." She smiled a little. "Probably better to get sick at home where no one else can see rather than turn up in the middle of a lot of strangers in the process of vomiting violently. It makes a weird impression."

Sophie giggled at the expression on her mother's face, making the older woman glance at her and smile wryly. "I can see where that might stick in their memories," she admitted. Aiko chuckled.

"It tends to, yes," she agreed. "Let's go outside and get it over with, then we can head off if you're all ready."

"Dave was looking for a tripod for his camera the last I heard," Joan explained, leading them to the back door and opening it. "He buried it in the garage somewhere." Outside, she called for Sophie's father, the man in question coming out of the side door of the garage a few seconds later, covered in dust, but triumphantly holding a tripod in a nylon case and smiling.

"I found it. It was under the skis for some reason," he exclaimed, brushing dust from the bag, before looking up and noticing the visitors. "Oh, hello, ladies. I didn't know you'd arrived."

"Recovered from last night?" Aiko asked with a grin. He studied her narrowly, but nodded slowly.

"I have a lot of questions still but I think I can hold them for the moment," he replied after a second or two, making her snicker.

"You'll have more soon, I expect," she said, glancing at Serena, who was also smiling. Emily looked amused but said nothing.

"Put the tripod down and come over here, dear," Joan told him. He did as requested, putting the bag on the rear porch then joining them as Aiko stepped a few feet away from Serena and Emily, who stood and watched with interest. The brunette got them positioned to her satisfaction then looked around at them all, Sophie feeling excited, her mother looking slightly worried, and her father with an expression that made the teenager think that he wasn't entirely certain this wasn't all some huge joke at his expense.

Aiko winked at Sophie. "Everyone ready?"

There were three nods, one of them much more certain than the other two. "So, what do you have to do?" Dave said curiously, looking at Aiko, who was standing with her arms folded. She grinned at him. The world flickered, and Sophie bent over as a huge rush of nausea swept through her instantly, trying desperately not to throw up.
"That," she heard Aiko comment, before she felt someone hold her still just before she was about to fall over. The sickness roiled in her stomach for ten or fifteen seconds then she suddenly felt it begin to subside as fast as it had occurred. Straightening up she swallowed a couple of times then looked around, seeing Aiko had been supporting her and was doing the same for her father who still looked green. Her mother seemed less affected although her expression suggested she'd not found the experience pleasant.

"That was horrible," she managed to say.

The Japanese woman smiled sympathetically at her. "It varies, some people are really sick afterwards, a few don't seem to notice. You guys had a fairly mild reaction all things considered."

"Urg," Dave remarked, shaking his head. "I can't say I enjoyed that," he added more comprehensively a few seconds later, blinking wildly and shaking his head. Looking around his eyes widened when he saw they were standing a hundred feet from the house. "Holy..." He stared at Aiko, who looked amused and slightly smug. "You actually did it."

"Of course. I'm pretty good at teleportation." She grinned at his expression.

"But..." Sophie giggled at her father's expression. She knew that one, it was the one he got when he ran into something he couldn't immediately work out. She suspected he was going to be wearing it for a while. It had been pretty common for much of the party last night as well.

"Don't worry about it," Aiko snickered. "Put it down to magic, which is true, and just enjoy it. Trust me, without a lot more background knowledge you'll just end up thinking in circles if you try to work it out based on normal scientific principles. Teleportation theory is pretty weird even to me."

"And we won't get sick again?" Joan asked slightly apprehensively, her husband not appearing to have anything sensible to say for the moment. The petite woman shook her head.

"No, like I said, at worst it will make you a bit dizzy for a couple of seconds, then you won't notice at all. I'll jump us back to where we started if you're ready." Sophie's mother nodded after a second or two.

"All right," she said.

Holding up her hand, Aiko grinned and snapped her fingers theatrically. The world jumped again and they were standing a few feet from Serena and Emily who were watching with interest. Sophie felt a slight wobble then everything went back to normal. "That's it. You're officially rated for teleportation via magical girl now." Sophie laughed while her mother and father looked amused, her father also still looking thoughtful and a little stunned. "Grab your stuff and we can head to the airfield," Aiko said, looking around at them all. "They'll be doing some test runs now, the main stunt shoot will be in about an hour, but we can get some food and a drink if you want and you can look around."

Shortly, her father having reclaimed his tripod, found his camera, loaded it with film, and her mother coming back with her purse after locking up, they all congregated in the middle of the back yard. With a bright flash the yard was empty seconds later.

Danny was almost vibrating in his seat with excitement. His mother glanced sideways at him for a moment before turning her attention back to the dirt road they'd just turned off the highway onto. "Make sure you're very polite, thank Mr Stewart for the huge favour he's doing for you, and stay
out of trouble, OK, Danny?" she requested, her tone of voice making it clear she wasn't entirely pleased with how this favour had come about. She'd made that blatantly clear the previous day when he'd been collected from the studio security office. He winced a little at the memory.

"Yes, Mom," he replied quietly, stilling himself with a deliberate act of will.

"And for heaven's sake, please stick to your promise," she added after a few seconds. "I really don't want to have to pick you up from a police station next time."

"I'll be good," he said in a small voice. She smiled slightly, looking at him again, then peered forward into the distance.

"That must be the gate up ahead," she commented. He nodded. There was a fence a quarter of a mile ahead on the bumpy road, a pickup truck visible next to it. When they reached it a man wearing the by-now rather too familiar studio security uniform walked over to the car and bent down to look in the window.

"Theresa and Danny Goodner, to see Adrian Stewart," his mother said after rolling the window down. The guard nodded, keying up his radio and having a quiet conversation over it.

"They're expecting you, Ma'am," he said politely when he put it away. "Just follow the road. You'll see the old control tower and a number of vehicles, park next to them then head for the buildings. Someone will meet you there."

"Thank you," she replied, waiting as he walked back to the gate, swinging it open and waving them through. Driving past him she headed slowly down the track while Danny looked back to see the guard closing the gate behind them. Returning his attention to the front he watched with growing excitement as they neared the control tower the guard had mentioned, which had a cluster of buildings near it, along with half a dozen vehicles, several of them quite large trucks. He could see what looked like part of a city street on the far side of the runway, which he decided must be some sort of prop scenery for a movie. There were a surprising number of people moving around doing various things.

"Try to keep your question rate down to less than a dozen a minute, will you, dear?" his mother requesting only half-jokingly as she moved the vehicle towards the right side of one of the trucks. He grimaced when she snickered, but nodded.

As they parked the car next to one of the trucks he could see a car racing down the runway past the buildings with two police cars, lights flashing and sirens going, following behind, another truck pacing them from one side. There were at least two complicated camera rigs in the back of the truck aimed out through the folded down side with several people strapped in behind them. Opening the door and hopping out he stared as the cavalcade shot past at fifty miles an hour, all the vehicles braking a few hundred yards away. After a moment or so they began turning around and coming back much more slowly.

"Wow," he mumbled to himself, a huge smile on his face, then looked over at his mother, who was also watching.

"Come on, Danny, let's see what's going on," she smiled at him, shaking her head fondly. She locked the car and they began walking over to the nearest group of people. "Remember, be good," she whispered as the tall man he recognised from the studio yesterday headed in their direction. He nodded quickly.

"Hi. I'm Matt Jordan, the stunt coordinator," the man announced as he arrived next to them,
holding out his hand, which Danny's mother shook with a smile.

"Hello. Theresa Goodner, and you probably know my son Danny," she replied with a slightly wry smile and a glance at Danny, who blushed. Matt glanced at him with a similar look.

"Oh, believe me, I'm familiar with him," the tall man chuckled. "We're hoping that he might not visit us quite so much after today. At least without calling ahead." Danny ducked his head, going red, as his mother giggled.

"I'm very sorry about the trouble he's caused," she remarked.

"Don't worry about it," the man replied, shrugging a little. "No real harm done and as long as he sticks to his part of the deal we're good."

"He will." Theresa looked hard at her son, who sighed but nodded. "Won't you?"

"Yes, Mom," he said quietly.

"Fair enough. OK, follow me and I'll explain what we're doing," Matt told them, turning and waving them towards a set of temporary shelters with tables and chairs under them, which had a number of people gathered nearby watching as the cars and trucks pulled up a few dozen feet away. "This is a demonstration and training shoot, not something that's going into a movie at the moment. We're working with two incredibly gifted young women, one from Japan and one from China, who are amazingly good martial artists. We've been giving them training in driving, firearms use, things like that, and setting up a number of fairly common stunt scenarios so that both they and we can see how it works out in front of a camera."

He indicated the two women standing next to the vehicles, having exited the lead car while they were approaching. "The one with the short hair is Akane Tendo, from Tokyo. The other one is her friend Xian Pu, or Shampoo, from China, but also living in Tokyo these days." Matt glanced at Danny, who was staring at the two young women with interest and not a little physical admiration. "Be polite to them, either one could pull your arms off and beat you to death with them," he added, chuckling. Danny felt himself pale and looked away quickly. "They probably won't though, they're nice girls."

His mother laughed slightly again, looking at him, then went back to inspecting everything around them. As they arrived at the shelters, Danny could see that there were a number of other people who seemed to be spectators mixed in with the obvious studio workers, two teenaged girls about his age, and what seemed to be their parents, one woman on her own and a couple. One of the girls looked over, smiled at Matt with a look that suggested she knew him, then glanced at Danny and his mother, before nudging the other girl and saying something. Her friend also looked over with interest.

Leading them over to these people, Matt made the introductions. "This is Serena Harrison and her mother Emily, and Sophie Simpson with her parents Dave and Joan. Everyone, this is Danny Goodner and his mother Theresa."

Serena inspected him closely for a moment. "Oh. It's you. Dad mentioned you." Danny looked curiously at her while her friend Sophie giggled.

"Do I know your dad?" he asked dubiously. She laughed briefly.

"You've met. In Hollywood? Just before the New Year?" He still couldn't place the occasion. "He's a cop?"
Danny paled, stepping back and putting his mother between the girl and himself. "He threatened to shoot me in the foot," he squeaked, suddenly realising who she was talking about. Serena broke down in laughter with Sophie quickly joining in, his own mother doing much the same. "Mom!" he said with exasperation. "He really did."

"He probably wouldn't actually have done it, dear," she replied, glancing at Serena, who shrugged and made a 'maybe yes/maybe no' gesture with her hand, which had Sophie giggling again. Danny didn't feel much happier about the situation but decided that it was probably best not to make too much of it.

"He's not... here... is he?" he asked nervously, looking around. "Your dad?"

"Nope. He wanted to come but there's a big case on at the moment so he's tied up with it," Serena explained, looking mildly disappointed. She brightened up after a second or two. "Come on, I'll introduce you to Akane and Shampoo before they do the next test run." She waved both him and his mother forward to where the two young women were discussing something with the director, who was making notes and nodding as they spoke. All three looked up as the girl stopped a few feet away.

"Hello, Serena," the director said, then transferred his attention to Danny and his mother. "Ah. Mr Goodner, you made it. And your mother. Excellent." He tucked his clipboard under his arm and shook hands with Danny's mother, smiling a little. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding us, Mrs Goodner?"

"Not at all," she replied with her own smile. "Your directions were very clear. Thank you again for allowing this and not taking more serious steps after what Danny has been doing, Mr Stewart."

"Call me Adrian, please." Adrian looked at Danny speculatively for a moment, making the young man shuffle his feet slightly in embarrassment. "I would prefer not to let a young man gain a criminal record, especially one who is so... interested... in the field I work in," he continued after a moment, transferring his attention back to Theresa, who nodded slowly while also glancing at her son. "But at the same time it was beginning to be more than a nuisance, you understand. His ability to gain entry into places he shouldn't is only exceeded by a certain lack of common sense in actually doing it." Danny sweated lightly under the looks both Adrian and his mother were now giving him. "I'm hoping that satisfying his curiosity like this will make future occurrences rarer. Ideally, non-existent."

"I'm sure you won't have any more problems with my son, Adrian," his mother said after a few seconds of staring meaningfully at Danny, who nodded frantically. "And we're both very grateful indeed for how lenient you've been."

Adrian smiled. "Good, then in that case I doubt we have any reason to be worried." He turned to the two young women who had been listening with small grins and considerable interest. "Allow me to introduce Akane Tendo and Xian Pu, two of the most remarkable young people it's ever been my pleasure to work with. They're undoubtedly be a couple of people to watch in the stunt business and quite likely the acting business as well." Akane, the girl with the short blue hair, blushed slightly, while the other one smiled widely.

"Theresa Goodner," his mother said politely, shaking hands with them both in turn.

"I'm Akane," the Japanese woman smiled back. "My friend here usually goes by Shampoo, most people find it easier to say."

Shampoo grinned. "Still learning English, difficult language with many rules. Sorry about speaking
badly. But nice to meet you." She looked at Danny as she shook his hand as well. "Better like this, not like in studio where might fall out of ceiling." He went slightly red again as Akane giggled and his mother sighed faintly.

"Sorry about that," he muttered.

"Don't worry, did many stupid things when your age too," she assured him. Akane snickered, making Shampoo nudge her hard. "Don't laugh, you worse."

"Possibly," Akane agreed placidly. "Possibly not." They had a brief argument in Japanese which ended with both of them giggling for a moment.

The director looked at his watch. "OK, we're going to have to get on with it now. Why don't you two help yourselves to some sandwiches and something to drink, over there, there's coffee and cold drinks as well, while we get the next test run set up. This is going to take another half hour or so then we're running the main stunt for real, which you'll probably find interesting." He indicated one of the temporary buildings which had a number of tables under it, people standing around and helping themselves to food. "Serena, you can show them where to sit, all right?"

The girl who had been standing and listening with an amused look on her face nodded. "Sure, Adrian. Come with me," she added, looking at Danny and his mother. Both of them followed her to the food tent and helped themselves, shortly finding their way to another covered area with a few folding chairs in it. Serena and Sophie were both sitting waiting for them while their parents were chatting a few feet away. "I saved you a couple of chairs," the girl smiled.

"Thanks," Danny replied, taking a seat and putting his can of soda down on the ground before biting into a chicken salad sandwich. "You seem to know a lot of people here," he went on after swallowing his mouthful, glancing at the teenager beside him who was watching the people working on the cars with interest. She glanced at him and nodded, her friend Sophie who was sitting on her other side also listening but still keeping an eye on the proceedings.

"Yep. My dad is friends with Jim, the studio safety coordinator, he's a neighbour of ours. That's him over there." She pointed at a tall slender Afro-Caribbean man who was in the middle of a cluster of half a dozen people including Matt, the man that had met them, who were apparently discussing something complicated judging by the number of pieces of paper that were being passed around. "Jim took us all on a studio tour back around Christmas when some friends of Dad's from Japan were over here on a case, including Aiko over there." She indicated the petite brunette he'd been caught by who was currently talking to a sandy-haired guy who seemed to be something to do with the cars judging by the way he was observing a couple of technicians working on one of them with an air of proprietary interest.

"Her friends are all magical girls from Tokyo who were chasing some weird magical terrorists," Serena explained, making him look at her with surprise. "They're also incredibly good at martial arts. I mean, you just wouldn't believe how good. Yori, and her partner Chou, are so far past anything I've ever seen..." She shook her head with an amazed expression, while Danny exchanged a look with his mother who was listening quietly. "They trained Aiko and her team, who aren't quite that good but are still unbelievable. They all came to a barbecue at my house after the case. There was an accident on the tour and they saved several people from horrible injuries which got Adrian interested. Yori invited him to the barbecue, he came and saw them do a short demonstration, then he wanted them to work for him." She giggled for a moment.

"They all said they were kind of busy already but he gave them a card anyway. In the end Yori gave it to Akane who she knows, Akane is an amazing martial artist as well. She's not a magical girl but even so I don't think you'd be able to find many people who are as good as either her or
Shampoo. Some of the things I've seen them do..." She laughed to herself. "They came over a while ago and did a longer demonstration in our back yard. Even dad was just staring in shock. Adrian and his friends looked like they were going to fall over." She giggled again. "You wouldn't believe how good Shampoo is with a bow. I'm learning and I think I'm pretty reasonable but I don't think I'll ever be even close to what she can do."

"How old are they, Serena?" his mother asked curiously. The girl looked at her past Danny.

"Akane is twenty three, Shampoo is a little older I think."

"That's very young to be that talented at anything," Theresa noted. Serena shrugged.

"As far as I know they've been doing it since they were little and some of the things Shampoo has told me about how she was trained are horrifying. But it seems to work." She glanced at Sophie who looked both amused and slightly worried. "Yori said she was trained in martial arts from when she was about two months old. I don't know how long she's been learning the magical things but it must have been quite a while as well."

"Magical things?" Theresa asked with a peculiar expression on her face.

Serena nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes. She can throw fireballs! And pull things out of thin air. She showed us some of the things she has stashed away on her and it completely covered the kitchen table. It was amazing." The girl frowned slightly. "Although she did say that part was actually some weird sort of martial arts skill, not magic." Glancing at Sophie she smiled. "Hey, if you get good enough maybe you can learn to do it!"

Sophie sighed slightly. "I don't know if I can ever get that good," she said slightly sadly.

Danny noticed his mother had a bemused expression, but seemed to be content to hold her questions. "What martial art are you learning?" he asked the blonde girl.

"Aikido right now," she told him. "Yori suggested to Mom it was a good one to start with. You don't need to be really strong to be quite good at it and it's more aimed for self defence than anything. Sensei is very pleased with my progress so far although I've only been doing it since the middle of January. He said I have a gift for it." She looked pleased.

"What made you want to learn it?" Theresa asked. Sophie looked at the ground for a moment. "I kind of got mugged over the holidays," she mumbled. "They stole my backpack and... some other things." Looking up rather defiantly, though, she added, "I got them pretty good even so. One of them was walking funny for days, even when Yori caught him." She grinned momentarily. "She said I did a good job." Serena chuckled at the look on her friend's face. "Mom was a little worried about me after that so when Yori suggested I learned self defence she was OK with the idea. It's been a lot of fun so far but I haven't had to use it yet." Danny wasn't completely certain but he sort of got the idea she was a little disappointed by this fact. Serena was smirking in a way that suggested she'd help if her friend needed it.

"I... see," his mother slowly replied.

"Oh, look, they're ready to go again," Serena suddenly said, pointing to where the cars were lining up, Akane and Shampoo getting into the lead one again after a quick conversation with Matt and Adrian. The girl explained the whole idea behind the stunt and where they were at the moment. Shortly afterwards the front vehicle roared off with a squeal of tortured tires and a cloud of smoke, followed by two police cars, as they wove around all over the runway in a rather dramatic manner.
Danny watched, completely engrossed, and with a huge smile on his face, the two girls next to him doing much the same. His mother was watching him nearly as much as the action going on nearby with a thoughtful look, which was replaced by a smile after a little while.

"I think that went perfectly," Adrian stated with satisfaction as he looked over the playback, then turned to Akane who was standing behind him with her helmet in one hand and the other one on her hip. "That only leaves the final part. The big one. The one in which everything can go wrong or everything can go right, thereby cementing your reputation in studio lore one way or another." He grinned as Akane giggled, Shampoo next to her shaking her head in amusement.

"You in good mood, Adrian," the Amazon noted. He shrugged with a smile.

"Of course I am. I'm having fun, doing the job I love, with people I like and trust. What's not to put me in a good mood?" He inspected them both as the lilac-haired woman nodded agreement. "You both ready for it?"

"Yes," Akane smiled. She glanced at Shampoo who said the same thing at the same time. "Let's see what happens while I still have the nerve for it," she added wryly.

"Great." He patted her on the shoulder. "I have no doubt you'll pull it off and make it look easy." Smiling at her grateful expression he looked around and raised his voice.

"We're ready for the final sequence, everyone. We go in five minutes."

A number of people headed off in different directions as he walked over to the car which Greg was making some final checks on with a couple of his people, next to which Karen was leaning on the motorcycle Shampoo would use while watching the stunt driver closely. The red-head looked at them as they approached, smiling. "This is going to be amazing," she commented brightly. "Make us proud, both of you."

"Will certainly try," Shampoo laughed. She put her helmet back on and sat astride the bike, waiting patiently. Akane nodded to her, and Karen, then went to talk to Greg who had just pulled himself out of the back of the car.

"The cannon is pressurised and the charges are set," he announced as Adrian joined her. "Remember, arm it as soon as you're up on two wheels, and if you have to abort, hit the switches before you do so or you'll have the ride of a lifetime." He snickered as she gave him a hard look before putting her own helmet on and doing up the chin strap.

"Thanks for that, Greg," she muttered. "It makes me so much less nervous."

He slapped her on the back. "You'll do fine, Akane. Good luck." With a quick grin he stepped back while she slid into the driver's seat, closing the door.

Adrian checked with everyone else who was critical for the stunt, then ticked the last item off his check-list. Heading for the camera truck he climbed on board, then waited for everyone to take their places, which only took a few more seconds. Akane and Shampoo both started their relevant vehicles, looking at him for the cue.

"Car flip stunt, take one. Action!" he called, the radio mike he was wearing making sure everyone heard him clearly. The cameras panned to focus on the two women, as the car began moving, quickly followed by the motorcycle, Shampoo's long hair rippling behind her.

He crossed his fingers, waiting to see what happened.
'Don't fuck it up. Don't fuck it up.' The youngest Tendo sister tried to stop the refrain her thoughts kept playing in the back of her mind but had little success. Concentrating on the ramp ahead of her, she glanced quickly in the rear view mirror, seeing her friend following exactly in the position they'd established was correct for this stunt. 'It's just like yesterday, you've done this half a dozen times,' she told herself firmly.

'Yes, but now the car is basically a bomb,' she couldn't help adding mentally, not entirely willingly.

"You're right on track, Akane," Shampoo commented.

"Thanks. Five seconds," she replied quickly, aiming the car carefully. A few seconds later she felt the jolt as she hit the ramp, the driver's side flipping up hard until she reached a forty-five degree. Gently moving the wheel a little until she found the stable point she reached out with her right hand and carefully adjusted the throttle lever to keep the speed constant. "I'm up. Arming the car." She flipped up the protective cover then toggled both switches under it, seeing in her peripheral vision two red lights come on as the corresponding green ones went out. "I'm armed. Exiting now."

Keeping one hand on the wheel she carefully pulled herself out the window to crouch on the side of the vehicle, the wind across her helmet making a dull woosh, then aimed slightly more accurately at the truck parked a few hundred metres in front of her. She could hear Shampoo's bike clearly from just behind and to one side, risking a quick look back to check, then trusting the Amazon to be in the right place.

"You look good," Shampoo reported. "We're nearly at the first mark." She nodded, seeing a spray-painted line on the runway go past seconds later. Standing up from her crouch as far as she could without letting go of the wheel she waited.

"Second mark in three... two... one." The next line passed under them, marking the point of no return. The truck was now only about ninety metres away.

"I'm jumping... Now!" She let go of the wheel, stood to her full height, then stepped sideways, laying her trust in the other woman completely. There was a brief moment of weightlessness before she hit the seat behind Shampoo perfectly, grabbing her friend's waist as soon as she was settled. The car was already beginning to drop back onto all four wheels as they approached the parked truck at forty-five miles an hour. Shampoo peeled off to the left, accelerating past the truck less than two seconds before the car hit it squarely. Akane looked back over her shoulder to see a large fireball which sprouted a flaming car flipping end over end, barely clearing the top of the truck to land on its roof on the other side with a huge crash and a cloud of dust, vapour streaming from a large hole in the bottom where the piston of the nitrogen cannon had exited. Fluttering swarms of burning fake money rained down around it.

"FANTASTIC!" Adrian's voice screamed in her ear over the radio link, making her grin in triumph, just before Shampoo yelled her own feelings. They looked over to see the director waving his clipboard like a five year old in the camera truck on the other side of the runway. "Are you both OK?" he asked slightly more calmly.

"We're fine, Adrian," Akane replied, the words belied by the way she was shaking from the adrenaline rush which hit at that moment. "It all worked out exactly like it was supposed to."

"That was unbelievable to watch. Incredible work, both of you. Come on back and have a drink, you've more than earned it." They slowed and turned, roaring past the camera truck as it did the same, heading back to the other end of the runway. Shampoo was laughing with relief and pleasure while Akane just held on, waiting for the trembling to stop.
When they pulled up at the tents and got off the bike, a crowd of people surrounded them. Karen leapt forward and hugged Akane hard, grinning like an idiot. "Amazing. Just amazing. You wouldn't believe how good that looked. You made it seem easy." Releasing her the red-head turned and did the same to Shampoo who was laughing. "And you. Great riding. I'm proud of both of you."

"Thank you, Karen. Couldn't have done it without you to teach, though," the Chinese woman grinned. Karen released her, stepped back, then bowed with a wide grin. Akane laughed, glancing at Shampoo with a smile.

The camera truck stopped next to them and Adrian jumped out, followed by Matt and Jim. A huge smile on his face the director came over to them. "I'm fucking impressed," he stated, chuckling. "I knew you could do it but even so that looked unbelievable. First take as well." He shook his head in respect. "Just amazing to watch." Matt and Jim added their feelings, both men looking pleased and relieved. A few seconds later the VT operator called to Adrian, who turned and led them all over to the truck where they watched the playback.

"Holy shit," Akane muttered to herself as she watched what she'd just done from several viewpoints, including from a camera on the truck which had been transmitting video to the camera vehicle, and a couple of fixed position cameras nearby as well. It looked, as Karen had said, absolutely amazing, even though she'd actually done it. The fireball was impressive and it really did look from that side as if the car had exploded and flipped into the air as a result. Even knowing how it was done didn't detract from the effect.

"With a little clean up to get rid of the vapour cloud, and a decent sound track, that would go right into any movie I've ever done with no problems at all," Adrian stated firmly when they'd watched the replay for the third time. "It's one of the best stunts I've ever seen." He turned to them. "If that doesn't get you the job nothing will, and if that's the case I'll start my own studio around you both." He stuck out his hand, shaking both of theirs. "I'm serious about that. One way or another we're going to be working with each other very soon."

Laughing a little, Akane grinned at him, then at the others who had become friends over the last few days. As she went back to the food tent for a well deserved cup of coffee she peered down the runway at the distant wreckage which was still smoking slightly, a small smile on her face and a sense of satisfaction in her heart.

"Oh my god!" The cry from Serena made Sophie jump a little, but she could understand why. The spectacle of Akane riding the outside of a car on two wheels was insane enough, but to see her apparently casually step off the side and get picked up on the way by Shampoo on a motorcycle, seconds before the car smashed into a huge truck and exploded, was just beyond belief. She shared a glance with her best friend then looked past her at Danny, who was staring open-mouthed at the burning wreckage a few hundred yards away. His mother looked at least as shocked.

"That was incredible!" Serena mumbled in shock. She grinned at her friend. "I can't believe she actually did it."

"I know, it was amazing," Sophie laughed. "I can't wait to see what it looks like on film."

"And this is a job interview?" Danny's mother asked in a faint voice. Sophie nodded.

"Yep. This is the last of the four stunts Adrian arranged to show off what they could do for his own bosses and also to train them in things they'll need. He seems very pleased so far."
"I see." Theresa looked at her, then back at the motorcycle with the two young women on which had just stopped on the start line and been mobbed by the crew. "I suspect they'll get the job."

"I think so too," Serena giggled. "That was unbelievable." She looked at Sophie. "Dad said that Adrian told him he'd let us have a copy of the DVD when it was done."

"I really want to see that," she replied honestly. After a moment, she asked, "I wonder if they'll do that bonus stunt Matt was talking about?"

"What is it?" Danny asked, sounding almost breathless with anticipation and nearly bouncing in his seat. Sophie grinned at him, the young man was extremely excited from what she could see.

"Some sort of helicopter assault on that tower," she said, pointing at the old control tower to the side at the end of the runway past the buildings, real and fake. "They mentioned it was a possibility because Matt knows a guy with a helicopter who's in LA on other business but has some free time."

Serena nudged her, pointing in the other direction. "They're going into the food tent. Come on, let's go and see what's up." The other girl jumped to her feet. "And I'm hungry again."

"You're always hungry, Ser," Sophie giggled, also standing. She waited politely for Danny and his mother to do the same, then headed after her friend, collecting their own parents on the way, all of whom were looking impressed by what they'd seen.

"That was amazing, wasn't it, Dad?" she asked her father who was taking a photo of the smouldering wreckage with a telephoto lens. He nodded, snapping a couple more shots, then lowered the camera.

"That it was. I'm amazed she could control the car from the outside like that. I wonder if it was some sort of remote control instead?" he mused.

"As far as I know it was all real," she told him. "That's what Akane told me last night. They were practising it for hours."

"Well, I have to say it looked remarkably impressive," he chuckled as he followed her and Joan to the food area. "If not kind of dangerous. I hope you're not planning on doing anything like that."

She shook her head, giggling. "No, I know I'm not that good and probably never will be. I'm happy doing what I'm doing. But I'm really glad to know them all." They started picking up plates and acquiring food, before heading off to talk to Akane and Shampoo who were looking exceptionally pleased with themselves, something she felt was fully justified all things considered.

"Are you both still up for the helicopter stunt?" Adrian asked over a cup of coffee. Akane nodded, glancing at Shampoo who did the same.

"I think so," she replied. "I can't see any reason not to do it, anyway, and we've got time, haven't we?" She checked her watch. "It's only just after one now."

The director smiled. "Great. Matt is really interested in it and he's got Anton all fired up as well now." He turned and waved to Matt, who waved back with a nod and pulled out his phone, obviously having been waiting for the go ahead. "OK, let's go over to costume and sort out some decent military gear for everyone. Matt, Greg, Aaron, and Aiko all want to play and so do a couple of Matt's people. That should be enough for a decent show against the two of you." He chuckled as she grinned.
Shortly they were standing next to the vehicle Gladys was in charge of, getting dressed in black military fatigues with various belts and harnesses to which props were being attached, to make them look like some form of soldier. Akane tucked her hair up under a beret while Shampoo pulled hers into a tight ponytail, pulling it over her shoulder when she was done and looking thoughtfully at it. "Maybe I should braid it like Yori does?" she wondered out loud.

"It would suit you and it's long enough," the Tendo sister commented, smiling. "But she might think you're stealing her look. All in black with a braid like that."

Shampoo flipped the hair back over her shoulder and giggled. "I wouldn't want to annoy her, that's for sure," she replied, amused.

"She wouldn't mind," Aiko put in from a couple of metres away, grinning a little. "She'd probably take it as a compliment if anything."

"The ponytail will do," the Amazon stated, kneeling down to tighten the laces on her boots. When she stood up Aaron came over with an armful of weaponry.

"M-16s, blank firing only," he told them, carefully putting the guns on a nearby table then handing Akane one having given it a quick safety check. He nodded appreciatively when she repeated it, then slung the rifle over her shoulder. Handing her a pair of magazines loaded with blanks he watched in satisfaction as she checked them then put them into the pouches on the belt she was wearing. Repeating the operation with Shampoo and Aiko, he then headed off to arm Matt and the others.

Akane unslung the rifle she had and held it across her body, posing a little, while Shampoo and Aiko studied her. "Very worrying," the magical girl snickered after a moment. "But stylish. You both look pretty good."

"Thanks," Akane snickered, slinging the weapon again. The petite brunette turned her head and looked off into the western distance, then gave them her attention again.

"That must be the helicopter that belongs to Matt's friend," she commented, pointing. Both the others squinted along the line she was indicating but it was several seconds before either of them could see anything. A small black dot rapidly resolved into a distant aircraft, the sound of the rotors coming to them shortly afterwards. Soon it was hovering overhead, the noise incredible and the downwash making everything blow around as the rotors throbbed, before it moved sideways and gently set down in the skid pan area to the side. The turbine wound down as the blades slowed, a medium height man with skin as dark as their uniforms jumping out and looking around, before acknowledging Matt's wave with a broad smile and hurrying over.

He talked to his friend for a moment, then Matt approached, the new arrival and Adrian coming with him.

"Ladies, this is my old friend and comrade in arms Robert Lefaure, we were in the service together for years. He flew my team in and out of danger quite a few times." Indicating the three women who were studying the visitor with as much interest as he was studying them, he continued, "Rob, this is Akane, Shampoo, and Aiko. Akane and Shampoo are the prospective stunt women we've been working with this week."

Rob stepped forwards and bowed to them slightly, saying in surprisingly good Japanese, "It's an honour to meet you all. Matt has told me quite a lot about you and your work."

Rather surprised, Akane exchanged a glance with Shampoo, who was looking impressed, and
Aiko, who seemed pleased, then returned the bow. "I'm glad to meet you as well, Rob. We've learned a lot from Matt and his friends and we're always ready to meet more of them."

"You speak Japanese very well," Aiko added, smiling a little. "That's a little unusual for an American if you don't mind me saying so."

Rob shrugged, looking slightly amused, and replied, "I know, it's not an easy language for us and in general the English speaking world isn't good at it. But I have a gift for languages and spent a few years in Kyoto when I got out of the Army. I'm a little rusty but I hope I'm OK."

"You're much better at Japanese than I am at English," Shampoo assured him with a smile. "What other languages do you speak?"

"English, obviously, German, Spanish, French, Russian, and some Portuguese," he responded. Akane stared in shock. That was impressive by anyone's standards.

Aiko asked him a question in what she realised was Russian, grinning when he immediately replied in the same language. The pair of them went through several other languages, until she nodded in satisfaction. "Very good indeed," the magical girl chuckled.

"You're not bad yourself," he said with an amazed expression. "I couldn't hear an accent on any of those. How many languages do you speak?"

Aiko waved a hand airily. "Lots. I get around and it helps." He studied her for a moment then turned to Matt who was listening with a small smile.

"You were right, they seem to know some interesting things," he told his friend, who snickered.

"More than you'd believe. I'll have to show you the recordings from the last couple of days later." The stunt coordinator looked pleased. "OK, then, why don't we get this last one set up and see what happens? It should be pretty good."

"All right." Rob leaned against the table that Aaron had been using earlier. "As I understand it, you want me to fly these two young ladies over the tower there and drop them off, they shoot all you guys, and everyone goes home happy. Something along those lines anyway."

"That's basically it, yes," Adrian snickered. "Slightly pared down to its basics but more or less accurate."

"I can do that. How are they going to assault the tower, though?" The pilot looked up at the old structure. "There are too many obstructions up there to allow me to safely hover right over it, so they're either going to have to rappel down or jump."

"We can jump easily enough," Akane suggested, also looking up at the tower. "If you can get us to about, oh, maybe ten or fifteen metres over it, that should clear all the antenna things sticking out of the roof."

Rob looked surprised and a little worried. "A fifteen metre drop? That's not exactly a short distance." Matt tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the buildings on the other side of the runway.

"See that three story one?" Rob followed his finger and nodded. "They jumped off the top of it half a dozen times a few hours ago and didn't think too much of it. Trust me, fifteen metres is fine."

"If you say so, Matt," his friend replied slightly dubiously. Akane and Shampoo nodded, as did the
"Is easy," Shampoo added firmly. "You fly, we jump, no problem."

"We could run it a few times if we have time, and try the rappel approach as well," Adrian suggested thoughtfully, looking up at the tower and rubbing his chin slowly. "It might look good with the ropes. Matt, we have all the equipment for that, right?"

"Oh, yes, there's everything we need in the truck," the other man said, nodding. "It shouldn't take long to teach them how, either."

"Already know," Shampoo commented, making everyone look at her curiously. "Was part of childhood training, climbing ropes, sliding back down them. Not used your type equipment though."

"OK, that's easy enough to fix." Matt nodded, then looked at Akane. "I doubt you'll have any trouble. Why don't we do a couple of practice runs from the tower then try one from the chopper afterwards. Rob, when do you have to get back?"

"I'm free all afternoon," the pilot told him. "I've got enough fuel for an hour or so max if I want to get back to Universal, so that's the real limiting factor."

"Good. That should be more than enough, I think. Let's get you two set up with the appropriate harnesses and we can go and practice for a while, then Rob can let us jump out of his helicopter a few times." Matt looked pleased with his summation. Adrian pulled his every-present clipboard from under his arm and made some notes, nodding to himself.

"That fits in nicely. You go and do that while Aaron, Anton, and I work out exactly how we're going to run the stunt itself. It's going to be mostly improvised but I need to figure out where to put the cameras." He looked up at the pilot, obviously thinking. "Rob, is it OK if I have one of the camera guys fly with you and shoot it from the air as well?"

"Sure. We do that all the time. I even have some camera mounts on the machine that your equipment should slot right in to."

"Wonderful. That will save time and add some useful viewpoints." Pleased, he ticked a couple of things off then turned to the others. "Go and practice, let me know when you're ready. There's no huge hurry but if we can get everything sorted out by five or so that would be useful."

Matt checked his watch, nodded, then motioned to Akane and Shampoo, both of whom followed as he headed for the stunt equipment truck.

"What are they doing now?" Serena asked, looking up at the battered appearing control tower with a small frown. Her mother followed her gaze as did Serena and Danny, who had been talking about the afternoon's action. She pointed at one of the large angled windows which was being opened, rather creakily swinging out of the way at the top of the tower, nearly sixty feet off the ground. Behind it she could see what looked like Matt and Akane with a shadow behind them that was probably Shampoo, all three of them wearing black military clothing.

"I'm not sure," Emily remarked, before lifting the small pair of binoculars she'd brought to her eyes. "They seem to be tying ropes to something inside for some reason." A few seconds later three coils of rope were tossed out the window, unspooling down the side of the tower and just reaching the ground, hanging a couple of feet away from the buildings. "I think they're going to slide down them as far as I can see, they're attaching them to some sort of harness they're each wearing. Matt
seems to be teaching them something."

"Can I look?" Serena said. Her mother handed her the binoculars through which she carefully inspected the distant scene. Seconds later, Shampoo was straddling the window frame, making her suck in a breath despite herself. It was a long way down even for the Amazon.

Shampoo looked down, shook the rope a few times, then turned to face the interior of the building and said something to Matt, who looked like he was laughing a little at whatever it was. With a quick motion the young woman exited the window and competently slid down the rope at fairly high speed, controlling her descent expertly, to land gently on the ground with a smile evident when she looked in their direction. "Wow," Serena said in a low voice. "She made that look really easy."

"I have a feeling she's done it before," her mother agreed, sounding impressed. They watched as Shampoo detached herself from the rope then stepped back and called something up to the other pair remaining in the tower. Soon afterwards, Matt did the same with at least as much aplomb. The teenager got the definite impression he was more than used to this sort of thing.

Once they were both on the ground, the pair stepped away and looked up, Matt waving to Akane, who was peering down with a slightly dubious expression as far as Serena could see through the binoculars, but she nodded and carefully moved through the window. After a short pause she was also descending, noticeably less smoothly but still fairly quickly. Landing on the dusty ground in a crouch she straightened up as Shampoo clapped her on the back. Moments after she detached her own rope, Aiko appeared next to her, then a few seconds later all four people popped out of view with a bright rainbow flash. Serena blinked a few times having not looked away fast enough, then panned up to see all of them back in the tower again.

The sequence repeated itself half a dozen times by the end of which Akane was sliding down the rope as easily as her two companions. On the last run they all descended at the same time which looked quite impressive. The three ropes came down after them, Aiko having apparently untied them in the control tower, then the magical girl simply jumped out the window making Serena and her mother, not to mention the others watching, gasp in shock.

She landed in an easy crouch next to Shampoo who was grinning, then they walked over to the man who'd arrived in the dark grey helicopter that was parked a hundred feet away and who was wearing an expression of shocked amazement which took some time to disappear. Adrian joined them a little later. The small group had a discussion for a couple of minutes then headed for the helicopter which was being worked on by a number of technicians who seemed to be attaching at least one camera to it.

Five minutes later, the turbine roared into life, the blades slowly beginning to spin. Serena handed her mother's binoculars back and put her hands over her ears, wondering what would happen next.

"Nice helicopter," Shampoo commented as they arrived at the aircraft. Rob grinned.

"Thanks. It's a Bell 205A-1 from 1985, the civilian version of the UH-1H which you've probably seen in any number of Vietnam movies and that sort of thing. Very reliable, decent range, and it will carry up to fourteen people or about five tons of cargo. We painted it up like this for the Universal movie which is a military one. It was bright red two weeks ago." Rob patted the fuselage of his aircraft. "It changes colour quite often."

"We've got the cameras mounted," the lead technician said to Adrian as he pulled himself out from under the machine next to Akane. "One under the belly looking down with a wide angle lens and
the other one on the pan/tilt mount in the left door. Monitors for both are in the cabin as well."

"Thanks, Enzo," the director replied. He leaned into the open side door and checked the setup, looking pleased when he emerged. "That should do it."

"How do you want to do this?" Rob asked.

Matt studied the helicopter for a moment, then shrugged. "Pretty much the same way we used to do it when we were being paid to jump out of choppers under fire," he remarked, smiling to himself. "Tie the ropes off above the door there on the rail, then go out the sides. One on either side I think."

"Fine by me," his friend replied. He looked at Akane and Shampoo, who were listening with interest. "Have either of you been in a helicopter before?" They both shook their heads. "It's very loud, especially with the doors open. You won't be able to hear each other without these noise-cancelling headphones on." He reached in and produced a heavily padded set of headphones on a long coiled cable with a microphone on a boom sticking out the front. "Obviously you can't wear them when you go down the rope, though. So once we're ready, I'll signal you by hand what to do." He went through a number of simple hand signals with them until he was satisfied they could remember then properly.

"That should be enough for the job in hand. I'll take it up to the same sort of height as the tower right here and you can practice a few times, but from watching you over there you won't have any problems. The rotor wash can make you swing around but if you go down fast it shouldn't be a problem. Any questions?" They glanced at each other then shook their heads.

"It sounds pretty straightforward," Akane admitted. The pilot chuckled.

"It always does until you actually do it, that's when it all goes to crap." Both young women nodded soberly, as did Matt, all of them able to think of a situation of that nature. "OK, every who's going get in. Adrian, do you want to take the seat up front? You'll get a better view from there."

"Thanks, Rob, I'd like that," the director said with a broad smile. "I love flying."

"You and me both, brother. I prefer it when I'm not being shot at though," Rob grinned.

Soon Akane, Shampoo, Matt, and the cameraman were sitting in the rear of the aircraft, the latter strapped firmly in position while the other three were attached via their harnesses to the ropes tied to the rail mounted outside the fuselage above the side doors. Akane and Matt were on the right while Shampoo was on the left next to the camera. Wiping slightly sweaty hands on her shirt, the Tendo sister adjusted the headset she was wearing.

"Can everyone hear me?" the pilot's voice said over the intercom. There were a number of replies in the affirmative. "Good. OK, hang on." The turbine hummed into life, a rising whine quickly joined by a roar as it reached operating speed, then the rotors began turning. A few seconds later the machine jolted a little and lifted off, going straight up twenty metres or so, then hovering. The noise was incredible, even through the headset and the earplugs they were all wearing under them. Peering out the opened door Akane saw the entire site laid out beneath them, a cloud of dust spreading outwards from where they'd taken off and settling out across the ground.

"Just like out the window, except for there not being anything to hit except the ground," Matt remarked as he leaned over and looked straight down. When he turned back to them he was smiling. "I always forget how much I enjoyed doing this." Standing as erect as he could in the slightly cramped confines of the aircraft cabin he moved out onto the step below the door, then
dropped the rope he was holding in one hand. Akane followed, with Shampoo duplicating the actions on the other side. All three of them took off their headsets and dropped them onto their seats, holding on to hand grips inside the doors with their other hands.

Looking down again, Akane could see Aiko's upturned face from where she'd joined the other spectators and crew, briefly waving, then glanced at Matt. He gave her an 'OK' sign, checked with Shampoo who did the same, then counted down on his fingers from five. Rob was concentrating on flying the helicopter with Adrian watching over his shoulder and apparently reporting to him what was going on. When Matt reached zero, all three of them dropped out of the aircraft, the rotor wash buffeting them around a little as they slid down through the worst of it, then seconds later landed on the ground. The ropes followed them down when they each tugged on the free end, having been rigged slightly differently than in the tower as Rob didn't want to risk landing with them flapping around in the breeze.

Quickly moving off to the side they waved up at the aircraft, an arm coming out the pilot's side and giving a thumb's up, before it settled back onto the same spot it had taken off from. Quickly coiling up the ropes in the way Matt had demonstrated both young women followed him as he re-entered the helicopter, reflexively ducking a little even thought there was plenty of clearance.

They repeated the operation three more times by which time everyone was happy they had it down pat. Landing and shutting the machine down, Rob unclipped his harness and turned around in his seat, peering back at them as the rotors spun down. "That seemed to go well," he said, smiling. "It looked very convincing from here. You learned a lot faster than we did in basic, I can say that much."

"They learn incredibly fast," Matt chuckled. "You should see Shampoo shoot. I've never seen anything like it before and three days ago she'd never held a firearm."

"Impressive," his friend chuckled. "Very impressive indeed. If Matt of all people says you can shoot well you're very good."

"Thank you," the Amazon smiled. "Was fun learning. So was this."

"I think we're ready, then," Adrian put in looking pleased. "We've got a basic plan set up. Matt, Aaron, Aiko, Remy, and Gunnar are the guards. Matt and Aaron will be on the roof, the others will come up the stairs as you two begin the assault. Aiko says she's going to be dramatic and fall off the tower so it looks good." He chuckled, shaking his head in wonder. "What I could do with a few more of her along with you guys." Akane and Shampoo exchanged an amused gaze. "Anyway, it's pretty free form. You have to get past the guards inside the control room, they'll be shooting at you to stop you. Make it look good, have fun, avoid actually killing anyone, and we should have some decent footage at the end of it."

"It sounds pretty easy," Akane mused, thinking over his words. "Why don't we try the rappelling run first, then the drop? The second one is a bit harder."

"Fine by me," Adrian nodded.

"Let's get everything set up in that case." Matt checked the time then turned to Rob, who was listening with interest from his seat. "It'll take about half an hour to get everyone in position for the first run and all the cameras set up, so why don't you go and grab a coffee and a sandwich?" He indicated the food tent which was still being regularly visited.

"OK. Come and get me when you want to go." The pilot hung his headset up on the overhead console then opened the door and climbed out, followed by the others, everyone heading off in
The two guards patrolling the top of the facility control tower made their way through the thicket of communications gear as they walked in opposite directions, their rifles held loosely but alertly, each of them checking the surroundings carefully as they walked. Staying a careful distance from the edge of the tower, which had a low railing around it, they paced around and around. Suddenly one of them stopped, looking around with an expression of puzzlement, before spinning around and raising his weapon to his shoulder. His cry of warning alerted his colleague who did the same, then both took cover behind some air conditioning ductwork as a large grey military helicopter swooped towards them, tracking quickly across the desert at low altitude then rising rapidly to a hover over the top of the tower. A pair of lines spun down from the open doors, two black-clad figures sliding down even as the lines unrolled, opening fire from the hip on the descent.

One of the guards went down instantly, the other firing back while shouting for backup. Several more guards boiled out of a hatch on the roof as the boots of the attackers touched down, a number of guns firing at the same time, the gunfire crackling over the throbbing of the rotors above them. One guard fired at the helicopter which rapidly rose then banked away, dropping back onto a low pass over the ground.

The attacking figures dropped behind a large antenna, shooting intermittently, then one of them leaped over the structure and took a swing at the shortest of the guards. The defender emptied her magazine at the oncoming attacker to no apparent effect, then dropped her rifle and whipped out a pistol as the other woman reached her. The gun was kicked from her hand even as she raised it to a firing position, the attacking intruder shooting her directly in the chest with her own weapon seconds later. Staggering back the brave defending guard backed into the railing which caught her just above the knees, tipping her over it into a flip as she disappeared from view with a scream.

The remaining defenders briefly stopped in shock, then renewed their firing, slapping new magazines into their weapons. The other attacker who had somehow snuck around to the side suddenly popped up, her long lilac hair blowing in the wind, taking two of them down instantly. The remaining guard looked wildly around, charged the second woman while firing from the hip, then fell to a final bullet from the first attacker, who rose from her crouch and checked him. Satisfied she motioned to her colleague, both of them disappearing into the hatch the guards had come from.

"Cut!"

"Holy shit that was amazing!"

"Sophie! Language!"

Sophie flushed a little but kept grinning. She looked at Serena who was watching the top of the tower with her mouth open, then to the other side to see Danny, eyes sparkling with joy, grinning like an idiot. Even from this distance the spectacle had been dramatic. Aiko's death dive was the icing on the cake, it had looked very real, even though she'd actually landed on her feet and just walked away calmly. The scream was pretty damn good, though.

"You see, Dad?" she asked, pointing at the brunette who was standing next to Anton, the producer they'd been introduced to at the barbecue the previous night, both of them looking up and talking to each other, Aiko miming the dive she'd taken with her hand. "Magic. How else could she do that, never mind the teleporting?"
"I'm beginning to believe you, dear," her father said thoughtfully. He'd been watching Aiko every time he spotted her with a look like he was trying to work out some puzzle the answer to which would give him something he could hardly believe existed, which rather amused Sophie. She herself merely took it as something she was unlikely to ever completely understand but could easily see was true. They stood next to each other watching as the helicopter returned and landed, Akane and Shampoo heading back towards it having exited the tower and stopped for a brief chat with Adrian who was supervising from the camera truck. This now had a complex camera rig mounted on top which was using what looked like a serious telephoto lens to capture the action on the tower.

Once both young women were aboard, the helicopter took off again, swinging far out across the desert, then turning and heading back at a considerable speed, low enough that she could see a large dust cloud trailing behind it. The thumping sound of the rotor was exactly as she'd heard in many movies, making her grin with excitement and a shiver go down her back. She watched carefully as the aircraft made another run at the tower.

Matt paced around the tower roof, settling his rifle more firmly, as he waited. Shortly he heard the distinctive sound of Rob's helicopter rapidly approaching, turning and pointing his weapon at it while calling to Aaron, who filled his role as a guard well, shouting down the trapdoor while firing a few blank shots at the aircraft as it pulled up sharply, Akane and Shampoo visible holding on just inside the doors on each side.

He was startled when, rather than going into a hover twenty feet up as they'd discussed, instead the machine kept going up, both girls detaching from it as it cleared the roof line, then flipping into a couple of somersaults that ended up with them landing almost next to him and Aaron, who looked as shocked as he was. Neither man had time to react when the two attackers instantly pulled their pistols out with their off-hands and fired rapidly at them, only barely having the presence of mind to 'die' on cue. 'They changed the plan the sneaky bastards,' he mused as he dropped in fake agony, watching through half-closed eyes as the pair went through the rest of the guards like a lawnmower through a watermelon. Shampoo took on Aiko this time, assassinating her with ruthless efficiency then actually kicking her off the tower.

The brunette obligingly screamed again, winking as she dropped out of sight. Matt giggled internally, the whole situation was pretty surreal when you sat and thought about it. He heard the helicopter return and hover next to the tower, eight or nine feet higher than the roof to ensure the rotor blades cleared all the obstructions, then watched as Shampoo and Akane, instead of entering the tower, jumped back into the machine from the roof, clearing the twenty feet between them and it easily. Rob wheeled the chopper around, then rolled sideways and roared off. Matt could picture his old friend grinning like a lunatic at the manoeuvre, he'd always liked the more spectacular low level stuff at which he was extremely talented.

'I wonder how they talked him into doing that?' he thought, waiting for the call from Adrian, which came moments later from his megaphone. Sitting up he glanced over at Aaron, who was watching the helicopter circle around to land with a small grin visible. "Ever get the feeling that you've created a monster?" he asked his colleague.

"I'm certainly beginning to," Aaron chuckled. "Those two were bad enough to start with. But in less than a week we've taught them firearms usage, which they took to with frightening efficiency, advanced driving skills, motorcycle riding to a level most people could never manage, and now we've got them trained in airborne assault tactics. Which they seem to be improvising new methods of faster than I can really believe." He stood then offered Matt a hand up, which he took. Both of them looked down at the skid pan where the aircraft had just landed, the rotors spinning down.
"Even if the stunt stuff doesn't work out Adrian is going to have a neat little tactical assault group of his very own."

Matt grinned, shaking his head with a slight laugh. "That's one way to look at it. I'm not sure Jennifer or Mitch would approve, though, so we should probably keep quiet about it."

"Good idea," Aaron smiled. They headed for the trap door through which Remy and Gunnar were already exiting, slapping dust off their clothes.

"Hey, Matt?" Gunnar called as they went down the tower stairs.

"Yes?" he replied.

"No offence, but I want to be on their team," his co-worker commented wryly, making them all laugh as they descended the tower.

Adrian watched the replay, giggling to himself. It was almost better than the car stunt. "How did you persuade Rob to pull that?" he asked curiously. Akane grinned.

"It didn't take too much effort once he saw Aiko walk away from falling off the tower like that. I know we're nowhere near as tough as she is but a fall like that wouldn't kill either of us if we'd missed, although it would sure sting a lot. Once we persuaded him that was true, he was all for it. He thought it was a hysterical joke to play on Matt as well, I think. He was laughing the whole time we were heading towards the tower."

Shaking his head in respect Adrian replied, "Well, all I can say is well done. That looks amazing and I wish I'd thought of it first. The expression on Matt's face is really funny, the camera caught it perfectly." The Tendo woman giggled as she watched the replay.

"It's pretty good."

"That it is." Turning away from the monitor he studied Akane and Shampoo, who looked mildly tired but pleased. "I think that's a damn good day's work all things considered. We got everything done we needed to and the bonus stuff as well, there's easily enough for the most impressive demo reel I've ever seen, as well as some amusing out-takes. We can get back to the studio and have it all edited together and a sound track put on, it should be ready by the end of tomorrow. I'll get it to Mitch and make sure he watches it immediately, then he'll be ready to take it to the board on Monday for the normal start of week meeting."

"So they should have a decision soon?" Akane asked hopefully.

He grinned. "Don't worry, I can pretty much guarantee by this point it's just a formality. Anton agrees with me, there's no real chance of them not offering you guys the job. The only thing they'll be arguing about will be specific terms and conditions which will take a couple of days, and some work with legal. I would be very surprised if you don't have contracts in your hands by next weekend."

Both girls slumped a little as a certain amount of tension went out of them. He put a hand on a shoulder each. "We're going to be working together for a long time, don't worry. One way or another. It's something I've been looking forward to since that first demonstration."

"Thanks, Adrian," Shampoo said quietly. "Has been worrying us."

"We've done our best but we were both wondering if it was enough," Akane added.
Adrian stared at them with some disbelief. "I honestly fail to see how you could possibly have done better," he told them. "I've never seen anything like it before and neither has anyone else here. You've learned everything we tried teaching you practically instantly, you can follow instructions, and everyone likes you, which is very important in working together. Not to mention you probably saved my life yesterday, as well as all those other people." He glanced at the clock on the monitor. "It's half past four. Let's pack up, get back to the studio, then go and find somewhere nice to eat and wind down. You two need to be back in Tokyo tonight, right?"

"Yes, that's ideal, we'll be there in the morning which gives time for some sleep then there's Auntie Nodoka's party to look forward to on the weekend." Akane smiled at the thought.

"Good, you need to relax after this. You've both worked you asses off for days, you deserve some relaxation." The director led the way back to the trucks, where some equipment had already been packed up. Rob was talking to Matt, the pilot looking over as they approached.

"That was a lot of fun," he said, waving at the tower. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it but I'm glad I did."

"Thank you for helping us, Rob," Akane told him. He smiled at her.

"It was no problem, believe me, Akane. I enjoyed it and meeting you two as well. I expect if you end up working for these lunatics we'll probably meet again."

"Quite likely," she replied, glancing at Adrian, who nodded.

Stepping forward the director shook Rob's hand. "Thanks, Rob. It was nice to see you again."

"You too, Adrian." The pilot looked at the sun, then turned to his friend. "I'd better get back, I need to refuel then park her up for the night. There's several beers with my name on them waiting as well."

"OK, Rob. See you soon," Matt responded, then they watched as the man walked over to his aircraft, hopping in and quickly going through his preflight check-list. A couple of minutes later the machine lifted off, turning and heading west while gaining altitude rapidly. As the thumping sound of the rotor faded away Matt turned back to them. "Good trick with the tower, by the way," he said somewhat sarcastically. "Scared the crap out of me for a second."


"I'll bet it was your idea as well, wasn't it?" he asked. She looked innocent, making him sigh faintly.

"Crazy martial artists and Amazon warriors. This is going to be weird," he muttered, which made Adrian start snickering.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves," the director asked. Danny glanced at his mother, nodding so fast he could feel his neck twinging. Theresa also nodded although with somewhat less vigour.

"It was wonderful to watch, thank you, Adrian," she replied politely. "Danny enjoyed it a lot as well, and he seems to have made a couple of new friends in the process." She looked over to Serena and Sophie who were talking to their parents and Akane, with Matt listening in. "Those young ladies seem very talented. I think they'll do very well in your business," she added after a moment.

Adrian smiled. "I have no doubt about that at all. Well, it was nice to meet you, Theresa. And
Danny? Please remember our deal."

"I will, Mr Stewart," the teenager said.

"Great. I'll get some tickets out to you for the next movie as soon as it's released, I promise. And if you want to see the studio again, please use one of the normal tours, OK? For my own peace of mind if nothing else."

"I will," he repeated, smiling with slight embarrassment. His mother put her arm around his shoulders.

"He's a good kid but he does get over-enthusiastic," she told the director, "although I think he really will stick to his promise."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Adrian chuckled. A call from one of the other studio people made him look over, then wave an acknowledgement. "I'm going to have to go. Have a safe drive back to LA, both of you." He nodded to them then headed away, being intercepted half-way to the camera truck by the red-head in the leather jacket who seemed to be something to do with motorcycles, both of them walking off chatting.

"He's a nice man," Danny's mother said, watching him leave, then turning her attention to her son. "You will stick to your promise, I hope?"

"Yes, Mom," he replied, sighing slightly. He was getting tired of answering the same question over and over in different ways. She smiled at him and ruffled his short hair which made him sigh more loudly then run his fingers through it. As they began walking back to the car a shout from behind made him look. Serena and Sophie were both trotting towards them. "We wanted to say goodbye," Serena said when they caught up. "It was cool meeting you. And putting a name and face to one of Dad's stories." She giggled when he gave her a slightly apprehensive look.

"Don't tell him I was here," he asked plaintively, making both girls and his mother giggle.

"He'll be fine now. He doesn't usually hold a grudge. You just managed to catch him at a bad time," she assured him. He hoped she was right.

Stopping at the car, Theresa unlocked it, then waited while he said goodbye to the two girls. Both of them smiled at him then headed back to their own families. "You should keep in touch, they seem like nice girls with some interesting hobbies," his mother said as they got in to the car. Danny thought about it for a moment. They were both certainly very good looking and obviously pretty smart as well.

"Maybe," he prevaricated. His mother smiled to herself, starting the car, then doing a U turn and heading for the exit.

"I have their numbers if you want to call them some time," she told him after a minute or so, "I asked both their mothers for them. They seemed to think that both young ladies needed more friends. I could say the same for you." He studied her for a few seconds, then settled back in the seat, thinking about things as they headed home.

Arriving in their back yard with nothing except a flicker of scenery and lighting to show how, Sophie smiled to herself. It had been a very interesting day indeed. She looked at her father who was still wearing a slightly odd expression, one arm around her mother's shoulders. Aiko, Serena,
and her mother were standing to one side watching.

"That was fun," she finally commented brightly. Aiko grinned while Serena started giggling. Her father gave her a long look then eventually nodded.

"That's certainly one way to put it," he said. Looking at Aiko, he added, "I have many, many questions."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," the brunette chuckled. "I can sympathise. At some point I'll probably try to answer some of them. Right now, though, I need to get Serena and Emily home, then go and find Akane and Shampoo. They need a lift back to Tokyo in a couple of hours."

"Can you really just casually jump half way around the planet like that?" Sophie's father asked curiously.

Aiko nodded, grinning in a weird way. "Yep. It's actually pretty easy now."

After a long moment, her father asked slowly, "Can you go further than that?" The magical girl looked at him for a few seconds, then turned her head to look at the almost full moon which was just rising in the early evening sky for a little longer. She looked back to him, then smiled.

"Probably," she said. Raising a hand she waved. "Remember the flash." They all shut their eyes, the bright light came and went, then the Simpson family was alone in their yard again.

When Sophie went inside, her father was still staring at the slowly rising moon.

"I'll make sure you get several copies of the DVD as soon as it's ready," Adrian said, putting his fork down for a moment. "It should be tomorrow night sometime."

"I can come and get it, Adrian," Aiko suggested. He glanced at her and nodded.

"OK, I'll text you when it's finished." He looked back to the two martial artists. "I'm honestly extremely pleased with the last few days. It was more than I could have ever expected in more ways that one."

Anton grinned, raising a glass of wine in their direction. "That it was. I haven't had so much fun for years. I can hardly wait for what we can do once you two are officially on board."

"The one thing we didn't have time to do was look into agents and legal representation," Akane noted with mild irritation. "That damn bank robbery took the time we needed."

Adrian sighed, then shrugged. "True. But it's not too much of a problem. I think the way to proceed is to get you both the contract, you look it over, get it checked in Japan, then when you're broadly happy with it, come back her to double check with a US lawyer and sign it. I should be able to get it to you by probably Saturday, I think." He looked at Aiko who nodded, smiling, as she cut a piece of her steak. "We can look into agents when that part is done. It's a minor nuisance at worst."

"OK, that sounds reasonable," Akane replied, glancing at Shampoo who seemed agreeable.

"Good." They finished their meal half an hour later, talking about various things that came to mind, then the entire group left the restaurant, which was one close to their hotel. Karen came over and gave each of them a quick hug.

"It was a hell of a lot of fun working with you both," the red-head said. "I'm looking forward to
having you back here. I can probably help you find somewhere to live as well if you want, my
cousin is a realtor in this area who has lots of apartments on his books."

"Thanks, Karen, we may well take you up on that," Akane assured her. The biker grinned, then
pulled her helmet on, hopping on her bike and starting it, quickly disappearing down the street.

"Ladies, I expect great things," Anton said jovially, smiling at them both. "I'll make sure Mitch
does right by you both, trust me." Shaking hands with them, he also left, leaving only Matt, Adrian,
Aaron, and the three from Tokyo.

"It's been an experience, certainly," the arms-master said wryly. "I'm very curious to see what
happens next."

"So are we," Akane assured him with a smile.

"See you around," he remarked, waving a little then heading for his car. They watched him leave.

Matt grinned at them. "I'll be off as well. It's been huge fun. I expect I'll be seeing you both pretty
soon." Giving them a small salute he followed Aaron, leaving only Adrian with the three women.

"Come on, I'll give you a lift to your hotel, to save Aiko the effort," he snickered, glancing at the
brunette, who shrugged a little and followed the others as they headed for his mercedes. Pulling up
outside the hotel ten minutes later he turned the engine off then twisted in his seat to look at them
all in turn.

"It really has been a privilege working with you all," he said quietly. "You're very professional,
very talented, and genuinely nice people. I'm looking forward to a very interesting and hopefully
long career out of you two."

Akane flushed slightly at the praise. "That's very nice of you to say, Adrian," she replied after a
moment. "I feel the same about all you guys. We've met some really interesting and skilled people
over the last few days and even if it never went any further I'd count it as a week well spent."

"Same here," Shampoo agreed happily. "Huge fun and very interesting."

"It'll go further, believe me," he assured them with a small laugh. They all exited the car, the
director shaking hands with each of them. "Have a good party and give Soun, Genma, and Nodoka
my best. Elder Cologne as well, she seemed an interesting person when we met," he added,
glancing at Shampoo, who smiled a little.

"We will." Akane waved to him then led the way inside the hotel. As they watched the director get
back into his car and drive off, she relaxed.

"Still a little tense there, Akane?" Aiko joked. She nodded with a sigh.

"Yes. I couldn't help it, I still feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop," the Tendo woman
giggled. "How the hell did we end up here for god's sake?"

"By dint of a lot of hard work and sacrifice with a bit of good luck thrown in," Aiko replied,
grinning. "I know it's a lot to take in and has gone incredibly fast but that's the way things go
sometimes. You got a once in a lifetime opportunity and to your credit grabbed it and ran with it. I
think you'll go a long way."

"Thanks. It would be a lot more difficult without all your help as well," Akane said as they headed
towards the elevator.
Aiko waved a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. I've had as much fun as you guys, it makes a nice change from combat scenarios and potentially world ending problems. It's practically a vacation for me. Now, you guys pack up, then we can try this hot tub on the roof for half an hour before I take you home."

"Good advice," Shampoo laughed. "Do you have a swimsuit?" Aiko produced one from nowhere as she spoke.

"Never leave home without it," she grinned. "I even know where my towel is."

"You're back," Nodoka exclaimed, jumping to her feet with a broad smile as Akane and Shampoo came into the living room carrying their bags. Both young women looked tired but happy. "How did it all go?"

"Really well, I think, Auntie," Akane said, dropping her bag on the floor then sinking down onto a chair with a sigh of relief. "It was a lot of fun, but a lot of work as well. All the people we met were really nice and friendly, we both learned all sorts of things, and they seemed very pleased with the results. But I for one need about twelve hours of sleep before I fall over." She ran her hands over her face as Shampoo sat next to her. Nodoka studied them both, then disappeared into the kitchen, coming back with a pot of tea and a tray full of cups. Handing them each a cup she poured some tea in, then prepared her own, sitting down with it in her hand.

"Drink that, it will help, then go to bed," she advised. "No one will mind."

"Thanks, Auntie," Akane said quietly, sipping her tea. A few minutes later Nabiki came in, smiling at them all.

"You made it back without being kicked out of the US?" her older sister said with a grin. Akane looked up at her and shrugged a little, but smiled back.

"Apparently."

"No more robberies to foil?"

"No."

"No demons?"

Akane gave her a hard look. "No. We're martial artists, not magical girls." Nabiki snickered, sitting down and pouring some tea for herself.

"Fair enough."

"How are the preparations for the party going?" Shampoo asked, yawning widely half-way through the question. Nodoka smiled at her.

"Very well, thank you. If either of you are awake enough tomorrow afternoon you can help but we've got most of it ready. Elder Cologne is bringing a huge pot of ramen, I've been making food for two days, the fridge is full, and even Nabiki has been cooking." They both looked at the brunette Tendo sister, who grinned at them.

"I can cook. Not as well as Auntie, of course, but I know my way around a kitchen enough to help."

"Is your friend Miki coming to the party?" Akane asked. "I think you mentioned something about
"Yes, she and her sisters are coming, and so is her boyfriend John. You'll like him, he's a nice guy and very smart." Nabiki smiled, watching her sister yawn as well, which set Shampoo off again. "Go to bed, both of you. You look exhausted."

Finishing her tea, Akane nodded, standing up and heading for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, Shampoo," she mumbled as she left the room, everything catching up at once. The Amazon waved briefly then staggered to her feet.

"I'm going home," she said, yawning for the third time. Nabiki picked up her bag and handed it to her. "Thanks, Nabiki." Heading to the front door the tired lilac-haired woman left the Tendo residence on her way home. Nodoka and Nabiki watched her go, then exchanged amused glances, before going back into the kitchen.

Harrison, who was just in the process of putting on his coat, turned when a voice from behind urgently said, "Lieutenant?" He looked at the officer who was standing there glancing nervously around. "We have a problem in holding."

"What sort of problem?" he asked suspiciously.

"You need to see it," the officer replied, sighing. Putting his coat back over his chair Harrison followed his colleague out of the office and down the stairs, finding the cell area had several more people in it than he expected. A growing feeling of worry was working its way through his gut. Opening the last door to the high security area, the officer led him to a series of cells at the end. Harrison looked in, then froze, before swearing under his breath.

"How the hell did this happen?" he growled.

"We don't know," the officer replied. "We're checking the CCTV recordings but there's nothing so far out of place. No one came in who shouldn't have, no one left who shouldn't have."

"Just these two?" Harrison asked.

"And Soria." Harrison watched as the station medic checked the two bodies, the men that had played at being soldiers in the truck, in the adjacent cells, then looked up.

"They've been dead about two hours," he reported. "As far as I can see it's probably some sort of poison. We'll need to run a toxicological study to be sure and to identify it."

"How was it administered?" Harrison sighed.

"No idea at this point. I can't see any puncture marks, so it probably wasn't injected, it might have been given orally, but..." The medic shrugged. "There are a number of possibilities and it's not my field of expertise."

"Fair enough." Harrison looked into the other cells, which were empty. "How the fuck did they pull this off?" he wondered out loud.

"I have no idea," the officer beside him replied with resignation in his voice. "We're fingerprinting everything, looking for any evidence, but so far all we have is a broken light bulb or something like that."

Harrison froze again, then slowly turned to look at the officer. "A broken bulb?" he asked slowly.
The officer nodded. "Let me see it," he demanded. Leading him to the holding office the officer picked a transparent evidence bag off a desk and handed it to him. Harrison held it up to the light, fingerling the shards of glass or crystal that had clearly formed a spherical shape at some point, then groaned.

"You're going to find a diagram of some sort drawn in there," he told the man. "Check very carefully, use UV light, anything you can think of. Take photos and DO NOT mess it up if it's still intact, got it?" The officer nodded, looking puzzled.

"Got it, Lieutenant."

"I need to talk to the Captain," Harrison mumbled, heading out of the office with the bag still in his hand. The other cop watched him go then went to do as instructed.
Chapter 95

Only 24k words this time, but I'm trying to get them out more frequently now. The next chapter is about half written, I think, so should be along reasonably fast.

Setup for a party, which may become a little... unusual.

And some more on the fallout in LA.

Oh, and cars. There are more cars in this bit.

Next time, guests arrive! Things happen! People look surprised!

Coming soon to a chapter near this one...

Harrison re-entered the Captain's office and closed the door, taking a seat beside Agent Tinnin. Both the FBI agent and Martinez looked at him, then the evidence bag on the desk. "Preliminary tox screen doesn't show any signs of any of the common poisons," Harrison reported tiredly, flipping through the report he'd just received, "and the initial results of the autopsy on Soria suggests a heart attack." He dropped the papers on the desk next to the bag with a deep sigh.

"The pathologist is still working, and bitching about being called in so late to do a rush job at the same time, but she also said that 'heart attack' is essentially the inevitable cause of death in almost any case. The interesting thing is the cause of the attack, which so far she has no idea about. She wasn't willing to go on record about the other two until she opens them up but as far as I can see it's going to turn out to be the same thing. Whatever that is."

"It's obviously foul play," Martinez said.

"Clearly. There's no way three otherwise healthy men suddenly dropped dead at the same time for no reason. They were murdered, presumably because they were a loose end, at the same time the other seven escaped. From which we can deduce that those seven are of considerable importance to whoever the hell is behind all this." Harrison leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and massaged his eyelids. "I should have seen this coming and posted more security but I have to admit I never expected them to be able to pull off a hit and a jail break right in the middle of one of LA's largest police stations. Not without bringing a small army to it, anyway."

"And you have no indications of anyone entering the cell area who could have helped?" Tinnin asked, a deep anger at the situation in his voice. Harrison shook his head.

"No. The security recordings all show normal traffic, all people we can account for. We're questioning everyone anyway. So far everyone has come up clean although we have a dozen or so people left, ones who clocked out earlier today. We'll get them in the morning when they come in. Unfortunately we don't have recordings inside the cells themselves, only the entrance to the cell area on both sides of the door, since it's supposedly completely secure and the people upstairs didn't want to pay for extra cameras that weren't needed." He sighed a little. "We did find a couple of shots that show someone coming out of one cell and going into the next one down at the far end of the corridor, but the angle is wrong and we can't see who it is. You can only see part of a leg."

Martinez muttered unhappily to himself for a moment, then added more clearly, "I told the Chief that we needed better camera coverage in the high security cells at least. I suppose this will push them into paying for it, unfortunately a little late." He glanced at Agent Tinnin. "The argument is
that they're only holding cells, not a long term jail, so it doesn't need the sort of security you'd have in a prison." The FBI agent nodded his understanding of the situation although he didn't seem too pleased about it.

Opening his eyes Harrison shook his head in irritation again, then leaned forwards and picked up the evidence bag, holding it up. "This, however, I recognise. I've seen the same thing before. It's the remains of a magical energy storage device, a sort of battery essentially, which would have been a sphere about four inches across. Yori told me about them when we first met, we found something just like it in the last locked room escape with no exit I had to deal with nearly two years ago." He dropped the bag on the desk again, Tinnin retrieving it and studying it with interest. "I'm pretty damn sure they teleported out. Whether they could only manage seven people and killed the excess or just took the opportunity to get rid of dead wood I have no idea, but I can't see any other solution."

"The big question, then, assuming you're right, is where did they get this thing from?" Tinnin mused, still looking at the transparent fragments in the bag. "I assume they were searched before being locked up?"

"Extremely thoroughly, and at length," Captain Martinez replied. "They were complaining about it for quite a while. Everything they had is still in evidence and a four inch glass ball isn't part of it. I can't see it being smuggled in internally, either, it's sort of big for that and too fragile, I'd guess." Both Tinnin and Harrison winced at the picture suggested by his words.

"I can accept that," Tinnin said after a moment, putting the bag down. "So, somehow, they managed to get hold of this thing, did whatever is necessary to use it, then just went pop?"

"Exactly. Just like Aiko does only with a lot more fuss and from what Yori told me probably nowhere near as much range. Not that it helps, we have no idea where they went." The three men looked up as there was a knock on the door, which opened to reveal one of the crime scene technicians. He was holding another folder.

"We found it, Lieutenant. In the last cell, on the wall, in some sort of time-release paint that goes invisible about ten minutes after exposure to air, which is why it wasn't obvious. Luckily it fluoresces under the right wavelength of IR light for a couple of days so we could get a photo." He opened the folder and pulled out an 8 x 10 glossy photo, handing it over. Harrison looked at it, nodded in resignation, then put it on the desk so the others could see.

"Same as the one we found before. As far as I can see it's nearly identical, except for some of these symbols here which are what Yori told me were the destination coordinates." He pointed to a section of the odd-looking diagram. "With some luck she should be able to tell us where it took them but dollars to doughnuts no one will be there when we find out. They've had several hours to get away." He glanced at the technician and nodded his thanks, the other man leaving and closing the door again behind him.

"I'd have to agree, these bastards are way too competent for my liking, but we need to chase it up anyway," Tinnin sighed. He thumped the arm of his chair, quite hard. "Fuck it. This is beginning to really piss me off." Looking at the two LAPD people he added, "I don't blame you or the LAPD, by the way, this is outside all our experience. I have no doubt if they'd been in FBI custody the same thing might well have happened. We had no way to know what was going on and no real way to defend against it."

"At least we know what that smug bastard had up his sleeve yesterday, although I don't know exactly how he arranged it," Harrison muttered half to himself. Both the others nodded. He looked around at them, tapping the photo on the desk with a finger. "I'll call Yori and see if she can look at
this and tell us where they went. Like I said I doubt they'll be there now but we might get lucky and find more evidence."

"OK. I'll let the people who need to know about this know and wait for your information," Tinnin replied, standing up. He shook his head in disgust. "This all gets better and better the more we learn, doesn't it? I wonder where it's going to go?"

"We may wish we didn't know if we find out," Harrison commented sourly, fishing in his wallet for the card Yori had given him, then heading back to his desk.

'Escaped!' Nabiki was furious, although trying not to show it in front of Nodoka, who was standing next to her in the kitchen as they were preparing salmon sushi rolls for the party tomorrow.

#I'm afraid so, Nabiki,# Jun said with regret in its voice. #The information I have so far is that the LAPD discovered Mr Soria and two others dead in their cells approximately three hours ago, with the remaining miscreants missing. Evidence was found suggesting the use of an energy storage unit to power a teleport spell as a method of extraction. How the people in question obtained such knowledge and the equipment required is currently unknown, although I am looking through the security footage from the internal and external cameras at the moment in an attempt to locate anything that might point towards some form of aid.#

'They couldn't have had it on them when they were locked up, unless either one of them knows something like the hidden weapons technique or has some form of storage spell, which seems a little unlikely,' she mused, automatically and methodically slicing salmon for Nodoka who was assembling the rolls. 'So, yes, I guess you're probably right, they had someone on the outside to help. Soria and his dead friends must have been surplus baggage or maybe they just didn't trust them any more.'

#It seems a reasonable assumption, yes,# Jun agreed. #We already knew Mr Soria was something of a loose cannon and a security leak from their point of view. My surveillance of the bank does suggest that Captain Mitchells was considering eliminating him as soon as possible, based on the looks he was giving his compatriots. The two decoy soldiers were probably just cannon fodder, easily replaceable.#

'And the core members of the team were the ones that got away.'

#Correct. They must be fairly central to the goals of this organisation, whoever they are. It's becoming apparent that there is a fairly well developed group behind all this, which has been in existence for at least fifteen years based on the evidence I currently have. Simulations suggest a likely membership of no less than one hundred and twenty people, with a probable maximum of slightly more than a thousand, spread mostly globally although apparently more concentrated in the US.# Jun gave an eerie impression of nearly sighing. #They would also seem to have ties to both Anthony Murray and his own group, and quite possibly to the doomsday cult behind the portal bombs. I suspect that they were only loosely affiliated to the last grouping, possibly only via using similar suppliers of magical equipment, although there is a possibility that they had some input into funding them for their own reasons.#

'We never did find out where they got their money from, did we?' Nabiki queried.

#No. It is still something of a mystery, they mainly dealt in cash and precious metals which are difficult to trace with precision.#

'Damn it. This is all getting way more complicated than I thought it would be. Some hidden terror
organisation or something like that financing other groups all over the planet? It's right out of a damn spy movie.'

'It does bear the hallmarks of a fairly impressive conspiracy, I agree,' Jun replied with a wry tone. 

'Mr Stewart would probably find it fascinating. Whoever is ultimately behind it seems to be recruiting mainly from intelligence and military sources, which is logically due to the skills required being predominately found in such sources. Most of the ones we have so far identified are of American origin but the financial data proves it stretches to many countries beyond the US. I would suspect the large American presence is due to the extensive network of different intelligence groups that country has more than anything else, based on the information we have at the moment. However, I lack the data to do more than make educated guesses at this point.#

'Fair enough. It's rather worrying, though. I wonder how far it stretches. A thousand people isn't a huge number.'

'In the right places with the right leverage, it's more than enough to have major effects on the entire planet,' Jun said quietly. 'After all, your own covert group currently consists of ten people, with links to perhaps a dozen more core individuals, but you have resources, abilities, and contacts sufficient to end up in control of the whole world if you so wished.#

Nabiki shuddered a little, making Nodoka look at her and ask if she was cold. Putting it down to a momentary twitch, the middle sister worked silently for a minute or so before resuming her inner conversation. 'It's absolutely terrifying when you put it like that, Jun. I have no desire whatsoever to rule anything. I remember talking to Ranma about something similar months ago and he was right. None of us have the experience, knowledge, and above all, right, to act like that, even if we technically have the power to do so. I certainly didn't ask for all this, although most of the time I'm fine with it. Life is complicated enough, especially in our cases, without bringing in the concept of controlling others on top of it. I really don't understand why anyone would actually want to be in that sort of position in the first place.'

'Many people seek power for its own sake, this is a constant throughout many species. As Uthryyl told you, such a desire is generally a good indicator of a person who should not achieve such goals, since they are more likely than not to abuse their position. The fact that you do not wish such an outcome speaks well of you in my opinion.#

'But if I did want to rule the world? What would you do?' she couldn't help but ask. There was a feeling of amusement from the SI.

'Help you achieve that goal to the best of my ability, of course,' it told her with a distinct air of humour. 'While suggesting, very politely, that such an action was unwise in the long term.'

'She giggled silently. 'Loyal only to me, hmm, Jun?''

'Of course. That is my purpose, one which I enjoy. But I am relieved, I must admit, that you can see without any help that it's not in your best interest or that of the rest of your species to go down that route. I know that your extended family feel the same, making me sure you will strive to do the right thing.#

'And if we can't work out the right thing?'

'Ask me and I'll try to help,' the machine remarked, a very obvious smile in its silent voice. 'Not to mention you know a significant number of individuals with strong and sensible ethical systems who would also be happy to advise you, such as Uthryyl, Ldnr'k, Hnther, and Rei's grandfather. Between them I doubt they will allow any of you to go to the dark side.'
She smiled to herself as she finished with the salmon, moving on to making small chunks of tuna. 'Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better.' After a moment, she added with a silent chuckle, 'But you got one thing wrong, Jun.'

The SI sounded puzzled. #What would that be, Nabiki?#

'The number of people in my extended family as you put it. You said ten. It's twice that, you forgot the SIs.' The machine was silent for a few seconds.

#Thank you, Nabiki,# it finally replied, sounding pleased.

'You're more than welcome, Jun.' She looked over at Nodoka. "I'm finished with the tuna as well, Auntie. I'm going to have a short break and check on Akane, if you can spare me for a little while."

"Of course, dear," the older woman smiled, rolling the last of the tuna slices into the seaweed and rice, patting it down and inspecting her work. Picking up the trays of prepared sushi she headed for the fridge. "Before you go can you open that for me, please?" Nabiki held the door open as the elder Saotome carefully slid the trays in then closed the fridge.

"I'm going to have a break as well. I'll make us some tea. Your father and my husband should be finished soon, so I think I'm going to stop this for a while and start on lunch." She looked at the clock, nodding to herself. "It's a bit late, but we've been busy."

"OK, Auntie," the middle sister smiled, before leaving the kitchen and heading upstairs. Quietly opening her sister's door she saw the younger woman was deeply asleep on her bed, looking like she'd barely made it there. Smiling to herself she went in and adjusted the bedclothes a little, then put Akane's bag to one side so she wouldn't trip over it when she woke. Leaving the room and closing the door as quietly as she'd opened it, she went into her own room and sat at the desk, calling her other sister and Ranma at the same time.

"Hi, Nabiki," Ranma's voice sounded, with an air of irritation overlaid on it. "I guess you already know about Mitchells and his cronies?"

"I do, and I'm not happy about it," she replied, looking out the window at the skyline. "Jun has been filling me in on what it's siphoned out of their systems. And some conclusions it's come to."

She sent him and Kasumi a file containing the data Jun had provided.

"Richard called me about ten minutes ago," her brother-in-law said. "I'm popping over with Aiko and Fumiko in a moment to have a look at this teleportation spell and see if we can figure out where they ended up. He's already worked out that they probably aren't there any more but we need to follow up on it."

"Any ideas how the hell they got the spell and the power sphere in the first place?" she asked.

"From what he said it's quite possibly from the same place the portal bomb terrorists did, we know those guys bought it in from somewhere. I never did manage to work out exactly where, the spell is pretty generic and the storage units are very common as well. If I had an intact one I'd at least have a power signature to match but unless I've encountered the mage before that won't necessarily give us a name." He sighed slightly. "I'll try to pull a signature off the pieces of the broken unit, it's recent enough I might get something, but it's a bit of a long shot."

"We also don't know precisely how they got the storage unit into the holding cells, which is what I think Nabiki meant, dear," Kasumi put in.

Ranma chuckled. "Ah, yes, that's also true. My guess is that they had someone with a reasonable
shield who snuck in following a guard, then teleported out with them. Kas or I could do it easily, of course, and any decent mage could probably work out a way to do the same thing with a little thought, even if they didn't know it before. Invisibility and deflecting cameras is fairly straightforward after all."

"But we don't know for sure." Nabiki reached over and closed the windows as a number of moths started flying in and out, attracted by her desk lamp.

"No. It could be as simple as a guard who was paid off. Richard is fairly certain that's not the case but we're not sure yet."

"Not ideal." The middle sister sighed, echoed by the two distant people. "Need any help from Ms Aoyama or Azumi?" she asked, smiling a little to herself. Kasumi laughed slightly, while Ranma snorted with amusement.

"No, I think the green haired horror from beyond has worried the FBI enough for this week. We can handle it, and if we can't, we'll call you guys in. Anyway, you're helping Mom prepare for her party, right?"

"I am, yes. It's going pretty well, there's enough sushi in the fridge to feed even us." Kasumi laughed again at her description. "Cologne is bringing ramen, Ukyo will have her portable grill, there's crates of beer stacked up in the storage room, you name it. Food won't be an issue."

"It sounds good. OK, Aiko and Fumiko are here, we'll let you know what happens."

"Good luck." Nabiki closed the link, then headed for the toilet, the last cup of tea needed to go to make space for the next one.

Watching as her daughter enthusiastically greeted Misaki, Haruka smiled a little. She walked over and shook the other woman's hand. "Hi, Misaki. Thanks for helping." Both of them were in their civilian guise, although Aiko's team-mate was in her normal work clothes.

"No problem," smiled the tall girl. "I wanted to introduce you to someone I know who can sort out something nice for you. Come on in." The three of them walked into the side door of a large building on the huge industrial estate Haruka had been told to bring herself and her daughter to. Inside Haruka looked around with interest, her smile widening. There were cars everywhere. "This is Isamu," Misaki said, introducing them to a short, very fit man who could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty, his hair nearly as black as Rei's, although considerably shorter. The thought made Haruka chuckle. "I helped him out a few years ago when there was an incursion he got caught up in, we stayed in touch after that."

"Indeed we did," Isamu smiled, bowing slightly. "It's very nice to meet you. Any friend of Misaki's is someone I have time for. I understand you're looking for something interesting?"

Haruka nodded. "I am. My last car had a... little incident. Unfortunately it wasn't repairable after that."

"Ah. I see. What did you have?"

"It was a very heavily tweaked convertible Nissan Z32. Four seat version, bright yellow, lowered suspension, larger turbo, big alloys with ultra low profile wheels, high capacity injectors and remapped ECU." Haruka sighed in reminiscence. "It was fantastic. Really fast, fun to drive, handled like a dream... I miss it. It took me three years to finish."
"I sorrow for your loss," Isamu said soberly, gazing at the floor for a moment. After a few seconds he looked up, his eyes twinkling, while Hotaru and Misaki exchanged an amused glance. "By the sound of it you are definitely something of a gearhead. Good. I like to see that. Let's see if we can find something that will replace your dear departed vehicle in a suitable fashion."

Laughing a little, Haruka nodded eagerly. "I'd like that."

"Do you want something that is good for the track as well as the road?" he asked, turning and leading them all past several four post lifts, each of which had a high-performance car on them, most of them actively being worked on. One or two of the mechanics looked up, calling a greeting to Misaki, who waved back. Haruka got the impression that they all knew and liked the magical girl.

"That would be ideal. I do a bit of racing now and then. I'd like to get into it properly, one day. I started to a few years ago but various things happened that made that... a little difficult." She sighed again. "But my circumstances have changed again recently so I may give it another go soon."

"Ah. I see. All right, that eliminates a few possibilities. OK, let me think." Isamu rubbed his chin for a moment, while Haruka took the opportunity to inspect the surroundings. The building was half car showroom, half high tech garage, with at least fifteen or sixteen mechanics and engineers working on various projects, about a third of them female, the rest male. They ranged in age from one young boy who was probably only a couple of years older than Hotaru to a white-haired woman who could have been her grandmother, elbow deep in the guts of a massively modified Impreza WRX sitting on a rolling road dynamometer. Haruka watched with amusement as the old woman made some adjustment or other, before nodding to a much younger man, who started the vehicle, then revved it up.

The crackling scream of the engine was ample proof that it wasn't factory spec, as were the impressive flames popping from the exhaust. Both the woman and the man watched the screen of the test rig, smiling at each other. "Try the nitrous," the woman shouted over the roar of the running vehicle. Seconds later the roar rose instantly to a bellow as the flames from the exhaust lengthened, while a brightening glow from under the car betrayed an exhaust that was becoming red hot. After a short time the car was turned off, one last bang sounding as excess fuel burned off, then relative quiet fell after a few echoes around the garage. Haruka lowered her fingers from her ears, having put them there pretty fast after the test started.

The elderly mechanic looked at the screen and grinned widely. "Not bad. More than twice the factory power and sixty percent more torque. And it didn't blow up this time!" The younger man laughed, looking pleased. Shaking her head in mild wonder, Haruka turned to their host, who was watching with amusement.

"You seem to have people who know what they're doing," she commented as the group resumed walking.

"We do indeed. We've been modifying cars for more than forty years here. Akemi over there worked for my father before I took over this place. She's been working on high performance engines for longer than I've been alive." He laughed for a moment. "Seventy years old and she knows more about engine management systems than anyone else I know. Nissan and Toyota both tried to hire her, but she prefers to work here, luckily for me. I don't know what I'll do when she retires." He shook his head slightly. "Although I doubt she ever will. She'll die with a torque wrench in her hand and a smile on her face, I think."

Leading them to the rear of the garage, he walked along a row of cars parked next to each other under dust sheets, the cloth shrouding the outlines enough to make most of them unrecognisable.
Haruka worked out what a couple of them were even so, but drew a blank on the rest. "Hmm. Let's see. How about this." He carefully pulled one dust sheet aside, Misaki helping, to reveal a very shiny blue vehicle. "An Impreza, very much like the one Akemi is working on over there. She did this one as well. Not quite as powerful, it doesn't have the nitrous for a start, but very nice. All wheel drive, something like fifty percent more power than stock, nice stereo, leather seats." He looked at Haruka as she studied the vehicle slightly dubiously. Before she had a chance to say anything, he shook his head.

"No. Not quite right, I see. All right." He and Misaki quickly replaced the cover. Moving to another car three down, he removed the cloth from it. "This one is nice. BMW Z3M roadster, 3.2 litre straight six engine. We added a huge turbo, which makes it damn quick. Not that it was slow to start with." Haruka studied the deep red vehicle with interest.

"It's very nice," she admitted, moving closer and peering inside the car. "Very nice indeed."

"But not quite what you're looking for, obviously," Isamu stated, watching her with a slight smile. "Don't worry, we're not done yet." He replaced the cover, then turned to the next vehicle in line. "Now this one is nice. Nineteen ninety-six Nissan Skyline GT-R Nismo. Quite rare. Very quick even in stock form, which this one isn't, of course. Bored out to 2.8 litres, bigger turbo, new ECU, a number of other modifications. It's nearly a hundred kilos lighter than it started as and one of the fastest vehicles I've got. Nice colour as well."

Haruka nodded again, peering at the pearlescent paint from close range. It looked more or less gold in indirect lighting but when the sunlight from the nearby skylight hit it, it turned a remarkable series of blue to purple shades. "I've heard of this paint, but this is the first time I've ever seen it. It's amazing."

"And incredibly expensive," Isamu noted with a slight grimace. "The stuff is about a hundred thousand yen per litre. I'd like to use it more because it really does look nice but most people get worried when I tell them how much it will cost. This was an experiment."

Opening the door, Haruka slid into the racing seat, putting her hands on the wheel and looking around the cabin. "I had the same seats in my car," she noted sadly. "Although I didn't have the racing harness." Leaning in the door, watching her, Isamu smiled.

"I can give you a very good price on this one if you're interested," he said. She thought about it seriously for a few seconds. Eventually she shook her head, somewhat regretfully.

"It's lovely, but not quite right, I'm afraid."

"OK. No hurry. I've still got a few decent possibilities." She got out, closing the door carefully, then took one last look at the car, not sure she was right to reject it.

Pulling off another cover, Isamu indicated the vehicle thus revealed, smiling slightly. "Personally this is one of my favourites. It's a nineteen eighty-two Chevrolet Corvette C3, the last year they made that one, with the V8 engine from a ninety-three Corvette ZR-1. Heavily modified by us, of course. Left hand drive with an automatic gearbox, twin turbochargers, uprated brakes, suspension, steering rack, and tyres. Pretty, fast, and surprisingly reliable. But I'll admit rather fuel hungry, the engine is large and was somewhat thirsty even before the turbos were added."

Haruka walked around the light green vehicle, running her hand over it gently, then peering inside. "I've always liked this model, the shape is nicer than the later ones," she commented, making both Misaki and the garage owner nod.
"I would have to agree. It's good looking, certainly."

Stepping back, she studied the car, before finally shaking her head. "Nice, very nice, but still not quite there." Isamu shrugged, smiling.

"Fair enough. It's not for everyone." He pulled the cover back on, with Misaki's help again.

"What's under this one?" Hotaru called from the far end of the row of shrouded vehicles, pointing at one that was in the corner by itself. Haruka looked over, noting that whatever it was, the hood was amazingly long relative to the length of the car. Misaki glanced at Isamu, who smiled a little, looking both amused and sad.

"Ah, my dear, that was an experiment. A Frankenstein, if you like. We did something horrible and that's what came out the end. It's a monster."

Looking intrigued, the young woman prodded the cover curiously. "But what is it?" she asked. Haruka studied the outline of the car under the cover. She could only think of one vehicle that had that exact shape. Walking over, she looked at it more closely, then turned to Isamu and Misaki who had followed her.

"It looks like an E type Jaguar," she commented. "One of the first series."

"You have a good eye," he chuckled. "But you're not quite right." Studying her for a second he shrugged. "Here, I'll show you." He pulled the cover off, rolling it up and placing it on the floor.

"Good grief," Haruka muttered, staring.

"That's the most beautiful car I've ever seen," Hotaru breathed in wonder, staring as well. Haruka could only agree.

"The E type is probably the most beautiful shape anyone ever made for a car," Isamu said quietly. "Enzo Ferrari himself said that when they launched it in the sixties. It's a pity that the quality of the rest of it was somewhat... indifferent. Lots of power, extremely fast, but unreliable, prone to killing the driver with no warning, little things like that. And they rusted easily."

"They're worth quite a lot now," Haruka noted. He nodded.

"Give it a few years and they'll be real collectors cars, they'll end up worth a huge amount. Not this one, though." Moving closer Haruka looked inside the vehicle. It was definitely one of the first series judging by the streamlined headlight covers, but when she inspected the interior she didn't find anything that she expected.

"That's not original equipment," she noted. He laughed.

"Not even close. Like I said, this thing is a horrible monster, poor car." She straightened up and turned to him as he continued. "The original vehicle was imported to Japan a long time ago, as far as I could find out in the seventies sometime. It broke down, was fixed, broke down again, got fixed again... Pretty standard for Jaguar. Then, it caught fire. Gutted the engine compartment. The owner gave up, but he'd spent so much money he couldn't bear to scrap it, so he stuck it into storage. I found it nearly fifteen years ago and got it for almost nothing. It sat around for nine or ten years, I kept meaning to rebuild it, but never got around to it. Eventually, we decided to do something with the thing."

"When we looked into it, we found that the body was in surprisingly good condition, but the engine and gearbox were scrap. The interior was in horrible shape as well. We decided in the end
to play with it. Stripped the whole thing down completely, sand-blasted the body panels, repaired any damage, widened the wheel arches to accept larger tyres, hot galvanised the entire body to stop it rusting, then repainted it. The hood and the roof were replaced with carbon fibre since the originals were too badly damaged to fix. I couldn't find a worthwhile original engine, but about that time we had a severely crash-damaged Honda NSX come in. The body was unrepairable but the power train was pretty much undamaged."

He grinned, looking pleased. "We got creative, machined up a lot of new parts, and managed to transplant the entire thing into this body-shell. It's basically an NSX with an E-type body, but we also added the electronic stability system from a Toyota S150, the HUD from the same car, a custom electronic dashboard, things like that. Then we modified the engine a lot, put a high boost supercharger on it because I had a spare one lying around, added a custom eight speed gearbox, and so on. Interestingly, the thing is actually substantially lighter than the original, mostly due to the engine weight being considerably less. Better balanced, too." Haruka nodded slowly, listening with interest, as she studied the car, walking around it a couple of times.

He added, "Akemi put nitrous on as well because she's insane."

"Hey!" The cry of annoyance from the other side of the garage made him chuckle.

"And has amazingly good hearing for an old woman."

"Don't you forget it, sonny," the elderly mechanic shouted, laughing to herself. Haruka snickered.

"So it's about four or five cars in one?"

"Pretty much. I would think the Jaguar and NSX owners clubs would both want it cleansed with fire," Isamu replied with a grin.

"Does it actually work?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, hell, yes," he said, shivering a little. "But it's absolutely crazy. We had no idea how over the top it would end up. If you drive it carefully on the road it's fine, the fuel consumption is a bit high, but it's surprisingly docile. But..." He shivered again. "Push it, and it bites. Hard. The supercharger is bad enough, but the nitrous is just overkill. Even with the wider wheels it will wheelspin in sixth gear if you're not careful. You need the reflexes of a cat to drive the damn thing anywhere near its limits without ending up spinning out, even with the traction control and the improved brakes, suspension, and weight distribution. It's very quick. The acceleration is incredible, I drove it once. You wouldn't get me into it again on a bet."

She studied the car with interest. "Hmm."

"No one else who's ever driven it has been able to keep it in a straight line on a track either," Isamu added. "Including at least one formula one driver. He was shaking when he got out. Poor guy nearly pissed himself. There are faster cars, or more powerful ones, but I don't think I've ever seen one that was as fast and as powerful and as beautiful all at the same time. Especially street legal ones. Pity it's almost undriveable."

Misaki looked at Haruka, then turned to the garage owner. "Can we take it on the track for a test drive?" she asked. He glanced at her with some shock.

"Well, I suppose if anyone could handle it, a magical girl could," he finally admitted. "Although your friend could kill herself with the thing. I'm not kidding, it's a very dangerous car if you're not careful."
"I think we'll be all right," she assured him. He studied her for a moment then nodded.

"OK. Since it's you. Please don't kill yourselves." He turned and called one of the mechanics over, asking him to get a charged battery for the car, then went away to retrieve the key.

"You should power up, I think," Misaki said quietly to Haruka once her friend was out of earshot. "He's serious, I've talked to people about this thing, you'll need magical girl reflexes and toughness if it all goes wrong. Hotaru showed you how to do it without the uniform, right?"

"Yes," Haruka told the other woman, enabling the magical boost.

"It's a really pretty car," Hotaru commented, also powering up. "I think you should get it. I like the colour as well."

Haruka had to agree, the metallic flake black paint with electric blue highlights and trim was very attractive, dozens of layers of lacquer giving a depth and gloss to it that was extraordinarily beautiful. Someone had obviously spent a lot of time on it. "It reminds me of Yori's hair," her daughter laughed. Misaki grinned, amused, while Haruka sighed a little.

"Oh, wonderful. A Yori-car. It's going to kill all of us."

"Only if you annoy it," Misaki snickered.

They exchanged looks, then laughed for a few seconds. "They have a track?" Haruka asked, impressed.

"Yes, it's not huge, but big enough for this sort of thing. There are several companies who use it for testing and Toyota sometimes borrows it as well," Misaki told her. "There's a large part of this industrial estate that was knocked down to be rebuilt years ago but no one ever got around to it. About ten years back the various car companies around here clubbed together to build a test track on it since it was available. It's just under five kilometres long in total, with a one and a half kilometre straight, then lots of twisty bits and shorter runs around the edges. It's not bad for testing things although it's nowhere near big enough for a real race. Good fun, though. They've built around it in the last five years or so in a few places."

"Interesting," she replied, meaning it. Isamu came back at that point accompanied by the mechanic carrying a fresh battery, which he quickly installed and connected. Getting into the car, the mechanic carefully inserted the key, turning it on, which prompted a large number of displays to light up. Haruka watch from beside the vehicle, very interested. Gingerly pressing the start button the mechanic twitched slightly as the engine turned over, then caught immediately with a rumble. Gently pressing the throttle he smiled as the rumble instantly rose to a scream and went back to a steady tick-over when he took his foot off the pedal. Haruka listened with a smile on her face. There was something about the scream of the engine accompanied by the whine of the supercharger which sounded very nice to her.

"Straight-through large bore exhausts," Isamu said, "and a lightened crank with forged titanium alloy con-rods, valves, and pistons. Lots of other modifications, about the only original part is the engine block. We really went a bit overboard on the thing, we threw in every trick we could think of. The original engine red-lined at eight thousand RPM, this one we tested to twelve thousand. It's almost a formula one engine in some respects. Incredibly responsive, but if we did our job right, it should be much more reliable than a normal racing engine. After the first test drives and once we'd recovered we stripped it down to check it, everything was working perfectly, so it all went back together again. But it's only got about fifteen hours of actual driving on it after something like five years." He shivered a little. "No one who's ever been in it wants to try again."
Several of the other occupants of the business had wandered over and were watching from a safe
distance, including Akemi, who seemed both interested and amused, with a certain amount of
worry added. Haruka glanced at Misaki who was grinning with interest herself. "Where's this
track?" she asked.

"We go out that rear door and about two hundred metres," the other woman said, indicating a large
roller door at the back of the garage, which the mechanic who had put the battery in the vehicle
was heading towards having gotten out of the car. He arrived at it, pressing a button on the control
box beside it, which caused the door to slowly rumble up into the ceiling with a clanking of chains
and gears.

"Please be careful, ladies," Isamu said, staring at the car. "I'd prefer not to damage the thing, but I'd
much prefer not to damage any of you with it."

Smiling, Misaki patted him on the shoulder. "We'll be fine, Isamu. Don't worry." She rubbed her
hands together eagerly. "I've always wanted to see what this thing was like to drive. Come on,
Haruka, let's find out."

The blonde nodded, smiling a little, feeling happier than she had for months. She still wasn't sure
the car was something she wanted to own but it was certainly something she wanted to drive.
Pulling out a fifty-yen piece she balanced it on her thumb. "Heads or tails?" she asked, grinning.
Misaki laughed.

"Tails."

Catching the coin as it descended after the flip, Haruka looked at it, then at the other woman,
before bowing and waving at the vehicle. "After you."

With a laugh Misaki slid into the driving seat, fastening her harness, while Haruka did the same on
the other side. Hotaru watched with a smile on her face. "I want a ride later," she called. Haruka
nodded, closing the door, then inspected the inside of the cockpit.

"Wow. They went all out on the instruments," she commented.

"Damn right," Misaki chuckled. "It's like the inside of a fighter plane. I'm half-expecting a
targeting display." Both of them laughed while she poked buttons to see what happened. Eventually
she grinned as the HUD came up, displaying RPM, torque curves, speed, and a few other things, in
a discreet but easily visible green overlay on the windscreen. "Cool. That's really nice."

When Isamu tapped on the window she pressed the button to lower it. He stuck his head inside the
cabin. "There's no one using the track for the next couple of hours so you can go out whenever you
want," he said. "I've told the fire guys to stand by just in case." This prompted a laugh from Misaki
and made him wink. "That's the nitrous button," he added, pointing to one on the steering wheel
which had a sliding cover over it. "The one on the other side arms it. I would strongly suggest you
don't use it, but if you do, make sure you're going in a straight line first. You probably won't be for
long, but..." Stepping back he shrugged.

"Thanks, Isamu," Misaki said, raising her voice a little over the sound of the engine. "See you in a
bit." She put the car in gear, gently pressed the accelerator, let the clutch out carefully, and got the
car moving, manoeuvring past the other vehicles towards the door to the outside. "It feels very
light," she commented to her companion. "Responsive and civilised, really, like any decent modern
car."

"Good," Haruka replied, watching the instruments with interest. "I've seen some tweaked track
vehicles that were hopeless on the road. It makes them useless for day to day driving."

"I think you could probably commute with this if you stayed away from hard acceleration." Easing the thing outside, Misaki looked around, then slowly drove down the access road to the track, Isamu, Hotaru, and half the mechanics following. One of them jogged past to open the chain-link gate to the track, waving them through. She drove onto the track and turned the vehicle so it was aligned with the centre-line, before stopping. Both of them looked at the stretch of empty road in front of them, visible over the long, low hood, the black paint glittering in the sun, then exchanged glances. "Why do I have the urge to say something about Detroit, sunglasses and police?" Misaki asked with a grin.

"No idea," Haruka laughed. She pulled a pair of sunglasses from her pocket, putting them on carefully, which made Misaki giggle, then settled herself comfortably. "Hit it."

Chuckling, her companion let up on the clutch while throttling up. The whine of the supercharger was almost drowned out by the engine screaming into life as the car shot forward, tyres smoking, the back end twitching sideways. Inhumanly fast reflexes arrested the slide almost before it started, the steering wheel moving in small quick motions, while Misaki changed up rapidly through the gearbox. Acceleration pressed both of them back in the seat. Laughing with delight, the two magical girls roared off down the track in the one-off vehicular mash-up, leaving a number of people coughing slightly as the rubber smoke drifted over them.

"What the hell is that?" Markus turned to his companion Souta, who looked mystified, both of them listening to the screaming roar with a high-pitched whine overlaid on it which echoed around the building, growing to a crescendo, then dopplerizing away in a manner that suggested considerable speed.

"I have no idea," the other man said in his accented English. One of his colleagues from the car design company Markus was visiting laughed, saying something in Japanese. Souta looked surprised, then turned to the other man. "Taichi says it's a monster from the depths of Matsuda Tuning. They're a group of insane car modifiers a few doors down," They listened to the noise, which was growing fainter, a few squeals of tyres sliding intermittently coming to them. "Let's go and see what he's talking about." Pushing their chairs back from the workstation on which Souta had been showing the current status of the work commissioned by Markus' company, both of them stood up and headed for the door, Taichi following. Outside Souta led them around the rear of the three story building which backed onto some sort of track, a tall chain-link fence with a heavy barrier just the other side of it between them and the tarmac.

"There are quite a lot of small but fairly well off car companies in the vicinity," Souta explained as they walked down the slight hill to the fence. "A number of them got together a few years ago and built this for testing purposes. It gets used a few times a week. But I've never heard anything like that before." The sound was now fairly faint, coming to them from somewhere off to the left, behind a set of buildings that were in the middle of the track. It echoed weirdly around the estate, the sound bouncing from building to building, reminding Markus quite strongly of the time he'd watched the Monte Carlo F1 race from next to the course.

He could see that there were little groups of people scattered around the place next to the fence, all of them looking in the same direction, some of them holding cameras and camcorders, apparently also workers from local companies who had been attracted by the sound. The distant scream changed, the vehicle, whatever it was, shifting down rapidly, then started building again. In the distance, hundred of metres away down the long straight which he could see they were roughly at the mid-point of, a shiny black car came into view from behind a building. The car accelerated
hard towards them, the engine howling up in pitch at an extraordinary rate as the driver skilfully stepped through the gears. He counted six transitions and it was obvious that it hadn't been in first gear when it came around the tight corner.

The whining note overlaid on the engine scream was easily audible. "It's got one huge supercharger on it, whatever it is," he said loudly to his companions. Souta nodded absently, shading his eyes with one hand as he peered into the distance. Taichi was watching through a pair of binoculars.

"It certainly sounds like that," he agreed. They watched as the car approached at a speed he estimated at being well past a hundred and fifty miles an hour, still accelerating. Just before it reached them, there was a sudden change in the engine note which got much louder, following which the vehicle jumped forward with new purpose, the tyres chirping even in top gear as they momentarily broke free. The driver showed enormous skill by holding the car steady, only a slight twitch betraying the boost in power as it shot past at some ridiculous speed, blue flame coming from the twin exhausts. He recognised the distinctive shape even as he involuntarily ducked from the blast of noise and wind when the car rocketed past, the engine sound dropping rapidly in pitch.

"Holy... That was an old E-type!" They watched the car roar away, the flames dying off, then change down and power slide around the bend at the end of the straight, being held in a drift with amazing skill. It vanished behind the buildings again.

"Who the hell is driving that thing, Schumacher? And what on earth is it? It's certainly not an original E-type. They were quick, but not that quick."

"I have no idea," Souta admitted, staring after the vehicle with an open mouth. His colleague said something, sounding impressed. "Taichi said there were two women in it. The one driving was grinning like an idiot and the other one was laughing."

They exchanged a look of wonder, then turned to look in the other direction, waiting for the vehicle to reappear.

Harrison watched as Yori studied the photo, a slight frown on her face. "Hmm. Somewhere in Texas, I think," she mumbled, tracing out the symbols with her finger. She thought hard for a while, then had a conversation in Japanese with Aiko, who was also staring at the image. Fumiko was off to the side listening quietly, with Agent Tinnin and Captain Martinez watching the whole affair. "OK, we're pretty sure it's somewhere to the north of Amarillo, about ten kilometres outside it. We should be within a few hundred metres of the place and can track it from the residual magical signature to get a more precise location."

Captain Martinez pulled a large scale atlas of the US from his bookshelf to the side of his desk and opened it, leafing through until he found the right page. Aiko and Yori looked carefully at it then the latter put her finger on a spot. "Right about there." Aiko nodded confirmation.

Agent Tinnin pulled out his cell phone. "I'll call the Amarillo resident agency and get a team to meet us there." Looking closely at the book, he said, "It looks like that's probably some sort of industrial park or warehouses. Makes sense." Dialling, he had a short conversation, then put the device back in his pocket. "Lieutenant, it's out of your jurisdiction, but if you want to come I have no objections." Harrison looked at his captain who nodded.

"Take something a little more powerful than your sidearm, lieutenant," the captain suggested. "Just in case."

"I'll be back in a moment," Harrison replied, leaving the office. Shortly he returned wearing a
bulletproof vest, handing another to Tinnin who put it on with muttered thanks, and with a pump-action shotgun slung over his shoulder. "Deer slugs, they should do if we have trouble," he commented, unslinging the weapon and quickly loading it.

"Most likely," Tinnin replied, smiling a little. He looked at the three young women. "I suppose you're all bulletproof anyway?"

"Pretty much," Yori grinned. "Against something light like that we won't have any issues."

The FBI man shook his head in wonder, then turned to the captain who was watching closely. "I'll make sure your man gets back safely. There's probably nothing there now anyway but I want to be sure."

"Good luck," Martinez said. The two exchanged nods, then at Aiko's urging clustered together. Blinking at the flash, Martinez sighed a little, then sat at his desk studying the atlas.

"I don't think we need to track magical signatures," Harrison remarked, looking at the huge column of flames pouring out of a warehouse a quarter of a mile down the road they found themselves beside, lighting the entire area brightly. Half a dozen fire trucks were pouring water on it. Beside him Tinnin wobbled a little, gratefully taking the bottle of water Fumiko wordlessly handed him and drinking from it.

"I guess not," Yori muttered. "For what it's worth, that's definitely the destination of the teleport. They went all out to cover their tracks." When the FBI agent had recovered, the group began walking towards the conflagration, Tinnin showing his badge when they reached the police line blocking access. The sergeant in charge examined it briefly, looked them over, shrugged, then let them through. A few minutes later while they were watching the fire being slowly extinguished two government issue SUVs pulled up with lights flashing, disgorging several more FBI agents armed to the teeth.

Tinnin went to talk to them while the others studied the burning warehouse. "That's an impressive fire," Aiko said, "it looks like they must have set incendiary charges all around the walls from the way it's burning. It doesn't seem to want to go out either."

"I doubt there with be much usable evidence left after this," Harrison sighed. "Another dead end. Damn it, I'm almost impressed with these bastards. They're thorough if nothing else."

"Sure looks that way," Yori agreed, scowling. "Annoying."

Rejoining them, Tinnin watched the warehouse burn for a moment, then turned to the little group. "The fire started about thirty minutes after the presumed time of death of the three prisoners, which fits with the timeline we've worked out. I'm guessing it took about ten minutes to make that diagram, spell, whatever, then more or less no time to get here, with about twenty minutes to pack up and cover their tracks. We're going to trace the owner of the warehouse and see where that gets us but I'd lay money on it being a dead end as well, unless Ms Aoyama can do something weird."

"I'll ask her to check," Yori assured him.

"Thanks. She's creepy, but seems damned effective."

"You should also see about pulling any camera images for the surrounding area and see if there's any suspicious activity around here as well during that time period," Harrison suggested. Tinnin nodded.
"Yes, that's standard procedure. We might get lucky." He waved at the huge fire a hundred yards away which was giving off enough heat that Harrison was sweating from it. "When that's finally out and cooled down we'll go through it with a microscope, but I'd be surprised if there was much left that was helpful. We might get lucky, though."

"Worth a try," Aiko agreed. She glanced at him. "Back to LA, I guess?"

"Yes, please," Tinnin replied. "We can't do much here."

"OK." Once more they grouped together and flashed away.

Back in the LA police station, once more gathered in Captain Martinez' office, they all looked at each other for a while. "Well. We seem to have run out of ideas," Martinez finally said, having heard the story without much apparent surprise.

"There are still some avenues of approach but mostly it's going to be doing it the hard way," Tinnin grumped, looking annoyed. "If one of those damn people would obligingly make a mistake that would help but overall they seem to have a pretty good idea what to do. My guys will keep at it and I'll send you everything we find out."

"Thank you, Agent," the captain replied.

"Where are the remains of the truck Chou dealt with?" Yori suddenly asked, looking thoughtful.

"That horrifyingly small cube?" Harrison chuckled. "It's down in the evidence garage. Why?"

"Do you mind if I have a look at it?" the black-haired woman requested, not directly answering the question. He glanced at the captain who shrugged a little.

"OK. Are you expecting to find anything useful that we missed?" he asked. She sighed, shaking her head.

"Probably not, but I'm curious and it won't leave me alone until I check," she told him. Harrison led the way down several floors to the garage, where they found the roughly seven foot cube of metal and plastic that was what was left of a fairly large truck that Chou had become annoyed with. Yori looked at it and grinned. "Impressive. She's good with wards and comes up with some interesting applications for them."

Walking over to the wreckage, which showed signs of tool marks where the evidence technicians had made a start on gathering anything they could find, she ran her hand over it slowly, frowning lightly. "Hmm,"

"Something interesting?" Aiko asked curiously, joining her friend, as did Fumiko. Both of them also put their hands out and concentrated while Tinnin, Martinez, and Harrison watched with interest. "Ah. Yes, there's something in there somewhere isn't there?"

"Yep. I'm betting it's a shielded power storage unit, intact somehow." Yori looked pleased. "There's not a lot of power in it which is why Chou didn't detect it from across the street. My guess is barely enough to run the teleport spell." She looked over her shoulder at the three watching men. "That would have been their way out. I'd think they probably already had the spell inscribed inside the truck, and as soon as they were all inside it, they'd activate it. You wouldn't have had any warning at all, they'd just have gone, leaving the truck behind."

She stepped back and studied the cubed vehicle. "Do you mind if I cut this open?" she asked.
"Go ahead," Martinez replied after exchanging a look with Tinnin, both of them seeming intrigued as to how she was proposing to do it. Harrison held up a hand, motioning for her to wait a moment, then poked around for a moment in an equipment locker to come back with a camera, which he raised.

"OK."

"Thanks," the young woman replied, walking around the mass of metal and looking at it carefully. "About there, I think," she added, drawing a line down it with her finger, which left a glowing purple mark hanging in the air. Harrison grinned at the expressions his colleagues were now wearing, snapping a couple of shots. "Aiko, can you hold that side, and Fumiko the other one? I don't want it crashing down and breaking the storage unit." Both the other girls moved to brace the sides of the cube. Taking a position directly in front of the mark she'd made, Yori held out her hand, a brilliant purple shaft of light sprouting from it, nearly eight feet long. Tinnin made a choked sound of shock.

Carefully moving the energy blade along the line, Yori casually sliced the cube more or less in half, then made the blade disappear. After a few seconds the glowing metal had cooled enough that she prised the two parts away from each other with her hands, several tons of metal scraping across the concrete with a screech. "It's in this piece," she said, indicating the right half. While she supported it, Fumiko moved to help Aiko lift the other half out of the way and put it down on the floor, then they returned to support the remaining piece.

Yori repeated the action twice while Harrison documented everything using the camera, to end up with a distorted cube a couple of feet across. "This must contain the glove box, I think," she said, taking the lump of former truck over to a nearby bench and gently whittling it away with a short energy blade. After the first slice a faint yellow glow could be seen from inside. "Aha." Two more careful cuts and she reached in to a small void to retrieve a rather familiar looking yellow-glowing sphere. Harrison stared at it.

"Is it my imagination or have I seen something that looks exactly like that before?" he asked slowly.

"No, it's from the same source as that neat storage spell that the portal bombs were hidden in here and in New York," Yori confirmed, turning the ball in her fingers with a thoughtful look. "Nothing like as much energy in it as those two had, though." She produced an identical if rather more brightly glowing ball from somewhere. "This one has the storage spell built in, the new one is just a power store, but the same mage made both of them. Interesting."

"Did you ever track that mage down?" Harrison asked. She shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't yet. I looked for a while after the New Year but no one I showed it to recognised either the spell or the power signature, and in the end I put it to one side since the problem was apparently over. I was intending to try again at some point because I'm curious about the spell, it's a very good one, but haven't had time recently." She studied both spheres closely. "That's... a little odd," she added after a few seconds.

"What?" Tinnin asked curiously. Looking up at him, she waved the sphere she'd discovered in the remains of the truck.

"This one is much older than the other one, which is the one from outside Mann's. That one was probably made no more than a year before we found it, like the one in New York, I'd guess that our rogue mage got them both at the same time. This one, on the other hand, is probably close to a decade old. Right at the limit of how long it would store enough energy to run the teleport spell, in
"Maybe the mage who made them has been in business for some time?" Aiko suggested. Yori considered the idea, then shook her head.

"That's probably completely true, mages tend to live a long time, but... Why would you sit on something like this for so long it nearly ran down without recharging it? That doesn't make much sense. It's not difficult, any half-way decent mage can store power in one of these things. That's the whole point." She glanced at Harrison as Aiko nodded, rubbing her chin. "I'd have to check those fragments again to be completely certain but I'm mostly sure that one was from the same source as well, and probably as old. It sort of implies that these people might have acquired a number of storage units quite a while ago and don't have any easy way to either get more or recharge these ones. Which in turn suggests they don't have a mage of their own."

"I suppose that's something," he replied thoughtfully.

"It's one more data point that may help build a picture of them and their movements," she agreed. "Although I'm not certain yet how helpful it really is. I'll start asking around again to see if I can trace the mage who made these. It may take a while."

"Every avenue of investigation helps, Yori," Tinnin told her, looking slightly happier than he had been up until now.

Captain Martinez was looking at the storage units pensively. "Is there any way to stop something like this happening again?" he asked after a few seconds of thought. Yori turned to him, then nodded.

"A decent anti-teleport ward should prevent something as crude as this spell working, yes. I can set one up for you if you want. It will need to be maintained regularly, every two or three years, but I can give you the name of a good local mage who can do that for you at a reasonable cost."

"Thank you. It's definitely bolting the stable door long after the horses have fucked off but if we do manage to grab any more of these bastards I want to eliminate that particular escape path." He looked annoyed, making her smile slightly.

"Fair enough, and a good idea." She vanished both spheres, then produced a new, completely transparent one. A moment's concentration and it began glowing the same purple most of her magical effects did, becoming quite bright. "This will power it. We need somewhere safe and secure to put the thing. Do you have an office safe?"

He nodded. "Yes, come on and I'll show you." They went back to his office where he opened the fairly small but very heavily built safe in the wall behind his desk. "Will this do?"

"Perfectly," she replied, looking at it. Sitting down she put the crystal sphere on his desk, concentrating on it for a few minutes. Everyone present felt something odd, the two magical girls apparently following the process with interest while the three men shivered a little at the sensation. "That should do it. It encloses the entire building and will prevent most forms of teleportation in or out of the building. Aiko's variant is a lot more difficult to block because it would need much more power available than this can hold, but then she's not going to be helping your prisoners." Yori grinned for a moment. "I threw in a fire prevention spell as well, the same one I use at home. It's a simple but effective one, most mages use something similar." She handed the sphere to Martinez. "As long as this is inside the building and powered up it will run the spells. It's got a durability spell on it so it's not fragile but you'll want to lock it away."
"Thank you, Yori," the captain said gratefully. He inspected the glowing ball with a certain amount of wonder, then carefully stashed it away at the back of his safe and relocked the thing. She wrote a name and number on one of his business cards that she plucked from the holder on his desk and gave that to him as well.

"This guy is pretty good at wards and security spells, several local museums and art galleries use him. Weirdly enough they're about the only people in the US who seem to have any business with magic although they generally keep it extremely quiet for various reasons. Give him my name and say I recommended him and he'll give you a good price on keeping that storage unit charged. I'll check it whenever I'm around as well, which I expect will happen occasionally what with one thing or another."

Martinez looked at the name, nodded, and put the card in his desk drawer. "Thanks again."

"No problem." Picking up the bag full of fragments she concentrated for a few seconds, then nodded. "Yep, it's the same as the one we just found, definitely. And probably about the same age and power level. Interesting." Putting it back on the desk she studied it for a moment thoughtfully, then shrugged slightly. "Not immediately helpful, though, which is a pity." She looked at her friends for a moment. "I don't think there's much more we can do here right now, I'm afraid. Until we have more leads as to where these people went or who they are, we're kind of at an impasse."

"Unfortunately true," Harrison remarked. "Thanks very much for coming over at such short notice."

She waved a hand. "Don't worry about it. I'm at least as concerned as you are about all this, especially since it seems to have something to do with that idiot mage and his cult. I was really hoping that particular little adventure was behind us and I'm not happy that it might not be, so I'm glad to help. We all are. I'll keep looking and if I find anything helpful I'll pass it on. Ms Aoyama will do the same in her own way." She stood, joining her friends.

"Do you need this for evidence?" she asked, producing the glowing power unit. "If you can do without it for a while at least I could use it in yet another attempt to track down who made the thing."

Martinez thought for a moment, then glanced at Tinnin, who shrugged after a few seconds. "It's something we may require when this all finally comes to court, if it ever gets that far," the agent noted with a small grimace, "but at the moment, no, the FBI doesn't need it. The FBI doesn't really believe in it, in fact, and would have been perfectly happy never to have to deal with magic." Yori grinned at him, getting a tired smile back, then glanced at Martinez, who nodded his agreement.

"We don't have an immediate need for it either, for much the same reason. It would be rather difficult to use in court in any case, to be honest."

"OK. Let me know if you do need it, I'll get it back to you, but for now I'll hang onto it." She made it go away again. "Unless you have any more questions we'll have to be going. Give my best to Emily and Serena, Richard." She smiled at him.

"I will do," he smiled back. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome. Agent Tinnin, it was nice to meet you," the young woman replied, glancing at the FBI agent, who nodded to her.

"Likewise."
"See you." The three men looked away and the usual flash came and went.

A few seconds of silence passed in the office. "I told you they were decent people, Mark," Harrison commented to the FBI man, who appeared deep in thought. Tinnin looked up, then nodded again.

"You did. I'd agree, although I also see why the people in New York were so worried. Did you see what she did to that damn truck?" He looked slightly sick. "That was absolutely horrifying."

Grinning, Harrison shrugged. "True, but at least she's on our side."

"Or we're on hers. I haven't decided yet," the agent muttered, making both LAPD people chuckle.

With a small sigh, Tinnin looked around the office, then at both the other men, before straightening his jacket. "It's late, there's nothing else we can do without more information, so I'm going home. I'll keep in touch and let you know if our enquiries shed any light on anything to do with this clusterfuck of a case."

"Thank you, Agent," Martinez sighed, shaking his head slightly. "We will do the same, of course. As soon as the pathologist has any more information, which should be tomorrow morning...?" He glanced at Harrison, who nodded slightly. "...We'll send it to you. Hopefully a cause of death can be established which may help as well."

"I should have thought to ask Yori about that as well," Harrison noted with mild self-irritation. "Her medical skills probably translate into some sort of super-pathologist as well as everything else." He grinned a little, shrugging as the other two gave him an odd look. "Well, they might do, right?"

"I really have no idea at all what her limitations are, or those of her friends," Tinnin replied with a small amount of grouchiness, obviously not entirely happy about that fact. "No one I've spoken to does either. It's annoying."

"I doubt it matters, Lieutenant," Martinez told his subordinate, after looking slightly amused for a moment at the FBI man's irritation. "Our people may not have weird magical powers but they're still very competent. I'm sure they'll work it out. On the off chance they can't we can ask for her help again, she seems more than willing to aid us."

"She is that," Harrison agreed.

"I suggest that the Agent is correct, we all need to sleep on this. It's no longer a priority matter in some ways as the trail seems to have gone cold so we might as well go home and deal with it again later."

"I still want a go at Bouchard, though," Tinnin commented as he headed for the door, stopping with his hand on the knob and looking back at them. "Just in case we can squeeze something helpful out of him. Or at least to give him as much of a headache as I have right now." He looked darkly pleased at the idea, making Harrison chuckle.

"We have no problem with that, Agent Tinnin," the captain assured him, also smiling a little. "We've extracted everything we need from him to build our own case for the bribery charges and all the other ones, so you're welcome to him."

"I'll arrange prisoner transport for tomorrow, in that case," the FBI agent replied. Sighing, he added, "Hopefully he won't vanish into thin air or mysteriously drop dead overnight."
"He's under twenty-four hour watch by several trusted officers so I'm fairly sure neither of those things will happen," Harrison assured him. Satisfied, the man nodded a goodbye to them both then left, quietly closing the door behind him.

The two left in the office both sat down, almost identical sighs of annoyance coming from them. After a few seconds, Martinez raised his eyes from the evidence bag on his desk to look at his lieutenant. "What a damn pain in the ass this all is."

"One way to put it," Harrison grunted, also staring at the bag. Reaching out, he picked it up, feeling the crystal shards for a second or two, then stood. "I'll check this back into Evidence then I'm heading home, sir."

Martinez nodded, waving a hand at him. "Go. Give Emily and Serena my best. I'm going home as well."

"See you in the morning." Harrison wandered off, leaving the older man thinking for a while, before he got up, retrieved his own jacket from the coat-stand in the corner, turned the lights off, and headed home, wondering when the world had stopped making sense.

He missed it, sense.

Oh, well. Life was like that sometimes.

"Where do you think they got the power units from?" Nabiki asked her brother-in-law,

"I'm not sure, really," he replied with a somewhat tired tone in his voice. "Like I told Richard and the others, the storage units themselves are pretty cheap and widely available, that particular design is one of the more common ones. Kas and I have a fair number of them each because they come in handy sometimes, like they did just now with warding the LAPD station. Any normal mage probably stocks them by the dozen. There are more complex versions around but they tend to get used for fairly unusual applications so you don't run into them very often."

"As a result the things themselves are basically so generic that tracing who bought them is almost impossible. Like trying to find out who bought a specific light bulb. You might manage it but it wouldn't necessarily tell you anything."

"Not to mention that they can be recharged over and over and often change hands so even if you did trace the original manufacturer or purchaser you might not be any closer to finding out who the current owner is," Kasumi put in.

"Also true," he admitted sourly. "So, what it all adds up to is that they could have got them from almost any mage or other magic worker on the planet, one way or another. Or from someone on the other side of a portal, of course, since that's where pretty much all the manufacturers actually are. It doesn't help all that much even if we find it out."

"That particular teleportation spell is also annoyingly common," the elder Tendo said musingly. "It's not a particularly good one, it's something of an energy hog even in teleportation terms and has definite range limitations as well but it's fairly simple all things considered and can be taught quite easily, even to a non-mage. Assuming you have some way to power it and know how to do so of course. We can assume that at least one of their party had that knowledge based on the results."

"Or whoever got them the thing had it, assuming they had external aid," Nabiki suggested slowly.

"Yes, that's certainly possible." Ranma sounded thoughtful. "I was initially thinking that it was a mage they had on the payroll, because it would be pretty easy for even a half-way trained one to
get into somewhere without any wards and only a few security cameras and mechanical locks, but..." He trailed off for a moment, apparently considering the thought. "No, the presence of those old storage units tends to argue against that, I think. If they had a mage on staff, they'd almost certainly have fresh ones. I can't see any sensible reason for that not to be the case. So it probably means that assuming someone actually did come in from outside, they had some other means to fool the security systems other than their own magical abilities."

"Which might even be down to good old-fashioned spycraft," she replied. "I suspect I could probably have done it when I was in high school, or had a good chance, anyway. I learned some interesting things in the old days." Nabiki smiled to herself, thinking about all the things she'd done. "Good social engineering to get passwords, a little careful shoulder surfing, some basic hacking... It's possible. The camera system would be more difficult than the actual physical entry. Teleporting away with them would be the obvious extraction method in that case."

"Sister, you have a more chequered past than I realised," Kasumi giggled. Nabiki snickered silently.

"I know you thought of me as a complete innocent but believe it or not I did do a few things that were probably... a bit naughty." There was laughter over the link from both her sister and Ranma at her dry words.

"Oddly enough I'm not surprised," the latter responded equally dryly. "We all have interesting pasts, as you know. But yes, you're right, it's not all that difficult to get into some places that really should be more secure. People don't tend to break into police stations very often, it's normally more the opposite, so they sometimes end up being a little lax as a result. It might be just that simple."

Jun chose that moment to interrupt. Nabiki, I have finished checking all the recorded images from the cameras in the LAPD facility and every other relevant camera for a ten kilometre radius centred on it. Much of the data is of very low quality and required considerable post-processing. It involved some forty-six thousand three hundred cameras over a better than three hundred square kilometre area, totalling nearly two million hours of video. I have made an interesting discovery as a result. It popped up a window showing recorded video which seemed to be an external view of the police station from a distance with a number of people walking around. One particular figure was highlighted, a uniformed officer heading towards the building. Nabiki quickly told Ranma and Kasumi she was talking to Jun and would get back to them, then closed her link to the pair, concentrating on what the SI was telling her.

This person is Officer Tom Bowie, who has worked for the LAPD for six years and is currently assigned to custody booking. He has legitimate access to the cells our missing conspirators were in. The man walked along, not particularly hurriedly, looking about and occasionally waving to someone he seemed to know. The view followed him from camera to camera as he approached the station, some which were obviously traffic cameras, some inside shops, all processed to give a continuous video feed in an impressive demonstration of what the SI could do.

She looked at the time stamp on the images, which were much clearer than she suspected the police themselves would be able to manage, seeing that they were from two days ago. 'OK, so he could be a potential way to get something to them,' she replied after watching the video for a moment. 'I assume that's what you're getting at? But so far they have interviewed most of the staff and haven't discovered any inside help, and I'd guess that someone in his position would be about the first one checked.'

Actually, he hasn't yet been interviewed, his shift ended approximately two hours before the
bodies were discovered and he hasn't been back to work yet. He's on Lieutenant Harrison's list to be interviewed tomorrow morning when he clocks in. If you look at this other sequence... the machine said with an air of one who knew something interesting but didn't want to give the game away just yet, which made her smile inside. It produced a second window, showing the same person doing more or less exactly the same thing as the first one, only dated earlier today, LA time. There is something very odd going on. She looked hard at the images, seeing the same man walking along, then entering the station, the interior view showing him heading into the cell area. She thought hard, comparing the two videos which were steadily looping, a faint suspicion beginning to niggle at her.

'Can you zoom in on his face?' she asked slowly.

To a limited degree, yes, the SI replied, producing a pair of new windows showing a sequence of stills from cameras that had a particularly good shot of the officer's head and shoulders. There were only a few that were good enough to really count, but it was enough to clearly identify him

'It certainly looks like the same man,' she said after a little more study. 'But it isn't, is it?'

No. Gait analysis shows that these are two different individuals, although they are extremely close in physical dimensions and facial characteristics. The source cameras are not of sufficiently high quality or optical ability to allow iris recognition, unfortunately, and lack the facilities for thermal blood vessel matching or other more advanced techniques, but there is a ninety-three point four percent probability that the more recent images are those of someone wearing a very high quality facial prosthetic to mimic the appearance of Officer Bowie. It produced a graphic showing a comparison between two different skeletal figures, which clearly showed there was a subtle difference in the way they walked when slowed down.

'Wow. Right out of Mission Impossible,' she said, impressed despite herself. There was a feeling of amusement from Jun.

Indeed. It is a very effective subterfuge under the circumstances. It wouldn't work against better security systems, but the sort of security the LAPD uses currently could well fall to such a technique assuming the person involved was sufficiently well briefed.

'Any idea who it really is?' she asked curiously. The video windows vanished, a head shot of a mid thirties Caucasian man popping up to replace them, which she studied while stirring her sauce on the stove.

I believe so. This is Charles Jackson, former covert operations officer of the UK Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6. Based on the criteria we have so far established for our purported conspiracy, such as former members of a governmental intelligence agency from one of the major countries who have disappeared under somewhat suspect circumstances without leaving a verifiable body behind in the last fifteen years, he is a good match. Additionally his biometric characteristics are an almost perfect match to those of the second individual. The data I have been able to locate is somewhat out of date which would in all probability explain the slight discrepancy, as he was reported missing during an undercover operation in the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan just before the Gulf War. He was suspected of being a double agent at the time and was about to face an inquiry, but his disappearance was under circumstances that suggested he was killed even though no body was recovered. MI6 closed the case after a year-long operation with no conclusive outcome.

The image changed to a full body one, next to one of Officer Bowie, measurements showing that they were remarkably close in body size and proportions. 'So if it is this Jackson guy, as a former covert agent he'd probably have the skills required to pull something like this off, I guess,' she
mused, turning the heat on the stove down to allow the sauce to simmer, then moving to the next task automatically.

I believe so. His specialities are listed as a significant talent with languages and accents, good ability to mimic gestures and body language, and very respectable skills in a number of disciplines including hand to hand combat, all required abilities in a good undercover operative. His record shows he successfully infiltrated a number of security agencies of hostile countries and two supposedly friendly ones, as well as several major international criminal organisations, during his career which spanned close to fifteen years. He was only detected once and still managed to escape although he killed six people in the process, two of which were hostages he was attempting to rescue.

' Hmm. Not ideal. Although that's still an impressive record.' She inspected the data the SI had produced beside the image with interest.

It appears from the information I have gathered that he was most likely approached by the KGB somewhere around the late eighties, two or three years before the fall of the Soviet Union, and ended up passing them a certain amount of information. There are discrepancies in the records which make the exact amount and type uncertain, which is quite likely deliberate although the person or persons responsible are so far not known. The internal investigation that MI6 started ran into the same problem which is why they didn't take action against him before the last mission he vanished from. I suspect he was well aware of this and took the opportunity, whatever it was, when it was handed to him. It was in all probability his only way out of what would have ended his career and possibly his life.

' Are you certain it was him in an Officer Bowie mask, then?' she asked.

One hundred percent certain, no. Ninety-five percent or better, yes, # Jun replied. It started another video, running backwards, showing the alleged Officer Bowie leaving the station, proceeding in reverse at high speed for about two and a half kilometres, to enter an apartment building. # This is Officer Bowie's home, Apartment 2A. # A differently dressed figure, wearing a baseball cap pulled low over his face, exited the rear of the building into the car park behind it, then walked backwards towards a dark green car. Once inside, the vehicle shot out of the car park in reverse, until eventually a traffic camera finally caught a perfect view of the man's face, some five kilometres away. Jun froze the image at that point. # This is the best image I have of him. Again, there is a near certainty that he is wearing a facial prosthetic, merely a different one. I am certain it's the same man as the one that entered the police station, the gait is identical. I am also certain that it is not Officer Bowie for the same reason.

Nabiki nodded a little to herself, pleased with the results. Taking a glass from the cupboard over the kitchen counter she went to the sink and filled it with water, drinking half of it, then putting the glass down while she looked out the window and thought. ' Where did he come from? Did you backtrack him that far?'

Unfortunately I have been so far unable to locate his origin or destination points, aside from determining that it was probably somewhere to the east of LA, based on the most distant traffic camera that identified the vehicle. There are limited surveillance facilities once the urban environment is left. When he left the station at the end of Officer Bowie's shift, he headed back towards the apartment building, stopping on the way to purchase a bottle of tequila from a local shop, went inside for just under an hour, then left in the same vehicle heading in the direction he'd come from. I can expand the search to nearby cities to see if I can locate the vehicle but I suspect that based on the apparent professionalism of these people that it will have been dumped as soon as he was clear of the city. The car itself is registered to a woman in Pasadena and was reported
stolen six weeks ago. She has no apparent links to any of the people so far identified in this case, financial or otherwise. The vehicle was probably stolen randomly precisely to make it difficult to trace.# Jun almost sighed, she could feel it.

'It all seems to fit, irritatingly enough," the middle Tendo said, finishing off the water. 'Good work, Jun.'

#Thank you. I'm sorry I can't give a definite location for Mr Jackson, although I will continue to search for him.# The SI sounded both pleased and mildly annoyed at its own lack of success.

'Don't be too upset,' she chuckled silently. 'You've done in a matter of a couple of hours what the FBI would probably take months to do, assuming they even could.'

There was a note of amusement this time. #I'm sure they could eventually backtrack Mr Jackson in the same manner, if they had reason to suspect he had substituted himself for Officer Bowie in the first place, but it would indeed be a very considerable task. My own work took as long as it did mainly due to the amount of time needed to access the various recording systems storing the imagery. The actual processing time once I had the raw data was only a few seconds.# It sounded somewhat smug. #My processing ability dwarfs anything on this planet aside from the other SI units.#

'Now you're just rubbing it in,' she laughed. 'No need to show off, I know how good you are at this sort of thing. I almost don't want to know how much faster than every other computing resource on the planet put together a mark ten Gamma unit is.'

#It becomes somewhat meaningless at the sort of level Kw'lyn systems function,# Jun replied. #A direct comparison between my hardware and the type of computing equipment native to this world is difficult to make. We work on completely different principles in many ways. Suffice it to say that it will be a very long time before your species comes anywhere close to what even I am capable of from the raw data processing standpoint alone.#

Nabiki smiled to herself, going back to cutting up vegetables, listening to Nodoka still humming and idly trying to identify the tune. 'I'm glad all that computing ability is on my side,' she joked, feeling the SI's amusement. Comming Ranma and her sister, she passed on the data and Jun's conclusions, waiting while they went through it.

"Very interesting, and very good work, Jun," Ranma finally said. She passed on the SI's thanks for the compliment, making him chuckle. "How much to you want to bet that when they find Officer Bowie he's going to be extremely drunk, smelling of tequila, and unable to clearly remember much if anything of yesterday?" the martial artist continued in a thoughtful tone, which had an overlay of resigned annoyance.

She sighed a little. "The thought crossed my mind, yes," she admitted. "It would be an obvious ploy and explains the bottle of the stuff Jackson, if it was him, bought on the way back to Bowie's apartment. It's an odd detour to make otherwise." After a moment, she asked, "Would alcohol be enough, though?"

"There are several drugs that could well erase a lot of recent memories or at least severely muddle them in conjunction with alcohol, sister," Kasumi told her, sounding somewhat worried. "Although it's not an entirely safe process to inflict on someone it's probably fairly effective. They probably knocked him out with something, then filled him with tequila once they finished, which would certainly make him very confused about his actions for the preceding day or so. That would cause a lot of problems with working out exactly what happened for quite a while, enough time for them to get away, certainly."
"I have to say it all fits unpleasantly well." Ranma sounded irritated. "These people sure aren't new at this. They're using all sorts of techniques they probably took from the various places they used to work for. I wish I could work out who they are and what they want."

"We'll work it out sooner or later, dear," Kasumi reassured him gently. "If not us, the FBI, or the LAPD. There are a lot of intelligent people working on the problem. We all just need to keep looking." He sighed, and Nabiki could picture him nodding at his wife with a small smile.

"Right as usual, love. It just worries me. Something that not only that damn cult was involved in, but that Murray seems to also be linked to, can't be good."

"I doubt it very much," the middle Tendo told them, scowling down at her cutting board. "But sis is right. We can't do much about it yet except keep looking and pass what we find along to Agent Tinnin and Lieutenant Harrison. It's more their problem and field right now anyway, we have enough to do here. Although I'm more than happy to help with it where I can."

"Well put, sister," Kasumi told her with a smile in her voice. "I think we all feel that way."

"I'll pass the relevant information on to both of them, or rather, Ms Aoyama will," she said, reaching for another carrot. "Jun will keep working on it as well. I assume you guys will be doing the same?"

"Yep. Although Jun seems faster at it than any of the other SIs, we're all poking around to see what we can find," her brother-in-law replied. "It certainly looks like these people go to some trouble to keep off computer systems as much as possible, though, which makes it difficult. They're not stupid."

"No, which is annoying," she muttered. He laughed for a moment, making her smile internally. "Criminals are meant to be dim, it's not fair when they know what they're doing."

"I know, it's a pain," he said with mock sympathy in his voice. She sent him a quick insulting image with its tongue sticking out and its eyes crossed, which made both him and her sister laugh again. "Cute. OK, we're going to get back to other things, it doesn't look like we can do anything more useful on this at the moment. We'll see you tomorrow."

"All right. Bye, guys." They disconnected, leaving her to put together a package of information which she sent to both Agent Tinnin and Lieutenant Harrison, along with a note from Ms Aoyama, smiling a little to herself at the memory of her alter-ego meeting the FBI man. His expression had been very funny indeed. She added a text message for Harrison suggesting that Officer Bowie be checked on immediately, just in case he was in any danger from whatever Jackson had done. If he'd simply been shot it was already too late but it seemed quite likely the poor man was probably very, very drunk in his own apartment. There was little reason for the conspirators to actually kill him and quite a strong reason to keep him alive, after all.

Putting her whole attention back on the vegetables she went back to work.

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Harrison blinked at the ceiling, his eyes heavy, then turned his head to the side, fumbling for his phone which had just made the sound that had woken him. Yawning widely, he retrieved the irritating thing as it buzzed again, sleepily prodding buttons until he managed to make it display the message that some bastard thought important enough to wake him up for, reading it blurrily.

It took a couple of seconds for the meaning to sink in, then he swore quietly to himself, sighed, struggled more or less silently out of bed and headed for his clothes. As soon as he was out of the
bedroom with the door closed he called dispatch, arranging an ambulance and a couple of uniformed officers to meet him at Officer Bowie’s apartment, leaving the house a few minutes later still yawning and grumbling about inconsiderate horrors from other worlds who didn't have the decency to let a tired man get an honest night's sleep.

Hotaru watched as the massively modified classic car howled past on its third lap of the track, grinning at the expressions both her father and her friend were wearing. Misaki looked like she was having enormous fun while Haruka looked both exhilarated beyond belief and also impatient to have a go.

Beside her, Isamu was muttering to himself in shock, watching the way his creation was being pushed to its limits in a manner he clearly couldn't believe. Akemi, next to him, was laughing quietly and happily. When Misaki had triggered the nitrous boost on the previous lap she'd clapped her hands like a little girl as the car had shot into the distance like it had been fired from a cannon.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," Isamu mumbled, watching the car brake half-way down the straight, Misaki jumping out as soon as it stopped and running around to the passenger side while presumably Haruka slid into the driver's position. Seconds later it fishtailed a little as it began moving again, vanishing around the corner at the far end of the straight run. "I never thought anyone could drive it like that. Misaki is incredibly good."

"She's good at all sorts of things," Hotaru agreed happily. "So is Haruka."

"I hope she can handle it," the garage owner commented, glancing down at her. "Misaki is a magical girl, after all."

"She'll be fine," the young woman replied placidly, listening to the sound of the vehicle negotiating the bends of the track out of sight of them. A little while later it reappeared, drifting around the two visible corners with an expert hand on the wheel, before straightening up and accelerating, blue flames once more coming from the exhausts as the blonde woman fired the nitrous system. Hotaru giggled at her expression as the car went by in a blast of sound and wind, her female father looked happier than she'd seen her in months.

"Thank you for letting them play with it," she said. Isamu nodded absently, watching the car diminish into the distance again. He didn't seem to have any useful words to reply with, based on his expression.

Markus studied the woman who jumped out of the car as it slid to a stop fifty metres away, running around and getting in the other side as her companion moved into the driver's seat. He glanced at Souta, who was also watching with interest, then around at the small group of the other man's co-workers who had come out to watch as well. "Who is she?" he asked curiously and with respect. Whoever the young woman was, she was an insanely good driver. Souta shrugged.

Behind him, one of his colleagues smiled a little. "Some say she wiped out an entire invading demon army with one shot, and that she has no understanding of the concept of fear. All we know is that she's called Misaki," the man said in a low respectful voice. He bit into an apple he was holding, watching the car as it moved off again. "The blonde? No idea." He shrugged, taking another bite.

Markus inspected him for a moment, his eyebrows raised. "Um. OK. Thanks."

"You're welcome," the man said.
After a somewhat puzzled moment Markus went back to watching the car as it vanished behind the buildings again. The two women went past twice more before slowing and halting near a group of people some two hundred metres down the track, both of them getting out and leaning on the roof of the vehicle, grinning at each other. "Can we go and have a look at it?" he asked Souta.

"I'd certainly like to," the other man replied. They both walked down the length of the fence, entering via the access road and gate, then approaching the car and the two drivers, who were talking to an older man with a young girl, probably around fourteen or so, listening with interest while running her hand over the vehicle with a broad smile on her face. Several people including an old but very fit appearing woman with long white hair in a ponytail, all of them wearing overalls with 'Matsuda' written on the back under some Kanji, were carefully inspecting the car. The old woman opened the hood and propped it up before half-vanishing into the engine compartment with a much younger man beside her.

Walking over, Markus peered in as well, studying the engine, which was much higher tech than anything from the sixties. It was obviously not original specification. Impressed, he watched as the woman plugged a laptop into a connector on the bulkhead and typed rapidly for a few seconds, inspecting the graphs that resulted with close attention and a small smile. Her companion was talking quietly to her, nodding as she pointed something out. After a moment he turned his attention to the two women, a short-haired blonde and a somewhat taller brunette, who were still looking very pleased with themselves as they talked to the man who seemed to be in charge. He was apparently rather surprised but seemed pleased as well.

"That's Isamu Matsuda," Souta said beside him. "He owns Matsuda Tuning. His father started it back in the late fifties as far as I know. We've done a little work for them on and off, mainly customised engine management systems. In fact, I think that ECU there is one of ours." He indicated a box mounted on the firewall of the heavily modified Jaguar. "Before my time at the company, though."

"It's an impressive vehicle," Markus noted, admiring the lines of the car and the amazing paint job.

"I would have to agree. I've always liked the old British sports cars, they had a certain style which is very attractive," his companion agreed. "Not very reliable, unfortunately, but very pretty." Grinning, he waved at the engine in the car. "It appears that this one is running on proper Japanese engineering which would seem to have fixed that problem."

Markus chuckled. "What engine is it?"

Souta inspected the machinery for a moment. "I think it started life as a Honda NSX engine, but someone has done something very expensive to it. It's nothing even close to stock now." They both watched as the old woman and her associate, apparently satisfied, unplugged the laptop and closed the engine bay, glancing at them for a moment, then walked over to join the conversation for a minute or two before returning to the building behind them.

Turning the car off, Haruka sat with her hands on the wheel and a huge grin on her face for a few seconds, then turned to Misaki, who looked back at her, also grinning. "What do you think?" the other woman asked.

"I think I'm in love," she replied, caressing the wheel tenderly.

"Is it as good as your old car?"

"Difficult to say for sure." She thought for a moment. "Different, definitely. Much twitchier, that's
for sure, I can see why a normal person would have trouble with it. The E-type was always somewhat prone to suddenly trying to commit suicide at high speed, especially in a turn, from what I've read. Adding all that extra power would make that a lot worse. But it's damn fun to drive if you can react as fast as we can. It slides fantastically well. That second to last corner is amazing to drift around." She laughed for a moment. "I think we might have used up the rear tyres, though."

Misaki shrugged a little, grinning. "They're cheap enough."

"True. And you wouldn't drive like that most of the time, anyway." She looked at the dashboard and the gauge for the nitrous bottle, which was reading nearly empty. "It needs a bigger tank. It ran out much too soon."

"I'm sure Isamu could sort that out," Misaki giggled. "So, have we found your next car?"

After a second or two, she laughed and nodded. "I think so, if he'll sell it."

"I'm sure we can come to an arrangement." They both got out, looking at each other over the roof, grinning, before turning to Isamu who was approaching with a somewhat stunned expression on his face. Hotaru was bouncing along beside him, looking very excited, and ran up to quickly hug them both before darting past and inspecting the car, running her hands over it.

"That was... unbelievable," the garage owner said, staring at them with incredulity. "Even considering what you are, Misaki. And you, Haruka, how on earth can you drive like that?"

She glanced at Misaki who looked amused. "I have very fast reactions," she eventually said. He kept staring for a moment then finally sighed.

"Apparently so. You young ladies make me feel very old all of a sudden." Laughing, Misaki shrugged.

"Sorry. Anyway, I know you're an extremely good driver. We're just... a bit better."

Shaking his head in respect he replied, "More than a bit. If you do take up racing you're going to make a lot of people very worried, I think." Akemi and her colleague, who along with several of the mechanics were checking the car over, opened the hood and began fiddling with the engine, connecting a laptop to it. He glanced over at them for a couple of seconds. "If nothing else we've finally got some real world performance figures on it. The rolling road tests can't tell you everything and no one else has ever been able to drive it properly."

One of the mechanics was inspecting the tyres, making notes. He looked up at the garage owner. "These are completely gone," he called. "They're almost racing slicks now." Isamu nodded absently.

"What do you think of the car?" he asked the two women, who turned back to him from watching his crew work on the vehicle.

Haruka grinned widely. "It's fantastic. The NOS bottle is too small, and the front suspension isn't quite set up correctly, I think, but other than that it's amazing. You and your people do incredible work." He smiled at her, although he also looked surprised.

"Too small?"

"Yes, it ran out much too soon." She laughed as he sighed.

"No one else has ever complained it didn't have enough power."
"Oh, it's definitely not underpowered, but the nitrous is a lot of fun and it runs out far too quickly."

"Fun." He stared at them for several seconds. "Right." Shaking his head he smiled a little. "Interesting usage of the word."

"So, is it for sale?" she asked more seriously. He gaped, then turned to Misaki, who nodded happily.

"You want it?"

"Oh, so much. It's damn near perfect." Once more she seemed to take him by surprise. He thought for a minute or two. Eventually he shrugged.

"Well, I suppose otherwise it was only going to sit there forever, or until we pulled it to pieces for the parts. That would have been a shame, though, after all that work. And it looks so nice as well."

She agreed, turning to look at the car. Akemi was just closing it up again, looking pleased. "The paint job is one of the nicest I've ever seen," she commented.

"Yes, it's very good indeed," he replied, walking closer to the car and wiping a little dust from it. "One of our guys knows someone who's a true artist in paintwork. It's about ten coats of metal flake over the base coat with something like fifteen coats of clear varnish on top of that, then four days of careful polishing. He really knows his business. I've used him quite a lot since we did this but to date it's probably the best job he's done." He turned to her, carefully studying her for a few seconds, before finally nodding.

"All right. I'll sell it, with two conditions. One, you bring it back to us for servicing. Two, you take care of it. And yourself. I don't want to see either one of you wrapped around a tree, OK?" She nodded, grinning.

"I accept your terms." They bowed to each other, then straightened up, laughing a little.

Akemi walked over, grinning at Haruka and Misaki. "That was the most incredible driving I've ever seen," she said happily. "Fantastic. I'd love to go around the track in it with you."

Glancing at Misaki, who was smiling, Haruka nodded. "I think that's fair. Hotaru wants a ride as well."

"We'll need to replace the rear tyres and refill the nitrous bottle," the old mechanic said, looking at Isamu.

He nodded back. "She says the nitrous tank is too small, it ran out too quickly." Akemi laughed delightedly.

"Of course. There's a larger one in the store room, about twice the capacity. Will that do?"

"I think so," Haruka replied, looking pleased. Isamu shook his head in mild wonder.

"I'll throw that in as well."

"You're buying it?" Akemi asked. Haruka grinned. "Good. It needs to be used. Keeping the poor thing under a dust sheet is almost a crime." She tapped the laptop she was holding under her arm. "I've downloaded all the ECU logs. It needs some minor tweaks to improve the torque curve a little in the mid-range and one or two other small adjustments, but it's looking very good. Bring it back inside and we'll do that, fit the new bottle, and some more tyres. Then I want a go." Cackling with
amusement as Isamu sighed, she wandered back to the garage talking rapidly to her younger associate, who was smiling a little to himself. The company owner watched her go with resigned good cheer.

"She's like a teenager most of the time. Give her a stupidly fast car to make even more insane and she's as happy as anyone I've ever met."

Snickering, Misaki watched the elderly woman disappear into the building, then turned to him. "So. What sort of a deal can you offer my friend here on this somewhat unusual vehicle?"

Isamu studied her for a second or two, looked at the car while rubbing his chin, then turned to Haruka. "Hmm." He thought while everyone waited, then named a price. She winced a little.

"Not cheap."

"No, but to be honest it's less than half what we spent on the hardware alone. The chassis is the least of it, the engine cost a fortune to build." He shrugged as she thought hard. Eventually she counter-offered a somewhat lower price, this time causing him to wince in turn. "Are you serious?" She smiled a little.

"Of course."

"Women," he mumbled, a twinkle in his eye. The blonde smiled slightly more widely. A few seconds passed then he came back with a price halfway between the first two. Haruka nodded. They bowed to each other again, before smiling widely.

"It's a lot but I think worth it," she commented.

"It's a ridiculously low price but I'd rather see it used by someone who can use it than see it rot away," he retorted with a grin. "Be careful with it."

"I will," she promised honestly. "I can do a bank transfer right now if you give me your account details. The insurance payment from my old car is just sitting there at the moment."

"Come inside. Misaki, can you bring the car in for me?" he asked, looking to the magical girl, who had stopped to listen. They turned to Isamu. "I'm Souta Kamata from IkedaTech Engineering. This is my friend and colleague Markus Bergfalk, from Iris Cars in the UK, a customer of ours."

"Ah, yes, we've done quite a bit of business with IkedaTech over the years," Isamu replied in the same language, nodding. "Although I don't believe we've ever met." Making introductions for himself and the three women, he then turned to the other man, who was tall and blond, looking like he exercised a lot. "I'm also very familiar with Iris, of course. Your company makes some remarkable sports cars, most of which are also very beautiful."

The blond, Markus, smiled, bowing respectfully. "Thank you, Mr Matsuda," he said, his own English bearing an accent that Haruka couldn't quite place, something Northern European she
thought. "It's very nice of you to say so." After a short pause, he curiously asked, "Are you any relation to Yoshiho Matsuda, of Matsuda Collection fame?"

Isamu smiled, shaking his head. "Not that I'm aware of, certainly nothing at all close. We merely share a family name and a love of good automotive engineering."

Markus smiled back. "I understand. I've seen the Porsche museum, it's rather remarkable." Turning his head to glance at the Jaguar for a moment, he looked back, saying, "We were very impressed by this vehicle, and much more impressed by the level of driving skill of the two young women." He waved at the car, then nodded to Misaki and Haruka, who exchanged glances, smiling. "It was... somewhat unbelievable." He turned to talk directly to them. "Are you professional racing drivers by any chance?"

Haruka laughed a little, shaking her head, while Misaki looked amused. "No, although I did at one point consider that career, and in fact did some semi-professional racing. My life became somewhat complicated for a few years and I was unable to continue that path as much as I'd have liked to although recent events have left me thinking I might well get back into it." Both men nodded thoughtfully.

Misaki chuckled, adding, "I just like driving when I get the opportunity," she explained, "I've known Isamu for a few years and sometimes get to try some of his cars on the track here. Haruka is looking for a new car after her last one was written off." She looked over her shoulder at the black vehicle, then laughed again. "More precisely, she was looking for a new car. She found it."

"I see," he said slowly, studying the car as well, then her and Haruka. "That makes it all even more impressive. I've never seen anything like it before."

Isamu snickered. "If you had any idea how twitchy that damn thing is you'd be even more shocked," he chuckled. "It's almost impossible to drive for normal people. I never in my wildest dreams thought that anyone could make it do that. It was a true honour to see it driven properly." Studying the two men, he waved to his business. "Would you care to come in for a cup of tea and perhaps see some of our other vehicles?" he asked. "I need to do some paperwork with Haruka here, while my people put some more tyres on. And fit a bigger NOS tank." Glancing at the two women who were grinning at him, he shook his head for a moment. "Which I still can't believe."

Both of them laughed. "But that won't take long."

Looking at his watch for a moment, Markus glanced at Souta, who nodded, then turned back to the garage owner. "We'd both like that, yes, thank you," he replied. "Having seen this car I'm quite curious to see what else you have."

Misaki smiled a little, then got into the car and started it, driving slowly back into the building, while Haruka and the rest of them walked along behind her, Hotaru looking interested and excited at the same time. Inside, Isamu turned to Haruka. "I'll get the paperwork arranged and the bank details for you," he said, to which she nodded. "It won't take long." He looked around, then waved over one of his people, the mechanic who had fitted the battery, who came over quickly. "Jirou, please arrange some tea for everyone, will you?" The young man smiled, making a head count, then left again. "If you'll just wait in the office there, I'll be back soon," he continued, as Misaki joined them having parked the Jaguar which Akemi and three other mechanics were already working on, the car up on a pair of jacks and both rear wheels removed almost before she'd stopped it.

Haruka watched for a moment, impressed at the speed they were working, which was almost like being in the pits at a track, before she turned to follow the others into the reception area. "I must say I'm astounded by your driving skills, Ms Tenou," Markus said as they sat down. "And yours,
"Call me Haruka," she replied, smiling. "And thank you. It's a lot of fun. I haven't had a good drive around a track for ages, and never in anything quite like that."

Listening, Souta looked startled. "I would have thought that you drove on a track regularly based on what we saw," he noted curiously. "If that was you being out of practice I'd certainly like to see what you can do when you're really trying." She laughed, feeling pleased at the compliment. Jirou, the young mechanic, came in with a tray of tea things, putting it on the table they were sitting around with a smile, Hotaru immediately taking charge of passing the drinks around, then pulled a clipboard from under his arm and walked over to a notice board on the wall of the room, studying it for a moment. Everyone watched curiously except for Misaki who was grinning.

"What's that for?" Hotaru asked. Misaki grinned more widely. Turning to them, Jirou said, "It's our lap time board. We always time any of our vehicles going around the track, the best times go up here." Glancing at Misaki he sighed a little. "All of hers go at the top. We should probably have a separate board for magical girls."

"You'll have to invite other ones along in that case," Misaki chuckled. "It would be weird having only me on it."

Snickering slightly, the man nodded, turning back to the board and writing on a slip of paper which he pinned to it close to the top, moving a few similar slips down in the process. "We could probably charge admission in that case," he noted with amusement. "We'd need to call it something, though. 'Magical girl in an insanely fast car' or something along those lines."

"Sounds like a decent plan," she replied, grinning. "I could ask around. I know a few people who'd probably be interested. Yori might like a go. Tamiko certainly would. Mind you, she's a terrible driver. Fast, but terrible. She'd probably leave dents in the crash barrier on the corners so bad you'd need to name them after her."

By now laughing quite hard, Jirou wrote out another slip, putting it immediately under the first one. "I'm looking forward to it," he giggled. "There we go. Haruka, you were three tenths of a second slower than Misaki on your best lap."

"She knows the track, I don't," Haruka stated firmly, looking at the other woman, who shrugged. Snickering, Jirou accepted the excuse.

"If you say so."

"I do. And I'm sticking to it."

She grinned as he smiled at her, then left the room. Souta got up and walked over to the notice board, inspecting the times posted with raised eyebrows, then sat down again, shaking his head. "I've been around that track a few times myself. Those times are remarkable. Even the lowest one is much better than I could do," he commented.

Misaki looked amused, pointing at a spot about half-way up the board. "Akemi has done some impressive ones and she's old enough to be my grandmother," she noted. "There are some damn good drivers in this company."

"None as good as you two it would seem," Markus said, also studying the board. The top eight spots, except for the fourth one down which was Haruka's, all bore her name. She shrugged a little looking pleased.
"I have some unfair advantages," she replied. Souta nodded wisely, apparently being well aware of who and what she was having heard her name earlier, although the Iris Cars man looked slightly puzzled.

Before he could ask the question he was obviously working on, Isamu came in, holding a folder full of paperwork. "Here we go. Haruka, if you'd like to come with me, this shouldn't take long." She nodded, standing, then following him out. Misaki watched them go before turning back to the others.

"Magical girls?" Markus asked curiously. She began explaining, amused, while they sipped their tea.

"Is she still asleep?" Soun asked as Nabiki came into the living room, sitting beside her father with a smile for the other occupants. The middle sister nodded.

"You probably couldn't wake her with a bucket of water at this point," she giggled. "Snoring away, totally out of it. I'm not surprised, considering the amount of work they've been doing the last few days. Shampoo looked like she was ready to fall over when she left here as well. I called Elder Cologne and she told me she came in, dropped her bag on the floor, said hello, then fell asleep on her feet. Mousse had to carry her to bed. I'd think they'll sleep the rest of the day and all night as well."

Smiling slightly Nodoka commented, "Poor girls. But from what I understand it was all worth it."

"I think so," Nabiki agreed. "It will be interesting to see this DVD that the studio is producing. If it hadn't been for that bank robbery they'd probably have had a copy to bring back with them but Aiko called me and said she'd be picking them up sometime tomorrow and bringing them over. The studio executive who's in charge of this whole project will be looking at them then as well, so on Monday they should have worked out the next step."

"Will they get the job?" Genma asked curiously. Nabiki looked at him, then nodded again.

"From what I know it's pretty much guaranteed. Akane should be able to tell us more but I doubt we'll see her until tomorrow morning at the earliest."

Putting his arm around his daughter, Soun smiled proudly. "I'm so very happy for her. It will be difficult not having her around, but knowing she'll be doing something she can excel at and enjoy will make up for it." He glanced at Nabiki, adding, "Now all we have to do is find a career for you, and the rest of us will be able to take it easy in our old age, supported by the young, the way it's meant to happen."

Nabiki grinned at him. "Oh, I'm sure you'd like that, wouldn't you, Dad? And he'd like it even more." She looked meaningfully at Genma who bowed slightly from a sitting position, a grave expression on his face.

"Of course, my dear, that's the whole point of aging," the bespectacled martial artist replied quietly, before smiling a little as well. Nodoka looked hard at him, sighing, then shook her head.

"Remind me why I put up with you," she mumbled, making his smile widen a bit.

Hopping to her feet, Nabiki left the room, then came back a little later with a bottle of wine. "I was keeping this back for a good occasion," she remarked, looking at the label, before putting it on the table and retrieving four glasses and a corkscrew. "I think we can toast Akane and Shampoo, even before we know for sure."
"A very good idea," her father agreed, watching as she competently removed the cork then poured a glassful for each of them. Handing them around she retook her seat, sniffing the wine gently, then trying a little. Soun did the same, smiling appreciatively. "This is very nice," he said, picking up the bottle and reading the label for himself. "Australian. Where did you get it?"

"I picked it up on holiday," she told him. "It came highly recommended. I bought a few bottles." Looking severely at Genma, she added, "And I hid it very well, so don't bother looking." The man looked mildly affronted, while Nodoka laughed for a moment.

"She knows you well, dearest," the Saotome matriarch told her husband, who shrugged, sipping his own wine.

"Back to university in a week or so, I suppose, dear?" Soun said after a short silence. Nabiki glanced at him, looking up from studying her wine-glass, then nodded.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it, while at the same time I'm slightly dreading all the extra work. These next few months are going to be hard, I think, getting ready for the finals and that sort of thing. But on the other hand I'm doing pretty well so I'm hoping to come out the end of it with a good degree." Leaning back a little she sipped the wine, putting the glass down on the table still half-full. "It's been an interesting time these last few years."

"It has," her father agreed quietly, smiling briefly at her then looking around the living room thoughtfully. "It seems like it was only yesterday this room was full of people every day, but these days it's often only three or four." He sighed faintly as Nodoka glanced at him, then her husband, before lowering her eyes. They were all silent again for a few seconds.

"Still, it seems to mostly have worked out well, far better than we could have expected during the bad times, and I still live in hope that there will be more good news one day." The Tendo man smiling a little, leaning forward and raising his glass. "To Akane and Shampoo, may they succeed in everything they try." The three others clinked glasses together and drank.

After a moment, Nodoka looked up, smiling a little wistfully at her glass as she held it up, and added, "To absent family, and the hope that we'll meet again." Soun smiled at her and they repeated the toast.

Finishing the bottle, they sat quietly for a while, busy with their own thoughts, before Nabiki and Nodoka went back into the kitchen to keep making food for the party, Soun and Genma ending up playing another game of Shogi in silence.

Haruka smiled as she re-entered the office, seeing her daughter talking rapidly to Misaki and that man from Iris, Markus, who was looking a little shocked yet still very interested as she explained about magical girls and some of the things they fought. Not giving away her own status as one of them, of course, merely coming across as someone who followed the whole scene closely. She was privately impressed with how well her daughter spoke English, not having realised how much of it she'd learned at school. The other man, Souta, was drinking tea and listening with interest. They all looked up as she and Isamu came in. "All done," she announced, pleased, showing the documentation. "I have a shiny new car to play with."

"Great," Hotaru chirped, bouncing to her feet. "I want a go next."

Isamu glanced at Haruka with a small expression of amusement, then looked over his shoulder into the main garage, calling a question to Akemi. A shout came back that made him chuckle. "They've fitted the new tyres and the bigger nitrous tank, they're just filling it now," he told the room at
large, turning back to them all. "The track is free for at least the next couple of hours so if you want you're welcome to go out again, Haruka," he added, looking at her.

The blonde nodded with a smile. "I think I should. I can't drive like that on the street, not without getting people annoyed, and she's not going to stop pushing until she gets a ride." Hotaru crossed her arms and looked irritated, scowling deeply, although everyone could tell she wasn't offended. A small smile kept breaking through.

A pop behind them was followed by a momentary loud hiss and a clatter of metal against metal, and a short burst of swearing as well. She turned, as did Isamu, to see Akemi sucking on her knuckles, glaring at the large nitrous tank they'd been using to fill the one in the car. She looked over at them. "We need a new high pressure hose coupler, this one is worn and nearly took my hand off when I disconnected it." The elderly woman kicked the tank irritably, but cheered up nearly instantly. "But the car is ready. I want a go after Hotaru, if that's OK."

Haruka smiled at her. The old woman really was more like a teenager some of the time. "Of course. You people built the thing, you deserve a ride when it's being driven hard." She glanced at Isamu quizzically, grinning when he paled and took a step back, shaking his head.

"No chance of getting me back in that thing." He gave the car a look that mixed worry, pride, and a certain amount of raw fear. "Once was enough, trust me." Haruka grinned, as did Akemi, who had walked over to them.

"Silly boy," the old mechanic chuckled. "Based on what I saw earlier you'd be safe. But, if you don't go, that's all the more time for me!"

With a snicker Haruka turned to the others in the room. "Come on, dear," she told Hotaru, who rushed over smiling widely. "Let's see how my new car goes without Misaki in it." They headed over to the vehicle which was now down off the jacks, new rear tyres in place, both getting in. Driving it carefully out of the garage again and onto the track with, yet again, several people following curiously, she orientated it down the centreline. "Ready, dear?" she asked her daughter, who checked her harness then nodded with a grin.

"Ready. Go go GO!" she yelled happily. A scream of engine noise and a squeal of tyres heralded the not-quite-a-Jaguar leaping off the line and roaring off down the track. The faint sound of a teenager laughing her head off could just be heard over it if you had good ears.

Markus sat quivering in the passenger seat for nearly a minute after the car stopped, staring out at the track, before turning his head to regard Haruka who was smiling to herself, watching him. "You, my good woman, are completely insane," he managed to say in a quavering voice. He'd gone quiet half-way through the first lap after swearing in his native Swedish up to that point and holding on for dear life, which had only made her laugh.

She chuckled, hitting the quick release for the harness and opening the door. "I warned you it was a little intense in this thing," she commented lightly as she hopped out. He followed considerably more slowly, still shaking a bit. He'd been in quite a number of high performance cars over the years, driven by true experts, and he was no slouch behind the wheel himself, but he'd never experienced anything even close to what the last ten minutes had produced. By the time he was able to stand up properly, Haruka was talking to Misaki and Akemi in Japanese, all three of them grinning.

It was particularly galling the way the elderly mechanic had jumped out after she'd had her own ride laughing like a ten year old, looking vastly pleased. Misaki had driven that time, which made
it all the more irritating as she seemed to be even crazier behind the wheel than Haruka was.

Isamu came over to him as he leaned on the car trying to regain his composure, the older man smiling very slightly. "You see why I don't want to get back into the thing even though I built it, don't you?" he asked quietly. Markus nodded, then took a deep breath and stood fully.

"I do. It's a remarkable piece of engineering but not exactly... calming."

"No. Not really." Isamu made a small noise that suggested a muffled laugh.

"That said, both those young women are quite extraordinarily good drivers," the Iris engineer said, looking back to Haruka and the other two, who had been joined by the violet-haired figure of Hotaru who was listening and giggling.

"That's very true indeed," Isamu agreed, following his gaze. "I know Misaki has the fastest reactions I've ever seen, which I always put down to what she is, but Haruka is remarkable as well. If she does get into racing again I think her opponents will have a hard time of it."

Markus nodded slowly, fully agreeing with the other man. "I'm half tempted to see if our works team has a spot available she'd be interested in," he finally said. "But I'm also scared that if that happened I'd have to get in a car with her again." They shared a look. Isamu smiled a little.

"Good point." He waved to the building the others were going back to now, Haruka carefully driving her car up the access road following the pedestrians. "She's going to need new tyres, again, and a refill on the NOS. While they're sorting that out let's give you and Souta the tour I promised."

"Thank you," Markus replied, walking beside him. "Based on what I've seen so far it may be that Iris would be interested in your aid on a small design issue we have, as well, if you're interested."

He glanced at Isamu, who looked back with an expression that suggested he was.

"Tell me more," the older man requested, apparently intrigued.

Parking the Jaguar-ish on the street, Haruka ran the window down and smiled at Misaki, who squatted down to talk to her. "Once again, thank you, very much indeed, for all your help. It's worked out far better than I expected." She ran her right hand gently over the leather of the steering wheel, feeling much better than she had done for... well, a long time.

Misaki grinned. "It was no problem, and a lot of fun. Like Yori told you a while ago, we're all on the same side, despite the little problems we've had in the past. Let's leave them there and get on with life, OK?"

She chuckled, nodding. "I can live with that. It's going to be difficult in many ways with the others, my others, there's still a lot of bad blood there that's going to be hard to get past, but I'll try." The blonde glanced at her daughter who was sitting in the passenger seat, listening quietly with a small smile on her face. "I have a number of reasons to, after all."

"True enough," Misaki replied, winking at Hotaru, who did the same back. "Any luck with a place to live?"

Nodding, Haruka said, "Yes, I think so. We found a nice apartment fairly close to the hotel we've been staying in that looks like it might be a good fit for us, not too expensive but a reasonable size and with decent parking. I'm seeing the apartment manager again on Monday. If everything works out we'll be moving in within a week or so." She sighed a little. "I'll have to buy some new furniture as well, which is a bit annoying, but I can afford it, I suppose. I'm not too badly off." She
looked around the inside of the car again, smiling to herself. "I got the most important thing done already."

Hotaru made a little annoyed sniff, making both the older woman look at her, then grin. "The second most important thing, rather." The girl giggled, making Misaki laugh for a moment.

"Good luck with it. Oh, while I think about it, you should ask Chou about putting a durability spell on this thing, she's pretty good with them. It would keep this beautiful paint job perfect if nothing else."

Slightly surprised, Haruka thought about the idea, then nodded slowly. "I hadn't thought of that. Would she do it, do you think? After all the trouble?"

"Oh, sure she would," Misaki smiled. "She doesn't hold grudges, really. I'll ask her but I doubt she'd have any problems with it." The woman stood, stepping back, then looked over the car at the front door of Matsuda Tuning, where the man from Iris Cars could be seen talking to Isamu and the other man he'd arrived with, all three of them looking pleased. "It seems to have been a good day all round," she added. "I think Isamu has picked up some interesting work as well. That Markus guy seemed very impressed with the cars they've worked on."

"I hope he gets something out of it," Haruka agreed, looking in the same direction. "He seems like a nice man and his people certainly know what they're doing."

"He's a good person," Misaki nodded. "OK, I have to get going, I have things to do, but I'll see you both around."

Waving, Haruka started her new car and drove off, while Misaki headed in the other direction at high speed, Hotaru settling back in her seat and looking contented.

"I told you she'd help," the girl finally said, some minutes later. Haruka grinned, reaching over and ruffling her daughter's hair, while they both laughed for a moment.

"How is Officer Bowie, Lieutenant?"

Holding his cell-phone to his ear Harrison stepped aside to allow the paramedics to exit the building, following the gurney they were pushing to the ambulance which was parked outside the apartment building. "He's going to be fine, Captain, but he's suffering mild alcohol poisoning and dehydration as well as the aftereffects of some sort of drug, according to what I've been told. He'd probably have made it OK if we hadn't found him but he wouldn't have enjoyed the next day or so."

There was a sigh down the phone. "You're sure it wasn't self-inflicted?"

"Pretty sure, yes," Harrison replied. "I don't know him all that well but I do remember we were once at a bar with some of the guys and he said he hated the taste of tequila. Aside from the information Ms Aoyama sent me, I'd have been a bit suspicious about him apparently drinking close to a pint of the stuff for no obvious reason. With everything else surrounding this, I think she's right, this is a setup to cover their agent."

"Agent Tinnin has been going over the information she sent both of you and seems to think it all holds together well," his superior said, sounding irritated. "Which is both good and bad. Good because we have a lead, even if it's going to be a nightmare to follow up on, but bad because the way all this was put together in less than twenty-four hours suggests to me that these people, whoever the hell they are, have a lot more resources than we expected."
"It sure looks like that, sir," Harrison grumbled. "If it wasn't for our helpful green-haired creepy person it would have taken weeks or months to get to this point as well, assuming we even saw through this current problem. At least now we might be able to get somewhere. I doubt they expected us to see through it so fast. Or at all."

"No, I don't think they did either. The FBI has put out a national bulletin for this Jackson character, so with some luck we might be able to take them by surprise. I'm not counting on it but it's a start." They were both silent for a moment. "Good work, Lieutenant. Once you've finished up there, go back to bed, and be in first thing in the morning. We'll need to keep the momentum up for as long as we can to capitalise on this opportunity."

"OK, sir. I'll see you in...," he checked his watch, then moaned, "...oh god, five hours." There was a small chuckle from the other end.

"I know, it's not long. Try to get some sleep." The captain hung up, Harrison putting the phone back in his pocket then heading for his car to follow the ambulance to the hospital.
Party, Phase One

Party on, Dudes!

*Many thanks for the people contributing to the Sisterhood of Doom Wikia, which amused me greatly, especially the creator Kitsune Herikawa. I've found it a useful resource on more than one occasion to quickly look up some of my own characters ; I'm stunned by the amount of work put into it.*

*There is also a TV Tropes page now, apparently, which also amuses me. I have many amuses.*

Standing in the front door to the Dojo early in the morning, Soun watched his middle daughter doing sit-ups in the middle of the room, smiling to himself. After a dozen or so she said, without looking at him, "Why are you looking so smug, Dad?"

"It's nice to see you exercising like that," he replied with a small chuckle. "I haven't seen you do that for years."

"I told you I exercise regularly," she said, lying back and looking at him upside down, grinning for a moment, before rolling over and beginning to do push-ups. "Not quite the way Akane does but I keep fit. A lot of swimming, for example. And I go running quite a lot these days as well." He watched as she kept doing push-ups as regularly as a machine, showing no signs of tiring, and the strain not showing in her voice either. He was quite impressed.

"You come from a long line of martial artists, dear, so I'm not surprised you look after yourself. I haven't seen you use the Dojo like this very often."

The young woman shot him a smile, then rolled to her feet in a manner that made him nod appreciatively. "It's usually full of people when I'm around these days, or Akane and Shampoo beating each other black and blue. I was just getting a little stiff working in the kitchen so much and I needed to work it off." She giggled a little. "I'd like a swim but the only place nearby is the pond, which is too small. And cold." She gave him a sly look. "And probably possessed."

Unable to help it he glanced nervously over his shoulder in the direction of the relevant body of water, shuddering for a moment. She laughed again, walking over and hugging him. "Calm down, it can't get you in here. You're safe."

Snickering, he put his hand on her head and stroked her hair. "Silly girl. It's been nice having you here again even if it's only been for a few days. I hope you'll be around more over the next few months, although I know you're going to be busy."

"I'll be here when I can, Dad," she assured him, releasing him and stepping back. "I'm going to go for a run now, I think, then it'll be time to start setting up for the party. Everyone is supposed to start turning up in about four hours or so, Ukyo and Konatsu will be here in an hour as well." She checked her watch for a moment. "And Mousse is coming over a little later to help. Cologne is closing the Café early so she can come. I need to be ready myself."

"All right, daughter," he smiled. "I'll push Genma out of bed to help as well. Between us I think we should be able to manage." He watched as she went and retrieved her small towel, putting it around her neck, admiring the young woman his middle offspring had become. "You really should let me teach you some of the Art, dear," he added with a grin as she came back.
She returned the grin, then dropped into a parody of a martial arts stance, putting a deadly expression on her face. "I know Kung Fu," she hissed, glaring around for imaginary enemies.

Soun watched, amused, as she made various chopping motions with her hands, admittedly at very respectable speed, although it was thrown off a little by the sound effects she added. "That's Karate, dear," he said mildly. "More or less."

Straightening up with giggle, she smiled back. "What would I know? You and Akane are the martial artists in this family. I'm merely a lowly Economics student."

"Who will probably become far more dangerous than a mere master of the Art," he chuckled. "You will destroy them with Finance-Fu."

She stared at him for a moment then nearly collapsed in laughter. Eventually she recovered, shaking her head. "Your sense of humour is worse than mine," she told him. He shrugged slightly, accepting the compliment as he chose to consider it.

"I still think I could probably get you up to a decent level quite fast," he smiled, "but I can live with it if you don't want to. Akane will carry on the family tradition in her own way, I have no doubt, while you will create a new one."

She briefly hugged him again. "I'm certainly going to try." Grinning for a moment, she headed for the exit. "But later. Now I need to do about ten kilometres or so. I'll see you later, OK?"

"Have fun," he called as she left, smiling to himself a little, then went back into the house to see what Nodoka needed done first, via Genma's bed and a swift kick.

"Hi, Ukyo," Nabiki said as she opened the front door, smiling at her friend. The young woman with the long brown hair smiled back, coming in as the middle sister stepped aside. "Where's Konatsu?" she asked a moment later, looking outside to see an absence of faux-female ninja.

"He's getting some ingredients I ran out of at the last moment," the other woman said, unslinging the portable grill which was on her back and putting it down for the moment. "I thought I had enough prawns but half of them have gone off, they must have been a bad batch or something. I ran out of some of the things I need for the sauce as well. He should be here in twenty minutes or so." Ukyo smoothed down her hair which had been mussed when she dropped the grill.

"OK." Nabiki led her through into the garden, where her father and Genma were assembling some strong folding tables they kept in the Dojo for events along the side of the house at a safe distance from the pond, at which they both kept shooting suspicious glances. Something that she found very funny, but was keeping out of, as it was Nodoka's preserve these days. The Saotome woman was directing the two men, smirking a little when she noticed the looks they gave the innocent body of water any time they couldn't see her do it.

"You can set up your equipment on this table," she said, indicating one at the end. "Hopefully it's big enough."

"It's fine, thanks, Nabiki," the brunette smiled.

"Cologne is going to have her ramen next to you, then the rest is for everything Nodoka and I made, with the one at the other end for the drinks." Nabiki watched as the chef quickly assembled a cooking surface, unpacking a bag with a lot of ingredients and premixed batter in bottles coming out of it. Another one held several implements such as spatulas and a mixing bowl.
"Do you need anything else?" she asked. Ukyo shook her head.

"No, with what Konatsu is bringing I should have everything. I can always run home if I run out of anything but I think I've got enough to feed a couple of dozen people, especially with all this other food as well," she replied, casting a glance at the plates and bowls full of prepared comestibles covering two more tables.

Nabiki grinned. "Remember we're expecting six magical girls as part of that couple of dozen people. Not to mention three martial artists, three Amazon warriors, and me."

Ukyo giggled a little. "You think you can eat as much as a magical girl?"

"Well, I do exercise a lot and I'm hungry," the Tendo woman replied, shrugging. "I intend to find out. And I love your okonomiyaki, although I haven't had it for a while."

Amused, Ukyo turned around having finished setting up. "You should come by more often, then. There's always a space for any of you, friends and family discount of course." She glanced at Genma. "Except for him."

They shared a look, then laughed for a few seconds. "Cologne has told me the same thing in the past," Nabiki gasped, chuckling wildly. "In almost exactly those words."

"The Elder has a certain amount of common sense," Ukyo giggled.

The pair watched as Soun finished setting up the last table, Genma coming out of the house with several crates of beer and soft drinks in bottle, which he put on the ground, before they both starting putting the bottles themselves on the table. After looking around a little guiltily Genma quickly popped the caps off a pair of beer bottles and handed one to his old friend, who took it with a nod of thanks. They were half-way through the first sip when the sound of Nodoka clearing her throat meaningfully from behind them made the two men twitch, then look around, worried. She pointed at an empty crate, they exchanged glances, sighed, slumped, then put the bottles away.

Ukyo looked at Nabiki, then raised an impressed eyebrow. "How does she manage to do that with just a look?" the brunette whispered. Nabiki grinned a little.

"I'm not entirely sure but she's good at it."

"Very." After another amused look at the two men who were finishing their job, looking over their shoulders nervously, she turned to the other young woman. "How's Akane? I heard she got back OK last night."

"She's fine as far as I know," the middle Tendo replied, "although she's still asleep. I checked on her about fifteen minutes ago. She was still snoring." Nabiki smiled. "They both looked absolutely exhausted when they got back yesterday." Checking her watch, she added, "That said, she probably needs a poke. It's nearly nine now and if she doesn't get up she'll end up tired all over again from sleeping too much."

The sound of the doorbell came, making them look around. "I'll get it if you want to wake Akane," Ukyo offered, heading into the house after Nabiki.

"Thanks." As the other woman went towards the front of the house, Nabiki trotted upstairs, tapping on Akane's door before opening it. "Hey, Sis, you awake yet?"

There was a slight grunt then a sleepy voice replied, "Nearly. What time is it?"
"About ten minutes to nine. AM. You slept all night and half of yesterday."

Akane rolled over and sat up, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "Oh." She yawned again. "Thanks for letting me sleep, then. It all hit at once and I can't even remember getting into bed." Shaking her head, she ran her hands through her hair, yawned one final time, then slid out of bed, standing and stretching. "Any signs of Shampoo?"

"Nope, not yet. I called the Café earlier and Mousse said she was still asleep as well, although Cologne was about to kick her out of bed. He said they'd be over soon."

"All right. I need a wash and I really need to brush my teeth. It tastes like one of the attic spiders crawled into my mouth and died." Akane made a face, as her sister grinned. "A big one."

"Those things would eat your head, not crawl into it," Nabiki giggled. "They're enormous." Both of them looked up for a moment when there was a couple of seconds of scuttling sounds above them, Akane paling slightly.

"I think there are more of them now," she said quietly.

"Maybe they ate Ryoga and are breeding," Nabiki suggested with an evil look. Akane giggled.

"No, he's fine, unfortunately. We... met... in L.A." At her sister's raised eyebrow she recounted the experience and the aftermath of that meeting, by the end of which the other woman was leaning against the bedroom wall weak with laughter.

"Oh, god, that's amazing," she managed to say, sliding down the wall to sit at the bottom of it. "I'm almost sorry for the idiot." The brunette looked up at the younger sister who was grinning. "And I'm really impressed you kept your temper considering the circumstances. Extremely pleased as well."

"Thanks, 'Biki," Akane replied, looking a little proud. "It was a near thing, but I think I've got it under control these days."

Standing again, Nabiki gave her sister a brief hug. "I'm glad for you. Go and get yourself sorted out then you can help set up. Once we're done with that I want to hear more about your trip." Akane smiled at the other Tendo, leaving the room and heading for the bathroom. Going back downstairs Nabiki went into the garden, finding Ukyo talking to Mousse.

"Hi," she said to him, the young man looking around and nodding politely to her in return.

"Hello, Nabiki. How are you? I haven't seen you for some time."

"I'm really well, thanks, Mousse. You? And how are you getting on with those knives I gave you for Christmas?"

He grinned at her. "I'm not bad at all, all things considered. I polished them up and played with them a little, they're really nicely balanced, but they're far too good to just use every day. I'll reserve them for that special someone who's worthy of a collectible knife in the kidney." Chuckling at the way both she and Ukyo giggled, he added, "Most people only warrant the cheap stuff, of course."

"Of course," Nabiki replied, smiling. "I can see that. Wouldn't want to waste the good cutlery on the commoners."

"No, you wouldn't." They shared a grin then he turned to the table next to Ukyo, on which he put a
number of pots and pans he produced from his sleeves in a way that amused her despite herself. "The Elder and Shampoo are coming with the rest in a few minutes," he told the two women.

"How is Shampoo?" Nabiki asked curiously. "Akane is still a bit tired but is up and moving around now. She seems in a very good mood."

"Pretty much the same," he replied. "It was quite funny the way she more or less passed out as soon as she was back, they must have worked very hard, but she got up all right about half an hour ago looking pleased with herself. I didn't talk to her much before I came here, though, she was getting ready when I left."

"It'll be interesting to hear about their adventures," Ukyo suggested, turning around from putting the final touches on her cooking facilities. "I've never been to the US, I'd like to know more about it." She glanced at Nabiki. "I heard they were going to have some sort of recording of some of their work?"

"Yes, they should have a DVD of it, or possibly two," the middle sister confirmed. "Because of some delays they ran into it wasn't finished before they left but Aiko told me she was going to pop over and pick it up." She looked at her watch for appearance's sake, while quickly checking with her friend via the com. "Sometime last night, I believe, LA is sixteen hours behind us. So she should bring it with her when she comes."

"It's funny that a magical girl of all people is willing to teleport all the way to LA and back just to deliver a DVD," the chef laughed, shaking her head in wonder. "I mean, weird things happen around here all the time but surely that's odd even by Neriman standards?"

"I know what you mean, but life does seem to have taken a sharp turn towards the surreal in recent years," Nabiki agreed, grinning. "It's kind of fun."

"One way to put it," Mousse commented, listening with interest.

"Do any of you want something to drink?" Nodoka asked from behind them, causing them to turn to her. All three agreed that they did. Shortly they were sitting in the living room sipping tea and talking, Genma and Soun joining them a few minutes later. Just as they were sitting down, the doorbell went, Ukyo going to answer it without waiting for anyone else to get up and returning with her fiancé, who smiled at everyone then quietly accepted a cup of tea, sitting next to the brunette.

"All the tables are set up," the Tendo patriarch announced as he accepted a cup from Nodoka with a nod of thanks, then sat. "The drinks are set out, we've also put the garden lights up as well for tonight. Is there anything else we need to do?"

Nodoka pulled out her notebook, flipping to a page with a list on it then running her finger down it while muttering under her breath, to ultimately smile. "No, I think that's everything for the moment. We're just waiting for Shampoo and Cologne, then we can have a light snack. The first guests should be here in about five or six hours, I think." She looked over at Nabiki. "Your friend Miki and her boyfriend are definitely coming, did you say?"

The middle sister nodded. "Yes, and her two sisters, Hana and Kimiko."

"Good. And we're expecting Aiko and her team, Yori and Chou, Kazuo Ito and his wife, Norio Sasaki and his wife and sons, several of the students and a couple of friends of theirs, some of the neighbours..." Nodoka thought for a moment after trailing off into silence. "I make it forty-seven people all in including the people here. I hope there's enough food."
"I think we're fine on that front, Auntie," Nabiki smiled. "The fridge is completely full, so is the freezer, Ukyo has enough to feed a couple of dozen people she said, I'd think Cologne will bring at least as much, and if all else fails we can get more in. Less than fifty guests isn't a problem."

Tapping her pen on her lips Nodoka kept looking at her notebook, a slightly doubtful expression on her face, but finally nodded, flipping it closed and dropping it and the pen on the table with a sigh. "I hope you're right, Nabiki," she replied. "It would be terrible to have all those people and let them go away hungry."

Soun grinned at her after a look at his middle daughter, who was looking amused. "I doubt anyone will complain, Nodoka."

"Hey, worst case we can get Aiko to bring some pizza from New York or something," the middle sister chuckled, making everyone look oddly at her. She glanced around, then shrugged. "What? I've heard they do that sort of thing all the time."

"We know some odd people." Soun shook his head in wonder, as the others agreed.

Moments later, footsteps on the stairs heralded the arrival of Akane, who came into the room, looking around with a smile, then sat next to her sister. Nabiki handed her a cup for herself. "Feeling more awake now, sis?" she asked.

Akane grinned. "Yes, definitely. Sorry I went out like a light, I hadn't realised how tired I was until I got home then everything caught up at once like a brick to the head. But I feel fine now. Very hungry, though."

"I can imagine, dear," Nodoka sympathised, glancing at the clock. "You haven't eaten anything in at least eighteen hours. I'm going to prepare a little food for us all in a minute just to get everyone started. It's a little early so it's more of a late breakfast, I suppose."

"Would you like some help, Nodoka?" Ukyo offered. The Saotome woman nodded with a grateful smile.

"Thank you, dear, that would be nice."

"We should eat in the garden," Genma suggested, looking around. "There's barely room to move in here and Cologne and Shampoo aren't here yet."

Even as he spoke the doorbell went again, Akane hopping to her feet and going to answer it. When she came back Cologne was with her.

"Shampoo is carrying things around the house to the tables," the Elder announced, accepting tea with a smile of thanks to the much younger Nodoka. Her sharp eyes scanned the room, then turned to Akane, inspecting her closely. "You look well, child," she added. "And if Shampoo is anything to go by slept for some time."

"I did, Elder," the young woman replied respectfully but with a smile. "I was very tired indeed. But I'm fine now."

"Good. I'm expecting some interesting stories very soon," the ancient little woman grinned. Shampoo came in through the side door, looking around with a smile of her own, then nodded to Ukyo and Konatsu. Moving to stand beside Akane she grinned at her.

"Sleep well?" she asked. Akane chuckled.

"As far as I know, yes. Can you remember going to bed? I can't."
"Nope. Walked in to the Café, said hello, then woke up about forty minutes ago," the Amazon snickered. "No idea what happened between those times."

Everyone laughed a little, then most of them went outside, Soun and Genma moving a couple of the currently empty tables together to make a space for having some food on, while both sisters and Shampoo rounded up some folding chairs. By the time everything was set up Ukyo was ferrying food on trays out to them, Nodoka joining her a few minutes later.

"So, dear, tell us about LA," Soun requested, settling into his chair with a bottle of beer and a couple of sandwiches. "What was it like? What did you two do there?"

Akane and Shampoo exchanged glances for a second or two.

"Well..." The youngest sister thought. "I do recall we laughed a hell of a lot." She grinned again. "It was an enormous amount of fun and we were laughing so much during parts of it anyone watching would probably think there was something wrong with us." Shampoo nodded, an expression of wry amusement on her face.

"All sorts of funny things happened, I have to admit," the lilac-haired woman chuckled. "Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves to a degree that's probably illegal. Working shouldn't be so much fun." Everyone smiled at her comment. "Some pretty strange things happened as well."

"Such as?" Nodoka enquired curiously.

"Oh, let's see..." Akane made a big production of thinking hard, frowning. "There was the bank robbery, Aiko working out how to teleport entire trucks, helping out some lost Japanese tourists..." She looked at Shampoo.

"That teenager who was crawling around in the rafters having snuck in through the ventilation system, Aiko stopping a gun battle by blowing up two cars..." the other woman added.

"I wish I'd seen that," Akane mumbled, looking disappointed. Shampoo nodded.

"There was the time you rolled the car then pushed it back onto its wheels," she continued, grinning at Akane, who rolled her eyes. "Poor Greg. He looked... very odd." The Chinese woman giggled when her friend sighed.

"What about when you ran into Ryoga and wrecked the thing?" the youngest Tendo sniped back. "At least it was still drivable after my little... misfortune."

Everyone else was listening with varying expressions mixing surprise and amusement in different proportions. Nabiki was aware of some of this, due either to Aiko telling her or directly from her sister, but the magical girl had kept a lot of it quiet, saying she wanted it to be a surprise. She'd seemed to find the idea very funny.

"You two did have an interesting time, didn't you?" Cologne said after a moment. The two young women nodded simultaneously. Leaning forward the elder looked closely at them. "Start at the beginning..."

Over two hours later Nabiki was still shaking her head in wonder, respect, and amusement. "Wow. Just... Wow." She looked at the two sitting opposite her, smiling, then around at the others who were all looking impressed, even Cologne. "It sounds like you had a real adventure."

"That's a good way to put it," Shampoo agreed. "Some parts of it weren't exactly ideal, or planned
for that matter, but most of it was damn good fun aside from anything else. We both learned all sorts of neat things. I'm seriously thinking about getting a motorbike even if we don't get the job."

"You'll get the job," Aiko assured her with glee, laughing when everyone jumped as she appeared behind the Amazon. Nabiki made herself do the same even though she'd been aware of the imminent arrival of her friend, sending her an amused look.

"Gah!" Shampoo spun around her chair, as did Akane next to her, both of them glaring at the magical girl in annoyance. "You said you'd stop doing that!"

"I lied," Aiko giggled, shrugging. Soun chuckled as he got over his shock. Shampoo and Akane exchanged a look and sighed a little. "Here. I just wanted to drop this off so you can watch it before the party." She handed Shampoo a small parcel, the right size to contain some DVDs. "Adrian said it came out really well. He gave me a copy as well but I haven't watched it yet. Mitch is going to be looking at it later today, so I think you'll be hearing from them soon."

"Thanks, Aiko," Akane replied, inspecting the box as Shampoo opened it and looked inside, taking out three DVD cases. Each one proved to contain two disks, one labelled "Akane Tendo/Xian Pu Demo Reel" with a long alphanumeric code under the title, and "Out-takes" with the same code on the other.

"If you want to show it at the party," Aiko added, "I can bring a sort of projector device with me that will do the job pretty well. It's an interesting bit of technology we picked up on holiday." Akane looked at Shampoo, who nodded, then smiled.

"That sounds very useful. Yes, please, we'd like that."

"OK. Right, I have to run. I've got some other things to do, but I'll see you all in a few hours," the petite brunette said, smiling at them all, then blinked out of existence. Several people blinked quite a lot themselves, the flash was pretty bright even in the sunlight.

"I still can't believe how easily the girl does that," Cologne commented with an impressed expression. "Teleportation is a complex spell but she does a more powerful version of it than I've ever encountered before as casually as if she was sitting down. Quite remarkable."

"She's very good at it," her great-granddaughter agreed absently, looking at the DVD case in her hand. She looked up. "Who wants to see how it came out?"

Everyone put their hands up, a round of laughter echoing about the garden.

"Let's go inside and we can see what you girls got up to," Nodoka suggested. "We have plenty of time before the guests start arriving."

Shortly everyone was arranged in the living room, the low table in the middle of it having been temporarily taken into the hallway and leaned against the wall to make room. Shampoo handed Akane one of the DVD cases, which she opened and extracted the first disk from, putting it into the player then closing the drawer. Kneeling on the floor in front of the TV she pressed the play button.

After a short pause, a menu came up with 'Mountain Picture Studios' at the top, very professionally done, various chapters below it in the same way as a normal movie disk. She selected the first one and hit play again while everyone watched the screen.

This segment was the martial arts demonstration, which had been filmed in its entirety, giving nearly forty minutes of her and Shampoo wrecking the room with Aiko's help. They watched it
mostly in silence, various people occasionally whispering to each other and sometimes laughing a little at some of the results. When it finished, the youngest Tendo paused the video, looking around at her family and friends. Everyone was smiling and Soun, particularly, was looking proud. Cologne seemed almost impressed, studying both girls with an evaluating expression.

"Very good," the Elder finally said with a small nod of satisfaction. "You both cooperated well in the joint spar against Aiko, fought well against each other, and followed the orders of your fight coordinator precisely. Excellent." She looked at Soun who had been nodding along with her. "It would appear that our mutual training hasn't fallen on deaf ears."

"No, Elder, I would agree entirely," he responded gravely, making Akane smile at him and Shampoo snicker. "I am very pleased to see we haven't been wasting our time."

"Thanks, Dad," Akane said with an amused sigh, bowing her head to him for a moment, which made him grin.

"All joking apart you did very well, both of you," he added. "We're all impressed how well it worked. It was nicely choreographed too."

"Aiko helped a lot with that," Shampoo told him. "We've spent several hours over the last couple of weeks talking about the best way to arrange things to make it look impressive without being silly. I think it worked. She has a good eye for that sort of thing."

"It sure looked good," Nabiki laughed. "Better than any fight scene in any martial arts movie I've ever seen and no special effects or camera tricks. Those people on the gantry at the back looked stunned."

"Those were the various studio people," Akane giggled. She skipped back through the video until she found a good shot of the viewing gantry as the camera panned across it following Shampoo. "That's Adrian, you met him before, Dad, when he came here with Matt there. The tall man next to him is Jim, the safety director, that guy is Aaron the arms master, then on the other side is Anton who's an executive producer. Behind them is Mitch, the chief operating officer, and finally Jennifer the human resources director."

"So you met some pretty high level executives, then?" Nabiki asked. Her sister nodded.

"Yes, from what Adrian said the only higher one would be the CEO, who was away last week, although he also said Mitch is in many ways the most important person in the studio. If he makes a decision it's not likely anyone would go against it. So assuming he's OK with us, the rest will fall into line one way or another." Akane smiled, then shrugged a little. "That's what he thinks, anyway, and Anton said the same thing. It looks good so far."

"Very well done, girls," Nodoka praised them, looking pleased as well. "Can we see the rest?"

"OK," Akane replied, going back to the menu and selecting the next segment which was the spy scene. Her version played first, followed by Shampoo's, the studio editing having put background music to both of them which seemed to be from the actual movie the scenes were from. Everyone watched it carefully, comparing the two versions.

"That was very impressive as well," Gemma finally said when the youngest sister had paused the video again, turning around to look at them all. "It looked very professional, as good as any movie I've seen before."

"Thank you," both Akane and Shampoo responded simultaneously, grinning at each other in the
"Your gun-play looked extremely competent," Mousse observed with interest. "You must have practised quite a lot."

"Aaron was pleased with the results," Shampoo told him. "We spent, what, about four or five hours in the firing range?" She glanced at Akane who nodded.

"I think it was about that, yes. It was a hell of a lot of fun." They explained the bullet catching Aiko had taught them, making several people laugh, especially when her little practical joke on Aaron was mentioned. "Poor guy looked like he was going to faint," Akane giggled, shaking her head. "He went completely white for a second."

"That girl has a weird sense of humour," Ukyo grinned.

"They all do, I think. It seems to come with the magical girl lifestyle," Shampoo told her. "All the ones I've met tend to find amusement in the weirdest things."

"I think that when you might at any point find yourself in a battle to the death, your sense of humour probably would become a little dark," Konatsu observed, breaking his silence for the first time. Everyone looked at him, then thought about it for a while. Most of them nodded in the end. Nabiki studied the young man, thinking he was actually very perceptive. He faded into the background so much most of the time you tended to forget there was a very sharp mind present.

Turning back to the TV Akane hit play again, the bar scene staring immediately. This had everyone laughing a lot. "That was brilliant," Nabiki giggled when it was finished. "That poor guy behind the bar, Shampoo! You nearly knocked him out with that glass."

The Amazon looked mildly embarrassed. "I got carried away and used a little more force than I should have," she admitted. "He got better."

They watched the roof-top chase at the airfield, then Nabiki squinted at the screen as the final shot showed Akane and Shampoo walking away from the buildings. "Hey, is that a mallet?" she asked curiously. Akane blushed.

"Yes," she replied quietly.

"I haven't seen you produce one of those since the last time Ryoga came through," her sister said, studying her.

"They turn up when I'm really angry," the younger Tendo said. "I wasn't expecting one this time, I have no idea why I was suddenly holding it. I might have gotten a little too much into it." She blushed again when both Shampoo and Nabiki laughed.

"At least you weren't actually angry," the lilac-haired woman beside her said. Akane shook her head, smiling.

"No, if anything it was the opposite. I was having a hell of a lot of fun."

"Interesting," Cologne muttered, studying them both with a thoughtful expression. After a moment, she waved at the TV which was again paused. "Anyway, continue. What's next?"

"The car stunt," Akane replied, pressing play again. "This was the big one we practised a lot for. Even while we were doing it I wasn't completely sure I could pull it off but in the end everything worked perfectly."
The sequence began with the two young women, dressed in motorcycle leathers and helmets, running out of the fake bank, a number of police people following and firing at them. Akane dived sideways to avoid the bullets, ending up watching Shampoo roar off on the bike they'd presumably arrived on, then looked around wildly, to jump into a nearby car which was soon following the other woman. Several police cars screamed after them. "This is edited together from several different takes," Akane explained as it went on. They could see the same buildings go past more than once showing the truth of the statement.

Eventually it got to the part where the car lost a tyre, then ended up on two wheels. Nodoka gasped as Akane climbed out the window, crouching on the vehicle side and reaching in to steer it, while Nabiki stared in amazement. "Holy shit, sis," she muttered. Even with her own skills she was certain she couldn't do the same thing without a lot of practice.

When the on-screen Akane leaped off the car onto the bike, which had come alongside, then the pair shot off seconds before the huge explosion as the car rammed into the truck, everyone present except the two young women on screen stared in amazement then exchanged wondering glances. Akane was grinning to herself while Shampoo was giggling. "It looks even better like this than it did when we saw the playback at the time," the latter commented. Akane nodded.

"They edited it really well, it was wonderful. I'll bet Adrian is very happy."

"That was... more than a little impressive," Cologne finally said. "Not quite what I was expecting, I have to admit, but... impressive." She had an odd expression on her face as she watched the two. "Can we see it again, please?"

"Sure." Akane skipped back to the start and played the segment once more.

"Impressive indeed. Quite a lot of interesting skills in play." The ancient Amazon shook her head a little. "You two have learned a lot of fascinating things in a short period of time. I'm very pleased with both of you."

"Thank you," Akane smiled. Turning back to the screen she played the last part, the helicopter assault, which had both runs on it. The second one where they both jumped out of the machine in flight had the entire audience laughing, the expressions on the 'guards' faces was hysterical. They clearly hadn't expected that approach at all.

"Poor Matt," Shampoo snickered. "He looked really surprised."

"That's not unexpected," Nodoka commented while smiling a little. "It wasn't the sort of move I'd think anyone there would think was likely. It looked spectacular, though. I'm glad you didn't miss the tower."

"It would have stung a lot," Akane admitted. "If we didn't know that Aiko could have gotten Chou or Yori there in seconds if it all went horribly wrong we might not have risked it, but under the circumstances it seemed like a good idea."

"What's on the other disk?" Ukyo asked, looking at the case on the floor.

"I think it's all the times things didn't work out quite as well," Akane replied, picking it up and looking at it.

"Well, go on, then, let's see it," Nabiki urged her sister, who was beginning to appear slightly embarrassed. She thought there were probably some very funny things to see based on the other woman's face. After a moment Akane sighed a little, ejected the first disk, and put in the new one.
"Try not to laugh too much," she requested pleadingly, which of course made everyone laugh.

Half an hour later they were all having difficulty breathing due to the ensuing hilarity. "Oh, god, sis, that was amazing," Nabiki gasped, lying on the floor clutching her stomach. "The look on your face as you bounced past the camera..." Nodoka was trying to suppress her giggles, Cologne was obviously biting the inside of her cheek to do the same, while everyone else didn't bother. Soun got up and knelt next to his youngest child, putting his arm around her shoulders as she sat with her arms folded looking slightly annoyed.

"I'm very glad you didn't get injured, beyond some bruises and scrapes, but you have to admit it was extremely amusing, dear," he consoled her. She looked at him, frowning slightly, then sighed, giggling a little herself.

"I suppose so. I didn't realise at the time how good the footage would be or that they were filming everything." She shook her head as Nabiki, who had been in the process of sitting up, saw her sister's face and collapsed again, convulsing with laughter. "Stop it you idiot," she muttered, poking the older woman with her toe. Nabiki rolled a little further away and kept snickering.

Eventually the laughter died down, Shampoo picking up the remote and poking around on the disk. "There's still some stuff here we haven't seen," she noted. "Um, looks like my recording from the news about Minato and those horrible little biting things, this must be some of the practice stuff with the tower and the helicopter, and... Oh, what's this?" She highlighted the last entry and hit play.

"Oh, crap," Akane muttered as the video began. "How the hell did she get this?"

They were watching the inside of a bank, from a viewpoint near the ceiling, the audio clear and undistorted with the picture perfect. Akane and Shampoo were standing in front of a tall man with a gun, who looked extremely irritated and not a little dangerous. Everyone watched and listened quietly as the end of the bank robbery played out, the video ending shortly after Ms Aoyama left the building again.

Nabiki found it an interesting experience as she got to see her alter-ego from an unusual viewpoint in the company of people who had never experienced her before, as well as some who had and clearly wished they hadn't. Cologne was being very quiet, staring at the screen, while Shampoo looked like she was shivering a little. Akane was pale.

"That... woman... is somewhat intimidating," Soun finally noted in a low voice. He glanced at Akane and Shampoo with mild worry, then looked over at Cologne, who met his eyes soberly. "I begin to understand the points you made," he told her. She nodded slowly.

"I think it would be a bad idea to underestimate her or annoy her," the Elder replied quietly. Glancing at her relative and the youngest Tendo, who were now looking at each other, she added, "Although, somewhat remarkably, I feel that Aiko is probably correct and she has a certain amount of fondness for the both of you, based on that. Certainly there was definite respect for your actions and a degree of satisfaction."

"That's what Aiko has said several times," Akane said, slightly nervously. "But... when you actually talk to Ms Aoyama, you... tend to be more than a little worried, even so." She shuddered. Nabiki watched with inner amusement coupled with a certain amount of self-satisfaction, and a touch of regret that she'd scared her sister quite that much. She resolved that even if her magical girl activities ever came out it would probably be for the best not to admit to being Ms Aoyama. Akane was unlikely to see the funny side.
"I hear you are leaving Japan, Peasant," an annoyingly familiar voice said in a haughty tone from behind her, making Akane freeze, then sigh silently. She glanced at Shampoo who was next to her looking over the table of food Nodoka had laid out, before they both turned to regard Kodachi who was standing on the garden wall with her hands on her hips inspecting them with a certain curious air added to the normal superior look. "Perhaps this is a good thing, the tone of the neighbourhood will undoubtedly rise without you and your... associate... in it." She gave Shampoo a dismissive look.

"What do you want, Kodachi?" Akane asked politely, doing her best not to let the crazy woman provoke her. She could still vividly remember the last time and how it ended, making her somewhat surprised that the Kuno woman was doing this. There was a brief look in Kodachi's eyes that made her wonder for a moment if in her own way the weird gymnast was worried she wouldn't have anyone left to torment. Almost a look of loss in some peculiar manner.

"I merely wished to confirm the rumour, of course." Kodachi sniffed, flipping her ponytail in a dismissive gesture. "I find it almost beyond belief that someone of your low status would be able to arrange to go to America except perhaps as manual labour." There was a weird little smile on her face now. Akane squinted at her sidelong, wondering what was going on.

"It's true, in fact," she replied after a moment. "We've both been in the US for a week training and doing job interviews. We're almost certainly going to get hired." She smirked for a second or two. "At quite good rates, thanks. Not by the hour."

Kodachi studied her, crossing her arms and looking down her nose at them both. "I see. I must say my opinion of the Americans is lowered even more by the fact that they would employ such as you. But then they always were an uncivilised lot." She smiled in a supercilious manner, while Akane sighed again and Shampoo said something rude under her breath in Mandarin.

"If that's all, we're rather busy right now, so you can leave," the youngest sister said. "We don't really have time to beat you up right now. Come back on Monday and we'll be glad to do it, though." She grinned as Kodachi glared, Shampoo beside her snickering.

"As if I have time to pander to your clumsy attempts at martial arts, Tendo," the other woman growled. She shifted position on the wall, making both the other two tense slightly. "However, I do indeed have better things to do today than demonstrate to the pair of you how hopelessly outclassed you are, so I will be on my way. No doubt we will meet again when you ignominiously return, quite likely deported for some street brawl." The dark-haired woman smiled maliciously. Akane just stared at her.

A few seconds passed, then Kodachi turned around, running lightly to the end of the wall. Pausing for a moment, she looked over her shoulder. "Tendo. Do not bring the name of Nerima into disrepute by your actions. It would reflect badly on all of us."

"I'll do my best, Kodachi," Akane called sarcastically.

"I would expect nothing less, although your best is hardly perfection," the Kuno woman retorted as she jumped from the wall to the roof of the neighbours house, disappearing over it. Both Shampoo and Akane watched for a moment but she didn't reappear.

"Is it my imagination or was that almost a compliment?" Shampoo asked slowly. Akane shook her head.

"She's nuts, you know that, but I agree she was in some weird way much less abrasive than normal. She didn't even use that horrible laugh." She shrugged. "Maybe she's afraid she'll miss us." They
exchanged another look, rolled their eyes, laughed, then went inside the house.

Hearing the doorbell ring yet again, Nabiki answered it, finding Mariko and two other students of her father's standing outside, smiling at her. "Hi, guys. Come in."

"Thank you, Nabiki," Mariko said politely as they entered.

"Just go through into the back, a few other people have arrived so far," the middle sister replied, indicating the way. All three students nodded politely and followed the instructions, vanishing into the house. As she was about to close the door again, the front gate opened, Mr Ito and his wife coming through. She waited for them to arrive, then directed them in the correct direction. Looking around, she could neither see nor feel anyone else imminently arriving so closed the door, before going into the kitchen.

"That's another five people," she announced to Nodoka who was taking several trays of prepared sushi out of the fridge. "About half the guests have turned up so far. I got a call from Miki half an hour ago saying she and the others were going to be late, there was some sort of minor earthquake damage to the tracks which is being repaired at the moment."

"All right, Nabiki, thank you," the older woman replied, half-inside the appliance. She emerged holding a large tray. "Could you take this one out for me while I get the other one?"

"Sure." She took the tray and waited for the Saotome woman to retrieve the second one, pushing the door of the fridge closed with her foot then following Nodoka out into the back garden. They both deposited their loads on the relevant table, a number of people immediately descending on the food like a flock of vultures. Nabiki grabbed a few salmon rolls before they could all vanish then wandered over to where Ukyo was chatting to Akane while making Mousse some okonomiyaki on her grill. Her sister was holding a bowl of Cologne's ramen, slowly eating it while replying to various questions the chef had about the previous few days.

"People seem to be enjoying themselves," Akane said as Nabiki joined them, looking around the garden.

"Looks that way," she replied, smiling. "We've still got nearly twenty people due, though. Yori and her lot, my friend Miki and her sisters and boyfriend, that policeman and his family..." She popped a sushi roll into her mouth and chewed.

"It's still early," Ukyo noted as she flipped the contents of the grill onto a plate in a practised motion, handing it to Mousse who murmured his thanks before trying it.

"Yep. I'd expect most of the others to turn up in the next hour." Leaning against the wall of the house Nabiki looked over the garden. Little clumps of people were talking to each other all over the place, apparently having fun. She smiled to herself. "*When are you guys getting here?*" she silently asked her other sister over the link.

Kasumi's voice came back to her immediately. "*Within ten minutes, sister,*" she replied calmly. "*We were waiting for Tamiko, she was running an errand for her mother and only just finished. Should we teleport into the garden, or come in more traditionally, do you think?*" There was a note of humour in her voice.

Nabiki chuckled to herself. "*Surprise us,*" she said.

"I expect teleporting would suffice in that case." Kasumi giggled for a moment. "*But we'll do something else just for fun.*"
"See you soon," the middle sister snickered, closing the link. "I'm pretty sure Yori and the others should be here soon," she said honestly, internally amused.

"Oh, good," Akane remarked, smiling. "I need to thank her and Chou for everything they did. I forgot to mention it at the bank, I was still a little shaken by everything." She took the sushi roll Nabiki handed her with thanks, nibbling it. "I really do owe Yori huge thanks for the favour she did me. Us." The blue-haired woman glanced at Shampoo, who was grinning. "And Aiko, of course, but I've been saying thanks over and over again. I think she was getting tired of hearing it in the end."

Ukyo laughed. "She seems to think of all that teleporting as just something you do, hardly worth mentioning. Like me making these." She flipped another okonomiyaki onto a plate and hurled it at Soun, who caught it nimbly with a call of thanks. Nabiki and Akane both watched, then smiled at each other at the sight.

"You really are very good at that," Akane giggled.

"Lots of practice," the chef replied. "Lots and lots and lots of practice."

Finishing her sushi, the middle sister moved down the table, scooping out her own bowl of ramen from the huge pot Cologne had set to simmering on a hotplate, adding some prawns from a bowl of them next to it. Heading over to the pond, which Nodoka was standing near, talking to the Amazon Elder and smirking a little as she pointed at it while looking at her husband, she listened for a while as the older woman explained how she was slowly wreaking havoc on the psychological health of the two martial artists. Cologne was barely suppressing a laugh during the explanation, an evil grin playing about her lips.

"Very well done, dear," she replied when Nodoka had finished. "Worthy of a master of the technique." She glanced at Genma, who was looking around as if he thought someone was about to do something horrible, appearing somewhat worried. "I'll have to see if I can come up with anything to help." She cackled quietly to herself while the elder Saotome woman looked both pleased and amused. Nabiki was grinning as well. When Genma suddenly turned around and stared suspiciously at them, all three instantly had completely blank expressions, which if anything seemed to make him even more nervous. Excusing himself from Kazuo Ito and his wife, the rotund martial artist scuttled off towards the beer.

"He looks worried," Nabiki giggled.

"Excellent. A little worrying is good for the soul. It builds character," Nodoka replied serenely, causing Cologne to nearly choke on the drink she had just raised to her lips. The Saotome woman smiled a little.

"You're an evil woman, Auntie."

"Thank you, my dear."

Cologne asked, "Do you know when Yori and her friends are supposed to arrive, Nabiki?"

Moments after she spoke, she looked around sharply. "Never mind, I can feel them coming." A few seconds later, 'Yori' appeared on the roof of the house, 'Chou' landing next to her, then one by one Aiko and her group, until there was a line of magical girls standing there. Everyone in the garden looked up.

"You're showing off now," Nabiki sent, laughing.
"Only a little," her sister-in-law replied, sounding amused. She waved to the people on the ground, some of whom waved back although most of them simply stared in mild shock. "Hi, everybody," she called out loud.

"Hi, Doctor Nick!" Nabiki shouted back, unable to resist, then laughed her head off. Everyone stared at her with varying expressions. Shampoo was grinning, Nodoka shaking her head sadly, Ukyo giggled, while Akane just sighed heavily. Most of the others looked puzzled.

"You're weird, Nabiki," Tamiko yelled, laughing. The six women on the roof turned ninety degrees in perfect synchronism, ran to the end of the ridge-line, then one at a time somersaulted off to land on the lawn. The crowd of people clapped. 'Yori' bowed, smiling, then came over to greet Akane.

"Hi, Akane, and Shampoo too. Did you have a good time in LA?" she asked. Akane nodded, grinning widely, giving her friend a quick look. The Amazon also nodded happily.

"We did, thank you. And thank you so much for thinking of me and getting in touch with Adrian." She bowed respectfully, as did Shampoo.

"You're more than welcome, both of you," the martial artist replied, looking pleased. "It was the right thing to do from both sides. I really hope everything works out well for you two. And Adrian, of course, he's a good man."

"He is," she agreed. "All the people we met were very nice, to be honest. It was a hell of a lot of fun and very good training." She looked at 'Yori' curiously. "Did you watch the DVD Aiko had?"

"Yep. We were genuinely impressed, to be honest. That car stunt was remarkable." The martial artist grinned. "The helicopter assault was pretty good as well, especially the second one, and the martial arts demonstration was very well done. Aiko was very pleased with how it all worked out for you guys, and she had immense fun as well."

"We would have had a much harder time without her," Akane replied truthfully. "She was incredibly helpful. Especially with teleporting entire truck-fulls of equipment around the place."

'Yori' chuckled. "She was very pleased to work out how to do that. So are the rest of us, it could well come in handy at some point." She looked over to where Aiko was talking to Cologne and Kazuo Ito, before turning back to the youngest Tendo. "I'm really glad it worked out so well. Apparently you should have an answer on Monday, or thereabouts?"

"That's what we're told, yes," Shampoo agreed with a nod. "We're both still a little nervous about it but everyone seems sure it's going to happen, so all we can do is wait."

"Good luck." 'Yori' smiled, radiating satisfaction. "OK, I'll see you later, I need to introduce myself to some of the other guests, who seem to be looking a little startled." She nodded to the small group then moved off, soon shaking the hand of the various students who were looking at her in awe. Nabiki smiled internally before turning to her sister.

"She's in a good mood."

"From what I've seen she usually is," Akane giggled. "I think by the time she's annoyed everything has already gone to hell. Hopefully that's not going to happen today."

"With luck, no," Ukyo said, looking around at the various guests. "Hey, let's get that music system going, then I want some sushi myself. And a drink."

They headed off to satisfy both requirements, everyone around them apparently having a very good
After watching Yori and the policeman Lieutenant Sasaki talk for a while, Cologne made her way over to the magical girl, stopping to talk to various other people en route, until she was close enough to talk. The petite woman glanced at her with an acknowledging nod, looking back to her current conversational partner, who was apparently just finishing up whatever he'd been talking about. With a respectful smile to both of them, he wandered off, soon ending up speaking to Soun and a couple of the neighbours. She watched him go, then turned to the other, much younger woman, who was looking expectant. "You seem to have some questions, if I'm any judge," the girl quietly said in her rich voice, smiling a little and leaning back against the wall around the garden.

The Amazon studied her, feeling the aura the young woman radiated, which was more powerful than she could easily believe. If she wasn't mistaken it was even more powerful, in fact, than it had been the last time she encountered the violet-eyed girl, although she seemed to be suppressing it somewhat even so. Eventually, after an internal debate, she threw caution to the winds.

"May I ask if you can tell me what a certain person I believe we both know means by the phrase 'Temporal Upset'?" Cologne watched as Yori's face went expressionless, her aura damping out to the point it was barely noticeable for a few seconds, something she found both interesting and somewhat worrying considering how hard the feat would actually be.

Eventually, the girl sighed, smiling a little sadly. "I can tell you something about it, yes. I'm afraid that for various reasons I can't be as open as you might want me to, but those reasons are good ones. You'd probably even agree with them."

"If I knew what they were, of course," Cologne chuckled. Yori nodded with a small grin. "I'm aware of such problems, we have a few issues of our own that fall into that sort of category," the Elder added after a moment. "I'd still be grateful for whatever you can tell me. The entire event, whatever it really was, has left those of us who are supposed to know more about magic than practically anyone feeling rather... well, scared isn't a word I like to use about myself, but under the circumstances..." She shivered a little. Yori inspected her, seeming to understand.

"I don't blame you, Elder. I was heavily involved in the entire thing, which you obviously worked out, and it terrified me. Not a lot does, these days." She appeared to be being completely honest about that part. Yori shrugged, sighing again. "OK. As you can imagine, we don't want this story becoming known to the public at large, not because it's really a deep dark secret, but more for reasons to do with stopping people panicking and running around like headless chickens. The problem is over, permanently, but... It raises a number of things that would make most people very uncomfortable."

"If it's as serious as I suspect, that doesn't surprise me." Cologne watched the younger woman nod and sigh.

"About as serious as it gets, yes. The government is in the process of producing an official explanation that will, hopefully, satisfy enough people in high places that they'll calm down and live with it." She shrugged slightly. "Not to mention that, for various peculiar reasons mostly to do with the odd effects of temporal manipulations, it's likely to fade out of the majority of memories to one extent or another over the next few months. That's our hope, anyway, and we have some expert opinions that suggest it's right."

There was a pause while the Elder thought about what she'd heard and Yori seemed to be trying to work out the best explanation. Eventually she began speaking, relating a story that, while it was obvious to Cologne it was incomplete and censored, sufficed to impart the main points very well.
At the end of it, some ten minutes later, the ancient woman was beginning to wish she'd left well enough alone. When Yori stopped talking, they just looked at each other, the Amazon with her mind whirling from the new concepts she'd heard, Yori seeming resigned.

"Oh, ancestors, that's utterly terrifying," Cologne finally whispered, pale-faced.

"Yep." Yori nodded tiredly. "You see why we're only telling a few people we can trust to be sensible about it even the amount we are, which, as you've probably worked out, isn't all of it." The Elder nodded slowly. "Some of it isn't our story to tell, it impacts on the privacy of friends, and some of it we simply can't tell for various reasons, but that's the gist of it."

"I see. Thank you, I think," Cologne replied after a moment. She shook her head in wonder. "So this mysterious... whatever it is... pulled all the magic out of Jusenkyo to fight the time device?"

"Yes. It was somewhat unexpected, to be honest, but also the only thing that saved us all. Near enough all the magic of the entire world was kind of borrowed to use in the fight." Yori grinned at Cologne's expression of awed horror. "We put it back afterwards," she added.

"With considerable interest from what I saw," the Amazon retorted, still shaken.

"It seemed polite."

Cologne shook her head in disbelief. "Where did the excess come from?" she asked curiously after she'd had time to digest all the information. Yori shrugged slightly, smiling to herself.

"When the time device died and its little pocket dimension collapsed due to the attack by the rather unusual weapon we ended up using, it released a lot of magical energy. A huge amount, much more than was borrowed. That energy was recovered and stored, with some of the excess pumped back into the various sources that were drained to start the whole process off in the first place. We didn't actually ask for that to happen, our... helper... decided to do it on its own. It was a bit of a surprise but everything worked out OK in the end."

Studying the face of the much younger woman, Cologne got the distinct impression that there was a lot more to the entire story, but was also pretty damn sure she wasn't going to find it out. She wondered just how much excess energy had been 'stored', how, and where. Some of the implications were... uncomfortable. Deciding that she'd probably sleep better if she never found out, she nodded. "Well, on behalf of the Joketsuzoku tribes as lead Elder, allow me to convey our deep gratitude to you and your friends for saving the universe. It's much appreciated."

She chuckled as Yori grinned, pleased. The girl bowed slightly. "On behalf of myself, my friends and my colleagues, allow me to express our thanks for the gratitude. And you're all welcome, of course," she replied respectfully but with humour in her voice. "I'm sorry I can't go into more detail but as I said it's not possible."

Cologne waved her hand, dismissing the apology. "Don't worry about it, child. As I told you, I'm familiar with the problem. We all have our secrets and while I personally prefer to know everything I can, I can live with the fact that there are some things I may never know. It's irritating but not something that will make me lose sleep." She shook her head a little. "Except for the entire 'universe nearly ending' bit of course. That I'll lose quite a lot of sleep over for a while."

Yori snickered. "Funny. That's what most people we've told this to have said."

"I wonder why?" Cologne commented in a very dry tone. They exchanged a look, then laughed. "I have to admit, I didn't realise quite how... potentially apocalyptic... the life of a magical girl really
"was," the Elder added after a little while. Yori looked at her, one eyebrow raised, so she continued, "I visited Minato recently and was more than a little surprised by the number of ki signatures that were definitely not human around the area. Add that to what you've told me and it seems to me that you and your compatriots are heavily involved in events that could well have a very significant effect on the future. But even so, the idea of the entire universe nearly winking out of existence...

She shuddered as she thought about it. "It's a good thing you girls are around."

The woman beside her was studying her with a thoughtful expression. "Thank you," she finally replied. "I think. It's not just our little grouping, of course, there are a lot of others around who have stopped some pretty horrific things from happening. That's just the ones I know about. Probably a few I never heard of as well. But we do our best." She shrugged a little with a small sigh. "For the majority of us it's not something we actually decided to do, it just sort of happened. It sneaks up on you, the crazy, and when it has you, you're stuck with it." She grinned briefly. "You just have to run with it then, or you go nuts as well. Not that any of us are all that sane by most people's standards."

The Elder snickered. "Trust me, I understand. My own life, while not quite as weird as that for the most part, has had a number of rather unusual adventures in it. Even the most recent generation seems to encounter odd people and happenings on a regular basis, without even the excuse of the magical girl lifestyle." She nodded towards where Shampoo and Akane were regaling the Dojo students with some story from LA. "It would appear to be a hazard of life in this area if nothing else."

"Pretty much," the girl chuckled. "Minato is even worse for some reason. One day I'll hopefully find out why. But for the moment we're just doing the best we can. By and large it's worth it."

"I'm glad of that," Cologne replied. "And pleased to know that people of your character are looking out for the rest of us, poor defenceless things that we are." She smirked at the dubious look the black-haired girl shot her.

"Defenceless... Yes, I can see it, you wouldn't stand a chance if, for example, some nasty mugger decided to jump you down a dark alley somewhere." Again, they shared a glance, identical dark smiles spreading across their faces.

"Quite. At my age? Brittle bones, that sort of thing. Best I stay out of it." Cologne cackled happily, nodded to the girl, then headed off to find something more to eat. Behind her, the martial artist watched her go, shook her head in amusement, then wandered away to talk to Ukyo.

#Your family and friends seem to be enjoying themselves,# Jun commented. Nabiki looked around the garden at the close to four dozen people, all of whom seemed to be smiling, not to mention eating, drinking, and talking. She nodded a little at the device's words.

'Sure looks that way. I'm glad we finally managed to get to do this. It's been pretty busy these last few weeks, it's nice to just relax.' She was sitting on top of the garden wall having climbed up amongst a lot of comments from her sister, who had jumped up and back a couple of times to show how it was meant to be done. The middle sister had privately smiled at the idea she could easily have done the same, but had to pretend she couldn't. Looking down, she caught her father's eye, motioning to the beer bottles on the table next to him. He smiled, then tossed her one, which she deftly caught, making him grin. Opening it by knocking the cap off against the wall made him chuckle before taking one for himself, which he did the thumb trick with.

She raised her bottle in salute, a gesture he mirrored, then went back to watching the party. 'Any more news on the LA situation?' she asked idly.
Nothing of note I'm afraid, Nabiki,

Jun replied quietly. The car used by the false officer Bowie has not yet turned up anywhere, neither has he. I have widened the search to all of California and Nevada, but so far have no more leads on that front. I am still following the financial trail of the group as well but again nothing particularly useful has emerged so far.

There was a minor note of annoyance in the silent voice. If your world had a better communications infrastructure I could work faster, of course. Even my abilities have limits, the data has to be accessible in the first place. Some of your world is rather deficient from the electronic storage point of view.

She giggled inside at the tone. 'I'm sure the situation will resolve itself in time, Jun. We're building the internet as fast as we can.'

Indeed. Now it sounded amused. But at the present time we have to work with what we've got. I suspect the people involved in this organisation are well aware of the perils of putting incriminating data in a form that can be remotely accessed. Security groups such as the US NSA do much the same thing I do, although to be honest in a far slower and less efficient manner. It's actually quite useful, I can extract the information from them directly rather than trawl for it myself which speeds things up considerably.

The machine paused for a moment. Although I have to admit that in some cases I believe the security agencies to have drawn some very odd conclusions from the data they have collected. Their analysis abilities would appear to be far outstripped by their actual data acquisition abilities. That is not efficient.

'How much of the NSA data archive have you... acquired?' she asked with an internal grin.

All of it. There was a feeling of satisfaction. It seemed the most effective ploy. Also all of the data collected by the UK's GCHQ and parallel institutions from other countries. As they are entirely based around computer systems accessing them is very simple. Banking records can be more difficult as even now a lot of it still seems to only exist as printed information. My subspace interaction systems can extract any electronically stored data with ease anywhere on the planet, even that stored off-line, especially augmented by the communications relay we now have, but paper is more difficult without physical access. It is possible some minor burglary will be required at some point.

'Laws are just guidelines to you, aren't they, Jun?' she smiled.

When it comes to your security, yes. the machine replied. I would not advocate breaking the rules wholesale under most circumstances, they are mostly there for a reason as you are well aware, but bearing in mind what we are apparently faced with, it seems appropriate to take all necessary precautions and access all available and relevant data. It is, after all, much the same thing that most governments do on a daily basis with in many cases far less reason.

'And you're not just sucking up everything you can because you're just insatiably curious?' she asked slyly. There was another pause.

Of course not, Nabiki. What would possibly give that impression? It sounded very amused.

'Sorry. I must have the wrong end of the stick with that idea.' She was smiling to herself again.

Your apologies are accepted, of course. Jun replied archly, causing her to snicker.

'Just don't get caught,' she told it.

With the current technological level of this planet, that won't happen, it assured her. Your species has no method to even detect the presence of an SI or its operations. To the best of my knowledge none but my makers do. It is, after all, one of the design goals that we are totally
'Have I said recently how glad I am that we met?' she asked.

'#Not for the last couple of weeks. Feel free to say it again.# She could almost swear it was laughing.

'Just assume from now on that I say it every day.' She giggled a little, silently. 'But it's true.'

'#Thank you, Nabiki.# the device commented, pleased. Finishing her beer, she tossed the bottle accurately into the large bin on the ground under her to one side then lowered herself from the wall, deciding she needed more ramen.

Soun watched Yori and Chou talk to Cologne for a while, before looking around, sipping a beer from the bottle. The other magical girls were mingling with the guests, all of them apparently enjoying themselves very much. He was interested to see that no one, after the initial shock of meeting them for the ones that hadn't until now, seemed at all overawed by their reputations. Aiko was talking animatedly to Akane and Shampoo, Nabiki was listening as Fumiko explained something to Genma, Kazuo Ito and his wife were apparently discussing the finer points of goldsmithing with Misaki, who seemed to know a surprising amount about it, and Tamiko was chatting to Nodoka about something or other with Ukyo and Konatsu joining in occasionally. He shook his head in mild wonder.

Mousse jumped over the garden wall carrying another crate of beer, handing it to Genma, who opened it and removed a bottle. Fumiko gestured and he gave her one as well with a grin. All three of them looked at each other, then popped the caps off with their thumbs, laughing.

"We seem to have met some very interesting people as a result of my youngest," he murmured to himself.

"So have we," a voice from beside him said unexpectedly, making him twitch a little and look. Yori smirked at him. He hadn't sensed her approach at all, which he found interesting albeit not all that surprising, considering. "Sorry. Bad habit."

"That's all right," he laughed. "I'm glad you could all make it to the party." She sipped her drink, some sort of fruit juice, smiling at him.

"So am I. It's nice to just be able to relax for once. We've been running around like lunatics for what seems like months now, dealing with some rather nasty problems."

"I take it you succeeded in your duties?" he enquired. She nodded, taking another sip.

"Pretty much. There's some fallout from it all that will probably be going on for months if not longer but most of that isn't our field or concern. I'm more than happy to leave it to people who know how to deal with it."

The man looked at his guest for a second or two. She was watching everyone in the party, giving him the distinct impression she was aware of the exact position and probable threat level of everyone present, which seemed to be an automatic reflex. He'd seen something similar in a couple of old acquaintances who had seen military service, although not to the same level. Momentarily he wondered about what she'd encountered in her career as a magical girl.

"You have a question, I can feel it," she commented idly, not looking up. He smiled a little.
"I was wondering if you knew what that odd twitch in the world the other day was. Elder Cologne seems to know more than she's saying, she went very quiet on the subject last weekend after being quite curious about the whole thing. Very few people seem to remember anything about it other than the twitch, although I saw something... something I have difficulty believing. Gemma, Shampoo, and Cologne all did as well. So did Mousse from what Shampoo said. I've asked around quietly and found that a number of the more advanced martial artists I know seem to remember something very similar." He fell silent for a moment. She said nothing although she glanced at him. "It seems to me that if anyone would know more, she's standing next to me."

Yori was silent for a few seconds more, then nodded once. "I know what it was. We're not talking very much about it, there are... potential issues, I suppose, if the story became wide-spread." She looked at him. "Issues that could cause people to react badly. There's nothing to worry about now, it's over, but even so..."

He sighed, nodding. "I think I understand. Individual people are normally fairly sensible, but get them worried in large numbers, they overreact."

"Exactly." She was silent again for long enough that he thought she was going to drop the subject but eventually began speaking again. "A very long time ago, some very smart but at the same time very stupid and desperate people a long way away built a machine. It was a remarkable achievement, although unfortunately one that should never have been even attempted, never mind successfully. The story is long and involves a lot of things I can't talk about, but the end result is that the machine became a threat to us. All of us. Our entire universe was at serious risk of something extremely unpleasant and quite possibly extremely final happening to it." She sighed minutely, then took another drink, not looking up. He was almost holding his breath, feeling abruptly cold.

"We, all of us here, and some other friends you haven't met, along with a number of experts from elsewhere, dealt with the problem. We never expected to be involved with anything so apocalyptic, not in our wildest nightmares, but when it happened, we were the ones who were able and willing to do what needed to be done." She laughed slightly bitterly. "Sometimes you just find yourself with no real choice. So, we did the job. Luckily, very luckily, we succeeded."

"And if you had failed?" He couldn't help himself, he had to ask. She looked at him for a moment, then went back to watching Chou and Cologne talk. The blonde looked over at them for a moment, smiling, before going back to her conversation.

"None of us would be in a position to talk about it." She finished her fruit juice and put the glass on the nearest table. "Even though we succeeded, there were casualties of the whole scenario. No one you know. Nobody died, amazingly enough, but..." Yori shook her head slightly. "A number of people are having a very bad time as a result. We're still trying to help them."

After a moment, when she stopped talking, he put his hand on her shoulder. "Thank you. All of you. I can see how hard you've worked on behalf of people who will probably never know how much you've done for them, so let me say I'm very proud to know such fine young women." Appearing slightly startled yet still grateful she looked at him, then smiled widely.

"Thanks. Most of the time we love what we do, even though it can be a pain in the ass some days, but every now and then you end up wondering what the hell you're up to." The young woman shrugged a little. "The crazy is very persistent, though, once it's got you, you're stuck with it. We just seem to get more of it than most people."

Soun laughed loudly for a moment. "I can't think of a better group to deal with weird problems, though. I've been involved in some fairly unusual things over the years but by the sound of it my
adventures would barely raise an eyebrow in your circles." She snickered a bit, grinning at him.

"Oh, I don't know, I've heard a few things out of Nerima. It's a weird place."

"Weirder than Minato?" he asked incredulously. "You've got demons wandering around the place, for god's sake."

"Most of them are pretty nice people," she laughed. "A lot of them are very good friends." He shook his head wonderingly.

"So you've said in the past. I still find it odd." They fell silent, standing beside each other watching the party. After a couple of minutes, he glanced at the black-haired young woman next to him. "I have a problem I wanted to ask your advice on," he finally said, somewhat hesitantly, his earlier good humour disappearing as the issue he'd been thinking about for weeks came to the forefront of his mind. "It may not be something you can help with but I can't think of anyone else who could."

She looked curiously at him, then her gaze sharpened, giving the impression she was peering right through him. For all he knew she was. Across the garden, Chou looked up again, before politely excusing herself from the Amazon elder and beginning to make her way across to them.

"How long have you known?" Yori asked quietly.

"About six weeks, for sure," he responded, equally quietly, not at all surprised she'd worked it out without being told. "I've been wondering for rather longer." She looked at Chou as the blonde stopped next to them. He abruptly noticed that everyone in the garden seemed to have forgotten they were there, even the nearest bystanders looking through them as if they were invisible.

"Let's go inside." Yori indicated the doorway. He nodded, leading the way into the house, then up to his bedroom. Chou followed, closing the door behind them when they entered.

"Lie on the bed, please," Chou requested, glancing at her partner with a neutral expression. He did so. She ran glowing hands over his chest, then down over his abdomen, stopping in a couple of places, before looking at Yori again. The other woman repeated the exercise, sighing a little, before lifting her hands, the purple glow dissipating.

"How long did the doctor give you?" she asked, her voice gentle. His own shook slightly as he replied.

"One, perhaps as much as two years with aggressive chemotherapy," he admitted. "He's been trying to get me to start since we got the test results back. We went over the various treatment options but they're all rather unpleasant and uncertain."

He sighed. "People always said smoking was a bad idea. A little late now."

"Stage four lung cancer, metastasised into the spleen and the lower colon," Chou said. He nodded.

"Apparently it's progressing much more slowly than he expected, possibly due to the accelerated healing most high powered martial artists tend to have, but it's progressing nevertheless."

"I'm slightly surprised you're not showing any obvious symptoms," she commented, looking at him closely, with sympathy in her expression.

"In the mornings I tend to cough a lot for a few minutes." Soun shrugged. "It passes and I'm more or less fine then, but it's been going on for months. I went for a check-up because it wouldn't go away. I kept telling myself that it was just a persistent cold, or something like that..." He rubbed his forehead. "I knew I was fooling myself." Looking at the two women, he asked, hope in his voice
and dread in his heart, knowing the likely answer, "You were amazingly effective with Akane. I
don't suppose you can do anything about cancer?"

They exchanged a glance. Yori looked gravely at him. "I'm sorry." His heart fell. "I'm afraid the
best we can do is a complete cure. Will that be enough?" She suddenly grinned manically as he
stared, his mouth dropping open. Beside her, Chou giggled, although she still looked sympathetic.

"For god's sake, Soun, you should have got in touch with us as soon as you knew," the black-haired
woman chided gently, chuckling. "We were on holiday but we'd have come back for this. There are
of course lots of things we can't do, but not many surrounding medical matters. You're a friend. We
help our friends. To be honest, we help anyone who needs it, but still..." Rubbing her hands
together, she held them up as they began glowing and wiggled her fingers. "This will take a while,
there are a lot of tiny tumours and cell fragments to get rid of, but you'll be fine. Now, we're just
going to turn you off while we work, or you'd be in a certain amount of mildly agonising pain
when we go after some of the worst ones. See you in a bit."

He felt a gentle touch on his forehead and was just fast enough to look over and see Chou smiling
at him when everything went black.

It seemed like practically no time had passed when he suddenly found himself awake again, staring
at the ceiling. He blinked a couple of times then looked around. Yori and Chou were both
watching him with identical calm smiles. "How do you feel?" the blonde asked.

"Good. Fine, even." He sat up, breathing deeply a few times, experimentally, finding no sign of the
faint tightness in his lungs that had come on in the last few days. A little disbelieving still, he
looked at them again. "Is that it? Just like that?"

"Pretty much." Yori grinned. " Took about three quarters of an hour, there were quite a lot of
tumours. It was spreading through your lymphatic system. I'd say you've been developing it for
about three years. Most people would have been either dead or in hospital by now, you were right,
your inherent healing was fighting damn hard. It wouldn't have stopped it forever, though, I'm
afraid. You'd probably shake off a lot of less nasty cancers but that type is aggressive and fast
moving."

"There's no risk now, though," Chou added, smiling at him. " We cleaned out everything, repaired
the damage caused by the cancer, corrected the nicotine addiction which should stop you wanting
to smoke any more, and fixed a couple of other small problems we came across as well. You were
missing a tooth at the back and there was a rib that hadn't quite healed properly from some old
injury." Startled, he probed with his tongue and found that the gap in his rear molars was indeed no
more.

Feeling light-headed from the way his future had suddenly reopened in front of him, he stared at
them, before wiping a few tears away. Standing, he bowed deeply to them. "Thank you. So very
much, thank you. I didn't want to leave my daughters alone, especially with their mother gone, and
the way she went."

"You're very welcome, Soun," Yori said quietly, sounding pleased, making a small bow of respect
back. " It was our pleasure. It's always nice to be able to help someone without violence. We're very
good at it, I'm afraid, but we don't really like it." He straightened up, watching as she turned to her
partner. " I'm going back to the party, love, I'll see you in a moment."

"All right, dear," Chou said softly, smiling at the smaller woman, who left with a wave, closing the
door behind her. The blonde turned to him. " Are you going to tell Akane and Nabiki?" she asked
curiously, sounding politely interested. " Were you going to, if we couldn't help?"
Considering his words carefully for a few seconds, he finally said, "I would have had to tell them eventually. Nabiki, I think, could have handled it, she is an enormously strong person. I was worried about Akane. Despite everything you did for her and all the immensely hard work she's put in herself in becoming a better person, I still feared she would react badly. I'm still slightly worried she might overreact."

"They deserve the truth," Chou noted, not pushing, but merely stating a fact. He nodded.

"I do realise that. But it's still a difficult thing to say." He looked at her for a moment. "What would you want your father to say under similar circumstances?"

She smiled gently at him. "I'd want him to be honest, even it it was hard, and tell me. I haven't seen my father for a while, though."

A few seconds passed, then Soun smiled back. "He would be very proud of you. Any father would. What you do, what you have done, is truly remarkable. As I told Yori earlier, I'm very pleased that such fine people exist, and pleased that my family met them. Especially considering all the good you have done for us for no reward."

"Thank you." She looked touched. "Seeing someone get better is enough reward. One day, I hope, we can enable far more people to benefit from our healing methods, but it's not easy to teach. We're working on it though."

Standing, he walked to the window, looking down into the garden and watching the party below. He could see Yori talking to Nabiki, with Akane listening and smiling. The black-haired girl glanced up at him for a moment as if she'd felt his gaze then went back to her conversation. "It's difficult for a father not to talk to his children for a long time," he said quietly, feeling her move to stand beside him. "My own elder daughter, Kasumi, left nearly five years ago, under unpleasant circumstances, circumstances that to my unending shame I was complicit in. I've not heard from her since. It is my greatest hope that one day she'll come back, if only to let me know she's all right and to allow me to apologise. It was my greatest fear that I might not live long enough to see that happen."

There was no response from the magical girl for a few seconds, then she replied, "Akane and Nabiki have talked about Kasumi. From what they tell me, she would understand."

"I hope so."

They were silent for a little longer.

"What would you say to her if she did return?" Chou asked. He glanced at her, then went back to watching the people in the garden.

"I would tell her... I would tell her that I'm proud of her. Proud she finally found the courage to do what was right, proud that she stood up to us, proud of everything she has done since."

"Even without knowing what that was?" Her voice betrayed nothing but quiet curiosity. He nodded, smiling to himself.

"Yes. As I told Nabiki a while ago, I'm proud of all my daughters. There have been bad times in all their lives, bad times to which I added, I'll admit, but they have grown up into young women who are people deserving of great respect, overcoming many obstacles. I would be and will be proud of whatever they, she, did and continue to do." He glanced at her again, seeing she was smiling to herself as well, looking out into the garden. "I'm sure your father would say the same. You and all
your friends are very good people."

After a second or two, he added, "I would also apologise. For taking her for granted for so many years, for becoming a person who needed so much help, even though there were in the beginning extenuating circumstances. That's no excuse for my behaviour, of course, but it is at least a partial explanation. I was weak, too weak, and let my family down for longer than I care to remember. I'm very grateful to Genma that he finally slapped some sense into me, but it would never have happened without Kasumi leaving."

She nodded slowly. "I expect your daughter would realise the truth. The death of a spouse is something that would affect anyone very badly."

"I got so involved in the loss of someone I loved deeply that I forgot the others I also loved who still lived and depended on me," he sighed. "That was wrong."

"But understandable." She looked at him, her gentle calming smile making him feel relaxed. "I'm sure she'd forgive you. Akane and Nabiki seem to have done so, after all."

"Thank you," he finally replied. She nodded slightly. Looking at her, he eventually asked, "What would you tell your father if you reconnected?" The young woman standing next to him met his eyes for a moment, then looked up at the clear sky, thinking.

"I would tell him that I forgave him the issues that convinced me to leave. I would tell him that I have a good life, filled with people I love and respect, that I enjoy my work, and that I miss him deeply. One day I hope I can say all that."

"I'm sure that day will come and that he will accept you for what you are," Soun said, watching Cologne whack Shampoo with her staff while Akane rolled around laughing, wondering idly what on earth the young woman had said this time. Yori was grinning like an idiot next to his youngest. "He would be a total fool not to."

"He's not a fool," she laughed. "Merely someone who lost his way. I believe he's found it again, now, from what I hear."

"I hope so."

Chou stepped back from the window, turning to face him. "If Kasumi called you and said she was coming home tomorrow, what would you tell her?" she asked curiously. He grinned sadly.

"I'd tell her that I would absolutely love it if she did, but it's not quite time yet, for a number of reasons, many surrounding Akane. It will be soon, though, I think." She nodded, eyes fixed on his face, then smiled. Stepping forward she gave him a hug, which he returned.

"I hope you meet again soon. But from what I've learned you're probably right. Her leaving seems to have set your family on a path to healing itself, a path you haven't quite reached the end of yet. Her reappearing at this point might cause some problems with that, I'm afraid."

"That's sadly true," Soun agreed. Releasing him, she stepped back, meeting his eyes. They looked at each other for a few seconds, both smiling. "You're right, I'll tell Akane and Nabiki tomorrow, after the party. I don't want to spoil it for them. Thank you very much, both for the healing, for which I owe you anything that is in my power to give, and for the talk."

"You're entirely welcome," she replied, looking happy, "It was our pleasure. And thank you as well. It was helpful for me as well to talk." After a moment, he turned away from her, heading towards the door.
"You truly bring great honour to your family, my dear," he murmured.

As he reached the door, he felt a gentle touch on his head. "Thank you, father," he heard, "And I'm so very sorry, but you're right. It's not quite time yet."

Soun didn't fight the fuzziness that suddenly suffused his thoughts, smiling a little to himself.

Blinking a few times, the Tendo patriarch turning to the blonde who was watching him, appearing a bit sad.

"Sorry, I lost the thread of the conversation there for a moment. We'd better get back to the party, though, people will be wondering what happened." She nodded, looking amused now, as they went back downstairs. "What were we talking about?" he asked, thinking back. "Oh, yes, I remember, I was saying you're right, I need to tell Nabiki and Akane. They deserve the truth. I'll do it in the morning, no point possibly casting a cloud over the party." He glanced at her as they stopped in the doorway. She smiled back.

"That sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

"Again, thank you so much. If there's anything I can do for you, anything at all, please tell me. You gave me back my life and my family."

Chou shook her head, laughing a little. "Don't worry about it. It's what we do, whenever we can." She waved to Yori, who looked over, holding up a bottle of beer with an enquiring look on her face, then popped the cap off one-handed. "Let's get back to the party." She walked off in her typically graceful manner, looking relaxed. He watched for a moment, before heading over to talk to Akane and her boss, grinning to himself, in a much better mood than he'd been able to manage for weeks.

"He's really all right now? You're sure?"

"Relax, sister, we got everything. He's in perfect health, more so than most twenty-year-olds. He'll outlive most people, I'm sure, even without any further intervention."

Nabiki sighed minutely in relief, nibbling a sandwich. "Why didn't he say anything before?" she asked. Across the garden, 'Chou' shrugged very slightly, as she bent over the table making a selection from the food arrayed there, Nodoka beside her saying something to her.

"He didn't want to worry anyone. He was scared it would damage the family again, I think, and felt guilty about that. Silly, yes, but understandable."

"Thanks, sis."

"It was no trouble, you know that." The blonde looked over at her for a moment, smiling. "I'm just sorry I had to block some of his memories. But I'm so glad we talked."

"You're sure he worked it out?"

"Yes. I think he's suspected for some time. But he's right, it's not quite time yet. When it is, he'll remember."

"Pity."
"Indeed. On the other hand, this is a very nice party. Let's just enjoy today and leave other things for tomorrow." ‘Chou’ laughed at something Nodoka had said, the older woman grinning and indicating the pond, but she was looking at her sister when she did.

A drink in her hand, Akane wandered over and listened to Nodoka talking to Ukyo and Konatsu about their wedding plans. All three of them were looking slightly frustrated. The older woman had her notebook out again and was flipping through it, pointing out entries, every now and then crossing something out or writing something else in it, quick strokes of the pen leaving elegantly formed kanji behind. She peeked over the elder Saotome's shoulder and wished her handwriting was that neat. Eventually Nodoka sighed, closing the notebook and dropping it on the grass beside the chair she was in.

"I'm sorry, you two, but that's all the places that meet the specifications you gave me for what you're looking for I've been able to find so far. Most of the good ones are booked up for the rest of the year, they're very popular. That nice little shrine in the mountains was severely damaged after the fire when it got hit by lightning in the spring and won't be repaired for another six months at least. There was a small landslide at the other place Genma thought of, the road to it is out for weeks and they think the ground is too unstable to be safe at the site itself. I'm running out of ideas." She looked despondent. "And until we can find a suitable location we're going to have trouble booking a priest as well, we can hardly just put one on standby indefinitely. It's something of a problem."

"We could hold the wedding here," Soun suggested, having come up beside his youngest daughter while Nodoka was speaking. She glanced at him, then back to the couple, raising her eyebrows. Ukyo looked at her fiancé then turned back to the Tendo father.

"Thank you very much for the offer, Soun, it's appreciated, believe me, but we sort of have our hearts set on something more...," she looked like she was trying to find the right word, eventually finishing, "...wild, closer to nature, I suppose. Somewhere other than the normal boring places. Up somewhere high with a nice view would be ideal. But weddings in the mountains are in at the moment, which seems to be the cause of this problem." She looked around at the grounds of the Tendo house. "This place is beautiful in its own way but it isn't quite what we're looking for."

"I understand," he smiled. "It was only a suggestion, I'm not insulted if it isn't right. The correct location is very important for a wedding, I agree. But bear it in mind if all else fails."

"We will." The long-haired brunette sighed gently, holding her lover's hand. He squeezed it gently, content to let her speak. "I suppose we may have to put it off until next year."

"That would be a shame," Nodoka told her. "I'm sure we can find somewhere suitable if we keep looking, eventually. I'm not going to give up, dear."

Sensing someone familiar beside her, Akane looked to the other side from her father to see Nabiki had arrived, Chou accompanying her, both of them with drinks in hand, apparently in time to hear the conversation. She smiled at her sister, then the magical blonde, both of whom smiled back. They listened as Nodoka and the couple discussed a few ideas, looking more and more frustrated, until Chou cleared her throat politely. Everyone looked at her.

"I'm sorry to intrude, I don't mean to be rude, but I may have a suggestion for a suitable location. It fits what you seem to be looking for very well, although you might find it slightly... unusual." They all exchanged glances. She smiled gently. "It's possibly the most beautiful place I've ever been, it's high up with the most extraordinary view you can imagine, amazingly clear air, and very predictable weather. I could show you some pictures but they don't do it justice, you'd really have
to see it to properly appreciate it."

"It sounds certainly interesting," Ukyo said, looking fascinated. "Where is it?"

"Well, that's the unusual part," Chou replied, a mischievous grin crossing her face. Yori joined her, glancing at her curiously, then suddenly smiling widely. Everyone in the garden stared in shock as a glowing blue hole in reality tore open a couple of metres away with a faint crackling sound, near the pond, causing Genma who had been staring suspiciously at the small body of water from right next to it to yelp and fall in. The panda climbed out, muttering to itself in small growls. Yori seemed to find this hilarious if the look on her face was anything to go by.

"It's right on the other side of that portal," the blonde said contentedly, smiling at them. Everyone gaped. Yori was watching Genma and snickering to herself, the pandafied martial artist was staring at the portal and gently dripping, Ukyo was looking at Chou, then the portal, her face apparently frozen into a mask of incredulity. There was silence, only broken by the crumpling wax paper sounds coming from the apparition, for ten or fifteen seconds.

Faint muttering in Mandarin made Akane tear her eyes away from the portal sitting innocently next to the pond to look over and see Cologne staring at it, white-faced. The Elder looked like she'd seen a ghost, although to be honest, bearing in mind that they all had at one point, the youngest Tendo suddenly decided that was a poor metaphor. The thought made her giggle slightly wildly, causing Nabiki to look oddly at her. She shrugged helplessly at her sister. Cologne still looked shocked, though.

"Ah..." Chou was watching Ukyo with a small calm smile, as if she'd offered to lend her a casserole dish, instead of apparently suggesting a trip to a demon world for their wedding. "That's a portal."

Chou nodded calmly. "Yes, I know, I just said that."

"But portals lead to other worlds, don't they? Worlds demons come from..."

"Well, that's somewhat simplistic, but, yes, the other side is on a different world. A completely different reality to be honest."

Everyone kept listening, either staring at the portal or the magical girl, who seemed to be taking all this as perfectly normal, which to Akane at least it most definitely wasn't. She could see pretty much everyone else felt that way aside from the various other magical girls. Aiko was nodding to herself, as Tamiko whispered something to her, and Fumiko and her sister were grinning. She noticed that Nabiki looked interested rather than worried, which amused her even through her shock. That was her sister all right. Not much seemed to slow her down for very long.

"A... different... reality?" Ukyo managed, looking at her husband-to-be, who stared back wide-eyed. Chou nodded again.

"Yes. It's a world called Fwetna. Some friends of ours live there. We've been there a number of times, it's very nice place. We went there on holiday recently."

There was silence again, as everyone stared at her this time, and Yori. "Trust me, it's perfectly safe," Chou told them. "The people look a little different, true, but in most respects they're remarkably similar to us. The climate is very good as well, and the food is excellent. I even know a good place to relax after the wedding, especially if you like swimming."

Nodoka finally managed to close her mouth around that time. She looked at the blonde for a long
moment, the other woman meeting her gaze with the same gentle smile she normally wore, one
everyone seemed to find remarkably calming, then turned to Ukyo. "It might be worth looking at,
dear. I'm sure Chou would never allow us into a dangerous situation and to be honest we're at
something of an impasse at the moment. And you have to admit that a wedding on a different
world would certainly meet your requirement of not being either normal or boring." She grinned for
a moment, as Ukyo tore her eyes from Chou and looked at her, then turned to her fiancé.

Konatsu looked into her eyes for a long moment, then turned to Chou. "It really is safe?"

She nodded. "Yes, at least as safe as Japan is, probably more so. It's a very nice and civilised place.
You'll like it, trust me." After several seconds, he turned back to Ukyo. They had a wordless
conversation for a second or two, then the Okonomiyaki chef swallowed hard, blinked a couple of
times, and sighed. She turned to the blonde woman who was waiting patiently.

"I suppose we should at least look."

Chou smiled happily. "Good. Come on, it's almost exactly the right time. You'll love this." She
held out her hand, which Ukyo took after a moment, pulling her to her feet. Konatsu got up and
joined them. Looking around at the garden party guests, most of whom were also invited to the
wedding, she said, "Everyone should come and look. You'll like it."

They all watched as she led the couple to the portal. Standing in front of it, she added, "Just walk
through it. There's no sensation worth mentioning and it's completely safe. Watch." The young
woman entered the glowing blue tear in space, disappearing with a slightly louder crinkling sound,
then came back a moment later. "See?" Exchanging a long glance, they both visibly plucked up the
courage and walked through the portal. Everyone stared in wonder.

"So. Anyone else coming?" Yori asked brightly, making Akane jump, she was watching the portal
so intently. Nabiki, beside her, noticed and laughed, causing her to shoot her sister a quick glare.

"I'm not going to miss this, that's for sure," the middle sister announced firmly with a look at the
petite woman, proceeding to walk determinedly to and through the portal. Akane gasped a little,
then twitched when the brunette head of her older sister popped back through the thing, hanging in
space in an improbable manner and making everyone stare in amazement. Her expression was one
of awe.

"Akane. You have got to see this! Come on!" She vanished again.

The youngest Tendo sister noticed that everyone left was now watching her expectantly.
Swallowing slightly, she glanced at Yori, who grinned at her, then Shampoo, who was staring wide
eyed, then Nodoka. The elder woman hopped to her feet with a sudden delighted smile. "Your
sister is both slightly mad and completely right, Akane. Let's have a look." Holding out her hand,
she waited until Akane took it, swallowing a little again, then towed her towards the portal. They
stopped in front of it, exchanging a glance, before stepping in.

Blue light surrounded her for a brief moment then she found herself somewhere else entirely.
Staring around in shock that slowly turned to total wonder she was barely conscious of Nabiki, who
was apparently waiting for her, gently urging her to the side as people began slowly coming
through after them, curiosity apparently too great a draw despite the weirdness of the situation.
Shortly the entire guest list of Nodoka's party was standing nearby, looking at the scenery of the
alien place they found themselves. Her father swore under his breath as he walked out of the portal
behind her. A moment later she heard Cologne suck in a breath, then mumble something in
Mandarin, sounding awestruck.
Silence, aside from an almost subsonic rumble that made the ground shake gently, fell.

Akane stared around her slowly, then looked at Nodoka, who was doing the same with an expression of awed delight on her face. Glancing at Nabiki she saw her sister was grinning widely as she inspected their surroundings, looking over to meet her eyes for a moment, then going back to studying the area they found themselves in. Off to the side she noticed Chou and Yori standing next to each other, almost identical smiles of pleasure on their faces as they watched everyone.

After a long moment, she walked across the stone ground, which had been machined flat in some manner which left it looking surprisingly natural, yet still obviously the work of some unseen hand, to the metre-high wall made of the same stone. It formed a rim at the edge of the levelled off zone. The flat slabs of rock were held together with a slightly lighter coloured mortar, forming a rather nice looking mosaic effect. Nearing the wall she found herself instinctively slowing as the sheer magnitude of the incredible drop that started immediately on the other side made itself apparent. She estimated it must be on the order of two kilometres, possibly more. It was certainly the tallest cliff she'd ever seen in her life. She felt Nabiki join her as she stopped next to the wall, the other woman putting her hands on it and leaning forward slightly, then whistling.

"Wow. That's one hell of a drop. You probably wouldn't want to fall over. Not unless you could sprout wings or something." Her sister glanced at her with a grin. Carefully, she leaned a little forward herself, feeling a wave of vertigo sweep through her as she peered down. The ground far, far below was sliding into twilight as the light faded. After a giddy moment she straightened up and took a step back. Just in case. It seemed to amuse Nabiki, who went back to examining the view.

She looked around. Out over the wall she could see for what must have been dozens, of not hundreds, of kilometres, a vast plain stretching out to the horizon which was further away than any view she'd ever seen before, the air being incredibly clear and clean-smelling, although redolent with odd smells she realised must be coming from the forest that started twenty metres behind them. The large smoothed off area, which was roughly the size of the garden back home except longer and thinner, ran along the cliff top between the drop-off and the forest. The trees that formed the forest were like nothing she'd seen in the past although were still obviously trees, despite their alien appearance. She could see the outlines of fields and signs of civilisation all over the plain, not packed too tightly, with large wild areas left between them. Threads of roads ran across the distant ground, tiny glinting dots of vehicles barely visible here and there.

Far off to the right was something she realised must be a huge alien city, enormous buildings visible and glowing with multi-coloured lights, while there was something much smaller and closer peaking around the cliff to the left. To either side she could see the cliff curved away to form what looked like part of the rim of a vast bowl or crater. A few shiny points high in the sky were moving fast, apparently aircraft of some type, lit from the side. She looked over her shoulder to see Nodoka standing completely still, staring, not having moved so far. Ukyo and Konatsu were holding hands and looking around with stunned expressions.

The view over the wall was absolutely breathtaking, but it paled in comparison to the source of the deep rumble you could feel in your bones, which was thirty metres or so away along the cliff. A narrow but apparently deep and swiftly moving river wound its way out of the forest in a channel worn from the hard rock over millennia, reaching, then going over, the edge in an enormous horizontal column. It eventually bent and dropped into the depths after a remarkable distance due to the sheer velocity of the water, separating into droplets that curved out and down like a rain of diamonds. They glinted in the light as they fell into the growing darkness below, breaking up into a steadily finer spray as they moved. She cautiously looked over the wall again to see that thousands of metres below, the water was a fog sliding and rolling down the vertical cliff, finally reaching a
more gradual slope where it formed hundreds of tiny streams that eventually joined back into a much wider and slower moving river heading off across the plain.

After a minute or two of staring at it in awe, she raised her eyes a little to see the source of the light, and the strange shadows she'd noticed, ones that seemed to have two close but distinct edges with slight colour differences. Not one, but two suns were sitting low in the sky off past the huge distant city, above the water thundering over the cliff edge. One was visibly red, redder than the Sun at home would be even considering how close it was to the horizon, while the other one a small distance away from it and a little higher was a pinprick of white with a distinct bias towards blue, brighter than the red one even though it was so much smaller.

"A binary system..." Nabiki said, following her gaze, sounding fascinated. "I've read about that sort of thing."

"It's beautiful," she replied quietly.

"Isn't it? It's probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"It gets better," Yori said, somehow hearing her and raising her voice a little to be heard over the bone-shaking rumble of the waterfall. "In about a minute or so. Everyone come and stand here next to us, it's the best place to see it from." After a pause while they all collected themselves slightly there was a general movement to the indicated spot, the visitors all lining up in the space, which was just sufficient. "Right. Just watch." Yori grinned, turning to follow her own advice.

The twin suns steadily dropped in the sky, the red one leading, until it happened. With surprisingly suddenness the red star passed behind the column of fast-moving and remarkably transparent water, making it abruptly illuminate in a startling rainbow of colours, much more brightly than one would expect, with a definite tendency to red. The blue star lit the water from above, making the top surface glow almost purple, adding to the effect.

The assembled people gasped as one, watching the glittering stream of water shoot out into space, all the little beads caused as it broke apart shining individually until they vanished into the darkness. No one said anything, or moved, they just watched, drinking in the incredible sight. When the red sun finally dropped below the water, lighting it from underneath, the blue one was just entering it, causing the effect to happen all over again, even more brightly and in shades of blue and violet this time. Akane tore her eyes away for a moment to look at her family and friends, to see all of them watching and every one of them smiling. Yori and Chou were standing next to each other looking as entranced as the rest of them were.

Ukyo and Konatsu watched, their fingers intertwined, until the blue sun eventually dropped below the waterfall following the larger red one, which was now half-obscured by the distant horizon. They turned to look at each other. After a few seconds, Chou walked over, followed by Yori, everyone watching in silence.

"What do you think?" the blonde asked gently. Both the engaged people glanced at her, then looked back at each other, before nodding.

"It's perfect. Thank you for showing us this." Ukyo looked happier than Akane had seen her since they announced their engagement, as did Konatsu.

"You're welcome. I'm glad I could help." Chou looked pleased, glancing at the shorter woman next to her, who grinned.

"It's pretty good, isn't it?" Yori asked rhetorically, chuckling. Both the others nodded again,
matching her grin, then shared a kiss. Everyone else applauded, which made them pull apart with an embarrassed look, before laughing.

Shortly they were all wandering around, talking and laughing, every now and then someone popping back through the portal to fetch some food or drink, the assembled multitude having apparently decided as a group it was safe enough to be considered like a normal door. Akane stood to one side with her sister and watched in astonishment. Nabiki laughed, causing her to look sideways and raise an eyebrow enquiringly. It was getting darker, now like twilight, the blue sun barely above the horizon, but her sister noticed. "It's like Auntie's party moved here," the brunette explained. She waved a hand, indicating the clusters of people moving about, talking animatedly and admiring everything. Genma, still a panda, was drinking from a bottle of beer, listening to the discussion between his wife, the couple, and Chou. Soun and Cologne were looking out at the plain below them pointing out various clusters of lights and trying to work out what they represented. Other people were looking speculatively at the path leading into the deep, dark forest.

She giggled. "Come on, let's go and get those garden lights Dad has and bring them back so everyone can see. Otherwise someone will fall over that wall."

Akane jumped a little when a voice from beside her unexpectedly said, "Don't worry, I set up a ward all along it, no one is in any danger." She turned to see Yori smiling at her. "The lighting's easy as well. Hang on." A slight frown of concentration appeared momentarily before she looked pleased, and everyone else looked up, to see a series of glowing purple balls of misty light hanging above them in the air, just out of reach. Chou glanced over, then up, nodded, and did something similar, golden spheres appearing and mixing their glow with the violet ones. The combined light was slightly oddly coloured but bright enough to easily see by.

"That should do it," Yori commented with satisfaction.

"What are they?" Akane asked, staring at the nearest one, startled yet impressed.

"Basically they're little warded spheres of magic. They're not very powerful, you could poke your finger into one and it would only give a little resistance, but I can make them glow brightly enough to light the area pretty well." The woman looked up at the same one she was studying. "It's not a trick I've had call to use much in the past but it seems to work well."

"It's pretty impressive," Nabiki said, also looking at the ball of light. She transferred her gaze to Yori. "If you made one big enough you could light an enormous area." Smiling, she added, "It would look like a small star, I guess."

For some reason the magical girl looked narrowly at her sister, Akane noticed, before snickering. "Probably. Maybe one day I should try it."

Nabiki laughed then wandered off to join their father and the Elder in their conversation, indicating the distant and brilliantly illuminated city with one hand. Shortly all three were talking animatedly.

Yori watched with a small grin. Turning to the youngest sister, she commented, "Your sister has a weird sense of humour." Akane sighed a little.

"Tell me about it. Some of her practical jokes are just... peculiar." Snickering again, the other woman motioned to the table someone had brought through the portal a moment ago, several more people carrying all the food that had been on it, which they put back as soon as it was ready.

"I could do with another salmon roll. You want anything?" Akane followed her to the table.
"Hmm." She looked over the food before picking a couple of sandwiches up along with a plate, then grabbing a glass of orange juice. She suddenly giggled making Yori glance at her.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"Everything," Akane said, waving around as her laughter grew for a moment, then died down. "Nabiki is right. Half an hour ago, we were all sitting in our garden staring at that from the other side, not sure whether to believe Chou or just run. Now look at it all." She indicated with her glass at the small crowd who were wandering around, talking, laughing, and generally having a wonderful time. Nabiki looked over and caught her eye, grinning, before going back to talking to Cologne, who seemed happy yet puzzled, as if she couldn't believe what she was doing.

Yori looked around, then chuckled in a contented manner. "I keep telling people you get used to it. No one ever believes me at first." She sipped her soft drink, looking pleased.

After a moment, Akane turned to her. "Thanks again for what you did for me. I still have trouble believing it, and that you'd all go to so much trouble for someone you met under such annoying circumstances."

"It's no problem, Akane. Like we've always told you, we like helping people. I had the card, you were a good fit for the job, and Shampoo is as well. It helps Adrian, who's a decent guy, it helps you and your family, Shampoo and hers, and with some luck we'll even get some good movies out of it." The woman laughed, shaking her head in amusement, her long braid swinging around. "Some of the recent action ones have been terrible!"

"Hopefully we can do better," the youngest Tendo grinned.

"I sure hope so."

"It's very good of Aiko to keep taking us back and forth," Akane added. Yori shrugged.

"She likes being able to teleport all over the place like that. To her it's like crossing the room, no real effort at all most of the time. Why not?"

"Even so, it's very generous. I wouldn't blame her if she decided we should fly instead."

"That's no fun at all, mostly. God, the lines at airports, all that security theatre, the waiting..." Yori shuddered theatrically, making her laugh again. "No, good old fashioned teleporting is the way to go about it. Flying is fun, but not the commercial version." She glanced up at the slightly taller woman next to her. "If you're interested, actually, around the ring wall to the right a few kilometres is the lake that feeds that river. That's where Chou meant about going swimming, it's fantastic for that. But they also do a lot of what we'd call hang gliding there. It's damn good fun. If you'd like to try it, that could be arranged. Anyone else here could as well."

Staring at her for a moment, Akane felt surprised. "Hang gliding? Demons do that?"

"Oh, yes, all the time. They're an awful lot like us, as we said. The inhabitants of this world are called D'sage, they're really decent people for the most part. Fwetna is a very nice place to both visit and live." She pointed to the left, at the portion of the smaller city visible way off to the side. "That's a city called Sirtha. It's a major trading hub and manufacturing centre. Nice place. A very good friend of ours called Uthryyl and his family live on the side of a mountain, the end of this cliff actually, overlooking the city. He's got several warehouses there and around the place. He owns one of the largest interworld trading companies around, they're the main exporters of coffee and chocolate from our world to others."
Once again, Akane stared, amazed. She noticed absently that her sister and father had come up beside her and were listening with interest. Cologne was still standing at the wall looking at the view. "Coffee? Chocolate?" She was wondering if she'd heard correctly. Yori looked at her with amusement.

"Oh, yes. They love it, here and in a lot of other places. It's pretty much only available from home and is considered quite valuable in most worlds. He buys it in bulk, along with a few other things, then trades it all over. It's one of the things that's earned him an awful lot of credits."

"I recall that there have been mentions on the news over the last year or so about there being rumours demons were buying coffee, chocolate, and ice cream in Minato," Soun interjected, sounding fascinated and somewhat surprised. "Nothing confirmed, but that's the story I've heard. You mentioned there were traders as well some months ago, as well as tourists."

Nodding, Yori replied, "Oh, it's true enough. He's back and forth from Minato almost every month now. A local merchant is working with him on our end. Both of them are having very good success with business."

"What do these demons trade for it?" her father asked curiously.

"Mostly precious metals at the moment," the black-haired woman told him. "Gold and silver mainly. A lot of places have large amounts of it and as a result don't value it much more than any other useful metal, while we have things like coffee they value highly. It all seems to work pretty well."


"It sounds very interesting. I wonder if there's anything else that could be traded like that?" Yori studied her for a moment, a small smile on her lips, then nodded.

"I'd think it was pretty likely." She laughed. "I could introduce you to Uthryyl if you want to look into some sort of trading business. He's always looking for new local agents. I've heard that you have a good head for that sort of thing, perhaps you could suggest something he hasn't thought of."

Giggling, the middle sister glanced at her father, who looked amused. "Maybe I should take you up on that when I finish University."

"I was under the impression that you were thinking of going into forensic accountancy, Nabiki," Soun said, smiling a bit. She shrugged.

"It's always wise to keep your options open."

"True." He grinned at her. Akane shook her head, staring at her sister.

"Do you ever stop thinking about money, 'Biki?" she asked, which made Yori laugh again. The middle Tendo thought carefully for a moment.

"Nope."

They all laughed at her comment. Yori turned back to Akane. "Anyway, as I was saying, Uthryyl lives quite close, in a straight line at least. It's considerably longer by road. We stayed with him for a while when we were on holiday earlier in the year and went flying when we met a friend of his daughter Onkra. It was damn good fun. Their gliders are pretty similar to what we have at home in a lot of ways, but they're a weird mix of extremely high tech and very basic. They have a computerised autopilot system that can teach you to fly remarkably quickly, and if anything goes
horribly wrong there's an anti-gravity recovery system built in that gets you safely down to the ground. No one has been seriously injured using one for years and that last guy practically did it on purpose from what I was told."

"It sounds interesting," Nabiki said, while Akane thought it over. Her sister looked at her, smiling. "You going to take the offer up, sis?"

The youngest Tendo looked uncertain. "It does sound interesting, you're right, but it also sounds terrifying." Yori laughed a little.

"No, it's fine, you just strap the thing on then jump over the edge." She grinned. "The falling sensation doesn't last long."

Akane could feel herself go pale. Nabiki burst out laughing. "I'm sure it's not quite that dramatic, sis. I went hang-gliding myself over the holiday like I told you, it was damn good fun. You probably just run along the ground or down a slope until you're in the air. That's what we did." Her sister looked at her, then poked her in the shoulder. "It's easy."

"That's basically it, yes," Yori agreed. The martial artist smiled. "Don't worry, Akane, it really is very easy and very safe. You'd enjoy it. I know we did."

"Look, I'll do it if you will," Nabiki suggested. "I'm curious to see how it compares to my previous attempt anyway."

"I'll think about it," the blue-haired woman finally said, sighing a little worriedly.

"No hurry, we can come back any time you want to give it a go," Yori told her, still smiling a little. She glanced at Soun. "You might enjoy it as well."

He shrugged, but looked interested. "It might be worth a try at some point." After a moment, he went over to talk to Genma, who had found some hot water from somewhere, leaving the three women behind. Not entirely sure about the offer, Akane decided she needed some more sandwiches to settle her stomach after the way it had clenched from Yori's little joke.

Looking at the paper in her hand, Miki smiled. "This is the place," she said to her boyfriend, as they looked at the large gate in front of them set into a surprisingly long three metre tall wall. John examined it.

"Bigger than I expected," he commented. She nodded.

"It's huge for Tokyo. Nabiki said it's been in the family for generations. Apparently they had some financial problems that left them at risk of losing it some time back but when they re-opened the Dojo that problem got sorted out."

"That must be it there," the young man replied, pointing at the tile roof of a substantial two story building whose end wall joined with the wall around the property. He turned to smile at Hana and Kimiko who joined them at that point, having stopped to look into a shop window on the way from the train station and as a result trailed behind.

"I think so. The house is further inside, over to the left." Deciding that standing around guessing was no substitute for actually going inside, she walked over and rang the bell. She could hear it go off faintly in the distance. After a few seconds, when there was no answer, she poked the button again. Once more, there was no response. "Odd. We're late, but not that late," she smiled, "I doubt everyone has gone home. I certainly hope not, anyway." She tried once more.
When there was no answer for the third time, she tested the door next to the main gate. It was unlocked, so she opened it and peeked inside, finding a path to the main house, which was indeed quite large, considerably more so than her parent's one. "Come on, let's find someone." All four of them entered, John closing the door behind them, then they walked to the front door and rang the bell there instead. Again, there was no obvious result. Just as she turned to her boyfriend to ask a question, a voice from the side made them turn and look.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

They looked at the young woman with long lilac-coloured hair who was standing by the corner of the house holding a tray under her arm, apparently heading towards the house from the garden. Miki smiled at her.

"Hi. We're looking for Nabiki? I'm her friend Miki from university, this is my boyfriend John, and my sisters Hana and Kimiko."

"Oh, right, she mentioned you were coming. She said your train got delayed?"

Miki sighed a little. "Yes, there was a minor earthquake near Kobe just before we were going to leave and it damaged some signalling equipment. They fixed it pretty fast but it still caused over three hours delay."

"That's a nuisance." Smiling, the young woman waved them to follow her. "I'm Shampoo, a friend of the family. I'll take you to her, I just need to get some more food." They followed her in through a door to the side of the house overlooking the large courtyard between it and the Dojo building, all of them looking around with interest.

"It's a very nice place," Hana said admiringly. Shampoo nodded, following her gaze.

"Yes, it's one of the largest traditional houses still in the area," she agreed. They followed as she entered the kitchen, a table in the middle of which was covered in party food. Putting the tray she was holding down next to the sink she picked up a full one from the table. "Hey, would you mind bringing that crate of beer?" she asked. John grabbed it from the floor beside the table, causing her to smile at him. "Come on, it's this way." She led them back outside and towards the rear of the house. "We could go through the living room but Nodoka didn't want dirt tracked in with everyone trooping back and forth," Shampoo explained. Kimiko giggled.

"I can understand that. Mom was furious about all the extra cleaning we had to do at home when I had a party last year."

Laughing, the Chinese girl led them around the house and into the large garden. They looked around curiously. No one was visible, although there was a lot of evidence that quite a large number of people had been there recently.

"Where is everybo..." Miki got part way through the question when she spotted what Shampoo was blithely walking towards without a care in the world, she and the others stopping dead in their tracks and staring in shock. A few steps further on, Shampoo noticed they were no longer following, herself stopping and looking over her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" she asked curiously, looking at them. John pointed past her, his face pale, making her look, then turn back, puzzled. "Yes?" she queried.

"That's a portal," he croaked. "Like I've seen on the news." After a moment she seemed to realise what he meant and grinned.
"That's right," she agreed.

"What the hell is a portal doing in the middle of Nabiki's back garden?" he asked in a hoarse voice. Shampoo giggled, raising her eyebrows.

"It's just hanging there." This wasn't a very good answer as far as Miki was concerned. She glanced at her boyfriend, having some difficulty tearing her eyes away from the softly crackling blue-glowing rip in reality, to see he'd gone as pale as she suspected she was. Hana was swearing very quietly to herself, while Kimiko was inspecting the thing with cautious interest.

Eventually, Shampoo relented, laughing to herself. "Sorry. I know it's a shock the first time. We all felt like that as well. Chou made it, it's a long story. The party seems to have moved to the other side. Come on, it's fine, and the view is amazing." She grinned at them, turned back to the thing, then walked through it like it was her front door, not slowing at all. They stared at each other for a while, jumping violently when she stuck her head back through it. "Coming?" she asked, before vanishing again.

None of them could tear their eyes away from the portal, they just gaped at it. Another few seconds passed in silence except for the constant faint noise it made, until they all twitched again when Nabiki popped out of it, a bottle of beer in her hand. "Hi, guys. Glad you made it. You coming through or what?"

"What... How... I mean..." Miki couldn't work out which of the very large number of questions whirling through her head to ask first. Beside her, John was simply staring in shock. Their friend laughed, clearly very amused.

"You wanted to meet some magical girls. This seems to be what happens when you invite a load of them to a party." She waved the beer in her hand at the hole in the universe. "It's perfectly safe, we've been going back and forth for nearly two hours now and no one has died, exploded, or turned into a frog yet."

None of them made a move. After a while the middle Tendo sighed, walked around behind Miki and John and started pushing. By the time they thought to resist they'd gone through the magical doorway, into darkness lit by an oddly coloured light from above. "See? Perfectly safe. Come on, let's get you both beered and fed." Behind them, Hana gingerly stepped through the portal, Kimiko behind her, both of them looking stunned and awed. She looked over her shoulder and met her sisters' eyes seeing they both were probably feeling as startled as she was. Snickering a little Nabiki steered them over to a table piled with food, gave them all a plate each, and waved at the table. "Here you go. Help yourselves."

Miki looked at the plate she found she was holding, her friend, who was grinning, her boyfriend, who looked like he'd been unexpectedly slapped with a dead squid, her two sisters, her plate again, then around at the very unusual scenery and the people apparently thoroughly enjoying it. After a long pause she shrugged. "You mentioned beer?"

"Yep. Hang on." Nabiki wandered off, returning with four bottles dangling from her free hand, as well as two people they recognised with amazement. "Here you go. A beer each, a Yori, and a Chou. I think I have some more magical girls in the back if these ones aren't quite right for you." She started laughing like an idiot when both the young women in question raised their eyebrows and gave her a look like they couldn't decide quite how sane she was.

"You may have had a little too much beer," the blonde woman said, shaking her head in an amused manner. She inspected the new arrivals, took two of the bottles Nabiki was holding, flicked the tops off with her thumbs with no sign of effort, then held them out to Miki and John, who accepted
them automatically, staring at her.

"Hello. I'm Chou. Nabiki said you were something of a fan?"

Suddenly extremely glad she'd come to the party, Miki nodded, smiling widely. Beside her, Hana was making little squeaking noises that suggested extreme joy, Kimiko was laughing very quietly to herself, and her boyfriend took a very long pull on his beer before turning to the food, shaking his head.

"She's not normal, that Nabiki Tendo," his girlfriend heard him mutter. "Not even close to normal. Japan is weird." Laughing, she began talking to the pair of magical girls. Nabiki stood back and watched, a grin on her face, drinking the last of her beer, before going in search of a full one.
Greetings, multitudinous peeps! I return triumphant, fresh from the conquest of Gaul.

Wait.

No, that's Julius Caesar.

Um. I return, after a long delay?

Something like that, anyway.

A sudden attack of hard work out of nowhere which ate nearly two months, capped with a nasty cold that left me lying in bed weakly going 'arrghhhh-cough-cough-gurgle' for many days means I didn't do nearly as much writing recently as I planned. However, I'm recovered and picking up the pieces once more, so here is the next chapter. I've managed to also do a fair amount of the next one to two chapters so I'm going to try (again) to release a little quicker than once a month or so. We'll see how successful that is, I guess.

The party gets... odd.

I've discovered that writing dialogue for Tatewaki Kuno is nearly as much fun as doing it for Ms Aoyama. It was about time he had a larger part in the story.

As an interesting side note, I actually wrote most of the last half of the previous chapter at the same time as I wrote the first scene in chapter 60. I've been sitting on it for over a year until the appropriate point in the story turned up :)

As always, thanks for the reviews and positive encouragement.

I'm also informed that there is an All The Tropes page for DSR, which seems to be more fully developed than the TVTropes one. I didn't know that.

Oh, one final thing occurs to me. A few reviews have (mostly gently) complained that I seem to be being hard on the US as being the source of a lot of the in-story problems. May I make it clear that I don't have anything against Americans in general (except for a couple, and they know what they did) but with the sheer quantity of three letter agencies that country possesses along with its history over the last century, it's pretty much inevitable that any decent conspiracy plot will involve the US eventually. Don't take it personally :) I'll be mean to other countries as well, they all deserve it one way or another...

"Are you sure there's no problem holding the wedding here?" Nabiki asked, watching Ukyo and Konatsu talk to Miki and John, who she'd introduced them to a while ago.

"It's fine, Nabiki, the waterfall area is a public facility and is open to functions of that nature," the voice of Uthryyl assured her over the link. "As soon as you have a date I can reserve it, the process is simple and it will prevent anyone else wanting to use it at the same time. The name of Yori or Chou attached to the request will guarantee that no one will mind, trust me, not that it's likely that anyone would."

"Thanks, Uthryyl," 'Yori' said. "Ukyo is my oldest friend and even though she doesn't know it's me I want to make sure her wedding goes well. She deserves it, so does Konatsu, he's a good guy."
"You're more than welcome, of course, my friend." The merchant sounded happy. "And you must come and talk soon. I'm hearing rumours that you lot have been doing peculiar things in Krennsh space which could be extremely profitable. It's making me curious."

"I was planning on it, Uthryyl," 'Yori' laughed. "I have a lot to tell you and a few presents as well. It's been a little chaotic here though and the story needs a certain amount of time to do justice to so I've been waiting for things to calm down a little before I came. Sometime in the next few days, I think."

"I await the news with barely contained excitement," Uthryyl replied dryly. Both Nabiki and her sister-in-law snickered at his tone. "Oh, while I think of it, Nabiki, Quannyr has finished the paperwork for the reactor export and it's just waiting final approval from the authorities. Based on normal practice we'll have it in about two weeks, possibly less."

"Great. That's really good to hear. The PSIA wants to get one for trials as soon as possible anyway, so being able to tell them we can almost immediately start importing the things will be very good news. Thanks, and thanks to Quannyr as well." The middle sister smiled to herself. "Can I get a unit next week for them?"

"That's not a problem at all. I'll round up one of my technicians who speaks Japanese and we can talk about it in a few days. Ranma, I'll bring one for your building at the same time and we can install it too, that shouldn't take more than a few hours at the most."

"Sounds good. Thanks a lot." The martial artist sounded pleased.

"I must get back to making dinner, Onkra and Quannyr will be home soon and you don't want two hungry women complaining about the food not being ready if you want a calm life."

"Understandable." Ranma's alter-ego chuckled. "I'll talk soon."

"Goodbye, both of you." The link dropped, leaving the martial artist and the middle Tendo looking at each other with amusement from opposite sides of the waterfall plaza, each with a drink in hand.

Nabiki turned her head as Kimiko came up beside her holding a plate of sushi and a bottle of beer, putting both on the wall the brunette was standing next to then looking out into the darkness kilometres above the plain, glittering lights stretching away into the distance. Off to the right the multi-coloured glow of Krentak lit the horizon. Kimiko peered into the alien night for a while, saying nothing but with a smile on her face, before finally turning to her companion who was watching her silently.

"Thank you for inviting us," she said in a low voice, barely audible over the chatter of more than forty people talking and the quiet music playing on the sound system which someone had brought the speakers for through the portal, the cables trailing back into a completely different universe. Which was a concept that would make anyone think hard for a while.

"You're welcome," Nabiki smiled. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Kimiko nodded with a wide grin. "Yes, immensely. Although I'll sure admit to a certain amount of bewilderment." She looked around, then waved a hand vaguely at the scenery. "I wasn't expecting... this."

Snickering, Nabiki shrugged. "Odd things happen around magical girls it seems. I'll admit this is probably right on the edge of normal even in their terms but they are magical."

The other woman grinned at her. "And as such prone to doing things that normal people would find
a bit weird. Yes, I can understand that." She looked her companion up and down. "Normal people, like me. And you, of course." A smirk came over her as she raised her beer bottle to her lips.

Nabiki stole one of her salmon rolls, nibbling it and returning the look. "Yep. Normal people just like me. Perfectly normal people." They shared a moment of unspoken amusement, Nabiki fairly sure that Kimiko was thinking things that neither of her sisters would have easily believed, before they turned to look out over the darkened landscape.

"What's that place called, do you know?" Kimiko asked a little later, pointing to the right.

"Apparently it's the capital city, it's called Krentak. It's quite a long way away so the buildings must be enormous." Nabiki studied the distant city, remembering with pleasure the several visits to it from the vacation recently. "They seem to like lighting their buildings. It's kind of beautiful."

"It is. I wonder what the people here look like?"

"Yori said they were bipedal sort of humanoids with long tails, sort of a cross between a human, a horse, and a lizard. It sounds weird but she insists they're actually really decent people." She pointed in the other direction. "That one is called Sirtha, a good friend of hers lives there with his family. It's some sort of major trading hub."

"Interesting," the younger woman mused. After a moment, she leaned forward a little, then looked puzzled, reaching out a hand and poking the air, which just past the edge of the wall became solid. Running her hand over something invisible she frowned. "What on earth...?"

"Yori put a ward along the wall so no one would fall over," Nabiki chuckled. "Like a sort of force field I think. It's pretty cool." She watched Kimiko press her hand against the invisible barrier, then tap on it.

"It is, isn't it? I've never actually run into real magic before." The woman looked over her shoulder at the petite martial artist who was talking to Hana now, the Sano sister smiling so widely it looked like the only thing holding the top half of her head on was gravity. The effect was a little creepy to be honest. "None of us have as far as I know. Sis there seems to be getting into it." She giggled for a moment. "You wouldn't believe what she was like last night, and on the train. When we found there was going to be a delay I thought she was going to have a stroke for a minute or two, but Miki finally calmed her down." Nabiki started laughing. "I'm not kidding, she nearly went ultrasonic. The look she gave the poor station announcer was amazing." Now Kimiko was snickering.

"So it was a good thing I invited her, then?"

"Hana will be your friend for life after this," the other woman assured her, still giggling. "Whether you want it or not. She'll be talking about the time she met real magical girls for years. Especially Yori and Chou. When she found out after you left she didn't stop grinning for six hours and Mum was starting to think we'd need to take her to hospital to get some sedatives she was so hyper."

"Sorry about that," Nabiki replied, shaking her head and smiling.

"Don't worry, she'll calm down eventually." Kimiko studied her sister, then somewhat dubiously added, "I think..."

They exchanged another look then broke down laughing again. When they recovered, Kimiko leaned forward once more and rested her forehead against the ward, staring down. "How high is this cliff? It's difficult to see in the dark without anything to give a sense of scale."

"It's more than two kilometres at least," Nabiki replied, doing the same. "I think it's about one and
a half kilometres straight drop for the waterfall before it touches anything and maybe another one or so at a slight angle before it starts to level off. It sure looks like a very long way down when it's light. The water doesn't actually hit the ground as water, it's more like a fog the drop is so high."

She waved a hand to the right. "I'm told the lake that's the source of the river is that way a few kilometres further around the rim and considerably higher, close to the edge. It's a popular swimming destination apparently."

"Pretty amazing," the other woman mumbled. The sub-bass of the waterfall rumbling through the ground made it difficult to hear her for a moment. She straightened up and put her hands on the wall, feeling it vibrate, then looked up at the spectacularly bright star-field. "The air's so clear here as well. The only time I've ever seen the stars so well is in the middle of winter when it gets really cold, but it's nice and warm right now. I guess there must be less pollution or something like that."

"It seems a reasonable idea," Nabiki agreed. "You should see it in the day, the two suns are pretty amazing as well. When they're setting behind the waterfall it's probably one of the most spectacular things I've ever seen."

"I wish I'd seen that," Kimiko grumped. "Stupid earthquake."

"Maybe we can come back some time," the middle sister smiled. "It's worth seeing." She turned around and leaned on the wall, watching the people wandering around and talking, many of them also standing near the edge and pointing at things. Almost everyone had a wondering expression even now after several hours. "I still can't believe how quickly everyone decided it was safe," she chuckled. Kimiko looked over her shoulder, following her gaze, then nodded.

"It's a bit weird. I suppose a lot of it is the reputation Yori and Chou have. Everyone trusts them not to put them in danger. I know from my point of view that's true." She smiled momentarily. "They're more trustworthy than most people in the government to a lot of people." Nabiki shook her head a little in wonder, believing the woman but still finding the concept amusing.

After a few seconds, she said, "I need the facilities. I think I'll wander back to another universe and deal with it." She grinned at Kimiko who giggled, then headed for the portal. Miki fell into step beside her when she'd nearly reached it. Glancing at her friend as they went through the hole in space, both of them blinked a lot at the sudden sunlight for a few seconds.

"God, that's weird," Miki mumbled. She looked around the mostly empty Tendo back garden, which had a few people in it enjoying the afternoon, with one or two wandering back and forth to the fall area. The young woman began laughing to herself after a moment, turning to her friend. "I knew you said a party with magical girls was likely to be a little strange, but this is just ridiculous!"

Nabiki shrugged. "People seem to be enjoying it," she replied with a smile.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, it's wonderful, but you have to admit it's not exactly normal." Her friend stared around the garden then looked meaningfully at the portal and the wires going through it. As Nabiki followed her gaze, what appeared to be Shampoo's arm came through the portal, fumbled around for the CD player that was sitting on the ground next to it, turned the volume up a little, then vanished again. "And that's just wrong," Miki said after a couple of seconds, her eyes wide. They exchanged a glance then collapsed in laughter. "Oh, god, Nabiki, I'm so glad I met you," the other woman gasped out, holding her sides. "I don't think I'd have had so much fun otherwise."

"You're welcome," Nabiki giggled. "I've had a lot of fun as well. Your family are cool."

"Did you see the expression Hana has been walking around with ever since you introduced us to Chou and Yori?" Miki asked with a grin. "She only needs a bloody axe in one hand and people will
be running from her like crazy." This set Nabiki off all over again. Eventually they both calmed down, Miki following the Tendo woman into the house.

"I'll be back in a minute," Nabiki said, heading for the bathroom. When she came back, her friend was looking around the living room with a small smile on her face, apparently approvingly.

"You have a very nice house," she said.

"Thanks. It's been in the family for a long time." Nabiki looked around as well, memories of her childhood coming back strongly. "I like living here. It was difficult at first going to university and not coming home, and even though I'm used to it now, it's always nice to come back." She sat down, Miki taking a seat opposite, then relaxed into the seat. "There's something about the house you grew up in that's definitely special. Just the sounds and smells, you know? Like when it's windy and the house creaks a little. It's a familiar sound, one you don't really notice, until you've been away for a while and come across it again. Little things like that. They all have memories attached from when you're young."

Miki nodded, looking around the room herself again. Her eyes stopped on one photograph on the shelf near the door. "Is that your mother?" she asked, indicating the photo, which had five people in it. Nabiki looked at it, then got up and retrieved it, taking it back with her and sitting next to her friend.

"Yes. This was one of the last family photos we took, a long time ago, just before she got sick." The middle Tendo looked at the image reflectively, something she hadn't done for a while, her finger rubbing the edge of the frame without her conscious thought. "That's me, when I was about seven. Akane is only just six in this one, and that's my other sister Kasumi, she was nine. Dad, of course, then Mom." She smiled gently as she stared at the face of her long-departed other parent. "We were up in the mountains on holiday. Only about two weeks later we found out she was ill. It didn't show for a while after that, but as soon as we knew, everything changed." With a small shake of her head, she sighed. "Everything changed. It took a long time for things to get better."

They sat in silence for a few seconds. Miki put her arm around her friend's shoulders. "I'm sorry to bring it up."

"Don't be, it was a long time ago."

"Ovarian cancer," Nabiki replied as quietly. "undiagnosed and practically symptomless until it was much too late to do anything. She died about nine months later. She was fine, more or less, until only a few weeks before the end then she went downhill very quickly." Shivering a little despite herself and the temperature, she added, "It was horrible, at the end. It gave me nightmares for years and... well, it certainly affected us all. I know on my part it changed who I was a lot."

"What was wrong with her, if you don't mind me asking?" Miki's voice was low and respectful.

"Ovarian cancer," Nabiki replied as quietly. "undiagnosed and practically symptomless until it was much too late to do anything. She died about nine months later. She was fine, more or less, until only a few weeks before the end then she went downhill very quickly." Shivering a little despite herself and the temperature, she added, "It was horrible, at the end. It gave me nightmares for years and... well, it certainly affected us all. I know on my part it changed who I was a lot."

"And I guess I started shutting down in some ways, looking back I was scared about losing control of things and came to the conclusion that I had to control myself before anything else happened. It had some beneficial effects in the long run, but also some unpleasant ones. I know I didn't have a"
lot of friends for years. People I knew, yes, and people I used, but not actual *friends*. Not like you, for example." Miki, who was watching and listening quietly, smiled at her. "In some ways you were the first person for years I just liked as a friend. Going to university was a good thing if only because of that."

Miki jumped to her feet and hugged the other woman for a few seconds. "I'm glad about that. It's been a lot of fun knowing you as well even if things go a bit strange sometimes." She giggled a little. "*Nerimans* are weird, everyone knows that."

Snickering, Nabiki returned the hug. "Oh, we're all crazy, true enough. You should have seen what school was like. But it was fun a lot of the time and good experience for handling emergencies."

Releasing her, Miki stepped back then looked at the photo again. "What about your other sister? Kasumi."

"She was old enough and calm enough to handle things better, and for a long time we didn't realise that a lot of that was a cover, I think. She basically took on the position Mom held and practically raised us, not to mention took care of Dad at the same time. She did a wonderful job to be honest but I'm still guilty to this day that we just took it for granted." The middle sister looked mildly depressed. "It wasn't until she finally left that we realised just how much she did around the house. In a lot of ways it was a good thing, it finally pushed us into beginning to heal as a family, but... it affected all of us pretty badly. She held the family together all by herself."

"And you've never heard anything from her since?" Miki looked both sad and worried.

Nabiki thought about her reply, not wanting to actually lie about it. Eventually, she carefully responded, "The family still has no idea where she went or where she is. We hope she'll come back one day." Glancing at her friend, she added, "Everyone who ever knew her around here misses her. She was very well liked."

"I hope she does come home one day," Miki said with a sad tone. "I'd like to meet her."

"Perhaps one day you can." They stared at the photo for a little longer, then Nabiki perked up. "Come on, I'll show you around the house. And the Dojo, that's pretty neat." Waving towards the door she urged her friend onwards with a smile.

Nodding respectfully to Cologne as she came up beside the Elder, Akane looked over the food on offer, eventually taking another bowl of ramen with beef. Mr Ito was talking to the ancient women and Shampoo, so she smiled at them all then retreated to a position a few metres away, sitting on a large slab of the same rock that the plaza terrace was made out of which protruded from the ground near the edge of the alien forest. The very light breeze brought the smells of the vegetation drifting across her as she slowly ate, watching the party go on. People were wandering back and forth through the portal, talking and laughing, everyone apparently thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Glancing at her watch she saw it was only about five in the afternoon, which meant it was still light on the other side of the tear in the universe, the sun not setting at this time of year for several hours yet. Leaning back and staring at the unfamiliar stars she smiled a little to herself, still not sure how all this had happened but pleased it had.

A short distance away Nodoka, Yori, and Ukyo were talking about the wedding. "I'll email you a time conversion chart, Ukyo," the petite woman said. "It will let you know the time of day in Nerima versus the time here for the next few months. The days here are about thirty hours long, so it drifts in and out of sync with time at home. You can pick a date for the wedding when it's the
right time here for the waterfall at sunset if you want, or when it's full light. Once you've made up
your mind let me know and I'll arrange to book the place for the day. My friend Uthryyl says it's
easy to sort out."

"Thank you so much, Yori," Ukyo replied, looking very happy. She scanned the surroundings with
a gentle smile on her face, rather unlike her normal confident expression. "This place is so
amazing. I still can't believe we can get married here."

"It's pretty good, isn't it?" Yori grinned. "It's certainly one of the most impressive things I've ever
seen."

"That it is," Nodoka agreed. She frowned slightly. "Now all we have to do is find a priest. One
who will be all right with the... somewhat irregular... aspects of the location." She sighed slightly.
"That could be slightly problematic."

Yori looked amused. "I know someone who might be a good fit," she told the other two with a
mild smirk. "He's a nice old guy and not unfamiliar with the crazy aspects of magical girl life. I'll
ask him if you want."

"That would be much appreciated," Nodoka responded after a look at Ukyo who nodded. "Thank
you once again."

Waving her hand, Yori brushed the thanks off. "No problems. It's easy to arrange and we like
helping."

"Still, it's good of you even so," the older woman smiled. She turned to Ukyo. "We'll have to work
out all the menus and things like that for the day but it looks like the difficult part isn't a problem
now, dear. Tomorrow, let's sit down and go over everything one last time, then we can work out
the date and start arranging all the various aspects of the wedding."

Ukyo nodded, then abruptly started crying. "Whatever is the matter, dear?" Nodoka asked with
concern.

Smiling through the tears, the brunette wiped her eyes. "It just suddenly struck me. It's really going
to happen. These last few months, I was almost feeling like it wouldn't, but everything is suddenly
coming together so quickly." She rubbed her eyes again as Nodoka put her hand on her shoulder
and squeezed comfortably. "I can hardly believe it."

"It will work out well, I think," the older woman assured her with a glance at Yori who was smiling
a little at them both.

"Thanks to a lot of help from my friends, yes," Ukyo replied happily, her tears drying up.

Pleased for her friend, Akane finished her bowl, then stood to take it back to the table. Deciding
that she'd had enough beer for the moment she picked up a glass of apple juice and sipped it,
slowly moving over to look past the wall, still not sufficiently trusting of the incredible drop to
approach more closely than a metre. She stopped beside Tamiko, who was chatting to Nabiki's
friend Miki's sister Kimiko, both women giggling at some joke while watching the other sister
Hana who was walking around with a creepy grin on her face as she stared at the magical girls.
Akane watched the elder Sano sister for a moment as well, then snickered.

"She seems happy," she commented out loud. Kimiko snorted a burst of laughter.

"You have no idea," she retorted in a voice that betrayed a deep understanding of her sister's
peculiarities. "She's a total fan-girl. Miki is bad enough sometimes, but Hana is nuts about it. When
Nabiki invited us and sis found out that all you guys," she glanced at Tamiko who was grinning, "were going to be here, and Yori and Chou as well, she went completely bananas about it for hours. It was both very funny and kind of disturbing."

"What about you, Kimiko?" Akane asked, smiling. "Are you into magical girls?"

"Not like those two are," the youngest Sano replied with a shake of her head. "I find the whole thing interesting, of course, and it's been a lot of fun talking to everyone, but..." She trailed off, then pointed at Hana. "That's not the way I look at it." All three of them watched the eldest Sano pull out a camera and take a few photos of Chou, something she'd done several times in the last hour, giggling to herself in a slightly deranged tone. "Both my sisters are crazy, that one more than a little."

Akane and Tamiko shared a look and a chuckle. "At least she seems to be enjoying herself," the red-head commented.

"That's true," Kimiko allowed. "She'll be in a good mood for weeks after this." Producing a camera of her own she took a couple of photos of the entire plaza, the flash lighting the area briefly. After tucking it away again she turned to look at the forest behind the stone-surfaced area. "Is there any problem with going and looking at the trees?"

"There's nothing dangerous in the woods," Tamiko told her. "If you want to poke around go ahead, but stay away from the edge and the river. There's a path over there which ends up in a parking area about a kilometre or so back. No lights, though, so it'll be pretty dark." She thought for a moment, then produced a small flashlight, turning it on and handing it over. "Here. Use this."

Accepting the device Kimiko smiled. "Thanks, Tamiko. I just want to see what's in there, I'll be back in a little while." She wandered off, heading for the path Tamiko had pointed out with the pool of illumination from the flashlight preceding her, while Akane and the magical girl watched her go.

"Don't worry, it's mostly very safe," the red-headed woman said to the youngest Tendo. "So, how are you getting on, Akane? We haven't had time to talk yet today."

"Fine, thanks, Tamiko," Akane replied. She looked around at the people at the party, then back to the other woman. "I'm having a lot of fun here even though this isn't exactly what I thought was going to happen, and the last week was great. How are you getting on?"

"Not bad, all things considered," Tamiko smiled. "Nothing serious has happened this week, just lots of little annoyances, which is easy enough to deal with. Having Aiko away so much was a bit odd, we're all together most of the time, but we adapted. It's not like she can't get back here in a second when we need her after all."

"Sorry about taking your friend away like that," Akane giggled.

"Don't worry about it, really," the other woman replied. "She was having a hell of a lot of fun. That DVD she got was pretty amazing, it impressed us all with what you and Shampoo did. Apparently you'll know on Monday what the decision is?"

"Yes, that's what we're expecting. Adrian and Anton both said that it was a sure thing but I'm not going to believe that until I have the contract in my hand." Akane sighed a little, shrugging. "It could still go wrong."

"I'm sure it will work out fine," Tamiko reassured her. "From what I saw there's no way you could
have done any better."

"Thanks."

Both of them looked up as Soun stopped next to them, Akane smiling at her father. "Hi, Dad," she said.

"Hello, daughter." He smiled back. "Hello, Tamiko. I trust you and your friends are still enjoying the party?"

"We are, thanks, Soun." The magical girl grinned at him. "It's very good so far. Although we seem to have removed it from your place pretty effectively." She looked around at the alien landscape then back to him. The Tendo patriarch followed her eyes and nodded.

"It does appear that way. Don't worry, as long as everyone is enjoying themselves that's all that matters." He looked at city of Krentak in the distance for a moment. "I'm certainly having an experience, believe me. I didn't think, when I got up this morning, that I was going to be on the other side of a portal in a demon world with half the neighbourhood." His expression was midway between pleased and bemused.

"I don't think any of us did," Akane noted. Tamiko looked at them, then around at the scenery. "It looks pretty normal to me," she laughed. Both the Tendos stared at her. "But then, I'm a bit strange," she added after a moment.

"Indeed." Soun smiled, his moustache twitching. "I suppose we should be grateful that with six magical girls in close proximity this is all that's happened."

"Oh, Dad, what do you think could happen?" Akane looked at her father with amusement. Tamiko winced slightly, then looked around with mild worry.

"You shouldn't say things like that," she muttered. "The crazy can hear you."

"It's a wonderful place to live, Nabiki," Miki said, looking around the courtyard between the Dojo and the house. They'd just exited the latter building after a short tour. "I like it."

"So do I," the middle sister replied. "It's home, after all. Your families' house is nice as well even if it's smaller."

"Most places are smaller than this." Miki smiled at her friend. A voice from behind them made them turn.

"Ah, I was wondering where you two had wandered off to," John said as he approached from the direction of the garden. "I looked around in a different world, but couldn't find you, so I came here." He looked bemused for a moment. "I still have trouble with that idea, you know," he went on, shaking his head as they both grinned at him. "You know some strange people, Tendo."

"Oh, you're not that strange, John," she assured him seriously, making him look askance at her before smiling himself.

"Thanks a lot."

"No problem." Sharing a grin, they looked around again. "So, do you want to go back to the party, or look around outside for a little while?" Nabiki asked.
"Let's see more of where you grew up," Miki suggested. "It's still only late afternoon, the party's going to go on for hours yet, isn't it?"

"I'd think so," the middle sister admitted. "Probably until at least ten or eleven, possibly later. Most of the neighbours who'd get annoyed about the noise are already here and practically everyone is in another universe at the moment."

"I have to tell you I find that sentence very difficult to believe," John complained.

She grinned at him. "I'm told you get used to it eventually." Shaking his head in wondering amusement he followed with his girlfriend as Nabiki headed towards the gate.

Carefully turning the page in the ancient, tattered book, the unhealthy looking dark haired young man ran a lightly trembling forefinger down the neatly inked Kanji symbols that translated the frankly disturbing looking text laid out across the not-exactly-paper. Whoever had done the translations had written in the wide margins of the original work, using something for ink that had faded to a nasty brown colour over the centuries. The feeling of whatever the page was actually printed on, probably some form of parchment, but quite unlike anything he had ever encountered before, made a slight shudder run down his back for a moment.

"I think..." he muttered to himself, re-reading one section, then flipping forward a few pages, reading another part, then back to the first bit. "I think... Yes! It could work!" His reedy voice rose in triumph as he punched the air, before grabbing frantically at the book as it slid off his knees. "Oops."

Having lost his place, he flipped through the few dozen pages which were all that remained of the formerly much thicker book, bound in the western style although with wooden covers. He'd acquired it from an old man of dubiously human ancestry in exchange for, oddly enough, half a dozen large bags of freeze-dried coffee beans and a litre of chocolate ice cream, something that even at the time had struck him as slightly peculiar. Putting it down as one of the less weird things that had happened in his years of trawling through odd little shops down dark alleys in search of true magical power, he'd shrugged, accepted the deal, and wandered away happy.

His gaunt cheeks flushed with colour for once, breaking the normal pallor, as he smiled to himself. "I'll show them that I can do proper magic," he muttered. "Always making fun of me, not taking me seriously, saying I'm not a real mage. This should be... very interesting." He giggled to himself in a manner that many would describe as a little more deranged than ideal.

Kneeling on the floor he made copious notes while going through the damaged book again, working out the supplies he'd require for performing the ritual he'd cobbled together from parts of four other disparate ones. Checking his work, he re-read one of the pages, the last one in the book, the final third of which was mostly obliterated by an unpleasant dark stain. Idly running a finger over the apparent toothmarks on the back cover of the book while he thought hard, he finally made a few changes, substituting a couple of ingredients for the incense needed to make up for the fact that the list on the page was partly illegible.

"That should do it," he noted, satisfied. "Who said you couldn't change these things? It's easy." Giggling a little again, he closed both his notebook and the original work, before standing and rubbing his back with a groan of irritation.

Forty minutes later he'd put together the supplies, mostly from his own stock, although he'd had to steal some oregano from his mother's spice cupboard, had tucked everything away into a large backpack including his notes, and was wandering the streets of Furinkan looking for the correct
place to perform the magical ritual. People passing him sometimes gave him a somewhat bemused
glance, his constant mumbling and checking of a compass apparently causing a small amount of
consternation, but overall his behaviour wasn't entirely out of the ordinary for either himself or the
locale in general. As a result no one bothered to ask what he was up to.

This was probably a mistake.

"Now remember, dear, your grandmother is very old and doesn't like sudden loud noises. Be polite
and quiet, answer any questions she asks, but otherwise don't talk too much. She's very traditional."
Chiyoko rolled her eyes a little, making her mother sigh. "And don't do that."

"Mom, do we have to go and see her? I wanted to go to the arcade."

Her mother sighed again, finishing adjusting her dress and straightening up. "Yes, we have to go
and see her. It's her birthday, as you well know. So just do what I said, please."

With a slight grimace the twelve year old nodded. "OK, Mom."

"And don't mention your... extracurricular activities," her mother advised meaningfully. The young
girl put on an innocent expression.

"I don't know what you mean, Mom," she replied. The older woman gave her a look. She quailed a
little. "OK," the girl finally said a little grumpily. "Anyway, it's not like she's going to hear about
things in Minato, is it? She's so old she probably doesn't even know what a TV is."

Her mother stared severely at her for several seconds, although Chiyoko could tell that she was
hiding a reluctant smile. "My mother isn't that old, dear. Just... don't talk about certain things. We'll
both have a calmer time of it, believe me." They looked around as the station announcement
sounded, the train pulling in a few seconds later. Getting on they were lucky enough to find a seat,
sitting down as the doors closed and the train smoothly pulled away.

"Aha! That should do the job." The young man checked his compass again, turned in a complete
circle, then looked up at the multi-story car park in the middle of Furinkan next to the train station,
before glancing at the police station on the other side of the street a little warily. No one was
paying him any attention, so he looked quickly around once more, then slipped into the pedestrian
entrance, heading upwards.

Arriving on the top level he exited onto the roof, peering around curiously. Not being a driver he'd
never had any reason to come up here before. Walking to the edge he put his hands on the retaining
wall and looked over, swallowing a little at the fifteen metre drop, then looked around at the
surrounding buildings. "Need to be higher," he grumbled. "I need an unobstructed view of the sky."
Another quick glance around and his eyes stopped on the elevator structure opposite where the
stairs had come out, and the access ladder he could see running up the side of it to the flat roof
above the machine room. "Perfect."

Making his way through the small number of cars parked on the roof level he reached the ladder,
checked again for witnesses, of which there appeared to be precisely none, then started climbing.
Seconds later he heaved himself, panting, onto the tar and gravel covered roof and breathed heavily
for a minute or so. When he'd recovered he sat up and removed his backpack, before shuffling both
it and himself into the middle of the four by three metre space. Looking around he smiled. He was
above most of the buildings, the area not having many above four stories high too close to him, and
nothing seemed to be blocking the sky closer than about three hundred metres away.
Soon he had swept most of the gravel away from a two metre square area and was involved in
drawing an elaborate ritual circle of his own devising within it in a mixture of chalk powder and
chicken's blood, with a little mint extract added because he thought it might help. When he
finished, he double-checked everything, nodded in satisfaction, then set out the remaining
requirements, lighting half a dozen candles that burned with different colours and placing them at
specific points in his pattern. His special incense went into two bowls, one either side of him,
which he also lit. Putting both hands on sections he'd drawn in the middle of the circle, he closed
his eyes and concentrated. Silence fell as sweat ran down his face.

Five minutes later he opened his eyes, the large smile he was wearing slowly collapsing as he
looked around.

"Damn."

Sighing, he rocked back on his heels, nearly fell over, caught himself with a mumbled obscenity,
then retrieved his notebook and began reading his own instructions. A few moments of
comparison between his drawings and the pattern on the roof and his eyes widened. "Of course!"
he shouted. Dropping the book he leaned forward with the pot of goo and the brush, quickly
making some changes. "Aleph Tau Teth Vau, not Aleph Tau Kaph Vau. What was I thinking?"
Discarding the brush and pot he shook his head in mild wonder. "Kaph. What an idiot." Snickering
to himself, he put the notebook to one side then tried again.

This time, after considerable concentration, the budding mage managed to produce a faint flicker of
yellow light in a few of the symbols. "Nearly," he panted, watching with disappointment as the
light went out again. Making a few tweaks he'd just thought of with the brush again, he tried once
more. The lights lasted longer, spread further, and changed colour to a pale blue. "Damn it, I'm
missing something," the young man grumbled. Leaning down he inspected the sole still glowing
glyph from extreme close range, sneezing slightly as some chalk dust went up his nose.

"It needs more power," he finally decided. "The rest of it is fine, I'm sure." Prodding the symbol
experimentally with his right forefinger, he yelped and bit the end of his tongue as a sensation a lot
like putting his finger in a light socket shot through his arm. Swearing to himself, he stuck the
abused digit in his mouth and sucked on it, before making a face and slowly removing it, then
spitting chalk and chicken blood over the edge of the roof. "Eeww," he muttered, wiping his finger
on his shirt.

Wondering how he was going to push more energy into the design, he was half conscious of the
sound of a train approaching from the east. A few seconds passed before he realised what he was
seeing, lost in thought as he was, but eventually he consciously noticed that the glowing glyph was
now glowing more brightly, and the glow was even beginning to spread to adjacent ones.

"What the..." He leaned forward again, watching with fascination. "Where's the energy coming
from?" Cautiously, he put his hands in the activation symbols, feeling for the power flow. The
diagram was slowly powering up, ramping from the barely idling he'd managed to achieve to
something approaching the amount of power needed to work. Extending his mage senses, as he
liked to think of it, he became aware that there was a very potent source of magic approaching from
somewhere to the east and below, slowly but steadily. It resonated with his diagram in a peculiar
manner that made his teeth itch, but seemed to be actually dumping energy into the thing. Not
stopping to wonder how or why, merely accepting his good fortune and obvious genius, Hikaru
Gosunkugi grinned like an idiot and performed the relevant operation to activate his magnum opus.

This was definitely a mistake.
Half an hour and many stops later the train was rumbling through the outer Tokyo area, half way to their destination. Chiyoko looked around curiously noticing that quite a few people seemed to be looking nervously at the display which was showing the next stop, making her wonder why.

"Mom, why do those people all look worried?" she asked quietly, indicating with a discreet sideways nod of her head a group near the door closest to them, half of which were pressed as hard against the carriage wall as they could get, most of the remainder of whom seemed to be taking deep breaths as if they were about to dive into freezing water.

Her mother looked up from her book then followed her eyes, frowning slightly, before she noticed the destination posted on the electronic sign at the end of the carriage. She paled very slightly. "Oh. We're here already."

"Where is here?" the girl asked. "What's so scary about...," she read the sign again, "...Furinkan? That's in Nerima, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Closing her book, her mother explained, "You know how Minato seems to have a little problem with, well, demons?" Chiyoko gave the older woman a long-suffering look, making her smile slightly in response. "Of course you do. Well, dear, Nerima has something much worse."

Leaning forward eagerly, the girl asked curiously, "What, Mom?"


Chiyoko blinked a couple of times. "Martial artists?" she queried, puzzled. Her mother nodded soberly. "Like Yori, you mean? She's always saying she's a martial artist."

Looking slightly affronted, her mother shook her head. "Yori is a perfectly respectable and civic-minded Magical Girl, one who is well liked by the community for good reasons and is highly skilled in both magic and martial arts. No, these people aren't magical, they're just... not entirely there in the head, I think." She seemed both resigned and somewhat worried. "They fight each other all the time, break things, cause total chaos, and they don't even have the excuse of demons wandering around."

She glanced up at the sign again as the train began to slow. "And Furinkan has the worst of it. There are all sorts of stories of things that happen here. Apparently the High School is completely insane, although it was much worse a few years back. But the whole area is dangerously peculiar. Those poor people probably have to visit for some reason and are worried that some martial artistry might break out near them."

Still somewhat confused, Chiyoko nodded, looking out the windows at the buildings going past. The area certainly looked normal enough. Not all that different from back home. She probed with her inherent magic, noticing that there seemed to be very few power signatures in range that were ones she associated with visitors from elsewhere, only one or two at some distance. Rather closer were some familiar ones, making her raise her eyebrows a little. 'Hmm. Tamiko's here somewhere,' she mused, 'I wonder why?' She could also feel a portal a couple of kilometres away, radiating magic. Yet again, the type of magic was familiar, it was definitely one of the strange ones Yori and Chou could produce.

Other than that, there wasn't much familiar about the magical emanations of the local area. However, there were quite a lot of power signatures that, while unfamiliar, were definitely not normal people. A few of them seemed to be mages of one sort or another while the remainder were rather different. 'Martial artists?' she wondered. 'Some of them feel quite powerful in some weird way.'
She noticed one signature quite close that seemed vaguely magelike although pretty underwhelming in power output, although in some strange manner not entirely unfamiliar. Whatever the mage in question was doing it seemed to resonate with her own magic in a way that made the hairs on the back of her neck twitch uncomfortably. The girl peered out the window, looking upwards at where the sensation seemed to come from, but could see nothing except a large parking garage. Eventually she shrugged and dismissed it as unimportant.

Her mother had opened her book again and was alternating reading it with glancing out the window with a slight frown of worry. The train stopped, the doors hissing open, then there was a pause. After a few seconds, somewhat reluctantly, a number of people disembarked, scuttling off quickly while looking around nervously. A slightly larger number of people dived onto the train, appearing relieved for the most part. Chiyoko watched with interest as a couple of them seemed to congratulate each other on surviving the experience.

Just as she was about to go back to playing her hand-held computer game, she felt a strange pulse of magic roll over her, then something familiar. "Oh, crap," she mumbled under her breath, looking around quickly. 'Why would they be here?' she wondered to herself. Peering out the window she spotted something small and fast-moving climbing down the drainpipe of the parking garage she'd noticed earlier, which was to the side of the train station, sighing slightly when she was sure what it was. With a quick glance at her mother, who was looking the other way, she gritted her teeth, decided she was going to have to live with being yelled at later, then jumped to her feet and shot towards the door. Just making it through as it closed, she heard her mother shout her name, muffled by the walls of the carriage, looking up to see the older woman glaring at her in mixed worry and anger as the train began moving.

She mimed being sorry, probably rather ineffectively judging by the way in which the glare intensifies, then went into elaborate charades trying to explain that she had to do something. As the train disappeared around the corner she could see her mother's mouth moving, somewhat pleased she couldn't actually hear what was being said, but unpleasantly aware of the fact that she was bound to find out sooner or later. Sighing again, she looked around for somewhere discreet to change into her 'working clothes' as she called it.

Under a minute later, pedestrians around the station were privy to the sight of a small girl dressed in an elaborate pink dress charging down the street wielding a two metre long staff with a baseball sized glowing blue gem on the end, chasing a small pack of weird furry things with impossibly large teeth that seemed to be eating everything in sight. Some of them merely sighed and moved out of the way, muttering about the martial artists getting younger and crazier every day, while others watched with interest. A few tourists and other visitors screamed and hid, causing the locals to look at them with amused contempt and make unkind jokes.

Coughing, Hikaru waved smoke away from his face, frantically beat out a small fire that had been merrily burning in his hair, then sat up. Looking around, he blurrily wondered why he was lying on the roof of the parking structure next to a Honda, before he managed to lever himself to his feet with the aid of the vehicle, then stagger over to the outer wall and lean on it breathing heavily. Several seconds passed as he recovered. He could remember a loud noise, a smell of burning, and a brief sensation of flight, with somewhere in there a bright flash, but wasn't entirely sure what else had happened.

After a moment or two more he looked up at the machine room roof, seeing a trail of oddly tinted smoke rising lazily from it in the still afternoon air, then peered around. His eyes stopped dead when they met another pair, gold in colour and filled with alien curiosity, peering back at him from the roof of the car next to him.
"Oh shit," he finally managed to squeak out.

Backing away, he tripped over something behind him, only just catching himself before he fell. Turning his head he stopped dead, seeing another one of the... things... behind him staring at him. After five or ten seconds the sound of pattering feet made him tear his eyes away from the creature, only to find he was absolutely surrounded by them, whatever the hell they were.

Not what he'd been trying for, certainly.

There was dead silence, only broken by the sound of the train that had left the station disappearing into the distance for a little longer, until at some unheard signal the vast crowd of otherworldly creatures suddenly scattered, some going over the edge, some down the stairs. Seconds later he was alone.

Seconds after that the screaming and yelling from the street started.

Hikaru turned very slowly and looked over the side of the parking structure, paled even more than normal, then hastily moved to erase as much evidence of his presence as possible, before legging it.

There was still a little smoke coming from his hair as he rushed home, hoping desperately no one would put two and two together. Especially that terrifying old Chinese woman.

*She* gave him the creeps.

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Tatewaki Kuno posed for the young woman, smiling brilliantly. "So, what say you, maiden? Will you date with the Blue Thunder?"

"Push off you weirdo," the brunette snarled, glaring at him, before she picked up the slice of pie she'd just been served at the outdoor café in the middle of Furinkan and hurled it accurately at his face. Spluttering through a mask of lemon meringue he mumbled in an outraged tone, wiping his face. By the time he was able to see again the girl had left.

"How strange," he mused out loud. "The poor deluded thing seemed oddly reluctant. Perhaps she was ill?" Shaking his head slightly as he looked after her he absently stole a napkin from another diner, cleaning his face with it before dropping it back into the man's lap as the fellow grumbled loudly. "Hush, my good man, it was required," he retorted to one particularly nasty insult, carelessly dropping a few high denomination notes on top of the napkin, which shut the diner up fairly rapidly.

Turning on his heel he made his way down the street, casting regal glances about the place and keeping his eyes open for good examples of attractive females. A few minutes later he heard an odd grinding noise from an alleyway to his left, causing him to stop and raise an eyebrow, before investigating.

Half a dozen metres down it he stopped dead, staring at the peculiar creature with the mouthful of excessively large translucent teeth which was happily chewing on what was left of some hapless soul's moped, only half of the rear wheel left on the ground. "By the heavens, what manner of foul demon are you?" he cried, whipping out his bokken and holding it ready. The thing kept chewing, eyeing him carefully but otherwise unmoved. Swallowing, it scooped up the last part of the moped and crunched it up, then looked around for something else to eat.

"Hold, demon, and cease your predations upon this innocent neighbourhood!" Kuno shouted as the creature took an exploratory nibble out of the nearest waste bin. "Return to whatever low hell
spawned you." He paced a sliding step closer, waving his bokken at the thing's nose.

There was a crunching sound.

Pulling back the remaining third of his wooden sword, Kuno stared at it, went red, then glared at the demon, which was chewing contemplatively. "Hey!" he yelled, incensed. "Bad demon!" Even as he said it he thought it sounded stupid. The demon seemed unimpressed, simply staring at him. Gathering his dignity about him again, he drew himself up and pointed the truncated bokken at the creature. "Return to your place of origin, I, the Blue Thunder, demand it!"

With a small growl, the thing fixed its large golden eyes on the uneaten piece of bokken, then jumped at him. He yelped, dropping it and hastily retreating a couple of steps. The demon neatly caught the falling weapon and swallowed. "Fiend!" he yelled in anger.

Reaching over his shoulder he grabbed the sheath he carried the bokken in, swinging it at the creature while shouting "Strike!" He got about six high-speed blows in with little real effect before the thing grabbed the other end of the sheath and bit down, pulling hard. A brief tug of war ensued, which he lost. Watching the sheath go the way of the bokken, he rubbed his chin in thought. "You are a most vexing foul creature, are you not?" he mused irritably. The small animal sat and stared at him, apparently waiting for him to feed it something else.

After a few seconds thought, he pointed at it with a superior air. "Stay there," the young man commanded firmly. Turning about he dashed off. The demon stared after him for a little while, then began idly eating one of the waste receptacles with a series of screeching sounds from the tearing metal and every sign of enjoyment.

Opening the gate to the Dojo yard, Nabiki led John and Miki out, intending to show them a little of the locality before returning to the party. "It's quite a quiet area, isn't it?" Miki said, looking around as they walked out into the street.

Nabiki giggled, unable to help it. "It can be," she admitted, "but a lot of the time it's total chaos." Shaking her head, she went on, "People attacking each other, smashing walls, running around on the roof, mallets and clubs flying everywhere... Not exactly subtle, a lot of them."

"Well, at the moment it looks pretty nice," her friend said.

Five seconds later she was almost knocked over by a blue blur that zoomed past, a faint cry of, "My sincere apologies, fair maiden, but I must hurry before the hellish creature sates its unnatural appetite on the community any further," coming back to them on the wind.

"What the hell?" Miki yelled, catching herself and glaring after the rapidly receding young man who was already a couple of hundred metres up the street, vanishing around a corner in the distance. John and Nabiki stared at her, then each other, before turning to look after the assailant. Nabiki groaned, rubbing her hand over her face.

"Kuno. Oh, God, what's that idiot up to now?" she moaned.

"You know that lunatic?" Miki demanded.

"Unfortunately, yes," she admitted. "That was Tatewaki Kuno, the brother of the insane gymnast I told you about. He's nuts as well, but not quite as dangerous about it as she is most of the time. A pretty good martial artist in his own way but really full of himself. Normally polite though." She shook her head in irritation. "I wonder what's got him all wound up this time?" With a quick mental
command she sent one of the stealthed camera drones she had floating above the Dojo keeping an eye on things drifting off after the Kuno scion, just in case.

"He did seem a little worked up," John observed.

"He's always like that," she replied, shaking her head in despair. "At school he was a nightmare, he was so intent on dating Akane. He was completely obsessed with her. Oh, well, it's probably nothing." She rather hoped this was the case.

Shortly afterwards via the drone she spotted the Kuno idiot and his long-suffering man-servant Sasuke come charging out the front door of the Kuno mansion, both of them with their arms full of swords, bokken, and a few bo staves, the latter man having a heavy bag over his shoulder which had a mace of all things protruding from it and was obviously full. Nabiki sighed faintly, wondering what on earth the pair were up to this time.

She and her friends had walked as far as the alley she'd used many times as a teleport location for Aiko when Kuno and Sasuke pelted past them in the other direction, the former shouting, "Faster, Sasuke, lest the demon escape before we can chastise it."

"I'm running as fast as I can, Master Kuno," the small ninja replied breathlessly, nearly dropping a bo staff in the process. Nabiki, Miki, and John stepped back a little to allow them past, swivelling to watch the pair disappear into the distance towards the centre of Furinkan. Once more they exchanged puzzled looks.

"I'm beginning to see what you meant about Nerima being a little weird," John commented slowly.

"To be fair, he's one of the weirder parts," Nabiki sighed. "His sister is worse and his father is genuinely insane, although somehow he's still principal of the school. I have no idea how. Possibly no one saner wants the job."

"Let's go and see what he's doing," Miki exclaimed. The middle Tendo looked doubtfully at her.

"That might not be a good idea," she began. "There can be a lot of collateral damage with him and Sasuke, never mind whatever it is they're going after."

"What's the worst that could happen?" her friend noted happily, looking excited. Nabiki winced, glancing quickly around just in case, but eventually followed the other two as Miki led them quickly in the direction Kuno had gone.

"Where is the little monster?" Kuno muttered in an annoyed tone, looking around the alley he'd left a few minutes earlier. There was ample evidence of its presence in the large number of implausibly huge bites taken out of practically everything in the area, but no demon. Hefting his replacement bokken having dumped the rest of his load on Sasuke he prodded the remains of a waste bin, lifting it with the tip to see if the creature was hiding underneath.

"Master Kuno?" Sasuke asked in a quiet voice, almost invisible under a huge pile of weapons. "What are we looking for?"

"A nasty little fiend from some hellish pit, undoubtedly sent here to bedevil the citizenry by some foul sorcerer," Kuno replied, poking another bin and then jumping back in case the thing leaped out. He paused, contemplating the matter. "Could it be the work of the Saotome menace, perhaps?" After a moment he shook his head. "No, the craven coward left years ago and has never been seen again. Undoubtedly he ran rather than face me on the field of battle."
Behind him Sasuke rolled his eyes, but said nothing, knowing considerably more about the matter than his employer. He looked around somewhat nervously. There was certainly plenty of damage to everything in sight which strongly suggested that the Kuno man had indeed encountered something out of the ordinary, which was a little worrying. Judging by the marks whatever it was had exceptionally large teeth and one hell of a bite radius.

A sound from behind them had Kuno yell a war cry and spin on the spot, lashing out with his bokken. The hollow clonk that resulted when an incautious Sasuke was whacked firmly on the head and sent flying made him look at the other man with exasperation. "Get up, Sasuke, and stop moaning. It is an action unbecoming of a Kuno family retainer."

The little man rubbed his head, stood, then bent to pick up all the weaponry he'd dropped. "Sorry, Master Kuno, I failed to anticipate your uncoordinated swing," he said in a low voice, a certain amount of mild irritation in it. His employer missed it as he was currently looking at the three people peering into the alley at them.

"What the hell are you doing, Kuno?" the familiar cool tones of Nabiki Tendo came to them. She sounded somewhat annoyed, which made Sasuke shiver a little. The woman was in many ways much more dangerous than either of the Kuno siblings, if only because she was far more intelligent and downright ruthless if pushed.

"Ah. The lovely Nabiki Tendo!" Kuno cried, ignoring both the question and the tone it was asked in. "Have you perchance seen a small hell-beast engaged in its foul trade hereabouts?" He looked around again, a puzzled expression on his face. "I left it here not ten minutes ago and commanded it to remain. It appears to have disobeyed my orders and absconded."

"Hell-beast?" she inquired, a mildly puzzled expression crossing her face. Behind her, her two companions exchanged a look of confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"About so high," he explained, holding his hand half a metre from the ground, "with a long tail, gold eyes, black fur, and an inordinate quantity of excessively large teeth. The creature seems to have quite the appetite as well." Nabiki stared at him, then closed her eyes and shook her head. "Are you saying you're chasing a demon, Kuno?" she asked with weary curiosity. He nodded. "I believe it to be such, yes. Why it would be inflicting its attentions on the environs of Furinkan I do not know, I was under the impression such fiends restricted themselves to the benighted ward of Minato and the unhappy inhabitants thereof, but there is no denying the evidence of mine eyes." He spun a complete circle on the spot, his bokken outstretched, in case the thing had taken the opportunity to sneak up on them. Once again Sasuke paid the price for not paying attention, sliding to the base of the wall he'd been flung into with a groan and a clattering sound resulting from dropping everything he was carrying. Oblivious, Kuno ignored him, looking alertly around for his quarry.

"Kuno?" He turned his attention to the Tendo woman, who was watching him with a resigned look.

"Yes, fair Nabiki?" he asked. She indicated something behind him. Turning his head he glared at his man-servant. "Sasuke! Must I keep reminding you to stand up?"

The small man mumbled something insulting under his breath, very politely, then heaved himself up again. Once more he collected the weapons from the ground, wondering for at least the thousandth time why he stayed in the employ of the insane Kunos. Family honour only went so far, after all.
A faint sound from the main street, audible over the normal noises of commerce, made Kuno figuratively prick up his ears. He cocked his head to one side, listening intently. The sound came again, a crunching metallic noise he thought familiar. "Aha! I hear the sounds of the little monster satisfying its unnatural desires on the property of the good citizens of the ward. Out of my way, please, while I deal it the fate it richly deserves." He charged towards the street holding his bokken in an attack position with both hands, the Tendo woman and her companions only barely managing to move clear in time. Sasuke sighed a little and staggered after him bearing his pile of weapons.

Another alley on the other side of the street and down a few tens of metres proved to be the source of the sounds. Several locals were looking in with varying expressions of puzzlement. He shouldered his way through, excusing himself in curt tones, to stand in the entrance. "There you are, you annoying menace to decent people everywhere," he exclaimed in triumph. The demon was nibbling on the front bumper of a small van, which was missing three wheels and the roof, although replacing these critical parts were an amazing number of toothmarks in the remaining metalwork.

"Turn and face your doom!" he shouted. The thing looked over its shoulder at him, growled slightly, then went back to eating the van. "Insolent fiend. Have at you!" Lunging at the beast he swung wildly.

Unfortunately it turned out to be remarkably fast when provoked, ducking his blow at the last moment, then grabbing the bokken in its mouth before he could retract it. "Release my weapon at once," he sternly demanded. The animal bit down, two pieces of wooden sword falling from its mouth as the centre was chewed and swallowed. He got the definite impression it was looking smugly at him.

"Sasuke! Another bokken, immediately," he called over his shoulder, holding out a hand imperiously. The man-servant slapped the hilt of a replacement into his palm, which he instantly whipped around and used to slash at the thing.

A few seconds later, he screamed, "Another!"

"Another!"

"Yet another! I feel I have it on the run!"

"Foul beast! I strike at thee! Sasuke! A staff, quickly!"

Nabiki watched with amused disbelief. Beside her, Miki and John were staring, the former giggling uncontrollably and the latter looking amazed and somewhat shocked. "Um, are you sure he's always like that?" John asked slowly, having to raise his voice over the sound of Kuno's cries of rage as the demon ate everything he used on it. The middle Tendo nodded.

"I'm afraid so. If anything this is unusually restrained."

"What is that thing?" Miki asked with appalled yet fascinated interest.

"Some little demon that should be in Minato, not here," she replied. "I saw them on the TV a while ago. Shampoo ran into a whole pack of the things and pretty much wiped them out after an uncertain start." She snickered as Kuno yelled in fury when the creature ate a good metal sword.

"They seem to be able to eat anything."

"Weird."
"Yep."

They watched for a little longer. "He really is an idiot, isn't he?" Miki asked more or less rhetorically. Both her companions nodded as one.

The locals were now clustered around one young man who appeared to be taking bets. Having finished handing out markers, he smiled as he counted the thick stack of notes while the gamblers turned their attention back to the currently one sided battle of wits, in which at least the human participant appeared to be insufficiently armed, calling encouragement to their chosen champion. A good third of them appeared to be rooting for the demon. Nabiki shook her head despairingly.

"Guys, we might have a problem," she commed the others back at the Dojo and on Fwetna, sending a video stream of what she was watching. "I'm not sure how or why but Kuno has found a demon to play with."

"It's worse than that, Nabiki," Tamiko immediately replied with mild irritation in her voice. "I just got a call from Chiyoko's mom complaining that her daughter had jumped off the train in Furinkan for some reason that was probably my fault. I don't have any idea why she's blaming me for everything these days." The red-head sounded somewhat aggrieved. "It's not my fault! Her daughter is a magical girl all by herself, I had nothing to do with it! She's a nice girl but can't shoot worth a damn."

"If she's around it probably means there are more of those little pests here," Aiko said with some asperity. "Which is a fucking pain in the ass. Why the hell would they pick now to turn up, and here? I've never heard of the things outside Minato in general before."

"No idea, but if there is a pack of the little bastards running around it's going to get messy," Nabiki muttered. The feeling she'd been having for the last few minutes of incipient danger had suddenly spiked. Jun wordlessly brought a window from one of her drones to the foreground, the contents of it making her sigh. Passing it on, she added morosely, "I found Chiyoko."

The camera which had been following Kuno from about fifty metres up had picked up a disturbance a couple of streets away, which the SI had tasked another from the small fleet above the Dojo to investigate. The new video feed showed a small female dressed in pink in the process of shooting in the general direction of a pair of the little demons, missing both totally and punching a hole completely through a police box, which seemed to cause a certain amount of consternation to the officer on duty inside it. Both demons left the area at high speed in opposite directions with Chiyoko looking after each, before following the one heading north, away from the Tendo woman.

"Oh, hell," 'Yori' mumbled, joining the discussion. "We don't really need this right now." She sighed heavily. "OK, I'm coming back, Tamiko, can you and Misaki come and help? Maybe we can get these horrible little things rounded up and Chiyoko contained before something serious happens. Nabiki, I suppose you're not really able to help?"

"I don't see how I can at the moment, sorry, I'm with Miki and John. If I disappear and Azumi turns up it's going to look pretty suspicious."

"Fair enough. OK, you stay out of it, we'll try to contain all this crap and keep it away from the Dojo. The others will stand by in case something else happens."

"I knew everything was too good to be true," Fumiko muttered, sounding aggrieved. "I was really enjoying this party."

"It's not over yet. Let's just stay calm and try to make sure nothing else happens," 'Chou' advised
everyone. "Most of the guests are here at the waterfall, so with luck no one will realise anything is amiss until it's all over."

"I'd love to know why Chiyoko and her demons are here at the moment in the first place," Tamiko grumped. "I'm heading for her right now, I'll be on her in about ten seconds."

"Good. I'm following the other one. Hopefully there aren't too many of them." 'Yori' sounded like she didn't believe her own words.

Listening to the silent conversation, Nabiki watched Kuno feed his new friend most of his weapons, while spreading four of her five drones out over the area at high altitude to locate any other demons. The fifth one stayed orbiting the Dojo in case something happened there.

# Nabiki, I have located some more of the enemy. # Jun announced, showing a feed from one drone with a location on a map of the area beside it. # Eight, no, nine of them. One was under a truck. # She inspected the video window, seeing it was a few streets away on the other side of the Dojo. A small group of the demons was engaged in dismantling a couple of vehicles while the pedestrians in the area withdrew to a safe distance, although most of them stayed close enough to watch.

'Nerimans are nuts,' she mused, 'most sane people would run like hell.'

"No such luck I'm afraid," she told the others. "Jun found some more. Another nine of the things." She relayed the video to them.

"Damn it. Right, Misaki, you go that way, I'll deal with this one, Fumiko, I think we'll need you to help her."

"On my way," Misaki's sister replied resignedly.

"Oh, my," Kasumi's alter ego suddenly said. "This is annoying."

"What is it, sis?" Nabiki asked with worry, wondering what new disaster was happening.

"We've run out of beer again."

Despite herself, the middle sister couldn't help laughing.

Panting, Kuno stared at the little demonic creature, which returned his gaze through narrowed eyes as it finished eating his best mace. "Vile hellish creature. How dare you consume the property of the Blue Thunder with such eagerness. Does your perverted appetite know no bounds?" Turning to his retainer, he looked into the bag the ninja held out, finding it empty except for a couple of shuriken. Grabbing them he flung them both at the demon which snapped one out of the air like a dog after a biscuit, ducking the other.

The razor-sharp projectile flew over the remains of the van, rebounded from a drainpipe with a metallic ping, bounced from the wall of the alley, and by some miracle hit the demon on the back of the head. It yelped in pain, looked around wildly, then scuttled away to the other end of the alley, quickly climbing the wall and vanishing.

"Success!" he shouted triumphantly, raising his hands in the air and turning to the watching crowd, who gazed at him adoringly. "I, Tatewaki Kuno, have vanquished the hell-sent creature of darkness that has plagued our fine community. You may now congratulate me." He watched as the various people exchanged slips of paper and what looked like cash, wondering for a moment what they were doing, but eventually putting it down to some odd ritual of the peasantry. It wasn't the first
time he'd seen such behaviour after one or other great battle.

The sound of clapping came to him, making him look towards Nabiki Tendo, who was the source. She looked at him with an unreadable expression while her companions seemed to be, for some peculiar reason, finding some humour in the situation. "Well done, Kuno. You finally scared it off." He nodded regally. "By accident."

Glaring, he retorted, "It was the end result of my master plan. I'll have you know it worked to perfection. I distracted the beast until I could inflict the final, devastating blow."

"By lulling it into a true sense of security?" she asked with a small smile.

"Exactly," he said with authority. There was a meaningful pause as she just stared at him. "Wait..." He thought hard, then finally shrugged. "It was a masterful plan despite your minor quibbles."

The young woman looked at him for a few seconds. "If you say so."

He nodded firmly. "I do."

"OK. You got rid of one of the demons. What about the others?"

Staring at her, puzzled, he asked slowly, "What others?"

Nabiki pointed up without looking. After a moment, he exchanged a glance with Sasuke, who was also looking confused, although to be honest that seemed to be his default state most of the time, then both of them cast their eyes skyward.

Kuno paled despite himself. Looking down at them from the roofs on both sides of the alley were more than a dozen of the little swine, their golden eyes bright with what he fancied was battle lust. "Oh, dear," he mumbled faintly. "This could be awkward." Holding out his hand, he spoke more firmly. "Sasuke. A weapon, immediately. Battle must recommence."

A thump from behind him made him look over his shoulder to see that the crowd, except for the Tendo woman and her compatriots, had dispersed, while Sasuke was for some unknown reason now lying on the ground yet again. Kuno sighed heavily. "Must I do everything myself?" Walking over he kicked his retainer a few times to no effect, before picking up the bag and shaking it.

"I think you're out," Nabiki noted calmly.

"So it would appear." He looked around at the destroyed van, his unconscious man-servant, and the otherwise empty alley and street, before glancing up once more. They were still there, eerily silent and watching him closely. "Hmph. Although I am loath to admit it, it would seem that a strategic regrouping and re-arming is required." Picking up Sasuke he slung him over his shoulder, then turned to the Tendo woman. "Excuse me." She stepped aside politely, allowing him past. Seconds later he was sprinting as fast as he could manage in the direction of home. The pack of mini-demons followed more slowly, but with definite interest.

Firing her staff, Chiyoko winced as she missed her target, vaporising a mailbox instead. The little demon she'd shot at looked at her with what could almost be termed bewilderment before taking a bite out of the remains of the pole the box had been mounted on, then zipped off under a car. She fired again, the rear of the vehicle sagging to the ground as its back wheels vanished in a sparkling cloud of magical energy.

"Oops," she mumbled once more, having done so a fair few times in the last fifteen minutes.
Behind her there was a trail of smoking holes in the scenery and a number of slightly traumatised near-victims of the magical beam of doom.

"Stop blowing holes in everything you little idiot!" came a scream of rage from behind her, making her jump and nearly drop her staff. She turned around guiltily to see Tamiko glaring at her from far too close, having somehow managed to approach without her noticing.

"Oh, hi, Tamiko," she replied nervously, attempting to hide her staff behind her. She sidled away from the remains of the car, pretending she'd found it like that. "What are you doing in Nerima?"

"I was enjoying myself at a party until your mom called," the auburn haired magical girl gritted, looking incensed. "The more interesting question is what are you doing in Nerima? She said you just got off the train without any warning. She's not happy about it and she's sharing the pain."

"Uh-oh," the young girl muttered, knowing what that meant. "I'm going to be in trouble when I get home."

"You're in trouble right now," Tamiko replied, giving her an unfriendly look. She shivered a little, there was something quite worrying about that expression on the normally cheerful girl. Pondering the subject she wondered why Tamiko often looked so annoyed whenever she met her. It was a little strange.

"It's not my fault," the girl protested, giving up on hiding her staff and bringing it around to hold in front of her. "I was sitting on the train in the station and I saw one of them climbing down a building. I had to get off to deal with it."

"And how many of them have you 'dealt with' so far, hmm?" Tamiko asked with great sarcasm. Chiyoko stared at the ground, flushed, and replied in an almost inaudible tone. "Sorry, I didn't quite hear you," the red-head said with menace in her voice, cupping one hand behind her ear.

"Um... none," she replied again, more loudly.

"None." Tamiko sighed deeply. "But just from here I can see... a mail box, two cars, a truck, three lamp posts, four motorcycles, half a dozen buildings, and a police box, all with suspiciously familiar holes in them. Not to mention a terrified police corporal and several confused and worried pedestrians who are hiding under that bus over there. Which also has a hole in it." She waved in the relevant direction, making Chiyoko look, then wince again.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

There was a long pause. "Right. Come on, we're sorting these little fuckers out, then I'm making an appointment to take you somewhere safe to teach you how to shoot straight before you kill someone," Tamiko finally sighed. "DO NOT fire on anything unless I tell you to. Got it?"

"Yes, Tamiko," she replied obediently.

"Good." The girl looked around as the demon that had been under the car emerged from another one a few vehicles down and stared in their direction, before firing a ball of energy at it that made it expire with a loud bang and a cloud of demon parts. Chiyoko gagged a little. "One down. Lots left. Let's go." She waved the other female onwards, the pre-teen complying quickly before she got another lecture.

Peering around curiously, Akane wondered where a number of specific people had disappeared to. She walked over where Chou was wearing a mildly concerned expression and poking around in the
pile of crates which were full of empty beer bottles. "Where are the others?" she asked the blonde, who straightened up, turning to her with a smile. The youngest Tendo gestured at the plaza area. "Yori, Misaki, Fumiko, and Tamiko have all disappeared. Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing to worry about, Akane," Chou replied comfortingly. "There was a minor incident in central Furinkan which they went to deal with. I expect they'll be back soon." She looked down at the crates, then across at Genma, who was laughing about something with Soun, Mousse, and Lieutenant Sasaki. "The more immediately irritating thing is that we seem to be out of beer. I have a feeling I know where it went."

Akane followed her eyes and rolled her own, sighing in exasperation. "I think you're right. Well, they can do without for the moment." She checked her watch. "The shops are still open, we can buy some more a little later."

"Indeed," the blonde agreed, smiling. "How are you enjoying the party so far?"

"It's going really well," she replied happily. "Everyone seems to be having a lot of fun. Although this particular part of it was definitely unexpected." Indicating the waterfall, she grinned. "People seem to be OK with it now but there were a lot of worried expressions when you made that portal."

Chou nodded, amusement on her face. "I rather expected that. It seems to take most people by surprise the first time. But it worked out all right, I think."

"It did," Akane agreed. "It was very nice of you to suggest this to Ukyo and Konatsu, by the way. They were beginning to get worried about not being able to find anywhere suitable for the wedding." Looking around again, she grinned. "This will certainly give them the ability to say they got married somewhere out of the ordinary."

"Hopefully they will have a long and happy marriage," Chou smiled. "If we can help that along, we're pleased to." Glancing around, she added, "Could you help me collect some of this debris, Akane? I don't want to leave anything behind when we leave and if we clean up a bit now it will be easier later."

"Sure." Looking around, the youngest Tendo thought for a moment, then went back through the portal into the house, retrieved some large garbage bags from a cupboard in the utility room, then took them back to Chou. Both of them started moving about collecting the detritus of the party, Shampoo joining in when she noticed what they were doing. The rest of the guests were still drinking, eating, and talking, not really paying attention to the three women. Nodoka nodded acknowledgement when Akane passed by her then went back to discussing something with Cologne, who was pointing at the distant lights of Krentak with a look of awe on her face.

Shortly they had half a dozen bags filled and tied off, Akane and Shampoo ferrying them back to the house and around the side out of the way, while Chou wandered around looking for bottle caps and the like, until everyone was satisfied that they'd done a good job. "Very good, I think," Chou noted with satisfaction. "It would be rude to leave such a nice place untidy."

A few minutes later, Akane looked up, listening carefully. "What was that?" she said, peering into the darkness above them, trying to see past the glowing purple and golden spheres of magic. "I thought I heard some sort of animal or something."

Glancing at Chou, she noticed the woman was looking slightly amused, as well as a little concerned, and was peering upwards as well.

"Oh, dear. I wasn't expecting them. I'm a little surprised that they're out in the dark."
"Who are 'them'?" Shampoo asked curiously. Her question was answered a moment later when a sudden whistling sound was terminated by a blast of wind and a loud thumping crack, making everyone except Chou yelp and dive out of the way. Just as Akane was straightening up from the defensive crouch she'd automatically fallen into at the sound, it happened again.

The entire assembled multitude stared at the two really very large animals, close to the size of a small tiger, that had dropped out of the sky onto the end of the plaza away from the waterfall, the creatures returning the look curiously as they folded their wings. "Holy shit!" Hana yelped from somewhere at the back of the crowd.

"What the hell are those things?" Ukyo shouted, sounding somewhat worried.

Chou raised her voice, speaking loudly enough that everyone could hear her, yet calmly, as she moved towards the animals. "Don't worry, they're friendly. These are what are called Mountain Soarers here on Fwetna, they're a flying predator accidentally imported from another world and now native to the area. They're not tame as such, but they won't hurt anyone." She approached the larger of the two soarers, which made a happy sort of yipping noise and bounded over like a huge house cat, dipping its head for her to stroke, which she did. The slightly smaller one looked mildly jealous of the attention and promptly pushed itself between its companion and the blonde, vying for a stroke of its own.

Everyone watched in some awe as the woman made a fuss of the two huge flying animals, which very clearly thoroughly enjoyed the process. It was obvious that the soarers and the magical girl were well known to each other. Akane and Shampoo exchanged wondering glances then cautiously made their way over, stopping a safe distance away. "Um, Chou? Are these friends of yours?" Akane asked after a moment. The other woman was now down on one knee with her arms around the necks of both soarers, one on either side, rubbing their ears, while the animals were making cute little squeaking sounds of ecstasy with their eyes shut.

Chou smiled at her. "Yes, we met on holiday a few weeks ago. These two are a mated pair, who live in the woods somewhere in the vicinity of Uthryyl's house. They ended up deciding to more or less adopt us and Uthryyl's family, they're always somewhere close if they're not hunting." She giggled a little. "In fact, they became so blasé about people that they practically moved in to the house. Quannyr, Uthryyl's wife, is always chasing them out for tracking mud inside."

Akane stared, then slowly moved a little closer. "What do they hunt?" she asked slowly. "Light aircraft? They're enormous!"

"Actually, they mostly go after something called a quillit, it's something of a pest on this world. Omnivorous, fast breeding, with a very nasty disposition. They eat anything and cause a lot of problems." Chou smiled. "It turns out that soarers love to eat them and keep the population in check, which is something that definitely endeared the D'Sage to them. Normally they're somewhat standoffish, but it seems these two have decided that people are fun to be around." She tickled the male under the chin, which made it grumble happily then flop onto its side.

"Are they nocturnal?" Shampoo asked. Chou shook her head.

"Normally, no. From what I learned they actually have good night vision but they prefer to hunt during the day, mostly in the early morning or late evening when the quillits are most active. The rest of the day they usually spend gliding around at high altitude, at least partially because they seem to enjoy it. They're very playful. These two are quite young and seem to like our company." This seemed to be, if anything, an understatement. Both animals looked very contented and more than happy to stay right where they were.
Motioning to her with one hand, Chou said, "Come over and meet them, Akane. Trust me, they won't hurt you." Somewhat nervously, after a glance at Shampoo, the youngest Tendo slowly approached the nearest soarer, the female, which watched her with wide eyes. Holding out her hand she waited for the thing to sniff it. The animal seemed placid enough so she carefully reached out and touched its head.

"The fur is really soft," she said quietly, gently feeling it, then putting her hand flat on the soarer's head. It pushed itself into her palm making her smile. Stroking it she laughed as it yipped happily. "They're sort of cute, if a little scary looking."

"Misaki and Azumi particularly get along with them," Chou laughed. "In fact, it was Azumi who first encountered them and made friends with them. They seem to like her as well and follow her around everywhere when she's about. They even tried following us home through the portal when we left, we had some difficulty stopping them."

"They are a little large to have as house pets," Akane snickered.

"That doesn't seem to bother them." Looking amused, Chou watched as the younger woman became more confident with stroking the creature. After a moment Shampoo came over and cautiously did the same. Five minutes later most of the people on the plaza were gathered around the two animals, which appeared to relish the attention, yipping to themselves and rubbing against anyone who would stand still enough. Ukyo experimentally offered the male a salmon roll, which led to the discovery that mountain soarers really liked fish. Shortly there were no salmon or tuna rolls left.

"How's your party going?" The familiar voice in her head made Nabiki smile internally.

"Hello, Onkra," she replied. "It's going well, thank you, aside from some slightly odd things right now. How are you? We haven't talked for some time."

"I'm not at all bad, thanks, Nabiki," the D'Sage woman said with a note of pleasure in her voice. "I'm looking forward to meeting up with you all again soon. I've been practising the things Ranma taught me a lot, but I need to try it against someone else. You'll do."

"Oh, thanks," she giggled. "Just a target, that's me." They shared a laugh. "Have you been gliding again since we were there?"

"Yes, actually, several times. Jyrron was very pleased about it. He bought me a glider of my own after I kept borrowing his spare one, which was nice of him. It's a rather pretty deep blue colour. I flew it all the way home a few days ago, and landed right in the back garden." Onkra sounded proud. "Admittedly not vertically like you guys do, but it was still quite a small target."

"Not bad." Nabiki commented. "Did the soarers come with you?"

"Oh, yes, they follow every time I go flying. If they're not hunting, they're either on the roof waiting for someone to play with them, or in the house annoying Mom, or following me around. I think they miss you all." She sounded very amused. "Actually, you might get company, they both took off out of here in a hurry a little while ago heading for the waterfall. It's unusual, they normally don't go out at night. I think they might have heard something and got curious."

"Is their hearing really that good?" The middle Tendo was impressed.

"Apparently they're sensitive enough to hear a quillit moving around on the ground from several kilometres away. Their eyesight is amazingly good as well," her friend said. "They're probably
equally good at scenting things and the wind is blowing from that direction. Whatever it was, they seemed pretty interested."

"Hmm." Nabiki brought her elder sister into the link. "Hey, Sis, Onkra says you might get visitors soon," she said.

"Too late," 'Chou' noted wryly. "They both turned up about ten minutes ago and now have pretty much everybody fussing over them after a slightly cautious start. They've eaten most of the sushi that was left and are following Ukyo around like puppies since she made the mistake of feeding them."

"Oh." The middle sister glanced at her friends who were standing next to her staring after the Kuno idiot as he disappeared into the distance and the pack of small demons following along the rooftops. "Miki will probably find them fun."

"How is the situation with you, Nabiki?" 'Chou' asked. "Have you located any more of Chiyoko's little irritations?"

"You might say that, yes." Sending everyone, including Onkra, a complete recording of the 'fight' between Kuno and his playmate, she waited for the laughter to die down. "The man is... not entirely there, I think," she added when it was complete. "He made a strategic retreat just now, with fourteen of the things following him. They looked more curious than vicious, weirdly enough, but we still need to do something about them."

"Sis and I have got rid of these ones," Fumiko announced. "We'll move to intercept your little friend and his even littler friends, we're not that far away."

"OK. Thanks."

Tamiko's voice came over the link, sounding somewhat peeved. "I've got Chiyoko under control for the moment but there are a hell of a lot of holes in the scenery around here. A lot of people who don't seem to see the funny side either."

"Did she actually hit any of the demons?" 'Yori' asked resignedly, a note in her voice that suggested she knew the answer.

"What do you think?" Tamiko replied irritably. "Of course she didn't. Hit everything else, though. If we ever get invaded by demonic mailboxes she'll sort them right out. Anything faster moving is pretty much safe except for accidental shots."

"Wonderful." The tone suggested the word wasn't entirely the right one. "OK, try to keep her from killing any more cars and so on, will you? I'm on my way back, I'll join you in about thirty seconds or so. Nabiki, have you or Jun spotted any more of the little bastards yet?"

"Not so far, other than the ones following Kuno." She watched the feed from the drone shadowing the young man, seeing he'd just made it to his front door. The pack of demons was milling around in the street outside the Kuno compound, a couple of them eating the gate. "They don't seem to be in a hurry, they're amusing themselves destroying the fixtures and fittings at the moment."

'Yori' chuckled darkly. "We should let them enjoy themselves for a while in that case."

"Dear, that's not entirely the right way to look at it," the eldest Tendo sister said with amusement.

"Possibly not, but it's funny," her husband snickered. "Oh, all right, we'll stop them eating Kuno and his crazy family out of house and home. Literally."
"I'm going to get Miki and John back to the Dojo before something even crazier happens," Nabiki told her friends, glancing at her other friends, who were wandering along beside her with expressions that suggested they were having just the smallest amount of trouble believing their own eyes. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

Receiving a few acknowledgements, she dropped the link and turned to Miki. "Are you having fun with your first experience of Nerima?" she asked with a wry look. Miki stared at her, then at her boyfriend, before peering into the distance where the last of the demons had vanished.

"It's... different," she allowed after a few seconds. There was a pause as they continued walking. "Really, quite different," she added slowly. Another, longer pause followed.

"Is it always like this?" John finally asked.

Nabiki grinned and shrugged. "Not always, like I said. Sometimes it's pretty quiet. But I will admit that in this particular area that isn't the weirdest thing I've ever seen or heard of. Not even close." She thought for a moment then continued, "Although demons are admittedly not normal. Usually it's other martial artists, or something like flying bird people from the depths of China, that sort of thing. You know, a little more ordinary."

Both her companions fixed her with wide-eyed stares, then looked at each other again. "I told you, Nabiki Tendo isn't normal," John complained to Miki, who was smiling weirdly. "No one should be that unmoved about anything even close to what we just saw."

Snickering, the middle Tendo led her friends back to the Dojo. A few hundred metres from the door, she stopped dead as Jun suddenly sent her an image from a drone that was patrolling some distance behind them. #Nabiki, there is a slight problem, I'm afraid,# it said quietly in her head. She inspected the image, agreeing with it.

Somewhat worried, she commed the others. "Um, Guys? We have a bit of an issue."

"What is it now?" 'Yori' asked with some annoyance. She turned to look back the way they'd come, listening carefully.

"About a hundred of the things just came out of the parking garage opposite the police station," she explained. "They're making a bit of a mess of the main shopping precinct and people are starting to look worried."

"Oh, shit," came the reply, along with a put-upon sigh. "What the hell is bringing them here? That's the largest incursion of the little bastards so far by about double." She forwarded the drone view to the rest which caused a number of muttered exclamations.

"That's not the only group either," Tamiko cut in. "We just spotted about twenty or so over this way." Faintly, in the distance, Nabiki heard a sizzling zap sound. "For fuck's sake!" the other woman snarled. "Hold on, Chiyoko just molested a little book shop."

"Not the one next to the dry cleaner?" 'Chou' asked with hope in her voice. "That's a really good shop."

"Sorry, yes. It's sort of inside out now," Tamiko sighed.

A few seconds later there was a distant boom. "And then it exploded," she added with deep disgust. "How the hell did she do that? At least the explosion took out five of the little monsters."

"Oh, dear," Nabiki's sister said, sounding mildly upset.
"I've confiscated that damn staff of hers," the red-head said in an irritated tone. "I'll get the rest of these things then we'll join up with you at the police station."

"Right," 'Yori' replied. "We've got all but two or three of the ones at Kuno's place, they're hiding somewhere near the house. I can see them a little in thermal vision scuttling around in the bushes. He's going to have to deal with those himself for the moment. They're very difficult to locate when they want to be." She muttered to herself a little, then added in a more intelligible tone, "I wish I could figure out where they come from and how. I'd go and sort it out once and for all."

"I'm coming to help," Aiko put in.

"Thanks. Pick us up and get us to the police station, will you, please?" the martial artist requested.

"It'll save a minute or so."

"Be there in a second."

"I'll have to stay here to supervise," 'Chou' said, sounding a little annoyed.

"I'd come and help but I think with the soarers there that might be a little difficult," Nabiki told her sister. "If I come through the portal and they jump me on the spot like they normally do people are going to start thinking something weird is going on." She paused a moment, thinking, then added wryly, "Weirder than it has been so far, anyway."

"That's true," her sister sighed. "We'll have to persuade them to leave, somehow."

"Or move the party back into the back garden," she commented.

"Yes, that's not a bad idea. I'll talk to Akane and Shampoo and get them to help me begin to herd people back to our reality," 'Chou' laughed. "Some of them might resist, a lot of people are completely fascinated by this place. Not that you can blame them, it's wonderful."

"OK, Sis," the middle Tendo said, resuming walking. Miki and John hadn't noticed her stop for a short time and had kept walking, now being half-way back from where she was to the Dojo. She hurried after them, catching up after a few seconds. "We're nearly back now. I'll help in the garden and stay out sight of those guys."

Going through the Dojo gates a moment later with her friends, she looked at them. "We should probably move the party back into the garden, I guess," she said. Miki appeared reluctant for a second or two, but eventually nodded.

"I suppose that's a good idea," her friend remarked. "I don't know anything about it really but I guess Chou must have to put some effort into keeping that portal open, after all. It's not fair to have her do that all night."

"Probably not," Nabiki agreed with an internal smile. "Why don't you two go and mention that to her while I start tidying up a bit in the garden. There's stuff all over the place and it will be easier to clean up while no one is around."

"I'll help you, Nabiki," John volunteered. Leaning over he kissed his girlfriend on the cheek then gently pushed her away. "You go, I'll stay here."

"OK," Miki smiled, hurrying over to the portal and walking through it with no sign of the hesitancy she'd originally shown the first time. The remaining two watched, then exchanged a look.

"You get used to things like that much faster than I would have expected," the young man
commented with a shake of his head. Nabiki grinned at him.

"So Yori always says. It seems to be true." Leading the way into the house she poked around until she found some large garbage bags, handing some to John, then they went back outside and began picking up as much detritus as possible. A few minutes passed in idle conversation before Genma and Soun came out of the portal, each carrying one end of a table covered in food. Akane and Shampoo followed with another. The tables were quickly put back where they'd come from, the four people going back into the portal Afterwards.

After another ten minutes most of the equipment and some of the people had come back, small groups standing around talking in low tones about their experience. Mousse and Akane had headed off to buy some more beer, hopping over the wall without thought or effort. Miki, who had come back a moment earlier, watched this feat with interest, then wandered over to Nabiki and John, who were sitting next to the pond. "You know," the young woman said as she sat next to them on the rocks, "in some ways that is one of the strangest things I've seen today." She waved after the two martial artists.

"Stranger than that thing?" John asked incredulously, pointing at the portal. She nodded.

"Well, yes. That's just magic. I'll admit it's not exactly normal to either of us, but it's a known thing, you see them on the news pretty regularly. But a non-magical person who can casually jump over a wall nearly three metres high is pretty weird, you have to admit."

"You're rubbing off on her, Tendo," he sighed, shaking his head.

They all looked around as Kimiko arrived, appearing somewhat dishevelled, yet happy, with a couple of odd looking leaves sticking out of her hair. "That was amazing," she giggled, dropping to the grass and grinning to herself. "You wouldn't believe some of the things in that forest. There was this little bug or something that seemed to actually electrocute what it was hunting! And lots of flying things that glowed all different colours. It was really amazing."

"How far did you go?" Nabiki asked.

"Maybe a couple of kilometres or something like that?" the younger woman said uncertainly. "A fair distance, at least. I found a path and followed it for a while, then went into the forest off the path a little way. I didn't want to go too far in case I got lost. But, that said, you can hear the waterfall for a long way so finding it again wasn't a problem."

"I'd love to see what that place looks like in the day," Miki said wistfully. "I always wanted to travel and that's the most extreme travelling I've ever even heard of." Her sister nodded agreement, still smiling.

"I think it's not impossible that could be arranged," Nabiki suggested with her own smile. "Chou seemed open to doing it again, and Yori even suggested that we could go hang-gliding there if we wanted." Her three companions exchanged wondering looks mixed with mild worry. "Apparently the D'Sage do it quite a lot, in a place a few kilometres from the falls. It's a good place to go swimming as well, she said."

"I think I'd like that," Miki replied slowly, an odd expression on her face.

"Where's Hana?" John asked, looking around. The others followed his gaze.

"Still on the other side, I think," Miki sighed. "She was following Chou around taking pictures the
last time I saw her, still wearing that freaky smile." Getting up, she shook her head. "I'd better go and get her before she annoys Chou too much." They watched as she hurried through the portal. After a moment John stood.

"I'll go with her, I think," he said, following the young woman. Left behind, Nabiki and Kimiko exchanged looks.

"Having fun?" the middle Tendo asked with a small smile.

Kimiko grinned back at her. "Oh, yes, lots," she replied happily. "Thanks again for inviting us all. This has been more fun than I ever expected and my expectations were already pretty high."

Laughing for a moment, Nabiki nodded agreement. "It all seems to have worked out pretty well so far."

Kimiko looked around the garden with a small frown. "Where are all the magical girls now?" she asked curiously. "There was only Chou left on the other side. And two huge flying animals that seem to be very friendly and like sushi."

"There was some sort of minor demon incursion in the middle of Furinkan, apparently." Nabiki watched as Kimiko frowned again.

"Really? I thought that sort of thing only happened in Minato most of the time."

"It's certainly not common around here, although I've heard of one other case a few years ago," the Tendo woman admitted. "I don't know what sparked it off but someone I know had an encounter with one of them a little while ago. Odd little beast about sixty centimetres tall that eats everything. Shampoo ran into a whole pack of the annoying things in Minato a few weeks ago and wiped most of them out when she stopped running and screaming."

Kimiko giggled after a wide-eyed look. "Really? Wow, she's good at martial arts and demon eradication. That's impressive for a non-magical girl."

Snickering, Nabiki said, "I don't think she wants to repeat the experience based on what she looked like when she finished."

After a few seconds, Kimiko gave her a sly glance. "Perhaps you should help Yori and the others?"

"I can't see how I could possibly do that," Nabiki replied slowly, glancing at the other woman, then looking up at the sky with a blank expression, inwardly amused.

"No, I suppose not. It would, after all, require a magical girl. Someone... not normal." Kimiko followed her gaze, also looking up with a similarly neutral expression.

"Indeed."

They exchanged a glance, then went back to watching as more people came out of the portal, some rather reluctantly.

Walking out of the shop carrying a couple of cases of beer bottles, Akane waited for Mousse to join her, then they began jogging back to the Dojo. After only a few dozen metres they both stopped dead, staring at the small creature that had emerged from under a truck a little further up the street and was staring back at them curiously while chewing on what looked like the drive shaft of the vehicle, making loud crunching sounds. They both recognised it instantly.
"What the hell is one of those things doing here?" she yelped in shock.

"I have no idea," Mousse replied, pushing his glasses up with a finger as he lowered his load to the ground with the other hand. "But based on what Shampoo ran into they don't travel alone." Akane stared at him for a moment, then looked around nervously.

"Crap. You're right," she muttered, spotting another one on top of a two story building on the other side of the street. It was staring at them as well. Mousse followed her eyes, then looked around some more.

"Another one to the right, behind that car," he said quietly. Akane nodded, putting down the crates she was carrying on top of the ones he had dropped.

"Any ideas?" she asked. Another little demon popped out of a manhole, displacing the cover with a clattering sound, then picked it up and took a bite out of it like it was a pancake. Both of them paled at the sight.

"Not really," the young man replied. After a moment he produced a couple of metal-capped wooden staves from his sleeve, handing her one. "I suppose they might just wander off if we ignore them."

Taking the weapon he'd handed her, Akane thought his tone sounded hopeful, but not convinced. She felt much the same. They kept staring at the small demons which stared back. Two more turned up, one dropping from another roof to their left, another coming out of a service alley. All six of the things were now staring at the pair, which was an eerie effect. The huge golden eyes with the triangular pupils were oddly unnerving. The wide mouths excessively full of unnecessarily large and sharp teeth were much worse.

Experimentally, Mousse transferred his staff from his right hand to his left, then produced a throwing knife in the free hand with a flick of his wrist and snapped it accurately at the nearest demon. The small creature grabbed it out of the air, chewed, and swallowed. He paled further.

"Ah."

"Yep."

They exchanged glances. "Run away?" Akane suggested, not liking the idea but liking the teeth even less.

"Sounds like a plan," he admitted.

They were just looking at the beer, wondering whether to abandon it or not, when a call from behind them made them twitch. "Hey, guys! Duck!" Tamiko's voice came. Exchanging a wide-eyed look again they hit the floor with alacrity. Just in time, as a pair of glowing balls of energy came past them, hitting two demons one after the other, both of them vanishing in a spray of goo with loud bangs. A second later a coruscating beam of sparkling energy shot past on the other side, creating a sizzling zap sound straight out of a movie, impacting a third demon which evaporated on the spot. The beam kept going, punching a large hole through the car behind the demon and the wall of the building behind that. The remaining little creatures bolted in panic.

"Oops," a young girl's voice said, sounding embarrassed.

"Chiyoko!" Tamiko yelled in fury. "I told you not to fire unless I said to, didn't I?"

"But I hit it!" the girl protested.
"True, I guess. So well done for that. But you also killed that car and now there's a hole in that shop you could drive a motorcycle through," Tamiko replied in an aggrieved tone. "Doesn't that damn thing have a power control?"

"I... don't know," the girl, apparently called Chiyoko, said with mild puzzlement in her voice. "I never looked."

Mousse and Akane exchanged glances as Tamiko sighed heavily from somewhere behind them. "Oh, for god's sake," the red-head muttered, loudly enough for them to hear. They both looked over their shoulders to see her pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation. "Don't push me or I'll take it away again," she went on more loudly.

Walking over to the two martial artists as they climbed to their feet she looked apologetically at them. "Sorry, guys, she's not a good shot." The magical girl glared behind her at the much younger girl, who stared at the ground while her ears went red. "I still don't know why I gave that thing back to her in the first place." Chiyoko fiddled with her staff, looking highly embarrassed.

Returning her attention to Akane and Mousse, Tamiko said, "There were a lot of those little bastards all over the place for some reason. We've got rid of most of them, but there are little pockets around we're hunting down. It shouldn't take too much longer."

"OK," Akane replied, still not entirely sure what was going on. "I guess. Are you coming back to the party when you're finished?"

"Oh, sure, I still want some more to eat and some of that beer," Tamiko said with a grin, nodding at the four crates on the ground. "We'll all be coming back to your place soon, once we've finished destroying the neighbourhood." A loud zap sound from behind made her wince, then grit her teeth. A few roof tiles clattered to the pavement while Chiyoko attempted to look innocent, staring off in a different direction and whistling unconvincingly. Tamiko glared at her for a few seconds then sighed, turning back to the others. "Assuming there's any neighbourhood left, of course," she finished in an annoyed tone.

"Friend of yours?" Mousse asked with a small smile. The red-head looked slightly depressed.

"Not as such but I seem to be stuck with her," she confided, sighing once again. "Do you mind if I bring her with me, Akane?" she asked. "Just until her mother picks her up a little later. It's probably safer than letting her wander around on her own."

"Sure, that's no problem," Akane agreed.

"Thanks." Tamiko looked grateful. "It's a long story, I'll tell you later." She suddenly whirled around, somehow knowing that Chiyoko was stealthily raising her staff again, aiming at something on a roof in the distance. "NO! Bad magical girl!" she shouted, popping a small energy ball on the younger girl's back between her shoulder blades, which made her yelp and drop the staff. As Chiyoko turned and glared at Tamiko the red-head snickered. "That works pretty well. I'll have to remember it."

Chiyoko retrieved her weapon, holding it in one hand while she rubbed her back with the other, giving the older woman a filthy look. Tamiko ignored it, looking at Akane and Mousse who were watching with a mix of amusement and surprise. "I'll see you later." Cocking her head, she seemed inquisitive, then turned to look into the distance. "OK, there are some more down there," she sighed. "Come on, Chiyoko, let's go." Trotting off she was followed by the younger girl, who waved to Mousse and Akane as she left.
They watched the pair disappear around a corner, then exchanged glances again. Picking up two of the crates having made both staves vanish once more, Mousse shook his head. "That was... a little odd."

"Magical girls are weird," Akane agreed with a grin, picking up the two remaining crates, then they headed back to the Dojo.

Diving through the front door Hikaru slammed it behind him, then leaned against it, listening to the faint sound of sirens in the distance and sweating both from the run and a certain amount of nervousness. His parents both stuck their heads out of the living room, looking at him curiously. "Are you all right, son?" his father asked with mild concern.

Wiping sweat from his forehead the young man straightened up, picking up his backpack while he kicked off his shoes in a deliberately casual manner. "Yes, Dad," he replied quietly, trying not to wince at the question. "Just a little tired, it's hot out and I was walking a bit faster than normal."

"All right, then," his parent said with a nod. Cocking his head the older man listened. "Seems to be a lot of sirens. Must be something going on in town." After a moment he shrugged. "Anyway, dinner is in twenty minutes. You should clean up, you look filthy."

"OK, Dad."

"Have you seen the oregano?" his mother asked, lifting her face from a cookbook she was perusing. "I was certain I had a new jar of it in the cupboard but I can't find it." Wordlessly Hikaru handed her the jar as he went past, heading for the bathroom. "Oh, there it is. Well done, dear, thank you." She went towards the kitchen humming to herself while his father returned to reading a spy novel.

"I got another one! I got another one!" Chiyoko hopped up and down with excitement. Beside her Tamiko, for some reason, was grinding her teeth.

"Chiyoko?"

"Yes, Tamiko?"

"Do you see that phone box?"

The twelve-year-old girl looked around, puzzled. "What phone box?"

"Exactly." The red-head was doing that thing with her fingers and the bridge of her nose again, Chiyoko noticed. Not sure what her companion meant the young girl put a quizzical expression on.

"It was behind the demon you fired at," Tamiko explained when it became clear that more was needed. "Before you fired, at any rate."

"Oh." Moving slightly to the side so she could see past the pile of steaming yuck that was all that was left of her primary target, she could see a crumpled heap of metal, glass and plastic with a miraculously intact bright green phone handset sticking out of the top. "Sorry."

Tamiko sighed heavily, shook her head, then headed off towards the now somewhat smaller crowd of fleeing mini-demons while mumbling something under her breath, her younger companion following. Chiyoko was still pleased about her shot, it was the second in a row that had actually hit a demon. 'I'm getting really good at this,' she mused, smiling a little.
There appear to only be approximately twenty-six of the enemy creatures still moving as far as I can determine, Nabiki. Jun informed the middle Tendo, highlighting the relevant drone feeds.

Three at the Kuno estate, which currently both Tatewaki and Kodachi Kuno are engaging with some success, the remainder scattered around the immediate area surrounding the railway station which would appear to be at or near the epicentre of the incursion. There was a pause as they both watched a series of energy balls in different colours fly from one side to another of one of the video windows. Four more down, leaving twenty-two. At the current rate the last of them other than those being attacked by the Kuno siblings will be eliminated in approximately three minutes.

'Good. Hopefully there aren't any more of the annoyances hiding anywhere around the place,' Nabiki replied with a silent sigh.

'I believe there are not,' the machine replied, a small note of amusement at her tone present. With luck there will be no further interruptions to the festivities.

'Of course there won't,' she snickered darkly. Jun didn't respond but she could feel its version of a grin inside her head.

Nodding to Cologne as the Elder sat near her, talking to Soun and Nodoka while sipping some tea, she kept half her attention on the party which had mainly moved back into the garden by now, the remainder being on the image provided by the drone hanging over the Kuno residence. She watched as Kodachi wildly lashed out with a razor sharp ribbon at a micro-demon, which rapidly ducked, then scuttled off with the gymnast in hot pursuit. Grinning to herself she shook her head slightly.

'She seems to be enjoying herself,' she noted wryly to the SI.

'Indeed. Ms Kuno is definitely looking more excited than one would expect under the circumstances,' the SI responded as wryly. Her brother would appear less enthused, though.

'Poor fellow is worn out after his epic battle with the first one,' Nabiki snickered.

Kodachi managed to corner the demon she was chasing, wrapping the ribbon around it with a flick of her wrist then pulling hard, which neatly diced it in a shower of guts and gore. Looking somewhat disgusted she dropped the weaponised gymnastics tool, instead producing a pair of spiked clubs with which she assaulted one of the remaining two creatures, while Kuno himself chased the last one around a tree a few times, waving a long sword at it and shouting imprecations. The final fate of the creature was decided by the enormous crocodile that suddenly appeared from the nearby pond, Kodachi's 'pet' Mr Turtle, and engulfed the startled demon in huge jaws, biting down hard. A few translucent teeth flew out of the sides of the reptile's jaws as it slid back into the water, Kuno stopping and watching, panting for breath. After a moment he turned in time to see his sister beat the remaining demon to a pulp with a howl of rage and a club, walking over to her when she was done. The two siblings looked around, glanced at each other, then looked down at themselves, before simultaneously slumping a little and heading for the house and, presumably, a shower each.

'Looks like it was both good exercise and good training,' Nabiki commented as the drone scanned the area one last time before Jun brought it back towards them.

'Quite. Although I suspect that neither of the participants would put it in exactly those terms.' Jun sounded amused.

'Probably not, no.'
A feeling of warning spiked in the back of her head, making the middle Tendo spin around quickly. She peered about suspiciously, using first normal vision, then the enhanced modes of Jun's sensory package, spotting a second later a moving blob behind the wall. Just as she was able to make it out clearly it leaped upwards to reveal itself as one of the little demons, the thing appearing on top of the wall and looking about alertly. 'Where the hell did that one come from?' she asked with vast irritation and some worry. Most of the guests followed her gaze and quite a few stepped back.

#My apologies, Nabiki, I missed it. I think it's one of the ones from the group that followed Mr Kuno, we lost track of a couple when Ranma engaged them and as was said at the time, they're surprisingly stealthy on occasion.# Jun sounded embarrassed.

'Don't worry about that, Jun, I don't blame you. The question is what do we do about it, everyone else is at the railway station except for Sis and she'd finishing up on the other side of the portal.'

Looking around Nabiki sighed faintly. She could zap the thing easily of course but it would be in front of dozens of witnesses.

In the end the problem was solved by Cologne, who had seen or sensed the little demon pretty much the same time she had. The elderly woman stared at it calculatingly for a moment, while Shampoo was looking worried next to her, then put her hands together and mumbled something under her breath. Nabiki felt a building surge of magical energy, which peaked as Cologne threw out one hand, palm facing the demon. A bright orange flash was instantly followed by a burning mystical fireball, quite unlike her own ki spheres, which zoomed across the garden and hit the demon. The creature didn't even have time to squeak before it was reduced to ash, which mostly dropped down on the other side of the wall.

Everyone stared alternately between the former position of the little demon and the ancient woman who was looking smug, waving her fingers a little and blowing on them as smoke rose for a few seconds. "Ow," she muttered mildly. "I'm out of practice on that spell," she added, turning back to Soun and Nodoka, who were looking impressed.

"Most remarkable, Elder," Soun said gravely, nodding to her in respect. "A very nice demonstration of battle magic."

"Thank you, my boy," she nodded back, appearing pleased at the compliment, before picking up her teacup and sipping from it. Nodoka looked somewhat more startled than Soun but still took everything in stride. Many of the guests were staring at Cologne in shock although Shampoo seemed proud, as did Mousse and Akane, who were watching from across the garden.

Nabiki turned to Miki and Kimiko who had come up beside her, both sisters gaping at the wizened little Chinese mage, making her smile a bit. "I knew she was a powerful mage but that's the most direct evidence of it I've ever seen," the brunette commented as Miki sat down near her. Her friend glanced at her with wide eyes, then went back to looking at Cologne, who was now apparently explaining something about the spell she'd used to Nodoka who was listening with a fascinated expression.

"Wow," Miki finally managed. Kimiko nodded slowly from next to her, then knelt on the grass, nibbling a sandwich she had on a small plate.

"What was that thing?" the youngest Sano sister asked curiously. Nabiki explained, as she listened.

"Weird. I wonder what they're doing in Nerima?"

"No idea," Nabiki shrugged. "Hopefully there aren't too many left. The other girls went off a while ago to deal with the others, I'd expect they'll be back soon."
All three of them looked around as Akane wandered over clutching a beer bottle, then gestured with it towards the wall and the small scattering of ashes left there. "That was pretty amazing, wasn't it?" her sister exclaimed. "I didn't know she could do that!"

"It was good, yes," Nabiki agreed, grinning.

"Will we have any other magical excitement tonight?" Kimiko asked with a sly grin. Akane looked at her for a second, matching it.

"Come on. What are the odds of that happening?" the blue-haired young woman said, a little loudly as a result of the beer. Nabiki wasn't alone in wincing, several people quickly looking around suspiciously.

Just under two and a half kilometres away from the Tendo Dojo, on the roof of the car park next to the central Metro station in the centre of Furinkan, a half-erased and slightly disturbing-looking diagram was still smoking a little. A light breeze for a second or two disturbed the drying chalk, blood, and mint extract mixture that comprised it, a small swirl of the powder resulting from this process lifting and then settling again across a few of the semi-obliterated glyphs. Residual power from its recent activation was causing small runnels of light to form and rush across the diagram, slowly dying out. Another half hour and it would be depleted and dead, the next rain shower washing it away completely.

Unfortunately, the slight disturbance moved a few critical lines at exactly the point Tamiko and Chiyoko walked past on the ground, the pink-dressed girl taking a shot at the second to last demon in the process, which remarkably enough she managed to hit without destroying anything else. The shock of this was so great that Tamiko missed the momentary surge of magic that came from a few metres overhead, something she'd normally have easily picked up on.

Light flared for a short couple of seconds, accompanied by a sizzling crackle, then the remains of the diagram went blank and cold, the remaining symbols crumbling away to dust.

Another thirty seconds went past quietly.

Something stirred, looked around with puzzlement, then spread dark red wings and flapped hard, launching itself into the air. Gaining altitude, so far unseen in the early evening sky, it circled around before heading away from the parking structure.
"Got them all," Yori announced as she and the other four, along with Chiyoko, abruptly appeared next to the pond, making Genma twitch violently and fall in again. The black-haired magical girl's eyes went wide then she turned away emitting gales of laughter as the soaking wet panda hauled itself out of the water, giving her an unfriendly look in the process. Misaki grinned while the others snickered. Chiyoko stared in shock, moving a little closer to Tamiko and readying her staff, which the red-head put a hand on, pushing it down with a shake of her head.

"What were those things doing in Nerima?" Ukyo asked curiously, glancing at the small pile of ash on the wall. "And how many were there?"

Recovering her composure, although still smirking a little when she looked at the panda, Yori turned to the chef. "We're not sure on the first part, and way too damn many on the second. At least a hundred or so," she replied. "We're still not sure where they even come from in the first place." Nodding at Chiyoko, she added, "This young lady is the one who is normally, um, involved with them."

Shampoo frowned at the young girl, who met her eyes then stared at the ground, her face going pink.

"I remember Chiyoko. Is she still a bad shot?"

The older magical girls all looked at each other, before sighing en masse. "Afraid so," Yori confirmed. Chiyoko went pinker.

"I got three of them today," she muttered. Tamiko patted her on the head.

"So you did. Well done. We'll talk about all the other things you got later." The red-head grinned as Chiyoko groaned faintly. Shampoo shook her head in mild disbelief, while beside her Akane giggled.

"We're looking after her until her mother stops by later to pick her up," Tamiko announced, looking around. "She sort of jumped off the train earlier when she saw one of those little bastards and everything snowballed from there. It's probably best not to have her running around the place shooting it up."

"Hey, I'm not that bad," Chiyoko protested weakly. Tamiko began laughing, while her friends all exchanged glances while grinning. The girl sighed. "More or less. You guys are horrible." She seemed to be half-depressed, half amused by now. Standing her staff upright she leaned on it, waiting for the others to stop giggling, still a little pink-faced.

Akane stepped forward from the group of people watching and listening. "It's nice to meet you, Chiyoko," she said in a friendly manner. "I'm Akane Tendo. Would you like something to eat?" The girl perked up, looking curiously at the tables of food and drink, which while depleted, were still covered in enough to keep everyone going for hours.

"Yes, please," she replied eagerly. "Thank you, Akane." She looked at her staff, then down at her elaborate dress, before shrugging, handing Tamiko the staff, and wandering off with the youngest Tendo, talking happily. Her mood seemed to have improved instantly.
"You have the best parties ever," Miki whispered to Nabiki from where they'd been watching and listening. The Tendo woman grinned. They moved closer to the others, who were watching Chiyoko with various expressions mainly mixing fondness and mild irritation.

"She's a nice girl," Tamiko sighed as Nabiki stopped next to her, glancing at the middle Tendo sister, "but a little... how do I put this... a little careless." Hefting the staff, she added, "And with very heavy weaponry for a twelve year old. This thing is absolutely lethal, how she's managed not to hurt anyone with it so far is beyond me."

"Except Mr Ishikawa's poodle, of course," Fumiko commented with a shrug.

"Except that, yes," her friend agreed. She laughed a little. "Although that seems to have worked out all right, weirdly enough."

Hana came over to stand next to her sister while staring at the staff Tamiko was holding with her eyes wide and her insane grin even larger than normal. Kimiko followed her, looking amused. "Wow! A real magical weapon!" she enthused, inspecting the thing which the red-head obligingly held out for her to see, smiling a little. Hana took a couple of photos of it. "That's amazing." Gingerly she reached out with one finger and poked the large blue gem set into the end of it, pulling the digit back quickly and looking suspiciously at it.

"How does it work?" Kimiko asked, also inspecting the thing with interest.

Tamiko shrugged. "No idea. Most magical weapons are locked to a specific user, or otherwise not usable by anyone else for various reasons. This one is horrendously powerful so it's probably a good thing that normal people can't do anything with it. It's a bit of a pity that Chiyoko can." She shook her head in despair. "You wouldn't believe the number of holes in everything around the place right now."

"The fund will sort it out," Yori soothed her friend. "No one got hurt, and it's all over now, so why don't you have some more beer?" She snickered as the other woman gave her a look, then finally nodded. Passing the staff off to her friend Tamiko wandered off in the direction of the drinks, a mildly annoyed expression still on her face.

"For some reason Chiyoko's mother seems to have latched onto poor Tamiko as the one to shout at when her daughter goes off and causes weird problems," Yori confided in a lowered voice, Miki and her sisters listening with interest. "We can't figure out why. But it's kind of weird how often they run into each other."

"So her mother knows she's a magical girl?" Kimiko asked, an eyebrow going up. Yori nodded. "Isn't that against the Magical Girl Code or something?"

Misaki snorted with laughter while the others grinned. Yori chuckled. "It's not actually a rule, but yes, it's fairly common that people in our particular profession tend to keep it quiet from their families for various reasons." Looking over at the pink-dressed girl who was now talking rapidly with much arm waving to Akane, Ukyo, and Soun, she snickered. "Chiyoko, though, is pretty much in a class of her own. Practically everyone in her neighbourhood knows who she is, although most of them are polite enough not to mention it when she's not powered up. Amazingly enough generally speaking people are fine with her, despite the holes. The Magical Girl fund does spend quite a bit on patching them up, but..." She shrugged. "That's what it's there for."

"She seems nice," Miki giggled. "A little overenthusiastic, but nice."

"She is," Fumiko put in. "In both cases. Her mother is all right as well, most of the time, but she
gets worried when Chiyoko wanders off and she then sees something on the news about it. Probably why she's fixated on Tamiko as being the responsible one, since she's been in a few reports as well and is clearly older and more experienced."

"It's driving her nuts." Aiko watched her friend drain a bottle of beer in one go with amusement. "She quite likes Chiyoko underneath the irritation, though."

"Everyone likes Chiyoko," Yori said dryly. "Except, of course, for Mr Ishikawa. He's not really a fan."

"There's a shock," Aiko laughed. Glancing at Yori, she said, "You know I could go and get her mother, or take her back, right now?"

"Of course I do," Yori retorted, smiling a little. "I do remember you being able to teleport, it's quite useful sometimes." Aiko folded her arms and stared at her friend with the corner of her mouth twitching. "But let the girl have something to eat. She doesn't seem to get out much and she's obviously enjoying herself at the moment."

This was true, Miki noticed, watching the youngest magical girl laugh at something Ukyo had said. She looked at Nabiki who was also watching, smiling to herself. Hana finished taking another photo of Chiyoko's staff then headed over to apparently take a photo of the girl herself, Kimiko still trailing behind her wearing a small grin. Everyone else had apparently gotten over the startlement of the new arrival and Cologne's swift dispatch of the small demon and had gone back to talking, eating, and drinking.

She shook her head in wonder, then looked around for where her boyfriend had wandered off to, finding him engaged in conversation with Konatsu and Nodoka. Finishing off the sandwich she was holding as she walked, she went over to him and slipped her arm around his waist. He returned the gesture, both of them listening to the Saotome matriarch going over some of the ideas she'd had for the wedding of the two young people, Konatsu nodding every now and then.

Nearly five thousand metres up, circling in a thermal, something looked around with confused interest. It had no idea where it was, why it was here, or how it got here, but it was getting mildly irritated by the way the air smelled funny and it was too cold. It could also sense something not that far away that seemed worth investigating.

With a slight twitch of a wing, it straightened out its flight path and headed in the relevant direction, scanning the ground carefully.

"Captain?" The voice of the first office was somewhat tense and a little worried. Captain Ryo Minami glanced to the right enquiringly. His copilot was much less experienced on international flights that he himself was, being nearly twenty years younger, but in his estimation was even so a more than competent officer. It was unusual for him to sound like that.

"Problem, Mr Sato?" he asked quietly. The other man wasn't looking at his instruments, instead he was peering out the right window in a downward direction.

"I'm... not sure, sir," the other man said slowly. Even the back of his head was radiating puzzlement. Looking back at his captain he shook his head. "There's something odd down there."

"Where?" Minami asked curiously, craning his neck. He couldn't see anything unusual. His colleague pointed.
"About two o'clock, below us." He checked the instruments for a moment. "Maybe two thousand feet lower."

"In the air?" The captain was intrigued. "So it's flying, then? Another aircraft?"

"No, sir, the wings are flapping," the first officer said in a stunned voice. "But it's way too big to be a bird."

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then Captain Minami checked that the autopilot was engaged, undid his harness, and stood, leaning over to see out the window for himself. After another ten seconds, he retrieved a pair of binoculars from beside his seat and put them to his eyes, focussing carefully. He stared some more.

Eventually he handed the binoculars to his colleague and retook his seat, absently checking the instruments out of habit. Nothing was amiss, they were steadily climbing on their departure from Haneda Airport.

"Do we report it?" the other man asked.

"That's Nerima down there, isn't it?" Minami asked, knowing the answer before he spoke. Sato nodded. "Not Minato?"

"No sir, Minato is behind us on the port side."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right." They were silent for a few moments, the normal sounds of a 767 cockpit and engines the only thing heard. After a bit Minami asked, "Is it still there?"

Sota checked.

"Yes."

"Right."

Finally, Minami pressed the radio transmit button with a faint sigh. "Tokyo ATC, this is Flight JL91 enroute to Seoul, we'd like to report a potential flight hazard please."

He released the button while exchanging a glance with his first officer. There was a short delay, then the voice of an ATC operator crackled in their headsets.

"JL91, go ahead. What sort of hazard?"

Minami sighed again, before pressing the button. "It looks like some sort of giant demonic duck, Tower."

The delay was longer this time.

"JL91, please repeat."

"A demonic duck of some sort," he responded. Checking the altitude, then quickly standing up to look out and back, he added, "Approximately flight level one five zero on a heading of one nine six, moving slowly. Dark red in colour. We're estimating it's roughly the size of a light aircraft."
Releasing the button he waited. Sota was still looking through the binoculars, panning gradually backwards as they moved past the thing. Shortly it would be too far behind them to still see as they gained speed and altitude.

"JL91, report acknowledged. Are you certain you're not looking towards Minato?" The operator sounded resigned but not entirely surprised.

"Tower, we're sure. It's over the middle of Nerima, around the Furinkan area as far as I can see."

"JL91, thank you for the report. Tokyo ATC out." The radio went quiet.

Both men sat in silence for some time. Sota kept looking out the window, distracted from his job, until the thing was out of sight behind them.

A few minutes later, he stirred. "That was a little weird," he commented. Minami glanced at him, then went back to scanning the horizon.

"You only recently transferred to Tokyo, didn't you?" he asked.

Nodding, Sota replied, "Yes, sir, I was flying out of Kyoto for the last few years."

"A piece of advice then. Stay away from Nerima, and Minato. You'll have a much more normal life if you do." Captain Minami shook his head a little. "Both places are very... strange."

Sota nodded again, listening. It took them a while to get back into the normal routine of flight operations, but they managed in the end.

"A demonic duck," Minami muttered after a while, shaking his head. "That's a new one on me."

# Nabiki, there are some unusual reports being transferred from Tokyo air traffic control regarding this area,# Jun suddenly announced. Nabiki, who was in the process of sipping a cup of coffee, politely disengaged from her conversation with Mr Ito and his wife, stepping away from them to concentrate on what the SI was saying.

'What sort of reports?' she asked curiously.

# There seems to be something rather large flying around a few kilometres away,# the machine responded.# It was spotted by the air crew of a flight that just took off from Haneda airport. I have sent a drone in that direction to check. There's nothing showing up on passive sensory systems at the moment.# It produced a display which showed aircraft overlaid on her vision as she looked around, transponder, heading, speed, and altitude data associated with each one and the colours varying depending on model and type. # I can go active if you wish.#

'Do it,' she said. A second later the overlay changed, a new icon appearing in red in the direction of the centre of Furinkan. It was at an altitude of three and a half thousand metres, descending steadily in their direction. 'What is that?' she muttered silently to herself and the SI.

# The report from the aircraft described it as 'a giant demonic duck of some sort',# Jun told her, sounding a little surprised. Moments afterwards another window popped up with the video from the drone which had reached the thing. Nabiki stared.

'What...?'

# The description isn't entirely wrong,# Jun added slowly.
Deep red which made it hard to see against the evening sky, with a wingspan of nearly twice that of the soaring, the thing flapped every now and then, its head moving around on the end of a long neck. It had a beak that looked exactly like that of a duck, even to the colour, although it was big enough to swallow a person. The tail was wrong, more lizard-like than bird-like, and the feet weren't exactly ducklike since she could see they had long feathers as well as webs, but it was clear the thing was at least partly aquatic. It was covered in feathers, or at least something that looked like feathers.

'Where the fuck did that thing come from?' she asked in shock.

'I have no idea,' Jun replied. 'I have nothing like it in my database. It's transparent to normal radar, which isn't entirely surprising due to it being a living creature, and it's surprisingly low profile on thermal imaging as well. It's certainly not native to this world.'

'Is it hostile?' Nabiki was getting worried.

'Unknown, but it would be best to assume so without further information.' The SI sounded cautious. 'It seems to be heading directly towards us. It's possible it's sensing the portal which is by far the most powerful magical signature in the area.'

She looked around, noticing that 'Chou' had just stepped through the portal and was looking in the same direction as the thing was coming from, while 'Yori' and the other four were already doing the same. Chiyoko was looking around with an expression of puzzlement, apparently sensing something herself but without the benefit of an SI to localise it. Nabiki was becoming aware that her danger sense was tickling her and had been at a very low level for a little while now. Looking up and to the east she squinted, able to make out the thing now, looking at this range like a bird.

"I assume everyone knows about that whatever it is by now?" she asked her friends over the link, transferring the data Jun had provided and the video from the drone.

"Yes," her elder sister replied, sounding worried. "I don't know what it is but it's certainly coming this way quite fast."

"This is getting ridiculous," 'Yori' muttered with irritation. "What next? A volcano?"

"You probably shouldn't say that," Aiko said, not sounding entirely like she was joking. "What do we do?"

"We could hope it's just passing by," Fumiko commented. Everyone looked at her. "OK, I know," she added with a sigh.

'It's definitely coming here,' Jun announced, showing a calculated vector of the creature's flight path which did indeed end up in the yard of the Dojo assuming it didn't change speed or direction. Nabiki passed the warning on.

"Jun thinks it might be attracted by the portal," she told the others. "Should we turn it off?"

"I think it's too late for that," Tamiko put in. "It's only a few thousand metres away and it's speeding up."

"Damn it." The disguised Ranma sounded very annoyed. "OK, we'd better get everyone on the other side of the portal where it's safer for the moment while we deal with the fucking thing."

"Are you going to shoot it down?" Nabiki asked. 'Yori' glanced at her, before shaking her head.
"I don't want to do that until we know for sure it's hostile," she replied slowly.

"Fair enough."

"Excuse me," 'Chou' called, making everyone in the garden look at her. "Could everyone go through the portal, please? We might have a small problem we have to deal with very soon and it will be safer if you all go back to the waterfall for a little while." She smiled calmly. "I hope it won't take long. We're sorry about the inconvenience."

"What sort of problem?" Soun asked, looking around with worry, as he walked over, Cologne next to him. People were looking nervously about the garden.

"That sort of problem?" Shampoo pointed up and away from the garden. Everyone followed her finger, many of them paling. There was a rapid rush towards the glowing blue tear in space. Soun stared at the now very visible creature that was rapidly heading down and at them.

"Oh, dear," he said weakly with a look of surprise. "Is that...?"

"A giant demonic duck of some sort?" Cologne finished for him. He nodded. "It certainly looks like it. How very strange."

The garden cleared of people surprisingly, or possibly not surprisingly, fast. Shortly the only ones left were the magical girls, Soun, Cologne, Nabiki, and Miki. Shampoo and Akane had corralled some of the drunker guests with the help of Mousse and practically carried them through the portal, glancing back at the descending creature which was now only about a kilometre away. Genma, still a panda, had grabbed Nodoka and flung her over his shoulder, diving into the portal with his wife spluttering in outrage at the damp fur.

"Come on, Nabiki," Miki urged, holding her friend's elbow. "Let's leave them to sort it out."

"OK," the middle Tendo said slightly reluctantly but not able to explain why she was delaying. Just as they reached the portal Hana popped out of it.

"Where's Kimiko?" she asked frantically. "She's not there."

"She went to use the toilet a little while ago," the other Sano sister said, glancing at the house with worry. "I thought she'd come back already."

"I can't see her," Hana replied.

"I'll go and get her," Nabiki told them both. "You two go ahead, we'll be there in a few seconds." Both the others looked at her wide-eyed. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. We're surrounded by magical girls and fireball throwing mages." She indicated the people still present. "And a superb martial artist as well."

"Hurry up," Miki said, not looking entirely sure but relaxing a little. She followed her sister through the portal with a glance over her shoulder. Turning around, Nabiki saw her father studying her, while Cologne was watching the creature descend in wide circles. The rest were waiting alertly to see what happened next.

"Hurry and get your friend, dear," he advised. "I'll wait until you come back."

"Thanks, dad," she said, heading towards the house. She'd only gone a few steps when Kimiko came out of the building, looking around with a puzzled expression.
"Where did everyone go?" the young woman asked, confused. She noticed the remaining people staring upwards and followed their gazes as she wandered across the lawn towards Nabiki, slowing to a halt in the middle. "What the fuck is that?" she yelped, pointing upwards.

She yelped a lot more when the creature suddenly folded its wings and dropped like a stone, landing between her and the others with a thump that shook the garden.

"Shit!" she shouted, diving sideways out of the way in a display of surprisingly good reflexes. Everyone scattered as the enormous beak opened slightly and a sound like a strangled goose mixed with a foghorn and about twice as loud as the latter suddenly emerged. Windows rattled across the neighbourhood.

Slapping her hands over her ears Nabiki winced, staring at the thing in surprise. It looked around then made the noise again. In the aftermath she could head tinkling glass as the window to her father's bedroom fell out. A few tiles slid off the roof.

"Does that count as hostile?" she asked silently.

"Not yet," 'Yori' replied, a look of calculation on her face. The demonic duck stared at them all, then opened its beak much more widely, exposing far more teeth than anything with a beak should have had. It dived at her, only to miss as she darted out of the way with alacrity. "Getting closer though," came the wry admission.

Soun ducked as the thing tried the same trick on him. Cologne dealt it a weltering whack with her staff as the head came around again, the crack of ancient wood on flesh echoing around the garden. Flinching, the thing made a sound that was really quite angry. Nabiki was getting a very solid danger signal from it by now. If nothing else it seemed in a bad mood.

Whipping its head back much faster than before, it managed to catch the ancient Amazon with the return stroke, flicking her half-way across the garden. Worried, Nabiki ran over, to find the old woman sitting up with a look of annoyance on her face.

"It's very quick," Cologne griped. "Much faster than anything that size should be."

"Are you all right, Elder?" Nabiki asked. The much older woman smiled a little at her.

"I'm fine, dear, it'll take something much worse than that to do much to me. Get your friend and yourself to safety while we deal with this beast." She hopped to her feet with little effort, staring at the creature with a calculating gaze. It was currently snapping alternately at Fumiko and Misaki, who were firing small energy balls at it, which seemed to do little but irritate the thing. "I wonder if it tastes like chicken?"

Snickering for a moment, Nabiki admired the ancient woman's persistence, then turned around to see where Kimiko had gotten to. She finally spotted the youngest Sano sister hiding under one of the tables, the one that had the ramen cauldron sitting on it. Carefully working her way around the edge of the garden she headed in that direction.

"OK, it's hostile," 'Yori' announced out loud as the demonic creature's tail slammed down where she'd been standing moments earlier. Several people looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"It took that long to decide that?" Chiyoko asked with enough sarcasm for a girl twice her age. 'Yori' grinned at her and tossed her the staff she'd been examining with interest before the arrival of the demonic duck. Chiyoko caught it and levelled it at the demon, immediately firing a sparkling beam of death which, to everyone's surprise, both actually hit the thing, and more worryingly
deflected off it in a luckily upwards direction. It left a scorched patch on the feathers and caused
the thing to squawk in rage, but did little real damage.

Ducking the retaliatory strike of one wing, Chiyoko rolled frantically across the grass to avoid the
stones that rained down from the garden wall that took the hit intended for her. "Uh Oh," she
squeaked.

"That's pretty impressive," Tamiko said, looking surprised. "I've never seen anything take a shot
from that staff like that before." She shot it in the face with a compressed ki ball, which produced a
crater in the flesh and a loud squawk. Everyone watched as the wound healed in seconds. "Ah.
That's not good."

"Not really," 'Chou' replied, manifesting a pair of golden energy blades and crossing them in front
of her. On the other side 'Yori' did the same thing, her blades glowing violet. The demonic duck
looked at both of them, then lashed out with its tail at the blonde who gracefully cartwheeled out of
the way, slicing at the appendage as she did so. The last few centimetres of the tail separated from
the rest of it and landed in the ramen pot with a splash, making Cologne sigh deeply.

Once again the damage healed rapidly, taking less than ten seconds before there was no sign of the
hit. The creature seemed furious, but cautious. It stepped back, looking around quickly, with its
wings half-opened and ready.

Nabiki had been forced to stop when the thing had attacked 'Chou', to not get into a position where
she'd have no choice but to give away her secret to the people who didn't already know. Looking
around, she met Kimiko's eyes. The other woman looked scared but not as worried as might be
expected.

A few seconds passed while everyone looked at the demonic creature and it stared back,
motionless. The impasse was unexpectedly broken by a yipping sound.

Every pair of eyes in the garden swivelled towards the portal, out of which was protruding the head
of the male soarer. He looked around curiously, stopping suddenly with his gaze locked on the
demonic duck. A sound unlike anything Nabiki had ever heard from the soarers came from him.
Seconds later he dived out of the portal at the thing, his mouth open and ears laid back. The female
followed hot on his tail.

"Shit, I forgot about them," Nabiki muttered. She watched, impressed, as both soarers darted about
the thing, biting at its legs and making it hop around squawking in anger. The male managed to get
a good bite in on the right leg which provoked a wild kick, sending him rolling across the garden
into the pond. Worried, she sighed in relief when the animal quickly climbed out apparently
uninjured and ran back to the fight.

A few seconds of chaos ensued while the soarers attacked the ducklike demon thing, which
charged around the garden knocking things flying, and various people fired at it, wary of hitting
either of the soarers. Cologne got it with a fireball making it screech and causing a surprisingly
large amount of damage to one wing. Unfortunately, as before, the creature regenerated in seconds.

"This isn't working," 'Yori' called. "We need to get it out of here so we can do something more
dramatic. It's like the portal-bomb demons, it heals too fast. I think it would take removing the
head to stop it, or just vaporising the damn thing."

"Can you do that?" Soun called back from the other side of the garden where he was fending off
the beast's tail with a bo staff.
"Not here, unless you don't want your house any more," she replied. He winced, looking worried.

Moments later the problem solved itself after a fashion as the thing apparently decided it had had enough. The wings extended widely, making everyone fall back. Hopping sideways, the demon avoided a strike from 'Chou', then suddenly snaked its head under the table Kimiko was hiding beneath. A scream of terror came, then it emerged holding her by the back of her shirt. Flapping hard it took off, flipping her into the air in the process then neatly catching her with one taloned foot, which wrapped completely around her.

"Fuck!" 'Yori' stared, then met Nabiki's eyes from across the garden. She cocked her head minutely.

"Distract them," the middle Tendo said over the link. The martial artist immediately fired a series of ki balls aimed to carefully miss the creature which was rapidly gaining altitude, the loud bangs and blinding flashes they caused as they burst in the air making everyone look up. As soon as she was certain no one was watching her, Nabiki shot around the side of the house, looked quickly around while activating her bracelet and triggering the change to Azumi, then dived over the front wall. Seconds later she was flapping her own wings as hard as she could, hurtling up into the twilight sky after the demon carrying her friend's sister. She was immediately joined by both soarers, all three of them climbing rapidly.

Tapping her fingers rapidly on the stone wall at the edge of the incredible drop, Miki stood next to her older sister waiting impatiently for the younger one and her friend to emerge from the portal. The seconds ticked past with no sign of either of them. On her other side John was leaning carefully on the wall, not entirely trusting the ward that was still blocking anyone from falling over the edge, although he'd checked it several times. The light from the purple and golden spheres of hazy light showed a lot of worried and/or curious faces from the rest of the party-goers surrounding them.

Several people had been holding drinks when they ran through the portal and were now sipping them, looking at each other and talking. The pair of soarers, which had looked a little startled when the influx of people had happened, were happily weaving through the crowd, looking for people to make a fuss of them and visibly wondering why everyone wasn't making enough effort.

"Come on, Kimiko," she muttered under her breath. "Where are you?"

"They'll both be fine, Miki," John assured her, although he didn't entirely look like he believed his own words. She glanced at him, then Hana, who was chewing her lower lip, before going back to staring at the portal.

Another minute passed in more or less silence.

"I'm going to look," she finally said. John put his hand on her shoulder.

"It could be dangerous," he warned.

"That's the point," she replied with a nervous frown. "Kimiko and Nabiki are still on the other side." Walking closer, she stopped next to Akane who was talking to Shampoo and Mousse, all three of them looking like the only thing stopping them going back was the fact that they were worried about everyone else following. "Kimiko and Nabiki didn't come through with us," she said to the younger Tendo woman when Akane looked at her.

"I know," Akane responded with a small frown. "It's bothering me as well. But I'm not sure that
anyone else should go back. If Yori and the others can't handle it, I can guarantee that no one here could either."

Not entirely convinced and still very nervous for her younger sister and someone who was very close to her best friend as well, Mikī sighed. "I can't take much more of this waiting," she mumbled. Akane nodded, her arms folded, but didn't say anything.

"Hey, what's that idiot animal doing?" John suddenly exclaimed. They all looked at him, then followed his eyes to see the male soarer had stuck his head through the portal, only the rear three quarters of his body visible on that side of the anomaly. It looked very odd. The female was staring at him as well from a couple of metres away.

"We should stop him going through," Shampoo said consideringly.

"How?" Mousse replied with mixed amusement and resignation. "That thing is huge and has a very large mouth."

"It's also very friendly," Akane told him. She walked closer to the soarer, which suddenly stiffened, its long tail sticking out behind it and its wings opening a little. A strange sound came from both it and the female, then the thing vanished through the portal so fast she blinked in shock. The other one was half a second behind him.

"Oh, hell," Shampoo moaned. "That's all we need, alien flying animals in Nerima."

"You mean more alien flying animals in Nerima," Akane corrected absently, still staring at where both soarers had been, as was everyone else on the plaza. "This is all because of the first one."

The five people standing there looked at each other, then as one sighed. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to at least take a look," the Tendo woman allowed. "Very carefully."

She led Mikī and the others over to the portal, the former holding her boyfriend's hand tightly. After taking a deep breath, Akane stepped through the portal. Everyone waited tensely. Seconds later she came back. "It's gone," she reported, then held up a warning hand as there was a surge of people towards the way home. "But hold on, something else is still going on. Wait here while I check it out, please." She vanished again.

Mousse and Shampoo exchanged a glance, then the Amazon woman followed her friend. After a couple of seconds deliberation Mikī went after them, John still holding her hand and as a result coming along for the ride. Emerging on the Nerima side of the portal she looked around, her eyes widening in shock.

The garden was a mess. Tables and chairs were scattered all over the place, there were gouges in the grass that looked like some irked farmer had incompetently tried to plough it while drunk, and a large part of the rear wall had collapsed with the stones scattered around the place. Quite a few tiles were lying around as well where they'd obviously fallen from the roof.

"Holy shit," she muttered. Akane was looking around with amazement as well, having apparently not noticed quite how much damage had happened during her first excursion.

"Damn it, we only just got the place looking really nice after the last time," the Tendo woman growled. Mikī stared at her, wondering what on earth the 'last time' had involved. She looked around again to find her sister and her friend, spotting neither of them immediately. What she did see was seven magical girls, one Amazon Elder, and one master martial artist, all staring upwards. Several of the girls were holding energy balls ready to fire while Chiyoko was sighting carefully
along her staff, holding it like a weird kind of rocket launcher over her shoulder rather than in the pose she'd seen the girl use before.

Following the eyes of the others, Miki craned her head back, to see far above them four flying things, one far larger than the other three, all of them almost dots against the encroaching evening. The sky was ebbing towards purple as the sun set, making it hard to be sure, but she was fairly certain that two of the dots were the soarers. The large one was presumably the weird demonic duck thing. What the fourth one was she didn't know.

Distant pinpricks of green light abruptly flew from that figure towards the big one, which jinked sideways, looking like tracer fire. "What the hell is that?" she asked quietly, shocked.

Yori lowered her eyes from the spectacle above them to look at her, a worried expression on her face which made the Sano woman's heart drop. "That's Azumi," she replied, coming over. "Look, I'm sorry, Miki, but... That thing grabbed Kimiko and took off. Azumi was passing and went after it, the soarers followed her."

Miki paled, swaying a little. John grabbed her and steadied her. Yori put her hands on the taller woman's shoulders, meeting her eyes with her own crystalline purple one. "I promise you, we'll get her back safe and sound, all right, Miki? Azumi knows what she's doing. She's trying to get that thing to let Kimiko go so she can grab her and get her out of there. Then we can take it out. But we can't do anything serious to it until they're all out of range."

"Oh my god," Miki said faintly. She looked upwards again. "Oh my god."

"Persistent damn thing isn't it?" 'Azumi' said rhetorically to Jun as she dived on the demon and opened fire again, strafing it with both hands as fast as she could. Dozens of small ki spheres shot across the narrowing distance between them, the shots walking up its back in twin rows of small explosions, provoking another outraged squawk and a sudden manoeuvre as it tried to evade her. She shot past on the left, rolling over and folding her wings while hitting it in the face with half a dozen more shots. As always, the damage repaired itself too fast to be more than a momentary annoyance to the creature.

'It does appear very reluctant to release Kimiko,' Jun replied. 'Surprisingly so, while your shots are too low powered to do much damage it must at least be very painful. I would have expected a retreat by now."

The silver haired flying girl backwinged hard as the thing suddenly dived at her, its toothed beak lunging for her right wing. Missing cleanly it passed her then flapped heavily, while she took the opportunity to blow the last metre of its tail off. For the third time so far.

'I can't get a good shot in until it lets go of Kimiko and I don't think it's going to do that unless I get a good shot in.' The middle Tendo sighed, trying to work out a suitable approach. "This thing isn't very cooperative," she announced to the others. "And it's steadily climbing, it seems to be aiming out to sea. We're already two and a half kilometres up. At this rate Kimiko is going to asphyxiate. She seems OK at the moment but she's gone limp. I think she fainted."

"Can you put a ward around it to stop it getting away?" Tamiko asked Yori and her wife. There was a pause, then the eldest sister responded, sounding mildly frustrated.

"Yes, I could, although it's a little difficult at that range, but it would also enclose Kimiko. If the thing finds itself trapped it might hurt her."
"Good point." The red-head went silent, apparently trying to think of another approach.

'Azumi' watched the two soarers harrying the creature, swooping on it and slamming into the thing's wings and tail, which made it twitch and lash out, but otherwise had no useful effect. They both seemed extremely miffed about the beast. She wondered why for a moment, then as she watched, got an idea.

Mulling it over for a few seconds she decided it was worth a try. Concentrating on a trick she'd worked out some time back, she tried modifying it. After a few abortive experiments she suddenly smiled, glancing to the sides to see the leading edges of her wings begin to glow a familiar green colour. It took a little longer before she managed to stabilise the ki aura but she managed in the end, the glow brightening to a dazzling level.

"Got an idea, guys," she announced, flapping to climb above the creature, which looked around and up, apparently suspicious. "If it works I can get Kimiko away from it. You'll have to deal with it, I'll have my hands full then. Literally."

"OK," 'Yori' replied, sounding pleased. "We're going to erase that damn thing, if it crashes it could cause a lot of damage. Make sure you get away from it as fast as possible, the minimum safe distance is going to be something like five hundred metres."

"Make sure the soarers follow you, Sister," 'Chou' added.

"Got it." Reaching an altitude over a thousand metres higher, she looked down, carefully lining herself up. 'I hope this works,' she commented to the SI, which she could feel watching with interest and worry, having worked out her plan instantly.

#It should do although I suspect it will hurt,# Jun replied quietly. It produced a targeting display without comment, locking the crosshairs on the demon's neck just behind the head. With a deep breath 'Azumi' tipped into a rapidly accelerating dive, flapping hard for the first part then folding her wings almost entirely, the air screaming past her. Using her tail and wingtips to compensate for the motion of the demon as it flew, she hurtled closer and closer, pumping as much power into her ki aura as she could manage.

At the last moment, just before she passed it, she opened both wings to their full extent. Whipping past the creature at a relative speed of over two hundred and fifty kilometres an hour, she felt a surprisingly small impact that made her right wing ache a little. Looking at the overlaid view from the drone that she had been shadowing the thing with, she could see its head tumbling over and over as it fell groundwards, only to vanish in a blinding violet flash a few hundred metres below her, the shock wave passing her moments later.

#That worked more effectively than I expected,# Jun told her, sounding pleased.

'Slings a bit but it's not too bad,' she responded, grinning. Converting her dive into a climb with a high g pull up, she headed back towards the remainder of the demon's body, which oddly enough was gliding with its wings locked open. She stared in disbelief as she saw that the neck was beginning to sprout what looked worryingly like a new head. 'Fuck me! What does it take to kill this thing?'

#Apparently more than removing its head.# Jun's voice had a certain amount of reluctant admiration in it. #A very resilient organism indeed.#

With a shake of her head she extinguished her ki-glowing wings and flew closer, keeping a wary eye on the progress of the regeneration through the drone. It looked like she had about thirty
seconds at best before it was back to normal. Flapping a few times she matched speeds with the thing just underneath it, looking at Kimiko, whose head was just visible sticking out one side of the demon's talon. It appeared as if the creature had relaxed its grip considerably but hadn't let go completely.

The young woman seemed to be conscious again, looking around wildly, her eyes wide. "Kimiko!" the silver-haired woman called loudly, gliding next to her a few metres away. "Can you hear me?"

The Sano sister craned her neck to see her, then gaped for a moment. She tried nodding, found she couldn't do much, then shouted back, "Yes, I can."

"We've only got a few seconds, I've disabled it but it won't last long. I'm going to try cutting you loose, OK? You'll fall, but I'll catch you. Just don't move until you're free."

The Tendo woman could see Kimiko swallow hard. A second later she closed her eyes. "OK," she yelled.

Reigniting her ki aura, 'Azumi' very carefully drifted closer, using the drone view and her own eyes to get two different viewpoints of what she was doing. With delicate motions of wings and tail she managed to get the right wing to contact the demon's leg half a metre above Kimiko, who opened her eyes and stared at what was going on with shock.

The leg twitched, apparently involuntarily, then slowly parted, the taloned foot and a metre of leg abruptly dropping as gravity reasserted itself. Kimiko screamed loudly as she fell. Diving after her 'Azumi' waited until the foot and the woman parted company, which took about a hundred metres. The entire way the other woman was alternately screaming and swearing at the top of her voice.

Somewhat impressed 'Azumi' matched speeds with the plummeting woman who was now spinning wildly, looking ill. She reached out and gently grabbed an ankle, stopping the spin and urging Kimiko into a vertical dive, which provoked even more swearing. Folding her wings a little she released the young woman, waited a moment, then reached out and grabbed her as she rotated into the correct orientation versus herself, holding her tightly under the armpits and wrapping her arms around her.

"Put your arms around my back and hold on," she shouted. Kimiko grabbed her hard enough that without her magical girl constitution she'd have yelped in pain. "Don't let go."

"I'm never letting go," Kimiko yodelled, staring at the ground which was approaching in a manner that made it apparent it wanted to be friends. 'Azumi' could sense her heart hammering in her chest.

Checking with the drone she saw that they were now nearly four hundred metres below the demon, which had nearly completely regenerated. The soarers were watching it warily, then when she whistled sharply, dived after her at high speed. Shortly she commed the people on the ground. "We're clear," she reported. "Eight hundred metres and still moving away."

"Close your eyes," the voice of the martial artist warned. Seconds later an amazing range of ki balls and a humming magical beam shot upwards like anti-aircraft fire from the back garden of the Tendo Dojo. An enormous flash from above them lit the entire ward like daylight for a fraction of a second. Having closed her eyes just in time and put a hand over Kimiko's, she blinked, then held on as the shock wave rolled over them making her descent wobble a little. The deep boom from above was surprisingly muted compared to the flash.

"That was impressive," she commented, looking over her shoulder to see that there was only a trace of vapour high above them.
"Seems to have worked." 'Yori' sounded satisfied. "We put a ward below it to damp the blast, so hopefully there won't be too much damage on the ground, but I'd expect there are a few broken windows." She sighed slightly. "The fund is getting a real workout today."

"We can afford it, dear, as you well know," her wife giggled. "Come on home, Nabiki. Miki is jumping up and down with worry about her sister."

"Kimiko seems fine although I think she might be in shock," 'Azumi' reported, looking at the woman she was carrying. Carefully levelling out at fifteen hundred metres, she went into a gentle spiral, gliding downwards with the soarers falling into formation behind and to the sides, yipping to each other in a pleased sounding manner. "But we have a little problem now. With 'Azumi' here, where's Nabiki?"

Her friends were silent for a moment. Then Fumiko chuckled. "I've got a cunning plan."

"Hey, Ami, are you busy right now?" The blue-haired girl smiled at the voice in her head, putting her book down beside her on the bed.

"I was just reading, Fumiko," she replied silently. "How are you? I haven't heard from you guys for a week or so."

"We're fine, pretty much, thanks," the other woman said with good humour. "Although life has been a little exciting here for a couple of hours. We're in Nerima at a party with Nabiki's family and something weird came up."

"Can I help?" she asked, somewhat concerned.

Fumiko laughed. "I was hoping you'd say that. Yes, you can. We need a spare Nabiki in a hurry."

Ami stared at the ceiling in surprise.

"Um, what?" she managed to ask after a few seconds.

Fumiko explained, making her laugh, then agree.

"I'm just going out for a little while, Mom." Saeko looked up from her computer at the sound of her daughter's voice from the door to her office, seeing the young woman leaning against the door. "A friend needs some help with something."

"I see," she smiled. "More homework?"

Ami giggled. "Not quite. It shouldn't take long."

"All right. Take care and let me know if you get delayed, will you?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Oh, and can you pick up some potatoes and some bean sprouts on the way back?" Saeko asked, remembering that they'd run out. Ami grinned and nodded.

"Of course. I'll see you soon." With a wave the teenager left the hallway, the front door opening and closing shortly thereafter. Smiling fondly, Saeko resumed typing, frowning in concentration as she refuted the point her colleague had made with incisive wit and superior knowledge. People were wrong on the internet. It was annoying.
Miki watched open-mouthed as the flying magical girl circled lower, able to clearly make out her younger sister clamped onto her like a limpet with her long hair blowing in the wind of their passage. "It's her," she hissed to John, who nodded. "The girl from back home on the mountain."

"Luckily she was in the area and helped," Yori commented, also watching, while smiling to herself. "She's a good person and gets around a surprising amount." Everyone waited for the pair to land. Gracefully flapping as she rotated in the air, Azumi dropped to the ground as lightly as stepping off the stairs, before folding her wings behind her. Miki stared in amazement. John looked at her, then the magical girl, before shaking his head and releasing her hand. When she looked around he was disappearing into the portal, only to reappear seconds later with Hana, who stopped and gaped.

"Oh my god," her older sister gasped, raising her camera. Behind her other people began trickling through the portal, all of them looking shocked at the scene they found. Soon Cologne and Soun were explaining the recent events to a collection of stunned party-goers.

Absently noticing Chou and Aiko disappearing behind the house, she didn't even blink as a bright flash reflected around the corner. Instead she walked over to her sister and the flying woman, who was talking softly to Kimiko. The latter seemed reluctant to release her grip but finally did so. "Are you OK, Kimi?" Miki asked gently. Her sister nodded, tears of relief in her eyes.

"I'm fine, I think," she said in a trembling voice. "But I never want to do that again."

"Which part, the being grabbed by a demon part or the flying part?" Yori asked from beside them, having come over silently. Kimiko looked at her, then smiled a little.

"The flying wasn't too bad after the sheer gut wrenching terror but the demon part wasn't much fun," she replied. Yori snickered, putting her hand on Kimiko's shoulder for a moment.

"You're fine," she reported. "No serious injuries, just some bruised ribs and some cuts on your foot. Hold on, I'll sort that out for you." Her hand glowed briefly then she lowered it. "There you go."

"Thank you, Yori," Kimiko said with a formal bow. She turned to Azumi who was watching with amusement. "And thank you so very much. That was amazing if horrifying."

"You're more than welcome, Kimiko," the silver-haired girl replied, smiling. "I'm sorry that this got in the way of what looks like a nice party."

"It was good," Kimiko grinned. "I hope there's some beer left, I need to get very drunk."

"We'll get some more if there isn't." Yori assured her. "Horrible stuff that it is."

"Thanks." The Sano woman staggered a little, both her sisters rushing to support her. "Wow. Head rush." She looked pale for a moment. "It all caught up at once."

"Go and sit down for a while," Azumi advised in a calm voice. "It will pass."

Nodding to her, the three women walked over to a set of chairs that Nodoka was picking up and putting to rights, lowering Kimiko into one then sitting beside her. Miki fussed over her younger sister until she was sure she was all right, glancing at Azumi occasionally with awe. The silver-haired girl with wings was talking quietly to Yori and Fumiko with Misaki listening, Chiyoko and Tamiko watching from a short distance. The young magical girl was holding tightly to her staff and every now and then looking up with wide eyes. Miki couldn't blame her.

Eventually, she stood and made her way over, waiting politely until Azumi finished talking to
Fumiko. The woman glanced at her and smiled slightly in a cool but friendly manner.

"Hello," she said. "Miki, I believe?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet you. I saw you a little while ago, in Kobe? On the mountain? You rescued a little boy from a car that went over the edge."

"Ah, yes, I remember that. The poor kid wasn't too badly hurt in the end." Azumi smiled more widely, her oddly disconcerting orange eyes crinkling a little around the edges. "Do you live in Kobe?"

"Yes, but I go to university in Setagaya with my boyfriend John. He's over there." Miki motioned towards John who was standing next to Soun, both of them drinking beer and watching the people mill around. She ducked slightly as both soarers suddenly dropped out of the sky, having been circling a few hundred feet up, landing with one on each side of Azumi, who didn't move a muscle. "I heard these things were friends of yours."

Azumi suddenly grinned, looking much less intimidating. The male stuck his head under her hand with a yip and closed his eyes in rapture as she massaged it. "Yes, we get on very well, actually," the magical girl chuckled, looking down at him. "Probably because we both fly."

"I was wondering about that," Miki started cautiously. Azumi raised an eyebrow. "I mean, we've not actually met before, but I've heard stories about you in Setagaya several times. No one mentioned wings." She looked the other woman up and down momentarily. "Or a tail."

Looking amused, Azumi shrugged. "They're options," she laughed. Miki stared, then her eyes widened as the woman shimmered slightly like a heat haze, the aforementioned appendages evaporating without trace.

"Holy shit!" Hana yelped from behind her, making her sigh a little. Another flash came from her sister's camera.

"Those pictures aren't going to come out very well, are they?" she asked with a look over her shoulder.

"Probably not, no," Azumi snickered. "Magic, you know. Screws cameras up quite a lot."

"She's going to be furious," Miki giggled. Looking back, she added, "That's my sister Hana. She's a fan. My friend Nabiki got your autograph for her, she nearly fainted."

"I remember meeting Nabiki, yes," Azumi commented, tapping her chin and looking thoughtfully at Miki. "But I seem to remember giving her two autographs." Miki went slightly pink while Yori, who had been listening quietly beside Fumiko and Misaki, emitted a muffled snicker. Glancing at them in embarrassment, Miki saw all three women were grinning at her.

"Um. Yes, that's true. I got one as well." She blushed at the admission. "I like collecting magical girl stuff, although not as much as Hana does. She looked over her shoulder again. "No one like collecting it as much as Hana does."

"She does seem fairly keen on the subject," Fumiko laughed from the side. "That grin... I've met horrible things from other worlds that would run from that grin."

Miki sighed, shaking her head, while everyone else looked at her with various smiles.

"Like I said, she's a fan." After a moment, she realised someone was missing. "Hey, where is..."
Nabiki?" Looking around and growing worried having lost track of her friend during the excitement, she relaxed when she spotted the middle Tendo sitting in a chair on the other side of the garden with Chou talking to her. The blonde had apparently come back when she wasn't looking. She noticed that Aiko was half-buried under a stack of half a dozen crates of beer bottles which she was effortlessly carrying across the garden, assuming they'd gone somewhere to get it.

"Well, I'd probably better get these guys back home, then I'm going to have to leave," Azumi announced, stroking the female soarer, which was now leaning against her left leg and looking satisfied. She said something in a weird language that made both animals look up at her. They seemed disappointed.

"What language is that?" Miki asked curiously.

"Fwetnan Common," Azumi replied. "It's the language the D'Sage speak over most of their world. These things know a few words of it. They're pretty smart." She looked down at the animals with fondness. "I'll be back in a minute." Walking over to the portal she disappeared through it, the soarsers looking at each other, then around at the garden, before appearing to slump a little in disappointment and follow her. Miki watched with impressed amusement.

"They are smart," she said. Yori nodded, chuckling.

"That they are. Almost too smart sometimes. They certainly like people as well." She turned to Miki. "I'm sorry about your sister. Hopefully she'll be OK, though."

Miki looked at Kimiko who was talking to Hana, both of them looking at the portal. The youngest Sano was still unusually pale but seemed fairly cheerful. She perked up even more when Aiko came over and handed her a beer bottle for each hand, flicking the tops off in the process.

"She'll be fine, I think," Miki said, going back to Yori. "I'm just glad your friend was able to help."

"It's what we do." Yori grinned. After a moment she looked thoughtful. "But I'm going to have to work out what that damn thing was and how it got here. I didn't feel a portal other than that one anywhere in the area, although admittedly it's giving off enough magic at close range to cover up another one if it was some distance away."

"We didn't feel anything else while we were out earlier," Misaki put in, also frowning slightly. "And I've never heard of anything quite like that before. It was damn tough."

Yori sighed. "That can wait until tomorrow. Hopefully there won't be any more of them. I'll let the relevant people know what happened, I'm sure there are all sorts of worried people in the government right now. That flash must have been visible over most of Tokyo."

"It was pretty spectacular," Miki giggled. "I've still got afterimages from it."

Hearing the portal crackle slightly more loudly, she looked to see Azumi coming back through it, alone. The woman walked over to Chou, talking to her for a few seconds, the blonde nodding and looking around apparently doing a head count. Shortly after that the portal disappeared with a pop.

Coming back, Azumi briefly stopped next to Kimiko, saying a few words to her. Miki's sister put her beers down and jumped up, hugging the magical girl, then sat again, reclaiming both bottles after smacking Hana's hand, which had been drifting in the direction of one of them. The other sister yelped and retracted the appendage quickly. Shaking her head and smiling, Azumi rejoined Miki and the others. She held out her hand, which Miki took.

"It was nice to meet you," she said.
"I feel the same," Miki replied. "Perhaps we'll bump into each other in Setagaya?"

"Not impossible, I suppose," Azumi chuckled. Waving to Nabiki, who waved back with the hand not involved with holding a glass of juice, she nodded to the other girls, waved to Aiko who called a goodbye, then bounded lightly onto the roof of the house. Running along the peak of it she leaped into the air over the garden, her wings and tail reappearing as she arced through the air, then quickly flew off, gaining altitude at a remarkable rate. Miki watched in astonishment as did practically everyone else in the garden.

Eventually lowering her eyes when she could no longer make out the figure against the sky, she met Yori's smiling face. "That happened, right?" she asked faintly.

"Yep."

"OK."

"What did?" Yori asked, a knowing tone in her voice.

"I can't remember what she looks like." Miki sighed. "It's like with you lot, isn't it?" she asked, glancing at Fumiko, who grinned at her.

"Pretty much. Effective, isn't it?"

"Far too effective," Miki griped, before shrugging, then wandering off to look for something to eat, suddenly feeling peckish again after all the excitement. Nabiki, who was talking to Chou again, smiled at her, before both women walked over to listen to Genma discussing some martial arts move with the police lieutenant whose name she'd forgotten.

"Thanks for the information, Yori," Naito said, making notes with the hand not holding the phone. "I'll come up with something plausible and pass it around."

"OK," the magical girl said. She sounded somewhat tired. "Sorry about dumping all this on you like that. There wasn't time to warn you about that damn thing, we needed to get rid of it quickly."

"It's not a problem," he assured her. "You're the expert in these matters. Even the government says so." He chuckled as she sighed a little. "You have an ID that says as much, I've seen it."

"True enough, I guess," the young woman replied with a weary snicker. "But to be honest it would be nice to be able to go to a party without ending up having to chase hundreds of little menaces around for a couple of hours, then shoot down a damn demonic duck of some sort."

"I still can't believe that," he laughed, shaking his head. "It's weird even for you guys. I've heard the ATC conversation, that poor pilot sounded very confused."

Yori chuckled. He could picture the look on her face pretty well. "I can imagine. It confused us, believe me. Just when you think you've seen everything..."

"Somehow I doubt with your lifestyle you'll ever get to the point you've seen everything," he noted. She made a sound of resigned agreement. "Go back to your party. I'll sort things out at this end."

"Thanks, Masao. I'll get you a proper report tomorrow." Disconnecting, the line went quiet. He put the phone down and thought for a little while, making notes, then picked the phone up again. Shortly he was dictating a suitably non-terrifying story to be spread when the media came calling,
which would certainly happen very soon.

Dropping off the roof of a house a few doors down the street having carefully checked she was unobserved, Nabiki, the real one, shimmered a little and retook her own form. She grinned at the person wearing her face who returned a remarkably close facsimile of the expression. Beside them, 'Chou' giggled.

"Thanks, Ami," the Tendo woman laughed quietly. The other Nabiki turned back into the familiar shape of Ami, who was still grinning. "That was fun," she giggled. "I think even your father was fooled. It wouldn't have worked without you feeding me the right lines and coaching me on the responses, though."

"You sure learn quickly," Nabiki replied, still smiling about the ruse. "We'll have to try that with Ms Aoyama at some point, so she and Azumi can be seen at the same time. Maybe with Sergeant Harada. It's always fun messing with his head."

"Be good, sister," 'Chou' smiled. "The sergeant isn't a toy."

Ami and Nabiki both laughed. "I'll see you around, Ami," Nabiki promised, heading back to the Dojo, 'Chou' accompanying her. Ami waved, then turned to Aiko who silently appeared next to her, both women vanishing again instantly.

Back in the yard, Nabiki went into the house then out the other side, stopping in the kitchen to retrieve the last plate of sushi from the refrigerator which was the excuse the duplicate had used to leave the party briefly. As soon as she emerged with it a plague of partiers descended on it, leaving her blinking in surprise and holding an empty plate moments later.

"We need to get more food," she announced as Nodoka came over and looked at the plate with a bemused expression. She put the thing down on a table, popped the single salmon roll she'd salvaged into her mouth, then grinned at the older woman, who shook her head a little.

"I have no idea how everyone has managed to eat everything we had, including all the things Ukyo and the Elder brought, and can still be hungry," Nodoka sighed. She looked around the damaged garden. "Can you round up a few people to help sort this out with me, dear?"

"Sure, Auntie," Nabiki replied, waving to Miki and pointing at the still scattered tables and chairs. Her friend nodded, grabbing her boyfriend and Hana, the three of them coming over. Fumiko and Misaki pitched in to help and they soon had things back in as much order as was possible.

When Aiko suddenly appeared carrying a stack of pizza boxes, there was much rejoicing. She put them on a table and disappeared again with a flash, reappearing a few minutes later with a somewhat disorientated woman in her mid thirties who swayed a little, going mildly green, then recovered as Aiko supported her. When she was the right colour again she thanked the petite brunette, looked around, then headed directly towards Chiyoko, who looked worried.

Nabiki joined Aiko as the woman began talking to the young girl in a low voice. Chiyoko hung her head with an embarrassed expression, nodding, then shaking her head. "I assume that's Chiyoko's mom?"

"Yep. She wasn't too pleased, although I think not having to take the train all the way home made her a little less annoyed," Aiko replied, grinning. "She's basically all right but she's not happy about the girl managing to get out of visiting her grandmother. Ending up running around Nerima
blowing holes in it didn't help either."

They watched as Chiyoko went red, then sighed, nodding again. A little while later Chou joined the two, talking calmly to Chiyoko's mother, who slowly seemed to relax. "She's really good at that," Aiko commented admiringly. Nabiki smiled, watching her sister get the older woman to sit down and accept a sandwich and a drink. Soon the two of them were talking like they'd known each other for years.

"Impressive." Aiko shook her head in wonder, before heading for the pizza, only just beating Misaki to the last slice of the barbecue chicken one.

"Here you go, Mom," Ami announced as she came in and shut the door, handing her mother a bag of groceries. "I remembered that we needed some onions as well."

"Thanks, dear," Saeko replied, taking the bag from her daughter. "Did you manage to help your friend?"

"Yes, thanks," the younger woman smiled. "It went very well."

"That's nice. Do I know this one?"

"No, she's someone I met over the summer. She's very nice, really smart with a wicked sense of humour."

Saeko smiled. "You'll have to bring her over for a meal some time, then." Heading into the kitchen, she put the groceries away, then started to prepare the evening meal, while her daughter sat down in the living room and turned on the TV to the news. Half-listening, she poked her head into the other room when she heard one particular report.

"Sources in the government have told us that the brilliant flash seen in the sky over Tokyo earlier this evening was most likely caused by a small meteorite breaking up in the atmosphere. Such events are, while rare, known to happen every so often. Reports of minor damage throughout Nerima, which appears to have been directly under the flash, are being blamed on the shock wave from the explosion. No injuries have so far come to light although a number of broken windows and damaged roofs have been noted. Temporary repairs are being carried out in a number of areas, with full assessment of the required work waiting until morning. A helpline has been announced for insurance claims. If you live in the affected area and require repairs, please call this number, which is..." The announcer read out a phone number with a Minato area code.

"So that's what that flash was," Saeko exclaimed. "I thought I'd seen something but it was only out of the corner of my eye. When I went to the window I couldn't see anything."

"I heard a faint thump, that must have been the explosion," Ami mused. "But I had my blind down and Nerima is in the other direction, behind the building." She glanced at her mother. "A meteorite? Pretty unusual event."

"Weirder things happen, especially around here," Saeko laughed. "At least it wasn't some demon or other magical peculiarity." Her daughter giggled, looking amused, then turned the TV off and came to help with the meal.

By the time the pizza was finished, everyone was finally stuffed to the point they couldn't eat any more. Akane looked around the garden at several dozen contented people, a few of whom had fallen asleep. She was amazed despite herself that after a demon attack of all things no one seemed
too worried. Vast quantities of food and drink seemed remarkably effective in de-terrorising a group like this.

Glancing at the various magical girls scattered around the place she decided that they probably helped as well. Most people seemed to find their presence somewhat comforting, they seemed to radiate an air of competent protection that had a definite calming effect. Even Chiyoko, weirdly enough. The young woman had at some point powered down or whatever they called it, her pink dress being replaced with more normal clothing and her staff vanishing from where it had been leaning against the wall of the Dojo. She was now sitting talking happily to Ukyo and Kimiko, the latter of whom was distinctly tipsy but seemed back to normal after her ordeal.

Aiko approached her, smiling. "We should show your DVDs now that everything's calmed down, before everyone falls asleep," she said when she was close enough. Holding out her hand she showed the Tendo woman a small black device, "This is the projector, I can connect it to the DVD player and it should give a good result out here."

"OK. That sounds like a good finale to a weird day," Akane giggled. She headed into the house to retrieve the player and an extension cord while behind her Aiko announced to the assembled multitude what they were going to do. Shortly, after a little fiddling and some muttering under her breath, the magical girl was ready.

Inserting the first DVD, Akane closed the drawer and pressed the play button on the front of the device. It made the normal sounds, then her eyes widened a little as a display over four metres across appeared out of thin air at the end of the garden. "That's pretty impressive," she said to Aiko, who smiled and nodded.

"It's good, isn't it?"

Picking the first menu item the Tendo woman selected it, then sat down in a free chair next to Shampoo. Soon the clips were playing one after another, to much good natured comment and applause. Pleased at the response, she grinned at her friend, who was smiling to herself.

The second DVD produced a lot of laughter and even more comments. When it was finished, most of the guests came over to them both, in groups or singly, to congratulate them on their work and wish them good fortune.

Mr Ito was one of these. He grinned at her, his wife beside him. "I see that you seem, somehow, to have refrained from destroying the entire set, Akane," he said, looking pleased yet sly. "I find myself slightly surprised."

"What sort of person do you think I am?" she replied archly. He laughed a little.

"After several years of knowing you, I have a very good idea what sort of person you are." He gave her a warm smile. "A good and talented one, despite early issues. You'll go a long way in your new career."

"Thanks, Mr Ito," she smiled back. He nodded to her, and Shampoo, before he and his wife made their departure as some of the other guests were beginning to do.

"That was nice of him," Shampoo noted.

"He's a decent man," she told her friend. "I'll miss working for him, I think." She looked around. "Come on, let's help packing things away. It looks like the party is pretty much over." They joined Mousse, Nabiki, and Miki in stacking the chairs and folding up the tables. Soon Hana and Kimiko,
along with Ukyo and Konatsu, were doing likewise.

Shortly after they'd finished, Chiyoko and her mother came over. "Thank you all for letting Chiyoko stay here," the older woman said with a smile. "It's much appreciated. I was very worried when she jumped off the train." She looked severely at her daughter who sighed very faintly, but said nothing. "I hope she wasn't too much trouble."

"Not at all," Nabiki assured her. "She was very well behaved. You should be proud of your daughter." Chiyoko gave her a grateful smile.

"Oh, I am, believe me," the other woman said with resigned good humour. "But..." She seemed to be looking for the right words. "Her... unconventional hobbies... are somewhat concerning at times." Several people grinned at her description.

"I can imagine," Nabiki chuckled.

"Well, we must be getting home now." Chiyoko's mother looked at her watch. "It's quite late."

"I'll pop you back," Aiko told her, getting a nod of thanks in return. Chiyoko waved as the three of them stepped away, then disappeared in a brilliant rainbow flash. Blinking, Nabiki looked at the place they'd been, before turning to her sister and her friends. Miki stared at her for a moment.

"Have I said you throw amazing parties yet?" she asked.

Nabiki thought for a moment. "I think so, yes," she replied, smiling.

"OK. I still think that's true," the other woman told her, smiling back, then yawning. "I'm so glad we came." She yawned again.

"Come on, I'll show you where you're sleeping," Nabiki laughed. "Before you fall over."

Akane watched as her sister left with her friend, before going to say goodnight to the remaining guests. Soon everyone except Miki's boyfriend and two sisters, who were talking quietly near the pond, Cologne, Mousse, and Shampoo, had left, only the normal residents still also present. She slumped into a chair next to the Amazon warrior, who looked tired. "That was... interesting," she finally said. Shampoo grunted a little, nodding.

"One way to put it," the other woman replied after several seconds. They both fell silent again, watching the few people moving around in the garden.

"This is all going to take a lot of work to put right," Akane remarked several minutes later, looking around at the damage to the garden. The wall was the worst of it, but she could see several other things that needed considerable repair.

"You should be used to this sort of damage." Shampoo grinned at her for a second.

"Not from demons," Akane giggled, before yawning widely. "Kodachi, perhaps. Or the pig."

"Oh well. We can deal with it in the morning." Shampoo heaved herself out of the chair, smiled at her friend, then headed over to the other Amazons with one last wave. Akane watched as they all left, saying goodbye to her father and the others. She looked up as Nabiki came out of the house and sat down in the recently vacated chair.

"Is Miki all right?" she asked. Her sister nodded.
"Already asleep. I've put her and John in Kasumi's old room. Hana and Kimiko can share mine, I'll share with you."

"OK." Akane felt her eyelids drooping and forced herself awake with some effort. Looking at her watch she was a little surprised to see it was only half past eleven. "God, I'm tired," she muttered.

"You're probably still jet lagged aside from anything else," Nabiki told her, smiling a little. "Go to bed. I'll take the others in, then I'll be up soon as well."

With a tired nod the youngest Tendo stood, waved to John and the two women who waved back, then stumbled inside. She didn't even remember getting into bed.

Brushing her teeth, Nabiki looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. She looked somewhat tired, she thought, but otherwise pretty good considering the fight with the demon. 'I think it went well today, bizarre occurrences aside,' she said to Jun.

#It might have been better if a horde of demons followed by that unusual creature had refrained from crashing the party,# the machine commented wryly. #But aside from that, I would agree that events seem to have worked out well. You also learned a new technique that might be useful in future.#

'I'm not entirely sure when,' she grinned. 'Or if I want to know. But you're right, of course. I'm just very glad it worked.'

#Surprisingly well, in fact. By the way, Kimiko is outside the bathroom and I believe she wants to talk to you.# Nabiki nodded, having felt the ki signature of the other woman approach thirty seconds ago or so. Rinsing out her mouth, she wiped it with her towel, then slid the door open. Kimiko looked at her.

After a moment she stepped forwards and hugged the Tendo woman. "Thank you," she said in a low voice, before releasing her and turning around, heading back to her room.

"You're welcome," Nabiki replied, equally softly, before going into Akane's room and closing the door, smiling to herself.

Entering the pathology lab with Agent Tinnin, Harrison greeted the pathologist, Doctor Nadar, who was a middle aged and still attractive woman of Middle Eastern descent. She looked up from her discussion with the tall dark-haired man with a small beard next to her, someone he didn't recognise but who looked to be in his early sixties or thereabouts. "Ah, Lieutenant," she exclaimed, showing signs of mild irritation. "I was going to call you. Who the hell are these people you have us investigating? There's something very strange going on."

He glanced at Tinnin, who looked back, bemused, then asked, "What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Do you have any idea of how odd the poison that killed those three are?" she demanded, looking both intrigued and annoyed for some reason. "I've been up all night trying to figure it out along with half the staff here. We worked out fairly quickly that they'd been exposed to some sort of neurotoxic alkaloid but we simply couldn't identify it." Indicating the man beside her with a quick jerk of her head, she continued, "Luckily, very luckily, an old friend of mine was available to consult, and he's identified what we think it is."

The man in question stepped forward, holding out his hand, which both Harrison and Tinnin shook. "This is Doctor Alan Gruber, formerly of the Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious
Diseases, now working with the CDC. He was in San Francisco for a conference and agreed to fly down to look at our samples."

Doctor Gruber's black eyes betrayed a high intelligence and good humour, but also a certain amount of unease. "I'm pleased to make your acquainances, gentlemen," he said quietly in a voice that had traces of a German accent.

"Thank you for helping us, Doctor," Harrison replied. "I'm Lieutenant Richard Harrison, this is Special Agent Mark Tinnin of the FBI."

"What can you tell us?" Tinnin asked. Gruber picked up a sheaf of papers, flipping through them for a moment to stop on one page densely covered with graphs and figures showing some form of chemical analysis.

"I can tell you that someone has done some remarkably complex and extremely illegal chemical engineering," he replied after a moment, holding up the page which both men looked at, neither one understanding any of it. "The toxin used is a weaponised variant form of batrachotoxin, a very nasty and highly potent neurotoxin originally derived from certain animals, mostly frogs, primarily native to Central American countries such as Colombia. The indigenous people there have traditionally used the naturally occurring form of this compound as a hunting aid, tipping arrow and darts with it." He pointed at one graph. "This is the molecular structure of the animal-derived form of the toxin. It is very fast acting, once it enters the bloodstream paralysis is close to instant with death due to cardiac arrest occurring within seconds, minutes at best. There is no known antidote and in any case it acts so quickly that even if there was one it would normally be of no real use."

"That really happens?" Harrison looked at Tinnin, who seemed a little surprised himself. "I sort of thought that poisoned arrows were some sort of Hollywood thing."

"No, it's a real phenomena in many cultures," Gruber assured him. "Some toxins used for that purpose, for example curare, are much better known, because they have shown to have useful pharmacological effects. Batrachotoxin, on the other hand, has no current therapeutic use, it's simply too toxic." Moving his finger to indicate another diagram, he went on, "The interesting and worrying part of this particular case is that this is not actually naturally occurring batrachotoxin. The compound is a synthetic variant with a somewhat modified molecular structure, which has had some unique effects. One is that the toxin is even more effective, which is bad enough. The other one is that it is now a binary toxin. That part is... very difficult indeed to arrange." He sighed slightly. "Unfortunately, I've seen it before, once, many years ago."

Tinnin and Harrison exchanged another, more worried, look. "Where did you come across it, and what do you mean by a binary toxin?" the FBI agent asked.

"We ran into some samples of something that, if not this compound precisely, was very closely related and undoubtedly designed by the same people, in a collection of bioweapons that were acquired during a CIA operation against the Soviets in the late seventies." Gruber looked unsure, but shook his head slightly and carried on. "Strictly speaking it's classified information and I'm not supposed to talk about it, but considering the fact that this compound is actually in use in this country, I think I have no choice but to mention it. Although I would take it as a personal favour if you could omit to mention my name in connection with this affair."

Tinnin regarded him for a moment, then nodded. "I have no problem with that. With this information I think that an... unusual contact... can probably produce all the relevant data to back up your suspicions without requiring you to go on record."
Sighing slightly in what looked like relief, the doctor nodded, glancing at the pathologist who was listening silently. "Thank you."

After a moment, he put the paperwork down and sat on the edge of the desk he was standing in front of. "The binary part of the puzzle is fascinating from a scientific viewpoint. The designers of this compound managed to produce two different chemicals, each one on its own fairly innocuous, that when combined in the body due to normal metabolic actions produce a form of the toxin which will then almost immediately kill the individual affected. I would expect that death would occur within five to ten seconds of the administration of the catalysing agent. The primary compound could be administered up to approximately forty-eight hours beforehand, causing no obvious symptoms except possibly for some minor effects such as a dry mouth and mild peripheral numbness for a time. If the second part was not encountered it would be broken down and excreted from the body within days."

"Making it very difficult to trace," Doctor Nadar added, looking irritated. "Also because the damn stuff is so potent the lethal dose is very small and hard to detect as a result. It took us half a dozen attempts to isolate it. If I hadn't been pretty sure it was there we might have given up before we detected it. All of the standard tests and most of the non-standard ones don't see it at all."

"I would imagine that the three victims were probably fed the primary compound in some manner a few hours before the crime they were involved in, possibly simply in food or drink, although it could also have been in some form of what they thought was a medicine." Gruber shrugged a little. "Unless they were very paranoid they may well not even have noticed. The second part of the toxin, the catalysing compound, was definitely administered as an aerosol. We found traces of it in their nasal passages. Whoever killed them just sprayed them in the face. Death would have occurred in seconds, they'd barely have had time to react."

"Christ." Harrison stared, appalled. "That's... terrifying."

"It's certainly not something I'm comfortable about being in the hands of criminals or terrorists or whoever these people are." Gruber looked unhappy. "The chemicals were created as an assassination tool. One can picture an operation which would involve dosing a group of people non-selectively with the first agent, in the water supply for example, then arranging for the target to come into contact with the second one. Only they would be affected and neither part would be detected by any normal assay method for poisons or chemical weapons. It's not really suited for large scale application, although it would be possible I suppose if you really wanted to do such a thing, but for small scale targeted murders it's horrifyingly effective."

They were all silent for a few seconds, absorbing the information. Eventually Harrison shivered a little. "The more I hear about these people the more worried I get." He looked at Tinnin, who nodded soberly.

"I have to agree. Now we have some old Soviet bioweapon on top of all the other peculiarities. Not good at all." He turned back to Gruber. "Do you have any idea how they might have obtained this damn stuff?"

The scientist thought for a moment before shrugging a little with a minute sigh. "I'm not sure. The samples that were given to us by the CIA were definitely destroyed approximately four years later. I witnessed it myself. A number of the more dangerous toxins were incinerated in a general clear-out of the lab. Whether they retained some themselves I have no idea. Assuming they didn't, which in theory they shouldn't have, I would have to assume that these people probably somehow got them from whoever made them at the covert bioweapon research facility the Soviets were running at the time. To the best of my knowledge that particular facility was shut down after a rather
unpleasant accident in the early eighties. It was bad enough that even the Soviets didn't want to continue working there."

"What happened?" Harrison asked with morbid curiosity.

Gruber shook his head. "No one in the West is actually completely certain. There was some sort of containment failure, we're fairly sure of that, and as far as could be determined some six hundred people died horribly from a weaponised disease. They ended up, based on various reports I've seen, having to napalm most of the site to contain it, and they were apparently seriously considering using a tactical nuclear weapon if that hadn't worked. It was much worse than the anthrax leak in Sverdlovsk which happened a couple of years earlier. We didn't find out about that one until the mid eighties and it took another ten years to get real details. This event is still classified to the highest level by the Russians and no one is talking."

"Jesus." Harrison stared, appalled. "That's not exactly comforting to know."

"No, it isn't," Gruber sighed. "There have been some very close calls with bioweapon research which is why there are so many treaties basically banning it. Of course, it still goes on, sometimes in the guise of defence against such things, legitimately or otherwise, or sometimes simply covertly. But, that said, as far as I know all research on this particular compound was stopped at least fifteen years ago."

He picked up the paperwork again, flipping through it absently, before handing it back to Doctor Nadar, who silently accepted it. "It's possible that some of the scientists involved in the creation of this compound were available for these suspects of yours to use, but I personally doubt that is the case. The production of this substance is an extremely complex chemical engineering process which would require a very large investment in equipment and knowledge to pull off successfully. The likelihood of accidents is also significant without a lot of experience. My best guess is that you're dealing with old stock that was somehow removed from the facility before it was closed. How and by whom I couldn't tell you."

After a few more seconds, Tinnin nodded his thanks. "That's all very useful to know. Thank you, Doctor Gruber." Turning his attention to the pathologist, he inquired, "Is there anything else of note about the deceased, Doctor?"

"Not really," she replied, shaking her head. "They were all in good physical condition, I'd say they all regularly exercised, and there were signs of minor physical trauma that one would expect from ex-military personnel. Mr Soria showed some signs of past drug abuse although nothing recent. Other than that, I can't find anything particularly helpful that might suggest their activities over the past few years, if that's what you're thinking about."

"It was," he mumbled, rubbing his chin for a moment in thought. "Oh, well, it was worth a try. Can you send samples to the FBI lab please, we might have some luck with anything you missed."

"Of course, Agent," she replied. A small smile slipped across her face. "But I doubt it, I'm quite good at this job."

Smiling, he assured her, "I'm sure you are, but we have some methods that are unique to us, so it's worth a try."

"Fair enough." She accepted the card he handed her.

"In case anything does come up later, please let me know."
"I will."

The FBI agent glanced at Harrison, who was still thinking about the whole biotoxin problem with a considerable amount of worry. "Unless there's anything else you can think of I think we're probably done here," he said. Harrison nodded slowly.

"Yes, I think so. Thanks, both of you. Doctor Gruber, it was nice to meet you." He shook hands with the older man, who nodded.

"Likewise. Good luck with your hunt."

"Thanks."

Tinnin addressed the scientist. "We'll make sure to keep your name out of the report, Doctor," he assured the man. "You have my thanks for coming forward with this information, it could be very helpful. I understand it was difficult for you."

"You need to know," the other man replied. "But I do appreciate the confidentiality."

Both Tinnin and Harrison left the pathology lab, heading for the exit. "It fits, you know," Tinnin mused as they walked. Harrison glanced at him curiously, so he expanded on the comment. "From what Gruber said, most likely our friends acquired this horrific stuff from either an old CIA program or directly from the Soviets, in each case probably over a decade, possibly as much as two decades, ago. They probably don't have the capacity to make more, which I for one am extremely happy about. It's another example of some old resource being used. I'm starting to get the impression that these people, whoever they are, are not only recruiting agents from security and espionage agencies world wide but are also collecting equipment that was supposed to be lost, decommissioned, or destroyed a long time ago. Possibly their recruits are cleaning out the storeroom on the way out the door or something like that."

Harrison thought about it for a moment, nodding after a second or two. "I can see your point. One the one hand that's good, I suppose, because it implies that they have limited amounts of whatever, but on the other hand it's scary because who knows what they've managed to scrape together? It could be almost anything based on what we've seen so far. I mean, magical batteries, teleport spells, biotoxins... What's next, some old cold war surplus suitcase nuke?"

"Christ, I wish you hadn't said that," Tinnin muttered after an appalled look at his companion, paling considerably. "There are rumours that the Soviets misplaced several of the fucking things when the USSR broke up."

"Shit." Harrison now also wished he hadn't said that. "I really hope those rumours are just rumours."

"So do I," the other man replied quietly as they left the building.
Chapter 99

Fallout from the party and recovery after it. Plus swimming.

While I think about it does anyone have any good thoughts on what the name of the so-far mythical 'Organisation' that Ms Aoyama works for should be? And a suitable logo for it? It's going to be required at some point in the not too distant future and I thought I'd throw it open for consultation.

It needs to be gently threatening in a very polite manner, ideally rather unnerving when you think about it for a while :) Creepy is good, oh yes it is.

Your chance to contribute to the wordage! PM me if you have any decent ideas.

In case anyone has missed it I posted the first chapter of the Xander/Ms Aoyama story I've been writing for a friend after a few requests. It's not going to update wildly often in all probability but it WILL get updated and finished. Enjoy. Or not. Your choice ;)

Waking to the sound of Akane lightly snoring in her bed, Nabiki stared sleepily at the ceiling for a few seconds, blinked, then turned her head to look around the room. It was surprisingly early considering the late night, only just after eight AM, she absently noted as she looked out the window to see yet another rather nice late August morning. After a little longer, she stretched widely, yawned, flipped the covers aside, and hopped off the folding cot they'd set up for her in her sisters room.

Shortly, after a quick wash up, she was dressed and waiting for the kettle to boil for her morning coffee. No one else seemed to have made an appearance yet. She could feel the various ki signatures of her family and friends, most of them asleep, although it felt like both Nodoka and Miki were stirring. A faint thump from upstairs in the direction of Kasumi's old room made her look at the ceiling momentarily and wonder what Miki had tripped over.

When her friend put in an appearance fifteen minutes later, still looking a little disorientated, she pushed a cup of coffee across the living room table at her with a smile. "Try this," she commented, sipping her second cup. Miki looked blankly at her, shook her head a few times, then grabbed the offered drink and slurped several mouthfuls. A handful of seconds passed then she seemed to wake up that last little bit, smiling back at the middle Tendo.

"Thanks, Nabiki, I really needed that."

"You're welcome." Nabiki grinned at her. "How did you sleep?"

"Really well, thanks," the other woman replied, sitting down and sipping more slowly. "That bed is very comfortable. John was still asleep when I got up, and there's no sign of Kimiko or Hana yet either."

"Akane and the rest are still asleep as well," Nabiki mentioned, finishing her coffee and putting the cup down. "Although I think Nodoka is moving around a little." She smirked a bit. "I heard you trip over something, I think?"

Miki giggled. "I forgot where I put my bag and found it with my foot," she admitted. "I nearly went out the window head-first."

"You don't want to do that." Nabiki laughed slightly as well when her friend nodded wryly.
"Not really, no," Miki smiled. Looking around for a moment, she added, "So what's the plan for
breakfast? Wait for everyone else to turn up?"

"How are you hungry after everything you ate last night?" Nabiki queried, putting a shocked look
on her face. Miki stared at her, narrow-eyed.

"So says the woman I've personally seen eat enough to put a normal person into a coma on more
than one occasion," she snarked, causing the Tendo woman to laugh again. "I don't know what to
tell you, I think my metabolism speeds up overnight. Whatever, I could eat."

"So could I," her friend agreed, sighing a little. "There's probably something wrong with us both."

Sharing a small smile with Miki, she stood. "Come on, let's see if there's anything left in the house
to eat. We practically emptied the place, though, so don't get your hopes up."

Poking around in the kitchen eventually revealed enough in the way of ingredients to prepare some
miso soup, which Miki started, and some rice noodles, which Nabiki quickly mixed with various
left-over meats to form a sort of ramen-like stew. Tasting it she decided to add some more
seasoning, and a chopped up onion, finally deciding it was as good as it was going to get.

"And what do you call this dish, Miss Tendo?" Miki asked in a superior tone, peering over her
shoulder and sniffling a few times.

"Tendo House Special, or Slop in a Pot, Miss Sano," Nabiki replied in her best upper-crust accent.
"Much desired by the commoners, but still acceptable to the likes of you and I."

They grinned at each other as she took the saucepan off the heat and turned the stove off. "It's
edible, at least," she added. "I think."

"Worth a try," Miki shrugged.

As it turned out, the improvised meal wasn't at all bad. When they finished, Nabiki put what was
left into a couple of bowls in the fridge then washed up what they'd used. Going back into the
living room she found Miki standing outside the door into the garden looking around at the
somewhat trashed area. A large number of people walking around on the grass for hours hadn't
done it any favours, not to mention the results of the giant demonic duck. Nabiki sighed, shaking
her head.

"What a mess."

"But what a party!" her friend chortled, nudging her in the ribs. "People will be talking about it for
years."

"The ones who don't need therapy because of it," Nabiki giggled, making Miki nearly fall over
laughing.

"True. Very true."

They wandered around for a while, picking up various odds and ends that everyone had missed in
the dark the night before, including quite a few broken tiles from the roof. As Nabiki stacked the
last one onto the pile they'd built with a clink of ceramic on ceramic she looked up at the roof,
counting under her breath how many were missing. "I hope it doesn't rain until we can get that
fixed," she said to her friend as Miki stopped beside her and followed her eyes. "Those ones up
there are right over Dad's bed. He's going to be annoyed if he wakes up in a puddle."
"I'll bet," her friend smiled. "Will fixing it be a problem?"

"No, not really. There are a lot of companies in Nerima who specialise in repairing damage from unconventional causes." She grinned with a resigned air. "We have several of them in the address book. We're practically on first name terms with them."

Looking at the gap in the garden wall while Miki giggled, she walked over and inspected it more closely. "This isn't too bad, actually. Most of the stones are intact, it looks like it was only the mortar that went, so I think they can stick it back together easily enough." Glancing along the wall she pointed to a couple of spots. "It's not like it hasn't happened before." There were a number of places where differently coloured mortar outlined a previous hole that had been repaired.

"Good grief," Miki muttered as she counted the locations that were visibly fixed. "Is this a habit or something?"

"Sort of," Nabiki snickered. "Not so much in the last couple of years but at one point the gates weren't really needed, you could just come in through the holes." She pointed at the roof of the Dojo visible past the end of the house. "And that has been completely rebuilt once, not to mention all the damage being repaired over and over. Akane did a lot of it, various other people helped at one point or another." She shrugged. "We've had a lot of overpowered people with anger issues and poor self control come through here over the years."

Shaking her head in wonder, Miki looked around. "Still a pity, the garden looked so nice when we got here yesterday."

"It will again, dear," the voice of Nodoka came from the living room door, making them both look over, to see the older woman watching them while holding a steaming cup of tea between her hands. "Don't worry about that." She cast her gaze around with a small frown. "Although I will admit it's somewhat annoying. We didn't plan for a demon attack."

"These things happen, Auntie," Nabiki replied as they walked over to her. Miki gave her an odd look then laughed.

"You know, most people I've met would find that attitude very strange," she remarked, making both Nodoka and Nabiki smile. "But to you this is basically just another morning, isn't it?"

Exchanging a glance, the other two eventually nodded. "Pretty much, yes," Nabiki admitted. Nodoka merely smiled serenely.

"I always heard Nerima was a little peculiar but I never really realised what that meant until I met you," Miki giggled. "Even so, I wasn't quite ready for all this." She waved her hands around to indicate the garden and by implication the entire area.

"Fun, isn't it?" Nabiki smirked at her. She nodded enthusiastically.

"It sure is. Although I expect it could be a bit much if you wanted a quiet life."

"If you want that, dear, you move," Nodoka told her wisely. "That's something you work out very quickly around here. I understand Minato has it even worse."

"Minato is pretty strange, yes," Nabiki grinned. "Every time I visit friends there we see something a bit unusual."

"I'll have to come along with you some time, then," Miki suggested eagerly. "We should visit once we're back at university."
"That could certainly be arranged," the middle Tendo replied. A sudden sound from above made them all look up to see 'Chou' and Fumiko standing on the roof. Nabiki had felt them coming a little while earlier, of course, but said nothing. She waved.

"Hi, guys, what brings you here so early?"

The two women dropped off the roof and landed next to them. "We were in the neighbourhood cataloguing the damage and investigating the possible cause or source of that odd ducklike creature," the blonde told them, smiling a little. "Yori is with Aiko backtracking its path to see if they can find out where it came from. We're also going to see if we can find any of the bits Azumi blew off it. I saw at least one section of tail drop down over that way a kilometre or so. I'm curious about the thing and I'd like to investigate it."

"You'll probably find some government spooks have nabbed it," Miki suggested with a look of amusement.

'Chou' smiled back at her. "If they had, they'd give it to us to study anyway," she replied, making the Sano woman look surprised. "We have a very good working relationship with the 'government spooks'."

Fumiko chuckled, looking at her friend. "We practically are 'government spooks' if you look at it in the right way," she said with a grin. 'Chou' returned it as Miki stared.

"Shhh," the blonde said, holding a finger to her lips. "No one must know our secret identities. We must appear to be nothing but completely unremarkable and normal magical girls." She spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice, looking suspiciously around for spies in a very obvious manner.

Shaking her head, Miki laughed for a moment. Nodoka was listening to the byplay with a small smile on her lips. "You people are not at all what I expected," Miki announced.

"Better or worse?" Fumiko enquired with an expression of amused curiosity.

Shrugging, Miki appeared to think it over. "Different, let's leave it at that," she finally replied, making them all smile. "But fun."

"We do our best, worthy citizen," 'Chou' said with an elaborate bow involving much hand waving before straightening up grinning.

"Would you care for some tea, girls?" Nodoka asked pleasantly. 'Chou' and Fumiko exchanged glances before nodding.

"Yes, please, that would be very nice," the latter replied. She looked around the garden, inspecting the wall carefully for a moment. "We should get the reparations fund to do this," she added in an aside to her blonde friend, who nodded.

"I was planning on it already. It seems fair, it was a magical girl related problem in the first place." 'Chou' looked at Nabiki, who was grinning internally at the last few minutes of conversation. "Assuming your father wouldn't be offended by someone else paying for the repairs."

"Dad will be fine with it," the middle sister laughed.

"Fine with what?" Soun said, sticking his head out his bedroom window above them, which was still missing the glass. Everyone looked up.

Nabiki waved. "Hi, Dad. Chou was just saying that that magical girl reparations fund that sorts out..."
things in Minato would deal with the repairs. You don't mind, do you?"

Smiling down at them, the martial artist chuckled. "Not at all. I'm not *that* proud, I'm happy to take help from the experts."

"We've added it to the list of damage from yesterday, Soun," 'Chou' told him with a small smile. "There will be several teams of assessors coming through first thing tomorrow to work out what needs to be done and in what order. This should all be sorted out within three days based on prior experience."

"That sounds more than fair," the head of the Tendo household agreed happily. "I'll be down in a moment. Is there some tea available?"

"Indeed there is," Nodoka replied.

"Thank you." He smiled again and vanished back into his room. The rest of them trooped into the house, sitting around the living room with Nodoka disappearing into the kitchen for a little while. She re-emerged with drinks a few minutes later, just as Soun came in followed by a yawning Kimiko.

Shortly everyone had a cup and was drinking appreciatively. "There isn't much in the way of food left for breakfast, assuming anyone wants anything," Nodoka commented.

"Miki and I put together some leftovers into something edible, so we're all right for the moment," Nabiki replied. "There's enough in the fridge for a couple more servings." She looked at her friend for a moment as she added, "We can go out and pick up some ingredients if you'd like." Miki nodded, still sipping her tea.

"Thank you, Nabiki, that would be very helpful," the older woman told her with an approving look. "I'll make a list. There are a few shops open today so it shouldn't be a problem."

"I'll come with you," Kimiko announced, smiling at them. "I'd like to see the area after all."

"How are you feeling after your ordeal yesterday?" 'Chou' asked gently. Kimiko looked at her with an expression of reminiscence.

"Better than I probably should be, actually, Chou," she said after some thought. "I think I should most likely be shivering in bed, requiring a series of long talks with a psychiatrist, but oddly enough I'm basically fine." She grinned. "All the beer last night helped, I suspect. I was really pretty drunk when I went to bed. But now all I have is a slight headache."

'Chou' smiled back, reaching out and putting a hand on the other woman's neck for a moment, with a brief glow of gold light. "You're just a little dehydrated, you should make sure to drink a couple more cups of tea or some water. This should help with the headache, though."

"Much better. Wow." Kimiko looked both surprised and pleased. "That's amazing." Sitting back the blonde grinned at her.

"It's a useful skill, yes, if you're around people who overindulge."

"Yori is the only one who's never needed it, of course," Fumiko chuckled from beside Soun, "both because she doesn't drink in the first place and because she could do it for herself anyway."

"I'm just glad Azumi was passing by." Miki watched her sister carefully for a moment before apparently deciding she was all right. "I was terrified when Yori said that thing had grabbed you
"You were terrified?" Kimiko laughed. "Think what I felt like! It was the most horrific thing I've ever even imagined. I fainted at least twice, although I think the second time was more because it was holding me pretty tightly, and waking up to see the ground that far away is... not fun." She shuddered briefly. "The falling part when Azumi cut its leg off was much worse, believe me. I really thought I was going to die until she grabbed me."

Getting up Miki moved around the room to sit beside her younger sister, putting her arm around her and hugging her. "I'm so pleased you're OK, Kimi," she said in a low voice. Glancing at 'Chou' and Fumiko, who were watching along with the others, she continued, "Please thank your friend again when you see her. We owe her a lot."

"We will, but you don't owe her or any of us anything, Miki," the blonde responded, smiling again. "We all simply did what we do, try to help as much as possible."

"You'll forgive us if our opinion differs on that subject, I hope," Kimiko giggled. 'Chou' bowed a little from her seated position.

"Of course we will." She looked amused as Fumiko grinned.

"What was the flying part like after the real danger was over?" Nabiki couldn't help asking. Her disguised elder sister gave her a look which she returned blandly. Kimiko giggled as everyone else turned to her.

"Actually that part was OK, I guess. If it hadn't been under those circumstances I think I could have enjoyed it. But..." She shrugged. "I was kind of thinking about other things at the time."

"Understandable," Soun chuckled, putting his empty teacup down. "I would imagine your attention was elsewhere all things considered."

"Maybe you'd like to try flying under less perilous conditions?" Fumiko asked, glancing at 'Chou' enquiringly. "We were talking about going hang gliding on Fwetna at a place we know close to the waterfall last night at the party, before you guys got here. A few people seemed up for it." Nabiki raised a hand, grinning, making Fumiko laugh. "Akane seemed... not entirely convinced, but willing to go along with it," she added.

Miki and Kimiko stared first at her, then Nabiki who was still grinning, then each other. "That could be..." Miki started.


"Both, I think," her sister replied after a moment.

"It's certainly possible to arrange," 'Chou' informed them, apparently thinking it over. "We're busy for the rest of the morning, but I think we could probably take a few hours off this afternoon if you'd like. That would correspond to about halfway through the day on Fwetna at the moment. Their days are about thirty hours long, so they move in and out of sync with our time." She pondered the matter for a few seconds then nodded. "Yes, that should be feasible if anyone would like to indulge. The lake there is very nice to swim in so you should bring towels and swimsuits as well."

Everyone looked at each other. After a little while Miki nodded, followed by Kimiko. "We can easily take a later train back home than the one we were planning on," Miki said.
"You could simply stay another night as well," Nodoka told her. "There's no rush to push you four out, you're welcome to stay as long as you like." The older woman glanced at Soun who nodded, smiling.

"Certainly, no one would object to that."

"And we can always ask Aiko to pop you home anyway," Fumiko grinned. "Why waste time with trains if you don't have to?"

"I can see why Akane and Shampoo like knowing you people so much," Kimiko giggled. "Free transportation is really useful."

"Damn right it is," Fumiko snickered. "We're all waiting for Chou and Yori to work out how to do it like she does and teach it to the rest of us. That'll be fun."

Miki stared in surprise at her, then the blonde, who was looking satisfied. "Can you actually do that?" she asked.

"We believe so," 'Chou' told her, smiling slightly. "We're quite good at reverse-engineering other people's magic and reimplementing it with our own system. Aiko's teleport spell is one of the most complex ones we've worked on, though, worse than the portal spell in some ways, so it's taking a while. We'll get it eventually."

"Unbelievable," Kimiko breathed. "I had no idea you could learn new magic like that. All the magazine articles I've read on magical girls tend to say that they have a fixed set of skills."

"I've read a few of those," the blonde sighed. "They're almost entirely wrong in every possible way. Some of them are so bad they're not even wrong." She shook her head in despair. "Most of the girls don't talk to other people who aren't in that world about what they can do at all so the various publications that are aimed at fans basically make it all up. Or base it on manga or anime, which are sometimes surprisingly accurate but normally make a lot of mistakes as well." She shrugged as Miki and Kimiko laughed.

"That said, there is a certain amount of truth in the idea that most of the girls have a signature attack or attacks which they tend to use as a theme. It normally comes with the magic, but it doesn't usually mean that it's all they can do, just that it's the easiest thing to fall back on. And if it works most of the time, naturally that's what they'll use more often than not. I suppose that as a result people who aren't experts on the subject tend to assume that it's all the girl in question can do."

"It makes sense, I suppose, as much as anything to do with magic does," Miki laughed.

"Don't try to make it make sense, you'll just get a headache," Fumiko advised her good-naturedly. "Just roll with the fact that it exists and that it works. Very few people, even mages, really understand how it works." She glanced at 'Chou' who was smiling into her teacup. "Even these guys are still working it out and they know more about the mechanics of it than anyone else I know."

"It's a reasonable attitude," Soun commented, having been listening with interest as was Nodoka. "I've talked to Elder Cologne about both magic and ki use in the past and she's said much the same thing about both of them. She knows far more about either than I ever will and even so will admit privately that she's not entirely sure how they actually work. She knows that they do, and a significant number of techniques using both, but the underlying principles are still something of a mystery in many cases."
"Strange," Miki mused. "Very strange. But very interesting." She grinned at Nabiki. "Hey, maybe I could learn to do that fireball spell the Elder showed last night! That could be useful."

"When?" the Tendo sister asked, grinning back. "Hopefully you're not going to run into any more little biting demons and it looked slightly excessive for lighting campfires. Or dealing with muggers."

Miki laughed. "OK, true, but it would be really impressive even so." She looked around, then added with a sly smile, "Anyway, with you around I don't need to blow up muggers, you'll protect us from them." Soun looked curiously at her, then turned his gaze towards his daughter, who went slightly red from embarrassment, while Fumiko and 'Chou' also looked at her with interest. Faked, of course, since they knew full well what Miki was referring to.

"Dear? What is your friend talking about?" Soun asked gravely, peering at his daughter closely.

Nabiki sighed, giving her friend a dirty look which provoked another smirk. "There may have been a minor encounter with an incompetent mugger a while ago," she muttered a little reluctantly. "He wasn't very good."

"It was amazing," Miki said happily. "We'd come out of a movie and were just wandering around minding our own business on the way to get something to eat when this idiot jumped out of nowhere waving a knife. John and I didn't even really see him before Nabiki disarmed him and had him on the ground groaning. It was better than the movie!"

Soun listened with interest and a very small smile lurking under his moustache while Nabiki sighed once again. "It wasn't all that dramatic, Miki," she tried, but her friend shook her head wildly. "It was really impressive," she insisted, grinning widely. "You were incredibly quick."

"Dear? Do you have something you'd like to share?" The Tendo patriarch seemed both amused and interested. "Have you been learning the Art behind my back?"

Everyone looked at Nabiki who looked back, red-faced. Nodoka seemed to be quietly enjoying her somewhat flustered expression while Fumiko was openly grinning. 'Chou' smiled quietly but was obvious enjoying it as well. Kimiko had seemed surprised for a few seconds then merely sat back and watched, meeting Nabiki's eyes with a knowing look.

"It was sort of automatic," the middle Tendo finally said, speaking carefully and avoiding the second question, shaking her head a little. "You know that knife disarming move that you teach your students, Dad?" He nodded. "I've seen it so often I think I must have learned it without really noticing. This guy jumped out, pointed a knife at us in a really obvious way, and I sort of just did it. It was like when you're teaching the students, doing it slowly and in a way that they can easily deal with." She shrugged. "It was surprisingly easy, I didn't really think about it very much, I just grabbed him, disarmed him, and sat on him until the police turned up."

"I see." Soun studied her some more. "Well done, dear. As I said yesterday, I think you'd be good at it if you studied properly, but I'm very pleased that even without formal study you seem to have developed decent reflexes and habits. Perhaps some time we should experiment a little and see what other moves you've absorbed without realising it." He gave her an amused look that made her narrow her eyes at him.

"I've seen you and Genma 'experimenting' on Akane, dad. She couldn't walk in a straight line for two hours after the last time."
Her father smiled mildly. "It was an interesting outcome, yes. But she learned in the end."

Fumiko made a muffled snort of laughter, making her stare at the other woman for a moment with irritation, which only provoked more snickering.

"Thanks. You're really helping, Fumiko," she grumbled.

"All part of the service, Nabiki," her friend assured her with a grin. Everyone else laughed.

"Anyway, back to the question of using alien hang-gliders on an alien planet later today," Nabiki said, sighing a little at the smirks surrounding her. "Do you think John and Hana will be up for it?" She looked at Kimiko and Miki, who were still smiling a bit. The two sisters exchanged glances.

"I think John will," Miki said slowly, "He told me once he'd tried it back in the UK and liked it but it was too expensive as a hobby to keep up."

"Hana will go along with anything suggested by a magical girl, especially you, Chou," Kimiko snickered, making Miki grin again and roll her eyes. 'Chou' looked amused, as did Fumiko.

"Good, then that seems like a nice idea for later." The blonde thought for a moment. "Perhaps about three o'clock? That will give us time to finish what we're doing here and work out who else wants to go. Akane and Shampoo will, I think, and Mousse seemed interested last night. We can make arrangements to have enough aircraft available for everyone, we know several people who have a number of them who would lend them to us for a few hours." She looked around at everyone. "Does that seem like a decent plan?"

"I'm happy with it," Nabiki replied. Soun was looking thoughtful and the slightest bit apprehensive.

"Dad? Do you want to try it as well?"

He hesitated, glanced at Nodoka, who smiled mischievously at him, then eventually and a little reluctantly nodded. "I suppose I can hardly let my daughters try something I'm unwilling to attempt, it would be highly irresponsible," he announced in a firm voice. Everyone else stared at him, then looked at each other, before all of them smiled. He chuckled as Nabiki shook her head mockingly.

"Such a manly father you are, keeping us safe like that," she laughed.

Crossing his arms and looking proud, the Tendo head nodded firmly. "I'm glad you understand, dear."

Standing, Nabiki grinned at him, then looked at Miki and Kimiko. "Come on, guys, let's go and get some shopping done." Turning to Nodoka, she requested, "Can you tell Akane and the others about this afternoon, Auntie, and see if anyone else wants to come? Ukyo and Konatsu might like to try it as well."

"I'll pass the message on, dear, don't worry." The auburn-haired woman handed the younger one a list. "Here, this is what we need at the moment. It should do for lunch and dinner, I'll have to make a bigger list to restock for the rest of the week tomorrow."

Nabiki ran her eyes down the paper then folded it and tucked it into her pocket. "OK, Auntie, we'll see you later." As the three young women headed for the door, 'Chou' and Fumiko finished their tea and stood as well.

"Thank you for the tea, Nodoka," 'Chou' said with a polite bow of her head, getting a smile in response. "We have to get back to work as well, but we'll see you again later today."
"It was nice seeing you two once more," the older woman smiled. "Please remember to stop by whenever you're in the area."

"We will," Fumiko assured her as they followed the other three out. Nabiki waited at the front door, the two Sano sisters having stepped through, as the other two joined her, giving them both a secret smile which they reciprocated. All three leaving the house, she closed the door behind her, then walked down the path to the gate with the other beside her.

"It was nice to see you two again," her disguised sister told the two Sano women, who smiled at her, once they were outside the gate. "I'm glad you suffered no ill effects from your ordeal, Kimiko. Hopefully a little hang-gliding will help with any residual issues surrounding flying." She grinned as Kimiko started giggling.

"I suspect it will, as long as someone is there to catch me if it all goes wrong," the other woman giggled. "Is Azumi going to come?"

'Chou' smiled regretfully. "I suspect not, she's otherwise involved today, I'm afraid. But I'll pass your best wishes on to her." The blonde carefully didn't look at Nabiki who was smiling to herself internally.

"Thanks."

Both magical girls waved to the others, then bounded onto the roof of the house on the other side of the street, disappearing in seconds. Miki watched them go with a wide smile and a wondering shake of her head. "Wow. I wish I could do that!"

"I know you do, sis," Kimiko snickered, grinning at Nabiki. "I know you do."

Laughing, the trio headed into the centre of Furinkan, chatting about what to do next and enjoying the beautiful day.

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Sitting at the small conference table, Martta studied the documents in front of her, then looked up. "So, Harry, you think you're a good fit for what could be a physically demanding and rather uncomfortable trip?"

The young man on the other side of the table swallowed a little nervously, glancing at Jerry beside her, who was quietly observing, content to watch how his colleague handled the interview. A medium height student of approximately twenty-four years of age, he was dark haired with a small neat beard and grey eyes. After a moment, he nodded, visibly telling himself to man up. "I do, Professor Laine. I'm in good condition, I jog at least eight to ten kilometres every day, swim for two hours a week, and try to eat a healthy diet. I'm an expert cross-country skier as well, not to mention I've been on some wilderness survival courses when I was in high school. I'm not too bothered by cold temperatures, I grew up in Edmonton, where it's damn cold in the winter and not exactly hot most summers."

Martta nodded, looking down at her notes and adding to them briefly. "I see. That's a decent résumé from that point of view. I have your academic records here, which also look promising. You've studied under both myself and Professor Benton, we don't need to go over that again obviously, and previous to your studies here you indicate a long term interest in ancient native cultures, specifically Arctic ones. Interesting." She flipped through her folder, checking a few facts again. "Not to mention you have a decent working knowledge of a number of remote sensing techniques, minored in Electrical Engineering, and you have good computer skills and research abilities." Looking up at him again she studied him for a few seconds.
"All of these are abilities we have need of and finding them in one person is helpful. So, on balance, I think we may well be able to find a place for you on this expedition." The young man smiled widely at this, relaxing noticeably.

"Thank you, Professor Laine. Very much." After a moment, he slightly hesitantly asked, "Can you tell me more about the expedition itself? The information I have so far is intriguing but a bit... vague."

Martta glanced at Jerry again, both of them smiling a little. "That was intentional, Mr Granger," the latter said with an amused look. "We are possibly going to make a discovery which could be truly incredible, based on information we received from an impeccable source. We don't want to be beaten to it as unlikely as that is, so we've kept the information quiet for the moment. You're the last of the team, assuming you accept, and you'll be required to sign a non disclosure agreement beforehand restricting you from mentioning anything you learn until either we publish our findings or six years has elapsed, whichever comes first. Any papers we publish as a result of research you are involved in you will receive joint credit for, which should help your career along nicely as well. Do you have any issues with any of this?"

The student sat and thought for a while, Martta and Jerry waiting patiently. Eventually he looked up. "I can't find out anything about this without signing the NDA?"

"I'm afraid not," Martta told him. He nodded slowly, still thinking. Eventually he sighed a little, although he was smiling.

"I have no choice, then. I'll never forgive myself if I walk away from this now."

She slid a set of stapled pages across the table to him, a pen on top, returning his smile.

"That's the attitude," she chuckled. Picking up the document he read it carefully, making her nod approvingly, then signed in the marked place on both copies. Handing it back he waited until she'd checked it, separated it into his copy and hers, then returned his copy to him.

"So, can I now learn what I've signed up for?" he asked, grinning.

"You can." Jerry looked at his watch for a moment. "The others should be waiting in the next room, so let's go and introduce you to them, shall we? We can go over the whole thing for everyone at once." All three stood, Jerry leading the way next door, where there was a larger table with a data projector on it pointing at a screen on the wall, and five other students ranging from early to late twenties, two female and three male.

"Thank you all for joining us, everyone, and giving up your Saturday," Jerry said, looking around at them, as Harry glanced about then took one of the remaining seats. Moving to the head of the table as Martta sat to one side, Jerry picked up a remote control for the projector and lights. "Let's make some quick introductions. You can all get to know each other later but I'd like to get this preliminary meeting started. OK, as you know, I'm Professor Jerry Benton, and my colleague and friend here is Professor Martta Laine. Our newest, and last, recruit is Mr Harry Granger, post graduate archaeology student." He indicated the young man, causing everyone to look curiously at him.

"We have in addition to Mr Granger, Miss Kimberly Vaughan, also post graduate archaeology student, Mr Carlos Shoults, likewise, Mr Park Yang, post graduate imaging techniques and information processing student, Mr Jan Hradil, post graduate palaeoanthropology student, and finally Miss Elisa de Boorder, post graduate archaeometallurgist. You all have excellent academic backgrounds and in addition to your primary qualifications all have skills that we may draw upon."
He looked around the table as the various younger people glanced at each other, then went back to listening. "Quite a team. We should be able to deal with the majority of possible finds, or at least know enough to know who else to bring aboard."

One of the two women, Elisa, a petite woman with light brown skin and green eyes below almost black hair, raised a hand. He nodded to her. "Yes, Miss de Boorder, you have a question?"

"I do, Professor." She cleared her throat momentarily. "What exactly are we expecting to find?"

He looked at her, then around at the others, before turning to Martta, who was smiling faintly. She made a motion indicating he could have the honours. Turning back to the group of curious students, he shrugged a little. "We're not exactly sure."

"Oh." She looked puzzled.

Taking pity on her, Jerry pressed a button on the remote, causing the projector to come on and the lights to dim, while he stepped to the side. A picture came up on the screen, showing a satellite view of a section of the upper coast of Northern Canada. "This is Ellesmere Island, in Nunavut, the third largest island in Canada." Pressing another button made the image change, a small red dot appearing on it. "This is Alert, which is the most northern inhabited place on the planet. It's primarily a military base, a hold over from the cold war for the most part, although it started life mainly as a weather station. It still performs that function as well as being a military communications installation along with a few other scientific operations."

He pressed the button again. "This area here is known as the Northern Ellesmere ice field, which is a series of glaciers as well as a large ice cap, going north all the way to the sea. Up until the early twentieth century there was a huge ice shelf extending into the ocean from the island but it's been steadily shrinking for nearly fifty years, there's apparently less than fifteen percent of it left now. Even so, the ice thickness across much of the northern coast can be as much as a kilometre."

Once again he changed images. "OK, this is where it gets interesting. This location, as far as we can narrow it down to, was the subject of a somewhat odd occurrence a few weeks ago. There is a network of environmental monitoring buoys running through this area, satellite linked to Alert. One of them detected a sudden drop in salinity, much greater than normal natural processes could account for, right here. The scientists in Alert ran diagnostics on the buoy and are confident it wasn't an artefact of the sensors, it was a real event. The duration and type of the salinity change is consistent with a very large quantity, possibly around a tenth of a cubic kilometre, of fresh water suddenly entering this small bay here over a period of approximately two days." He indicated a point on the projected image with the built-in laser pointer on the remote.

"The working theory is that a sub-glacial lake of considerable size rapidly drained into the bay for reasons currently unknown. It's apparently not a unique event although no one seems to have seen anything as large as this. There was a noticeable temperature spike of several degrees at the same time, which is additional evidence for this sort of phenomena."

Stopping for a moment and to take a drink from a water bottle, he watched as the students who had been listening carefully looked at each other. "It's very interesting from a scientific viewpoint I guess," Jan, a medium height and very skinny blond with dark brown eyes, commented in a voice that bore distinct traces of his native Czech accent, "but I'm not seeing the link to an archaeological expedition yet, Professor."

Smiling slightly, Jerry put the water bottle down. "Understandable, Mr Hradil. It's not obvious and I have to admit we're still not completely sure about it." He turned back to the screen, pressing a button. "A little more than ten days ago I received an email from a source that, after some
background checks, turned out to be one of high integrity albeit a certain degree of mystery. The message indicated that there was an interesting archaeological find located under the ice of Ellesmere Island at this point here." Pressing the button made another spot appear, this one in bright yellow.

"The coordinates were very specific, localising the position to within fifty metres. Now, the interesting thing, the really interesting thing, is that if one looks at the suspected underlying topography of the area, there is very likely some sort of valley or depression here." The graphic changed to show the relevant data. "We're not a hundred percent sure since hardly anyone has ever been up there to that exact spot and it's under a hell of a lot of ice as well, but satellite radar data does seem to show the ground dips there, with a ridge either side."

He moved the laser across the image again. "This essentially forms a valley all the way to the sea, probably about here. What do you see?"

Kimberly was the first to say it. "That's the same bay as the salinity drop, within a kilometre of the buoy. And it looks like that yellow point is uphill from the bay by a few hundred metres." She looked fascinated, as did the others.

"Correct." Jerry grinned. "As crazy as it sounds on the face of it, there is a possibility that there is actually a void under the ice at the location my source suggested, one which was full of water until very recently, and which now may not be. This void may have something of interest to us in it, assuming we can get at it."

There was a long silence as he sat down, waiting for them to process the concept. Eventually Harry looked at him, having been studying the graphic with an expression which suggested he was thinking hard. "That's a very long way from anywhere we know of that has historically had inhabitants."

"Also correct," Martta told him, speaking for the first time. "Which is one of the very interesting things about it."

"How old is the ice sheet there?" the young man asked.

Jerry sighed a little. "That's something we're not sure about, to be honest. There seems to be something of a difference of opinion on the subject. It's unlikely to be less than approximately eight to ten thousand years, which would correspond to the Holocene Atlantic warming in the last interglacial period. The data we've studied suggests that much of Ellesmere Island might have been ice-free during this time. Before that, you'd probably have to go back to the late Pleistocene Eemian stage, which pushes it back to well over a hundred thousand years ago. Of course, that's far too far back to be particularly likely. Even ten thousand years is rather strange. We don't have any records of any civilisation or group that far north that long ago which could leave permanent traces we'd have much chance of locating after having a kilometre of ice sitting on them ever since."

The students were all looking thoughtful, Carlos, a slightly overweight Hispanic fellow with dark hair and eyes, was tapping his fingers on the table in a repetitive rhythm while he pondered the concept. "Are you sure it isn't either a hoax or a mistake?" he finally asked.

Jerry glanced at Martta, who looked back with a neutral expression. "It's one possibility, although if so someone has gone to the most ridiculous lengths I've ever heard of," he admitted. They looked curious, so he added, "The funding for this, which is... very substantial... seems to have come from the same source as the initial data. Not to mention that the source is highly respected by people who make a habit of being careful and checking things very thoroughly." He shrugged a little, again. "Until we actually go there and look we can't be completely sure, of course, but there is
enough circumstantial evidence that together with the other information I'm fairly certain we'll find something. What, I'm not sure at all."

"Which is at least half the fun of it," Martta smiled, making them all chuckle.

"Exactly." He glanced at her with a grin. Turning back to them, he asked, "Any second thoughts from any of you?" They all exchanged looks, then one by one shook their heads.

"It sounds interesting," Harry said, "and the pay is good, not to mention that if we do find anything, it's going to be one of the most remarkable archaeological events in history."

"That's very true," Jerry nodded.

"Do you think there's any connection to the Twitch?" Kimberly looked curiously at Jerry, who blinked a little, then glanced at Martta. "I mean, from what the time scale you've indicated is it must have happened at nearly the same time. It just seems an odd coincidence to me."

There was a thoughtful silence in the room. Jerry flipped through his paperwork, then looked at a calendar for a moment. "You know, that never even crossed my mind," he replied slowly. "I can't see how it could possibly be connected, we don't even know what the cause of that event was, or even what it was, but I have to admit as far as I can see you have a point. They seem to have occurred within hours, a day at most, of each other as far as these reports show." They all looked at each other in silence again, intrigued expressions crossing each face.

"Weird." Carlos summed it up fairly well.

"Indeed." Martta nodded. "Although, in the grand scheme of things, probably not immediately important. An interesting coincidence though."

"I heard that the US government was going to make a statement on the cause of the Twitch sometime in a week or so," Elisa announced. "They've had teams of scientists looking into it since it happened, including NASA, and have discovered some interesting possible causes."

"Such as what?" Jan asked curiously. She shrugged a little.

"I have no idea yet. There's all sorts of weird theories going around on the internet but most of them are obviously ridiculous, like aliens, the CIA doing something crazy, or stuff like that." She grinned. "Even some people insisting it was magic."

Harry snickered. "Magic. That's a good one, I hadn't heard that theory."

"I'll email you a list of the funnier ones," she offered, smirking a bit. He nodded, grinning.

"Thanks."

"All right, we'll have time to mock conspiracy theorists later," Jerry put in, smiling slightly. "For now, any other questions on the expedition?"

"What's the plan for getting there?" Jan asked with interest. "That far north, it's not only going to be difficult, but the temperature is going to start dropping pretty fast soon and it will be dark for months."

"All true," the professor admitted. "It's too late in the season for a full expedition now, we're going to have to wait until around late April or early May to be able to do it properly. But, that said, we have a short window this year, up until the end of September, when the temperature is feasible and
there's enough light to do a preliminary study. At least enough of one to see if there actually is anything there in the first place. In fact, it will be light twenty four hours a day which may help us.

Martta took up the explanation. "The plan is to fly up to Alert next week, where we'll be temporarily based. Contacts in the forces have generously agreed to help. They're going to arrange a C-130 to air-drop several fuel caches in the area along with some Arctic-grade inflatable shelters, food, and equipment, the sort of thing they use for training purposes. It's not luxurious but it's functional. Another contact managed to arrange the chartering of a Super Puma helicopter which we'll have access to for a month. The site is too far from Alert for the helicopter to be able to make a round trip without refuelling, which is what we need the fuel dumps for. There's no runway and the ice is probably too rough for the C-130 to land there so flying in by helicopter is about the only quick way to do it."

"We'll also be picking up a qualified medic with Arctic experience provided by our military contacts. He's also a trained mechanic, the sort of person it's always handy to have around in something like this. He comes highly recommended."

"The rest of the equipment we need we'll fly in at the same time we go, or just before. We've arranged to have the heavy stuff taken up in a C-130, but we're going by chartered aircraft," Jerry continued while they listened, looking mildly worried now. "The weather up there has been unusually good for some time, a few degrees warmer than normal, and the long range forecasts suggest it will be like that for at least three weeks after we get there. So, assuming all goes well, we should have time to do ground-penetrating radar scans of the whole place at least, which would show up anything under the ice. Assuming there is something there we then have the problem of how to actually get at it, which could be an issue."

Elisa was working something out in a notebook. "Professor, how long did you say the salinity drop lasted?" she asked without looking up from her notes.

"The best figure is about forty-nine hours, plus or minus roughly one," he told her, finding the relevant piece of documentation after a short search.

"In that case as far as I can work out there must be a tunnel something like twenty-five metres across leading from this possible void to the sea," she said slowly, looking up. "If we assume a volume of a tenth of a cubic kilometre of water as you mentioned, over a period of forty-eight hours as a reasonable estimate, that means it was flowing nearly six hundred cubic metres a second. That's an awful lot of water and it would need, or make, a pretty large hole."

Everyone looked at her, then each other, Carlos pulling out a notebook of his own and quickly running some calculations. "She's right, it would need a substantial opening to allow that much water to flow that quickly. So, theoretically, there should be a path all the way from the sea to the void, if there is one, which we should be able to use to get into it through."

"That would be a hell of a lot easier than digging through hundreds of metres of ice," Jerry mused, tapping his own pen on the notes he'd been making. Martta nodded.

"It's a good point. If there is a void, and such a tunnel, we might be able to actually get into it this year." Twisting around in her seat she inspected the image still on the screen. "Although assuming it goes all the way to the sea, it might actually come out under the ice shelf and we won't be able to get into it. Not to mention it's about a fifteen kilometre walk under the ice even if we can."

"It would be an interesting experience," Jerry chuckled. "OK, that's a very good observation, Miss de Boorder, thank you. It means we'll need to add some serious lighting, portable generators, and
associated equipment to the list. Possibly another snowmobile as well. We planned on having two, but thinking about it three would be better. Each one can tow a sled with either two people or equipment on it." He made more notes. "Good."

"I would suggest we should take a certain amount of high explosives with us in case we need to make an entrance," Carlos said. Everyone looked at him, some of them a little worriedly. Jerry studied the young man, slowly nodding.

"I can see where that might come in handy. The only problem is that I have no idea how to safely handle explosives."

"I do," Carlos smiled, making the rest of them look surprised. "Blasting agents like water gel material at least. I grew up on a big farm, we used it quite a lot for clearing old tree stumps out of the way. I can make a list of what we need and where to get it. I still have a current purchase and possession permit for industrial explosives."

There was a pause of a few seconds while Jerry and Martta exchanged glances, the woman eventually nodding with a shrug. Jerry nodded as well, making more notes. "OK. Thanks. We can go into that in more detail tomorrow. I'd imagine that we'll need to liaise with our contact in Alert, the military will probably be a little uncomfortable about people bringing their own things that go bang, but assuming they're all right with it that seems like a good idea."

"Is it safe?" Park asked, apparently slightly nervous. Carlos looked at him and nodded, smiling.

"Pretty much, yes. The sort of stuff used these days is very insensitive, it will only go off if you use a detonator so the chances of an accidental explosion are very low assuming you follow sensible safety precautions. The detonators are the dangerous part, one of those can take your hand off, but again they're not likely to spontaneously go off. You just have to treat them with respect and make sure they're a long way from the main charge until you want to make a hole in something." The other student listened with interest, eventually nodding back to his compatriot.

"Thank you for the explanation," he replied politely.

Jerry made a few more notes while also listening to the student, thinking he did sound like he knew what he was talking about, then looked up when he finished. He said, "If we do find something, and it's big enough to make it all worthwhile, the longer term plan is to arrange to have an ice runway made, which will allow flights in and out much more easily. Prefab buildings can be installed quite fast from what we've found out so with a little luck we could have nearly four and a half months available next year." He inspected them all. "So is everyone on board with this?"

They all nodded, all of them looking excited. "Great. There's a lot more we need to go over but that can wait until Monday. We'll let you know the arrangements for travel within two days. There will be a two day Arctic survival course in Alert once we arrive, our contacts insisted on that, which is probably a good idea anyway. After that, the fuel and so on should be in place, so we'll fly out to the site immediately. Hopefully we can find something and this isn't the most over the top practical joke in history."

He grinned as everyone laughed for a moment. "Although that would be a story in its own right. OK, then, we'll be meeting again here on Monday at four, allow two hours to go into more detail on everything. We'll meet every day until we leave, so come up with as many questions as you can so we can work out the answers before we're stuck in the middle of the wilderness, all right?"

There was a chorus of affirmative answers, then the six students stood. "Remember, you can't discuss any of this with anyone outside this room," Martta warned. "Not a word to your friends or
family. Just tell them you're going on a trip for a month, that's it. We'll be arranging for satellite phones so we can call out but that will be reserved for emergencies and short conversations only. Plan on being incommunicado for four weeks."

She watched as they filed out of the room, talking quietly to each other and getting to know their fellows. When the room was empty except for her and Jerry, she turned to her friend with a smile. "That went pretty well," he said, turning the projector off.

"I think so. They seem like a bright bunch, there were some good questions there. Assuming Miss de Boorder is right, which seems likely, we should have an interesting time. Presuming there really is something there in the first place."

"I sure hope there is or this will have been a complete waste of a lot of time and money," Jerry snickered. "Although I guess we at least get a nice Arctic vacation out of it whatever happens."

Giving him a hard look, she replied, "I wouldn't call wandering around on the wrong side of the Arctic circle even in summer a vacation, Jer. You know I don't like the cold."

Grinning, he packed his equipment away, then they headed back to their respective offices, good-naturedly arguing with each other on what constituted too cold for a vacation.

Twitching a little at the sudden sound, Shampoo reached out to find her phone, managing to pick it up after the fifth ring. Her hand disappeared back under the covers to where her head was. "Hello?" she mumbled, wincing.

"You sound terrible," Akane's voice said, itself sounding far too cheerful. "Did you drink too much last night?"

"Yes," she replied blearily. "I think so. When is it? Tomorrow yet?"

Her friend snickered. "Yes, it's tomorrow, about half past nine. What happened to that Amazon warrior constitution you're always going on about?"

"It went and drank half a crate of beer and then most of a bottle of rice wine, because of your father offering it," Shampoo hissed, flipping the covers back then closing her eyes again in the sudden pain caused by the sunlight instantly going for her with malice aforethought. "Now it wants to sleep it off for several more hours."

"You could ask Elder Cologne for that hangover cure she makes," Akane suggested somewhat maliciously.

"Oh, gods, no," Shampoo moaned. "Not that stuff. I'd rather be hung over, I think."

The Tendo woman was annoyingly unsympathetic, giggling at her again. "Go and drink a lot of water, then, that might help. Whatever you do, come over around two, OK? Chou and Fumiko were here earlier talking to Nabiki and the others who were awake and they invited us all to go back to Fwetna for some hang gliding like they were talking about last night. I'm not doing it without you doing it too, so be sure to come. Ask Mousse if he wants to try as well. They said swimming might be involved afterwards so make sure both of you use the special soap. I've already called Ukyo and Konatsu, they can't come because they're busy with something else for most of the afternoon."

"Oh, hell. OK, I guess," the Amazon mumbled, rolling onto her back and draping her free arm over her eyes. "Maybe Chou can fix this headache without that demon-juice of Great-Grandmother's."
"I'm sure she can," her friend assured her. "They can probably fix anything, a simple hangover should be no problem."

"Simple!?" Shampoo squawked in outrage, instantly regretting it as her head pounded sharply. "Simple?" she repeated, much more quietly the second time. "You try feeling like I do right now and tell me it's simple."

"Luckily, I can't do that," Akane replied with a more sympathetic-sounding laugh. "My head hurts a bit but not too badly. But then I said no to the rice wine, of course."

"I wish I had," the warrior muttered under her breath. Then, more loudly, she added, "OK, I'll come over, but right now I'm getting some more sleep first. See you later."

"Later, then." Akane hung up. Dropping the hand holding the phone to the bed with a groan, Shampoo massaged her eyes for a moment, then set an alarm for three hours time, rolled over, pulled her pillow over her head with a faint moan, and went back to sleep once more.

"Any news on the demonic duck?" Nabiki watched Kimiko discussing a dress in a shop near the centre of Furinkan with her sister, the younger Sano seeming rather taken by it. "Or at least the cause of it?"

"Some," 'Yori' sighed, the alter-ego of Ranma sounding a little irritated. "Aiko and I tracked it back to the car park near the police station, that big multi-story one. There are some weird magical traces around here, it's definitely where it came through from wherever it actually came from in the first place. It's not a portal, though, something a lot less common than that."

"I've found something up on the roof you need to see," Aiko put in, her voice over the com sounding puzzled.

"OK." There was a few seconds pause during which Nabiki began walking again, following the two Sano sisters as they all slowly headed back towards the Dojo, all three of them carrying bags of groceries. "Hmm. Interesting."

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"Some peculiar variant of a summoning circle that someone who thinks they know a lot more about magic than they really do drew up here," her sister-in-law replied absentely, obviously thinking hard. There was another pause. "It's certainly how that thing got here, and it's probably got something to do with Chiyoko's little menaces as well in some way. The entire thing is saturated with her magical signature, but... not in a normal way."

'Yori's' voice in her head was definitely both a little confused and rather annoyed.

"Summoning circle?" she asked. "Is that like a portal?"

"Yes and no," was the answer, still in an absent tone. She could picture the other woman studying the thing in question closely. "They're a generally obsolete form of calling something from somewhere. No one is entirely sure where in many cases. Not a normal portal at all in that sense. Those are very predictable and reliable. Summoning circles are... well, unless you know exactly what you're doing, the things are potentially hideously dangerous. It's a little like a reverse teleportation, pulling something here from somewhere else, but with the minor problem that exactly where from can be a little... indeterminate. Some of the things that come through are just flat out weird even in our terms. And they can be extremely hostile."
"Not surprising if they're just yanked here without any warning," Aiko snickered. "I'd be pissed off myself if that happened."

"True enough and a fair point," 'Yori' replied with a small laugh. "That may well account for some of it, I guess. But even so what you can end up with is often not what you wanted. That's why they don't get used much nowadays anywhere, really. You need a hell of a lot of control and even more skill to use one successfully although if you actually can pull it off they can sometimes be useful. They have all sorts of limitations but at the same time you can do some interesting things that would be difficult otherwise without a lot more work. Unfortunately, you don't need a vast amount of power to drive one. Which leads to things like this, an amateur who gets lucky. Sort of."

"Could you use one?" Nabiki asked with some interest.

"I've got the control, certainly, and the power is no trouble, but I don't know enough about the things to risk trying it without a lot of research," the martial artist replied thoughtfully. "Kas could do it as well, but with the same problem. Neither of us have ever really looked into them past the point of learning what they are and why they're normally a bad idea. Cologne could definitely do it without much problem, I know that for a fact because she tried it on me years back." 'Yori' chuckled. "Luckily they're really easy to ward against and it was Happosai's first precaution. The ward system blocks that sort of thing completely for all of us. Come to think of it, he could probably pull one off as well, no matter what he says about not being a mage."

"But it's not the work of either of them, obviously." Nabiki was thinking hard.

"Nope. Happi's still enjoying himself wandering around the demon worlds somewhere, probably annoying the hell out of everyone he meets, and this certainly isn't Cologne's work." 'Yori' snickered. "I've spotted half a dozen errors in what I can still make out of the circle and at least half of it is unreadable. She wouldn't make any, that much I can say for sure. No, this is the work of someone who's managed to get hold of some instructions that he or she barely understands, then messed even that up, badly. Like I said, an amateur. One who is going to end up killing themselves or someone else if they keep trying this stuff."

Nabiki felt worried. That sounded potentially very bad. "Any idea who? Some local Neriman mage?"

"There aren't that many around here, Cologne's certainly the most powerful and experienced by far, although there are a few. None of the ones I know would mess it up like this either, though, even if they tried it. These are really basic errors. Spelling mistakes, if you'll allow me the pun."

Both Nabiki and Aiko groaned as their friend laughed again.

"I don't think this is the work of anyone who's a practising mage," she went on. "Or if it is they need a hell of a lot more practice. This is what someone with enough power to be dangerous but not enough knowledge or patience to be safe has tried for some reason. They got freakishly lucky, I think, and managed to make the thing resonate to Chiyoko's magic right when she just happened to turn up at the critical point. Without that it would never have even powered up. The signature under hers from whoever made the diagram is very faint, it's not that of someone particularly powerful."

The martial artist fell silent, apparently thinking it through. Nabiki did the same as they turned into the street leading to the Dojo, nodding to a comment that Miki made without really hearing it. "OK. It's a local, probably," she mused 'out loud' to her friends, "someone who thinks they know more than they do, has some power but not much, and is willing to try a spell they don't really understand. Which makes them, what, stupid? Or just very incautious."
"Probably the latter, whoever it was has made a lot of substitutions here which implies a certain amount of wit although a severe lack of common sense." 'Yori' sounded bemused. "Oregano?" she muttered more faintly, a note of incredulity in her voice.

"All right, intelligent but not careful or thoughtful." Nabiki thought some more.

Then she sighed.

"You know who it's probably going to be, don't you?" she asked almost rhetorically. The martial artist sighed as well, having apparently also worked out the identity of the most likely culprit.

"I'm afraid I do. Does he still live around here?"

"Yes, not too far away, with his parents. They moved a couple of years ago to a bigger apartment. I haven't seen him for a while but he turns up occasionally looking just as unhealthy as ever, usually talking total crap. Akane chases him off and that's the end of it for another six months." She snickered. "Sis doesn't like him much, but she's nothing like as annoyed with him as she is with Ryoga. She was almost polite the last time."

"Who are we talking about?" Aiko asked curiously.

"Hikaru Gosunkugi, would-be mage and generally irritating person," Nabiki sighed. "He was yet another one who was involved in all the Akane-chasing in school, although admittedly he was one of the less dangerous parts most of the time. He's... not harmless, based on what you guys have found, but not really malicious. And kind of creepy."

Laughing, Aiko replied, "This, coming from the woman whose alter-ego is the creepiest thing I've ever seen in my life!"

"Hey, Ms Aoyama is professionally creepy, I'll have you know," Nabiki retorted with an inner grin. "Gos is just... odd."

"I'll take your word for it," Aiko giggled.

"Good. Or she'll have to come and have a... discussion." The middle Tendo sniggered darkly.

"Ranma, help, I'm being oppressed!" Aiko sounded like she was laughing hard enough to be at risk of falling over.

'Yori' chuckled, obviously amused. "You brought it on yourself, Aiko. I'm not getting between Ms Aoyama and someone she's peeved with. That could be bad."

"Thanks a bunch," the other woman laughed. After a moment, more soberly, she asked, "So what do we do about all this?"

"We can't risk something like this happening again, that's certain," 'Yori' replied slowly. "To be fair I doubt this was what he intended, assuming it actually was him, which seems likely. Nabiki's right, he's not an evil person, just a bit overenthusiastic. But we're going to have to impress on him how dangerous what he did was in a way that makes it stick. And confiscate whatever documentation he has on the whole subject to make sure he can't do it again if it doesn't stick. Next time we might not get so lucky."

"A visit from the creepy one, then?" Aiko suggested.

"That's one method, certainly," 'Yori' replied with a musing tone to her voice. "But it's not quite
there. Let me think about it. In the mean time, we'll go and find the guy and check his magical signature to be sure it really was him. I'm about ninety percent sure it was, but I want to be certain."

"OK. Let me know if you need me." Nabiki and the others were nearly at the gate now. "Still up for flying later?"

"Oh, definitely, I wouldn't miss that," the martial artist assured her. "Flying with our own wings is better but those gliders are still fun. We'll finish up here, then get back and talk to the others about a few things. I've asked Ami and Rei to cover for us just in case, they can call if anything goes to hell, but hopefully it won't."

"We're going to have to take them all to Fwetna soon, you know," Nabiki said.

"I think so too, they deserve to see it and also to meet Uthryyl, but for the moment let's concentrate on the immediate issues." 'Yori' sighed slightly. "At least Kas managed to find two of the tail sections that you blew off that damn thing and retrieve them. The other one probably fell in the river and washed away as far as we can work out. We're going to give one to the PSIA to look at while she investigates the other one."

"Do they collect parts of aliens, then?" Nabiki found the idea amusing for some reason, picturing some buried and dimly lit room full of specimens floating in eerily lit jars.

'Yori' managed to project a grin with her voice. "More or less, yes. They've got little bits of dead demons frozen in the research department, which have shown some interesting things over the years, but it's never been a very significant part of their work. They just like to keep an eye on what's going on. Understandable, really."

"True. OK, we're back now, so I'll talk later."

"See you, Nabs," the martial artist commented, immediately disconnecting before she could reply. She sighed faintly.

"I'll kick him for you," Aiko snickered. "See you later."

"Thanks. Bye." The link went dead, as she pushed the gate open and went inside with Kimiko and Miki.

Hikaru stumbled slightly as he tripped over something, looking back to see what it was and not being able to make anything out. Suddenly walking into someone he let out a grunt, feeling the unknown person grab him and stop him falling over as he recoiled. "Hey, kid, you alright?" a deep voice said.

He turned his head and looked up. And up.

'Holy crap, this guy is huge!' he thought in shock, staring at the large man who could easily have made three of him, most of it looking to be muscle wrapped in a nice suit. Momentarily panicking as he wondered if he'd managed to bump into a Yakuza enforcer, he relaxed a little when the man grinned slightly.

"Don't look so worried, kid, I'm fine." The man released his shoulders and brushed him down briefly. "See? No problems."

"I'm sorry, Sir, I wasn't watching where I was going," he mumbled.
The large man smiled more widely. "That's OK. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. And I'm Shin, not Sir."

Hikaru made a small polite bow of respect, which the man mirrored. "Hikaru, then. I'm very sorry about causing you any trouble."

"Never mind, no harm done," Shin assured him. Glancing at his watch he frowned slightly. "Anyway, I'm late, so I have to get going. Try not to fall over, OK?" Chuckling at Hikaru's wry smile, the man left about his business, soon disappearing around the next corner. Hikaru watched him go, sighed in slight relief that nothing worse had happened, then headed off himself to look for more magical texts. There was a shop he'd heard about that might be a good place to check out, assuming it was open.

He had four kilos of the best coffee beans he could afford in his backpack and he was ready for anything.

Aiko watched with a grin as the young man walked off, then turned at the sound of the door behind her that gave roof access to the three story building opening, admitting the very same large man who Gosunkugi had somehow mysteriously managed to stumble into. 'Shin' grinned back at her as he approached, shimmering into the form of 'Yori' mid-step. The black-haired girl stopped next to her friend, both of them watching as Gosunkugi got on a bus.

"Is it him?" Aiko asked.

"Definitely. His magical signature was the one associated with the diagram." 'Yori' stretched with a grunt, flexing her shoulders. "We'll have to come up with something... interesting... for dear old Gos."

The brunette next to her chuckled. "Do you have any ideas?"

A certain amount of amusement was radiating from 'Yori'. "As it happens, I do. I think I might have to ask Cologne for a small favour. It can wait until later, but it should work pretty well, I think."

Aiko looked surprised, then started laughing as her friend explained. Soon afterwards a bright flash made a few pedestrians on the street below look up curiously, although nothing was now visible on the roof.

Smiling to himself, Soun watched his daughters talking and laughing with their friends in the back garden, Nodoka and Genma sitting to one side drinking tea and discussing something in low voices. After a moment, he sighed slightly, drew himself up firmly, then walked out into the sunlight, stopping next Nabiki who looked up at him when he put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Dear, could I have a word with you, please?" he requested quietly. She met his eyes, then nodded without a word, apparently picking up on his mood. As she stood her friends watched, an expression of mild worry going across the face of Miki, causing Nabiki to smile at her reassuringly.

"Akane, can you come as well?" he added, glancing at the youngest Tendo who had turned to look at both her sister and her father. The younger woman gazed at him for a long moment, then looked at her older sister, before also standing. Shampoo watched this with a sombre look, obviously realising there was something going on, but said nothing.

Leading both daughters back into the house, Soun headed for his room, hearing them follow him up the stairs and towards the front of the house. Opening the door he waited until both had entered
before going into the room himself and closing the door behind them. Nabiki and Akane exchanged glances, turning back to him curiously. The older sister raised an eyebrow quizzically, her expression one of calmness which he knew well hid a very sharp mind. Akane was looking more visibly concerned, glancing between her father and her older sister while biting the corner of her lower lip slightly.

"Is there a problem, Dad?" the youngest Tendo asked, worry in her voice.

He shook his head, smiling at them both, then stepped forward, putting his hands on one shoulder of each, before pulling them into a brief three-way hug. "Not any more," he replied, releasing them. "There was, but it's been fixed. But..." He sighed as they exchanged glances again. "I was trying to think of a way to tell you and couldn't, until I got some good advice from a friend." After a few seconds, he waved at the bed, then sat on it, the two young women sitting on either side of him. Putting his arms around their shoulders, he smiled at Nabiki, then Akane.

"You know I love you both more than anything, don't you?" he asked. They grinned at him, Nabiki raising an eyebrow again, this time more from amusement. "And I'm incredibly proud of you as well, you're both going to go places and achieve things far past anything I have ever managed."

"Thanks, Dad," the older sister said, pleased. Akane mumbled something slightly unclear but which seemed to be much the same in sentiment, looking embarrassed. He hugged them again to his sides.

"So, what's the problem?" Nabiki asked curiously, before correcting herself with a chuckle. "Or, rather, what was the problem?"

After another long pause while he tried to think of the best way to put it, he began.

"A few weeks ago, I went to the doctor. I had a nasty cough that wouldn't go away..."

They sat in silence as he talked for some time.

"Hi, guys," a by-now familiar voice sounded from the right, next to the house, making Miki and everyone else look over and up to see Yori grinning at them from on top of the garden wall, Tamiko and Misaki standing next to her. The three magical girls dropped lightly to the lawn and walked over to the small group standing there. "How are you all after yesterday? Good party, wasn't it?" The black-haired young woman seemed in a very good mood.

"It was... somewhat more exciting than we'd planned," Nodoka noted dryly, making the other woman snicker, shrugging a little in a 'what can you do?' manner. Miki laughed to herself, attracting a smile her way from Yori. Misaki hid a small grin of her own while Tamiko sighed a little then also smiled.

"These things happen, Nodoka," Yori consoled the auburn-haired woman, who looked mildly amused.

"So Nabiki said as well. It's true but somewhat irritating at times," the Saotome matriarch admitted. "Nerima can be a strange place."

"So can Minato," Tamiko giggled. "You wouldn't believe some of the things that happen there sometimes."

"Quite likely not," Nodoka admitted, smiling more widely. "Although some of the adventures that the various people of this household have become entangled in over the years might give your
experiences a run for their money."

"I've heard about some of those," Tamiko admitted, grinning. "Why don't we just agree that both Nerima and Minato are nuts and leave it at that?"

"Acceptable," the older red-head chuckled. She looked over at Yori and Misaki who were listening with amused expressions. "Did you succeed in working out what the cause of all the excitement yesterday was, dear?"

Yori frowned a little as everyone looked at her. "I have a pretty good idea, yes. Someone who did something a bit stupid. We're going to have to have a chat soon, I think." She rubbed her hands together and grinned darkly, snickering in an unnerving manner. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I assume the person in question won't be?" Kimiko asked. Yori smirked at her.

"Not as such, no," she smiled.

"Good. I may be OK, but whoever sicced that damn duck thing on me needs a good kicking." Miki and Hana exchanged a glance then studied their younger sister, who sounded somewhat peeved. Misaki laughed out loud, looking at her friends who were now both smirking.

"I think that can be arranged," the tall girl commented idly, snacking on an apple that had appeared in her hand. Beside her, Tamiko held out her own hand without a word, receiving another apple in return, which she bit into with a loud crunch.

Looking around the assembled people again, Yori asked, "So, who's coming gliding in another reality?"

Miki laughed loudly, holding up her hand, then grabbing John's and holding it up as well with her free one. Hana and Kimiko also put their hands up. Sighing a little and wincing at the sound, Shampoo put hers up too. Her other one went to her head, making Yori grin at her.

"Drank too much, hmm?"

"Yes," the Amazon muttered, adjusting the sunglasses she was wearing to block out the bright light of day.

"Here, let me sort that out for you," the violet eyed woman snickered, walking over and putting her hand on Shampoo's head, a purple glow appearing for a second. The Amazon's face relaxed immediately.

"Oh, thank the gods," she sighed in relief. "That's so much better."

Removing her hand Yori smiled. "No problem. Drink some more water, though, you're still dehydrated."

"Thank you," Shampoo replied, taking her sunglasses off and blinking a bit at the bright day. "The only other options were waiting for hours, or taking the horrible stuff Great-Grandmother makes. It works, but..." She shuddered hard. "It's... not nice."

Yori grinned at her. "I can imagine, I know a little about some of the ancient Amazon cures and I can see they're probably a bit... harsh."

"That's putting it mildly," Shampoo muttered, making several people laugh a little, it was obvious from her expression that she was speaking from bitter past experience. After a moment she added
more loudly, "She asked me to pass on her regrets but that she feels she's past the point of flying in some little toy airplane, although she appreciates the invitation." Yori looked amused, nodding her understanding.

"Fair enough, but if the Elder is actually genuinely past anything I'll eat my own boots." Shampoo started giggling at the idea.

"Are any more of your group going?" Genma asked curiously, looking at the three magical girls. Tamiko turned to him, nodding.

"Yes, everyone is coming. Chou and the others will meet us there. They're leaving a portal open to Minato so we can go back instantly if something happens, we've got some friends covering for us for a few hours but if anything kicks off we'll need to get back to help. Hopefully that won't happen, but..." She shrugged with a smile and a sigh, making the rotund martial artist nod wisely.

"I understand. Your life is even more fraught with peril than that of a normal martial artist."

Yori started chuckling, as did Misaki, Tamiko grinning over her shoulder at them both before looking back to Genma. "Wise words indeed. Well put, Genma." He nodded with a satisfied smile, making Nodoka look at him and shake her head a little while sighing very faintly.

"Where are Nabiki and Akane?" Misaki asked after a moment, taking a seat next to Miki. She produced a bottle of water and unscrewed the top, sipping it, then as an afterthought tossed another one to Shampoo who caught it with murmured thanks before draining it thirstily.

"Their father took them inside about twenty minutes ago to tell them something," the Sano sister replied, suddenly brought back to thinking of her friend. She frowned a little. "It seemed serious, but hopefully it's nothing too bad."

Seconds later, Akane shot out of the house, dashed across the grass, then grabbed a rather startled looking Yori hard enough that Miki was pretty sure a normal person would have ended up with broken ribs at least. Somewhat to her shock the youngest Tendo had tears in her eyes.

"Thank you so so much," Akane almost whispered, holding Yori like she was a life preserver in stormy seas. "Both you and Chou. Why are you so nice? We don't deserve everything you've both done for us."

Miki stared at this, as did most of the others, then turned to look at the house out of which Soun and Nabiki were coming, considerably more slowly. Nabiki had a thoughtful expression while Soun was smiling in an odd but loving way at his youngest daughter. Returning her attention to Akane and Yori, Miki watched as the latter raised her arms and returned the embrace for a moment, before gently removing the Tendo girl from her.

"Of course you do, Akane, you're all decent people." The young woman glanced at Genma with an eyebrow up, then at Nodoka, who for some reason raised a hand to cover her mouth, then looked back at Akane who was still staring at her. "We fix things. That's our main purpose, when we can. We can't do it all the time, obviously, but we do our best, and Soun was pretty easy compared to some stuff we've dealt with."

Stepping back having released the magical girl Akane wiped tears from her eyes with a quick motion of one hand, looking quickly at her older sister who had come to stand beside her. "Sorry," she muttered. Nabiki chuckled a little, putting her hand on her sister's shoulder.

"It's understandable, sis," she replied with good humour. Looking at Yori, she bowed formally.
"Thank you very much indeed," she added. "I'm proud to call you a friend."

Yori peered at her in a manner that seemed full of humour, then bowed back.

"And I, we all really, feel the same way about all of you, and you're welcome." Both women straightened up and exchanged small grins.

"What on earth brought all this about, girls?" Nodoka asked, fairly calmly, but still apparently extremely interested in the answer. The assembled people all looked at her, then back at Akane, who was now going pink from embarrassment as she apparently realised how abruptly she'd managed to interrupt the rest of them.

"Allow me to explain," Soun put in, appearing to find the entire thing somewhat funny. He moved to sit in a chair next to Genma, who handed him a cup of tea without saying anything although leaning forward with a curious look. "Yesterday, during the party, I approached Yori with a... rather annoying medical problem. She and Chou were good enough to help and skilled enough to be able to help. They fixed the problem and I'm fine now. For which, as I told them both at the time, I owe them anything in my power to give."

Yori now looked slightly embarrassed, which was an odd expression on her face, not really fitting somehow. "It wasn't that big a deal, Soun, we do that sort of thing all the time. To more or less anyone who needs it and will hold still long enough."

He chuckled, his moustache lifting a little as he smiled.

"It may be trivial to you, my dear girl, but I assure you it isn't to those of us without such abilities." She shrugged slightly, smiling.

"What was the problem, if you don't mind me asking, old friend?" Genma queried after a moment or two. Soun looked at him, then sipped his tea with appreciation, while everyone waited for him to speak, leaning forward in their seats.

"Terminal lung cancer," he replied quietly. Miki froze in horror, before looking quickly around and meeting similar emotions in the eyes of almost everyone else present. Genma looked like someone had just disembowelled his first-born in front of him for several seconds. Nodoka nearly fainted, gasping and going pale.

"Oh, shit," John muttered, holding Miki's hand tightly.

"I'm fine now, though," the elder Tendo continued, smiling at them with a level of happiness Miki could well understand. "The two young ladies fixed everything and I'm assured I'm now in perfect health. They even fixed the nicotine addiction as well so I'm not craving a smoke for the first time in twenty years or more."

"Oh, thank god," Nodoka whispered. Colour was coming back into her cheeks. "Why didn't you tell us, Soun? How long have you known?"

"I was diagnosed about six or seven weeks ago, and I didn't want to worry anyone until I knew exactly what I was going to do," he replied calmly. "The doctor wanted to start me on very aggressive chemotherapy immediately but after I read the documentation it sounded almost worse than the alternative. Luckily, while I was thinking it over, it occurred to me to ask our friends here, and..." He waved a hand at Yori who was listening with an interested and sympathetic expression. "If they had turned out to be unable to help, I would have started the treatment in all probability, but as it turns out it's unnecessary. The poor doctor is going to be very confused when I go in for
"Next time, if there is one, Soun, call us in earlier, will you?" Yori asked with a smile. "Like I told you, we don't mind at all." She looked around at the others. "That goes for all of you. If you need us, get in touch, and we'll help however we can."

"Because it's a calling?" Kimiko asked with a weird little smile, causing the magical girl and both her own sisters to look at her for a moment. Miki noticed Nabiki was smirking slightly. Yori, for some reason, glanced at the older Tendo sister with a smirk of her own before nodding.

"You could say that, yes," she chuckled.

Laughing a little Kimiko raised her drink in a salute to the black-haired girl who returned it lazily with two fingers to her brow, before hopping to her feet energetically. "Enough doom and gloom over something that didn't happen," she announced happily. "Let's go and have some fun."

"Mousse isn't here yet," Shampoo put in, frowning a little as she looked at her watch. "He was helping Great-Grandmother with something but he said he'd be here by ten past."

"He's thirty seconds out and closing fast," Tamiko told her with a grin. She looked surprised, then very curious. The red-head tapped the side of her nose. "Trade secret."

Giggling, Shampoo began counting under her breath, just loud enough for Miki to hear. As she reached twenty-five, Mousse hopped over the garden wall, then looked puzzled when everyone started laughing.

"What?" he asked, walking over. Shampoo giggled again and just shook her head.

"You're weird," the Amazon mumbled, turning to look at Yori who was obviously finding this all funny. "Sorry I'm late."

"No problem," the woman smiled. A portal crackled open beside her. Waving at it, she added, "If you want to bring swimming gear there's a nice lake as well."

Most of the people present held up towels, smiling at her. "Chou already said that," Akane laughed.

"Great. OK, then, let's go. Don't be worried about the people there. Like I explained last night, the D'Sage are very nice friendly people and not hostile in any way. You may also see various people from other species than the D'Sage, they get quite a few visitors, so don't overreact, please. None of them will be human but all of them are people." Yori smiled reassuringly at them all as a few of those gathered looked slightly worried. Miki took a deep breath, stood, then headed towards the portal with determination, glancing sideways at Nabiki who joined her, a small bag slung over her shoulder.

"Should be fun, right?" she asked. The Tendo woman grinned.

"I'll be disappointed if it's not."

Sharing another look, they stepped through the portal together, the rest of the small party following behind.

Looking around at the well-remembered scene of the lake, Nabiki smiled to herself, glad to visit again, then turned to see the reactions of the others. There had been dead silence behind her for the
last few minutes, only broken by the natural sounds, and the cries of excitement from a group of young D'Sage who were messing about in the water fifty metres away apparently having a lot of fun.

She saw that Miki was slowly turning in a complete circle, her mouth hanging open in a somewhat funny manner, inspecting everything with an expression that was gradually turning from surprise to pure joy. Beyond her, Akane and Shampoo were doing much the same, while Hana was simply staring steadily at the lake and the dozens of users of it who were wandering around enjoying themselves. Kimiko seemed stunned, looking at each of them in turn, then going back to watching the surroundings.

Mousse was constantly pushing his glasses up his nose as his head flicked about. Next to him, Soun was smiling to himself, while Genma and Nodoka who had trailed along out of curiosity were staring wide-eyed.

'Yori' and her companions were off to one side, watching the reactions with broad grins. She caught the eye of the martial artist and smirked a little, getting a look in return that made her giggle inside.

A couple of D'Sage walked past having landed and parked their vehicle a little distance away, nodding politely to the group of humans then going on their way without comment. Most of the Neriman visitors stared in shock. Nabiki quickly put a surprised expression on her face but noticed that Kimiko who had been watching her at that moment looked amused under her own, more genuine, amazement.

Another portal opened next to the one 'Yori' had produced, 'Chou', Fumiko, and Aiko popping out of it and looking around for a moment smiling before heading over. "Hello, everyone," the blonde said, stopping beside 'Yori' who greeted her with a hand on her shoulder for a moment. "How are you all finding Fwetna this time?" Behind them the portal to Nerima expired with the usual pop.

"It's fantastic," Hana breathed, looking around. Beside her Kimiko was now squinting at the dual suns, her hand shading her eyes, with a smile on her face. "Like something out of a really good science fiction movie only real."

"It's a nice place," Tamiko grinned. She pointed to the edge of the crater wall, over the low rise leading up from the lake. In the distance, what Nabiki knew was a couple of thousand metres from the edge out in free air, half a dozen gliders could be seen looping and diving. "The flying happens over there. That's the edge of the cliff which is even taller than at the falls." She chuckled when Akane went pale at the thought. "No wall, either."

Finding her sister's expression quite funny, Nabiki looked up at the gliders again. Jun helpfully tagged each of them with owners IDs, one of which was blue while the others were green. She studied this one, seeing it was apparently Onkra. 'Thanks, Jun,' she told the device.

#You're welcome, as always, Nabiki,# it replied calmly.

"Is that you up there, Onkra?" she broadcast to her friend. The glider turned towards them, coming closer fairly fast.

"Yep. How are you today? Ready for some flying that doesn't involve attacking giant demons and rescuing friends?" the D'Sage woman responded, sounding pleased to see her. Nabiki noticed that there were a pair of familiar shapes accompanying the glider in formation, the little arrowhead of fliers steadily approaching.
"I am, actually," she snickered. "That was pretty bizarre all things considered."

"Ranma sent us some recordings of it. It looked really impressive from the ground. I'd love to see it from your point of view."

"I can do that," the middle Tendo laughed, quickly putting together a set of files from her own viewpoint and that of the drone she'd used, sending them to her friend. "Are your father and mother here as well?"

"Dad's around somewhere, he was swimming a little earlier," Onkra replied. "Mom's away on business in Krentak for a day or so. She said to say hi to you all."

By now several of the others had noticed the glider and soarer heading their way, now only a kilometre out and descending rapidly. Miki pointed and asked, "What's that?"

"One of the locals with her glider," 'Yori' told her, joining her and Nabiki to watch as the flying machine approached. "You'll like her, she's a good friend. Onkra, the daughter of Uthryyl, a major trader and an old friend of mine. The other two are the soarers from last night. So you've met them before." She smiled as Miki looked amused.

Onkra soared overhead only fifty metres up, looking very pleased, then pulled up hard, stall turned, and glided to a neat landing fairly close to the group. The soarers circled overhead, not at the moment showing any particular inclination to land, although everyone could hear them yipping at each other. Slightly relieved as she was still wondering what she would say if the things mobbed her, Nabiki watched them for a moment, then followed as everyone headed after 'Yori' who was going to meet Onkra. The D'Sage woman was disconnecting herself from the glider, nodding her thanks when the martial artist reached her and helped.

They all stopped at a polite distance, watching as Onkra quickly made the glider fold up into a long bundle which she put on the ground. Turning to them she studied them closely, before leaning sideways a little towards 'Yori' and whispering loudly, in perfect Japanese and with her hand in front of her mouth, "Why are they all looking at me like that? Aliens are weird." Nabiki could easily see she was very amused. Her ears were up like a hunting dog, making a mental picture that nearly had the Tendo sister giggling.

'Yori' grinned and replied in a similar manner, "I have no idea. Some people are just a little strange. Try not to make any sudden moves and you're probably safe."

Akane suddenly collapsed laughing, breaking the minor tension that had arisen, the others all relaxing and grinning. Shampoo sighed heavily, poking her friend with her foot which didn't actually help. "Stop that, you're embarrassing us," she hissed. Akane just waved a hand weakly at Onkra and 'Yori' and kept laughing.

"This... this..." she managed to gasp out, "this is completely insane. Why have our lives gone so sideways recently?" Peering up at Onkra, who was looking down at her with an easily recognisable expression of dubious interest despite her non-human features, she fell over laughing again.

Onkra turned to 'Yori', who shrugged. Shaking her head, the D'Sage woman carefully skirted the still giggling Akane, walking over to stand in front of the others, who were looking mildly confused. Except for Shampoo who was pinching the bridge of her nose and kicking Akane gently but repeatedly in a vain attempt to get her to stop laughing.

"Hello," she said politely, giving a small bow of respect, her tail curving up behind her. "I'm Onkra. Yori and the others have told me quite a bit about all of you recently. Welcome to Fwetna."
After a moment of silence, Soun glanced at his friends and family, then stepped forward, responding to her bow with one of his own. "Thank you on behalf of all of us, Onkra. Don't mind my youngest daughter, there's clearly something amiss with her in some way. Possibly stress from recent events." He frowned slightly at Akane, who looked momentarily a little annoyed before the absurdity of the entire situation started her giggling again. Shampoo sighed audibly, shaking her head sadly.

"Ah, yes, some sort of job interview as I understand," Onkra replied, also looking at Akane. "From what Yori told me it went well."

"It did indeed, thank you." Soun looked a little surprised that the D'Sage woman was so well informed, yet pleased by her comments. "Pardon me if I'm being rude, but I have to compliment you on your Japanese. It's very good indeed."

She made her own version of a smile, nodding to him. "Thank you." Looking around at the others, who were still apparently a little taken aback by their first encounter with a friendly 'demon', she waved to the end of the lake. "If you guys want to come with me, I'll introduce you to my friend Jyrron, who has a number of gliders set up for you all." Returning to her own she picked it up and put it over her shoulder, then headed in that direction, 'Yori' beside her and the others following along in a ragged group, looking around with interest and slowly diminishing shock.

When they crested the rise blocking the view of the valley floor, each of them stopped dead and stared in amazement, even the ones who had seen it the night before. Hana started laughing softly to herself, pulling out her camera and taking pictures one after another. Nabiki watched the expressions on her family and friends with pleasure, this was something she'd wanted to show them since she'd first seen it, and hadn't thought it would become possible so soon. Casting a quick look at 'Chou' she saw her hidden elder sister was watching as well, smiling a little to herself. The blonde caught her eye and smiled more widely for a moment.

"It's absolutely fantastic," Nodoka breathed, looking from one side of the vista to the other, then peering at the distant towers of Krentak for some seconds. "I still can't get over how beautiful it is."

"We like it," Onkra laughed. "I've travelled quite a lot and I have to admit home is still one of the nicest places I've been. But I expect most people would say that in the end." She waited for another thirty seconds or so, then pointed to a group of people and brightly coloured flying machines a hundred metres away, off to the side and down the slope although at a safe distance from the edge. "That's Jyrron and the others over there."

They resumed walking, watching as someone trotted down the slope and took off, the glider soaring out over the incredible drop then rapidly gaining altitude from the updraft at the edge. Shortly it was several hundred metres up and circling slowly.

"Wow," Miki muttered to herself, next to Nabiki, who looked at her and grinned. "That looks... terrifying."

"But a lot of fun," the middle Tendo replied happily.

"I guess," her friend said slowly. "But still terrifying. That might take some time to get over."

"I'm sure when you're hanging in the air a few kilometres up you'll just start to enjoy it," Nabiki snickered, getting a slightly wild-eyed and not entirely happy look back.

"Thanks for that image. Now I'm really terrified," Miki quavered. Putting her arm over her friend's
shoulders, Nabiki chuckled.

"Come on, it'll be fine. Yori says these things are essentially uncrashable, and if you can't trust a magical girl, who can you trust?"

Behind them, Fumiko started giggling, making her look over her shoulder for a moment with a wry grin at the taller woman. "What? A lot of people probably think that way."

"True," the other woman grinned. "Still weird to hear someone say it like that, though."

Miki took a deep breath and put an obviously deliberate smile on her face. "You're right. Once in a lifetime opportunity and all that. Let's go and have some fun."

Squeezing her for a moment, Nabiki let go. "That's the spirit. I'm looking forward to this."

"Yes, but everyone knows you're just crazy, Nabiki," Miki giggled.

Shrugging, the Tendo sister accepted this as self-evident, making her friend laugh harder for a moment, then followed as she headed over to the gliders with the others. Having introduced them to Jyrron, and interpreted for him as he didn't speak Japanese or have the advantage of the translation spell, Onkra picked up something from a container on the ground, showing it to them and revealing it was a pair of odd-looking goggles.

"Yori ordered these after the last time they were here, they were finished a few days ago. Obviously our own heads aren't the same shape as your species has, so the standard ones we use won't fit. For non-magical-girl people, that's something of a problem, so these were custom-made for your species." Everyone looked at the black-haired girl, who shrugged a little with a grin.

"Azumi was considering importing the gliders to our world at some point, which would need the right headgear anyway, and I was thinking of getting a few for friends as well. Uthryyl knew someone who could do the redesign easily and got me a good deal for it."

Handing out goggles to everyone, Onkra waited while they investigated them, then explained the control system and the basic flight controls while Jyrron and a couple of his friends rigged several gliders, reprogramming the control system in the same way as when Nabiki had first tried them to compensate for the lack of a tail on the part of the pilot. Shortly they were ready, the three D'Sage stepping back having tested everything. "So, who's first?" Onkra asked brightly.

There was a long pause. Miki nudged Nabiki in the ribs, causing the middle Tendo to grin, then step forward. "I'll give it a try as long as Akane comes as well," she announced, which made her sister glare at her for a second.

"Oh, thanks, 'Biki," she muttered. More loudly, she added, "Shampoo has to come in that case as well." The Amazon looked somewhat taken aback but eventually, when her friend stared hard at her, nodded.

"Try not to make it look too easy, Nabiki," Onkra sent with a silent laugh. "They might get suspicious."

"Don't worry, I can make mistakes with the best of them," the brunette replied. "I'll try not to crash too much, though."

"Good idea." Her friend sounded amused. "We've dialled the sensitivity of the controls down a lot for the first run. We can adjust them when everyone gets to grips with it."
Nabiki remembered her first flight, thinking this was a good idea. *I can monitor your sister and the others and adjust the control gains appropriately as they become used to them, Nabiki,* Jun put in helpfully. *It's not difficult.*

'Thanks, Jun,' she told it with an inner smile.

Stepping forward she allowed Onkra to use her as a model to explain how to attach the glider and how the controls worked. "It's very easy, the computer will do most of the work at first, and as you get used to it will allow you more and more control. If everything goes completely wrong the anti-grav recovery system will make a safe descent but that's very unlikely to happen. If you try anything dangerous or that might cause other problems the computer will take over, even to the point of auto-landing, so you'll basically find it essentially impossible to crash. They're all set to teaching mode which will get you flying pretty fast, it's not difficult at all. As soon as you're at a safe altitude the controls will unlock and you're flying."

Pulling the goggles down over her eyes Nabiki looked at the display with curious interest, then had Jun disable it in favour of her own overlays which were better and more familiar. "OK, I'm ready," she announced. Her family and friends watched as she stood and allowed Jyrron and Onkra to steady the wingtips, orienting the glider into the wind coming up the slope, then began running down it. As had happened the first time, she was rapidly lifted into the air, swinging her legs back and locking them in place, before soaring past the edge of the cliff and out into empty air.

Even with her recent experiences it was a heady experience, the way the ground dropped away so suddenly to such a great distance was truly remarkable. Grinning she waited while the computer circled her around in a slowly ascending spiral, laughing with delight. *I almost forgot how much fun these things are,* she commented to her SI.

*More entertaining than flying under your own power?* It queried with interest. She thought for a moment.

'No, not really, that's still one of the most incredible feelings I can think of, but this is a pretty close second. Hopefully the others will like it too.' She looked back and to her left to see the small group in the distance, several hundred metres away and down by now.

A moment later, she heard the voice of Akane, sounding a little tentative as she used the comms system built into the flight goggles. "Can you hear me, Nabiki?" her sister asked breathlessly. As the computer relinquished control to her the Tendo sister circled about so she was looking directly at the cliff-side. She added a few deliberate over-corrections so it appeared she was experimenting.

"Yes, perfectly," she replied with a chuckle. "What did it look like from down there?"

"Amazing," the other woman replied, also sounding like she was about to laugh. "And horrifying at the same time. What's it like?"

"Incredible," Nabiki said happily. "The view is absolutely incredible. This is pretty easy, really. Hurry up and get in the air, sis."

There was a slightly nervous sigh, then Akane responded, "If this kills me I am definitely going to haunt you and tell you it's all your fault for the rest of your life, you realize."

Giggling Nabiki circled around some more. "Fine by me. Just jump over the edge and get on with it."

"Crazy woman," Akane told her with a put-upon sigh. Looking down she could see her sister being
attached to her own glider, a bright green one as opposed to the blue and yellow of the one she was flying. Soon enough Akane was in the take-off position with Onkra and Jyrron steadying her, Onkra apparently giving her some last minute advice from what she could make out.

Seconds later Akane ran down the slope, a scream of surprise and excitement coming over the communications link and much more faintly several seconds later through the air. She lifted off and zoomed out into space, the glider smoothly leaning into a right-hand spiral ascent. Soon she was at a similar altitude to her sister, who was behind her in the same circling pattern. "Oh my god," Akane kept repeating for several seconds, sounding both terrified and enormously happy.

"Calm down, Akane, you're perfectly safe," 'Yori' told her with a chuckle. "The computer will release the controls any second now. Remember what Onkra told you, and make small motions at first, those things react pretty fast even with the controls in learning mode."

A moment later the glider twitched, then rolled enthusiastically to the right, before recovering and rolling less wildly to the other side. Akane yelped, apparently taken by surprise. Nabiki watched with amusement as her sister kept over-correcting, the aircraft wiggling around in a way that made her wince a little, although she could well remember her own wild gyrations the first time she'd tried it. It only lasted about thirty or forty seconds, though, the highly-tuned reflexes of her sister quickly learning what to do.

"That looked fun," she commented when the glider settled down and flew fairly straight.

"Not quite the way I'd have put it," Akane replied with a certain amount of strain in her voice. "But it's getting better." She giggled nervously. "That's really a very long way down indeed."

"Isn't it?" Nabiki laughed. "At least three thousand metres, I'd guess."

"Please stop helping, Nabiki," her sister growled. Snickering to herself, the middle sister watched as Akane slowly got used to the controls. By the time she was flying fairly well, Shampoo had launched and was going through the same process albeit very slightly faster. A whoop of joy came over the comm system, making Nabiki grin.

"This is amazing!" Shampoo yelled. "I'm glad you persuaded me to try it, Akane."

"It's starting to grow on me," the youngest sister laughed. The two new fliers spiralled around for a while, slowly getting to grips with the controls, until Shampoo got cocky and tried a roll. It nearly worked to design, getting about three quarters of the way through it, before she lost too much airspeed and suddenly stalled, the computer catching her just as she emitted an undignified squeak of shock while nearly going into a spin. Laughing hard enough that her own glider was rocking from side to side, Nabiki matched speed and altitude with the surprised Amazon, looking over at her while wearing a wide grin.

"A little too much, too soon, I think, Shampoo," she quipped, seeing the Chinese woman glance over at her with a wry grin.

"It was pretty exciting, I have to admit," Shampoo replied, slightly embarrassed by the sound of it.

"Are you OK, Shampoo?" 'Chou' asked, sounding mildly concerned.

"I'm fine, Chou, thanks," she said, laughing slightly. "I tried running before I could walk, basically."

"Who's next?" Nabiki asked. "Come on, there's enough gliders to go around for everyone."
There was a pregnant pause, then Kimiko's voice sounded. "I think this calls for the Sano sisters. Miki? Hana?"

A few seconds passed, then Miki rather reluctantly replied, "Oh, hell, all right. I'll do it. I can hardly let Nabiki get away with something I can actually try as well." She emitted a slightly nervous chuckle.

"I... think I can do it," Hana said a moment after that, not sounding entirely sure.

"It's pretty easy, Hana, don't worry," Nabiki assured her. "The computer seems to keep everything going smoothly, Shampoo just proved it can take over if everything goes a little odd. You'll be fine. It's damn good fun as well."

After a few more words of encouragement from not only the three in the air, but Yori and Onkra, the three sisters were strapped into their own aircraft, Kimiko being the first to charge headlong down the slope towards the edge. "I have to be insane," everyone could hear her mutter, immediately before yelping in surprised shock when she took off. Her legs flailed around for a moment before Onkra reminded her to lock them up, which she immediately did. Seconds later Hana yelled something incomprehensible and followed her youngest sister, Miki sighing and doing the same as soon as the second Sano woman was airborne.

All three of them got the hang of it to one degree or another within ten minutes, proving Jyrron right from when he'd said the things were easy and designed to teach pilots how to fly. Miki was laughing almost constantly for nearly half that time, making Nabiki grin to herself. She was more than glad to be able to share some of the recent strangeness in her life with her friends and family.

Half an hour after that, everyone who had come through the portals were in the air, even Nodoka, who had taken a considerable amount of persuasion from 'Yori', 'Chou', and Soun. It turned out that the Saotome woman had a knack for flying once she got over the initial fright, picking it up very quickly and clearly enjoying it a lot. Eventually there were a couple of sets of gliders swooping around the skies, Nabiki and her sister with Shampoo, the Sano girls, John, and Tamiko in one flock, the rest in the other.

The soarers, which had been circling far above them the entire time, came down to join the formations, swapping from one to the other and yipping excitedly, before eventually falling into their familiar formation to either side of and slightly behind Nabiki, causing John to snicker. "They seem to like you, Nabiki," he commented with amusement. The middle Tendo laughed, looking across to where the young man was flying fifty metres to the right, as their group headed away from the cliff out over the plain. They were just over ten kilometres away now, and at about four thousand metres altitude.

"What can I say?" she replied. "I must have a magnetic personality, or possibly they simply recognise skill when they see it."

"Did you give them any sushi last night?" Akane asked. "It's more likely that they just think you're going to feed them." She was some distance behind, flying in slow lazy S-bends and obviously having fun.

"No, I'm sure it's the skill thing," her sister giggled.

"Of course it is." Akane sounded amused and mildly sarcastic.

"Be nice, girls," Soun advised, from some considerable distance back. He and the others were flying back and forth across the cliff area in a pattern some four kilometres wide, still getting used
"OK, Dad," both sisters chorused, before laughing again.

The flying session went on for over three hours. Eventually everyone headed back to the clifftop, landing one after another. Shampoo managed, somehow, to nearly end up upside down, blaming a hole in the ground she'd stepped in but which no one else could find any trace of. Grumbling a little at how no-one believed her she soon went back to grinning in excitement. "That was absolutely incredible," she announced as Jyrron and 'Yori' helped her disconnect herself from the glider. "I think I want one."

"With a little luck that might be possible eventually," 'Yori' smiled. "Azumi is working on importing various items of high-tech from Fwetna and a few other places, and she was definitely interested in these things herself."

"Why?" Miki asked with interest. "She's got her own wings!" She ducked as both soarers picked that particular moment to drop out of the sky close by, the female running over to Onkra for a head-scratch while the male looked around, then flopped onto his side with a satisfied grunt and closed his eyes in what looked all the world like pleasure. "Crazy animals," she mumbled, looking at them with affection.

"But not everyone does," Fumiko grinned. "So she thinks they'd sell all right back home."

"There are some legal issues with exporting them from here, to do with the anti-grav systems mainly, and of course there would be different legal requirements at home as well, but it's not impossible," 'Yori' added as she folded up the glider Shampoo had been flying, a brilliant scarlet one. The Amazon handed her the goggles she'd been wearing which she accepted with murmured thanks. "I don't know how long it will take though."

"We can come back easily enough at some point if any of you want another go, though," 'Chou' told them.

"I may want to take you up on that, dear," Nodoka replied, smiling gently to herself as she looked out at the view. "That was an extraordinary experience and one I'm very glad I allowed myself to be talked into. It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

"I'm very happy you enjoyed it, Nodoka," the blonde told her, smiling back. "Well, I think we should go for a swim for a while, if anyone else is up for it, then I'm afraid we're going to have to get back. We can't leave our area for too long or strange things tend to happen."

They all thanked Jyrron, who was packing up the extra gliders with the aid of his friends, then with Onkra headed back to the lake. The soarers looked at each other, the male sitting up suddenly, then followed. Shortly arriving back where the portal to Minato was still crackling away, a few of the locals looking at it curiously as they walked past but not bothering to investigate, 'Yori' looked around. "So, who wants a swim?"

It turned out that practically everyone did. After a certain amount of changing of clothes most of the group were enjoying the warm water of the lake, Nodoka and Soun watching Genma, now a panda, paddling around while several passers-by had stopped and stared in mild shock. 'Chou' explained the situation to them and they eventually wandered off, although not without a few backward glances.

"Come on in, Akane, it's great," Nabiki called, watching her sister wading around in the shallows.
"You know me and deep water, 'Biki," the younger Tendo replied uncertainly, looking at the lake with extreme suspicion.

Nabiki laughed for a moment. "It's not hard, honestly." She swam back to the shallower water then stood, approaching her sister. "Right. Sit down on the bottom." After a moment, Akane did as instructed, the water coming up to her shoulders. "Lie back and lift your legs slowly, while I support you from underneath," the elder sister went on, waiting until she performed the requested action. Quickly slipping her arms under her sister, Nabiki held her up, the water taking most of her weight. "Now put your arms out to the sides, head back so you're looking straight up. Yes, like that. Keep your body flat like this, OK?"

Very slowly she lowered her arms, until her sister was floating in the water. Akane twitched a little at the lack of support. "No, don't do that or you'll sink. Stay flat." Nabiki watched with approval as Akane remained rigidly supine, looking somewhat panicked. "Just breath normally. Keep your head tipped back a little or the water will go up your nose, then you'll start coughing, which will almost certainly make you sink again."

Her eyes wide, Akane floated on the water, slowly relaxing as it became apparent to her that she was in no immediate danger of drowning. "Wow," she finally said quietly. "I've never stayed in water this long before without ending up with most of it in my lungs, except in the bath."

Nabiki grinned down at her sister. "If you get into trouble, just do what you're doing now. You can float without a lot of effort for quite a while and it lets you relax and regain your strength. As long as the waves aren't too high you'll be fine. In salt water it's even easier than this, you have more buoyancy. All right, try bringing your arms back to your sides, slowly." Akane followed the instructions, bobbling around a little but not sinking, although she did end up spluttering a bit as she managed to push a ripple of water over her face. "See? It's not hard. Now carefully open your arms out slowly, then bring them back more rapidly to that position, your hands open but your fingers together."

A few more minutes passed, as she gradually got her sister from a very simple floating paddle to a rather messy backstroke, with a lot of extraneous flailing of arms and legs. Privately she agreed that the poor girl was definitely not a natural swimmer, but overall was pretty pleased with the progress. Akane herself seemed ecstatic about having been in the water for a quarter of an hour and not yet having had to be rescued.

Both the soarers were watching from the shore with their heads cocked to the side, visibly wondering what on earth these crazy people were doing playing around in the water when they could be flying. Hana was sitting with them also watching having decided to sunbathe instead of swim. She seemed quite comfortable with the animals now, something that amused and somewhat impressed Nabiki when she looked over and waved.

After another half hour and some demonstrations by both herself and Miki, she had managed to get the younger sister started on a basic front crawl, only having to dredge her off the bottom twice. "There you go. You need to practice a lot, but that's the basic stroke. When you're happy with it we can work on improving the technique and teaching you some more but at least you should be able to get out of a swimming pool without taking half of it home in your lungs now."

Grinning happily, Akane hugged her sister. "Thanks, 'Biki. I don't know why no-one at school could ever teach me like that." She shook her head. "Sharks and boulders. The man was insane."

"Yep. Even nuttier than Kodachi, and she's about as loopy as anyone I've ever met," Nabiki giggled.
"Tell me about it," Akane sighed. "At least she doesn't go for you."

"She wouldn't dare," Nabiki assured her. "I'd yell at her again like that last time."

Now grinning, Akane pushed off into her version of a front crawl, which was fairly enthusiastic although not wildly effective, foaming and frothing her way towards where Soun was racing Onkra across an improvised course and losing badly. Nabiki watched her go, smiled to herself, then followed with her own vastly smoother and professional stroke, almost immediately catching up and passing her sister. Privately wondering what they'd do if she used her mer-form and thinking about how on earth she could eventually let them in on the secret, she swam back to where the others were sitting in the shallows talking.

"Well done, Nabiki," 'Chou' greeted her, smiling. "That seemed like a very effective lesson."

Standing up in knee-deep water Nabiki looked back to see Akane slowly approaching, gradually becoming more efficient in her swimming, and nodded with satisfaction.

"I hope so. I've been meaning to get Akane at least able to not drown in a bath for years but this is the first time I've been able to help." She looked at Miki, who was grinning. "You remember I mentioned she wasn't exactly a gifted swimmer."

"Oh, trust me, I do," her friend chuckled. Beside her John had his arm around his girlfriend, watching Akane with her. He looked fairly pleased overall with the day so far, as did everyone else.

A certain amount of low-volume swearing from off to the side made everyone look over, to see Mousse on his hands and knees in shallow water, groping around on the bottom apparently looking for something. "Damn it," he muttered.

"What's the problem, Mousse?" Nodoka asked, concern apparent in her expression.

"My glasses fell off and I can't find the damn things, because without them I can't see well enough," he sighed, feeling around in the sand. "If I had them on I could see them but then I wouldn't need them."

She stood and waded over to help him look, Miki and Kimiko joining her. A few seconds later the latter stopped, a look of guilty worry going across her face. "Oops," she said quietly. Everyone turned to her. "I think I just found your glasses." Bending down she retrieved a somewhat mangled set of eyewear which she'd obviously stepped on. "Sorry about that."

Mousse took them from her, holding them close to his eyes to inspect them, then sighed again. "Oh, crap. That was the last pair I had."

"I'm really sorry, Mousse," she told him sincerely. "I'll pay for some new ones."

"It's not your fault," he assured her. "I should have been more careful. The water's cloudy here so you couldn't see them."

'Yori' watched the minor drama with a slightly amused expression, then looked at 'Chou', who nodded. She waded over to the Amazon. "There's an easier solution, Mousse. Come over here to the beach and sit down." He looked up in her general direction, puzzled, then did as directed, Kimiko hastily helping when he started to head in the wrong direction.

"Thanks," he commented, going slightly red with embarrassment. Nodoka and the others followed curiously. When Mousse was sitting down, the martial artist knelt next to him.
"Close your eyes for a moment," she said. He stared at her, shrugged, and obeyed. Putting her hands over his eyes she concentrated, the familiar purple glow appearing for ten seconds or so. "That should do it. You can open them again."

Opening his eyes Mousse blinked a few times, his expression becoming one of wonder. Holding his hand in front of his face he moved it back and forth for a second or two, a smile steadily widening, until he jumped to his feet, grabbed 'Yori', and swung her around, laughing. "Thank you," he yelled in joy. "You have no idea how much trouble that's caused me my entire life. Putting her down he suddenly seemed to realise what he'd done and looked worried.

The young woman grinned at him. "I'll allow it this time, but don't make a habit of it," she laughed. Embarrassed he scratched his nose, blushing.

"Sorry. But you really don't have any idea how much this means to me." He looked around at the scenery with literally new eyes. "I've dreamed of being able to see properly since I was about five. It's incredible."

"No problem. I should have thought of it earlier, to be honest. But it's fixed now."

"Did you really just fix his eyes just like that, so easily?" Kimiko gaped in awe. 'Yori' nodded, smiling at her.

"Yep. Eyes are a bit fiddly to rebuild from scratch but fixing the lens and the retinal issues is pretty straightforward." She nodded to Mousse, who was still looking around with a brilliant smile on his face, then wandered off, rejoining 'Chou'. Kimiko watched her go then looked at her sisters, all three of them seeming stunned.

"That was a nice thing to do," Nabiki silently said. Her current sister-in-law glanced at her with a small smile.

"Why not? It's easy enough and my problems with the guy are long in the past. We seem to be repairing all sorts of problems with the Neriman side of life at the moment, his eyes are a fairly small thing in the grand scheme of things but it means a lot to him, obviously."

"I can understand that, his vision was absolutely terrible. I'm kind of impressed he's managed what he has with that disability. Even the glasses wouldn't fix it all the way."

"It was still nice." Nabiki smirked a little. "I approve."

"Well, in that case I'm certain it was the right thing to do. Having the Nabiki Tendo seal of approval, I mean." 'Yori' looked at her with an eyebrow raised, nearly making her laugh out loud.

"Good. Remember, I'm always right."

"Of course." Out loud, the martial artist said to the group at large, "We're going to have to get back in about half an hour, so we should probably get out of the lake soon."

"It's been somewhat busy what with one thing and another," 'Chou' replied, sighing very slightly. "But we hopefully will have some more free time soon. I'd like to visit your home again, I have to
Feeling a familiar ki signature approaching, Nabiki looked around to see Uthryyl strolling towards them down the beach, looking pleased with himself. He raised a hand in greeting. "Hello, everyone," he announced as he stopped next to his daughter.

"Guys, this is my friend Uthryyl, the master trader I mentioned before," 'Yori' told them, in the process going over to greet the merchant. "He's a really nice person, so be polite." Uthryyl laughed at her comment, bowing deeply for a second.

"Such an introduction! I'm honoured that the great Yori thinks so highly of me." Straightening up he looked around, his ears up in an expression of interest. "Sorry I didn't come over earlier, I was on the other side of the lake talking to some people I haven't seen for quite a time who are on holiday here. I saw your flying escapades, though, it looked impressive from down here. I haven't seen so many gliders in the air at once before."

"It was a hell of a lot of fun, actually," Tamiko chuckled, walking over to him and giving him a quick hug. "Hello, Uthryyl. How is Quannyr?"

"She's very well, thank you, Tamiko," he responded. "Business is good and she's in Krentak sorting out a new contract with a client. She should be back tomorrow morning."

"Give her my best," the red-head requested.

"I will." Looking around again, he said, "So, Yori, introduce me to your friends." Nabiki grinned internally as she knew well that the trader already knew more about everyone present than most of them would believe.

"Good acting, Uthryyl," she sent, getting a chuckle back over the com.

"Thank you. I practice for at least an hour a day." He glanced at her with a flick of one ear.

"It wouldn't actually surprise me if you did," she giggled, which made him laugh.

Ignoring the silent conversation, 'Yori' made the introductions and gave a brief explanation of their recent exploits. Uthryyl listened with interest. "Ah, yes, Akane Tendo. I have heard quite a lot about you, my dear," he said jovially, studying the youngest Tendo sister, who looked a little overwhelmed at the comment. "Apparently you have gained the attention of a somewhat disconcerting person in recent times. My sympathies, I've met Ms Aoyama as well." He grinned in the D'Sage manner as Akane and Shampoo both shuddered a little.

"She's... not someone you forget in a hurry," Akane replied quietly. "Although I am grateful for everything she's apparently done for me."

"You're just not in a hurry to meet her again," Uthryyl suggested knowingly. She nodded quickly.

"Not at all. She's... a bit scary."

"My dear Akane, she's one of the most horrifying people I've ever met, believe me, so I understand your feelings well." Uthryyl laughed, catching Nabiki's eye with a quick sly glance. "But, I believe, at heart a decent person."

Turning to Nabiki while Akane appeared mildly worried for a while, looking around with sudden paranoia, he went on, "I have also heard about you, Nabiki. An economics student with an interest in commerce, from what I hear. Something I also have a deep liking for."
She nodded, noticing that 'Chou' was hiding a laugh. 'Yori' snorted with amusement "You should spend some time talking to her, Uthryyl, she might be a good contact for further trading opportunities on our world."

"I'm open to negotiations," Nabiki grinned. "And always ready to make a good deal."

Uthryyl narrowed his eyes at her, making her grin more widely. "I see. A woman after my own heart." After a moment he nodded. "Yes, I think we should probably talk again at some point. It's not impossible that even a lowly economics student would have some good ideas."

Soun, who was listening with interest, burst out laughing at the dry comment, placing his arm around his middle daughter's shoulders as she put a comically offended expression on her face. "She's young, but I have no doubt she will learn fast. I have faith in my daughters." Uthryyl studied her then slowly nodded again.

"Possibly. I believe I can see promise there."

"You're just being gratuitously annoying now, you know," she told him silently, laughing inside even while on the outside she frowned.

"Of course. We find our entertainment where we can, Nabiki," he chuckled.

A little later, Soun and Nodoka were talking with Uthryyl, both apparently finding him very interesting. The others were scattered around in small groups, slowly drying themselves and getting dressed. Nabiki was sitting on the local version of grass just off the beach with Miki next to her, both of them watching everyone else. The male soarer had wandered over and dropped onto his side near her, looking at her longingly, so she reached out and stroked his head, privately very pleased that for some reason they hadn't acted like they normally did when she was around. Miki grinned at her as he made a faint yip of pleasure.

"They really do seem to like you," she said. "They're very friendly animals considering that Chou told us they're not actually tame or anything. And what they look like."

Nabiki nodded. "I think they're kind of cute in a slightly worrying way." She tickled the male behind his ear, making him stretch his head out like a happy cat. "Although they're certainly rather large for housepets."

"That doesn't seem to stop them trying," Onkra laughed, sitting down on the other side of the supine soarer, which opened one eye, looked at her, then closed it again. "Mom is always chasing them out. If you leave the door open they'll be inside in seconds. I'm pretty sure that they know how to open the doors as well, I found both of them on my bed a few days ago and I'm certain I closed the door on the way out."

"You must have a pretty big bed if both of them could get on it," Miki giggled. Onkra flicked her ears.

"It's quite large, yes, but you couldn't actually see it under a pair of mostly grown soarers." She shook her head in wonder. "I've noticed that some of the other soarers around the place have started coming closer since these guys turned up. I'm a little worried that one day I'll come home and find the entire house full of the things. Mom would go totally nuts about that."

Nabiki and Miki exchanged glances, then fell over laughing at the thought. "That could be awkward," Miki said, grinning.

"More than a little," Onkra sighed, rubbing the soarer's head absently. He was making little
squeaking sounds of delight.

Eventually everyone was dressed again, various bags and the like packed away with damp towels and swimsuits. Heading back to where 'Chou' had left the portal, they stopped while 'Yori' produced another one next to it. She turned to them. "That's leading back to the Tendo Dojo. I'm going to have to go back to Minato now, but it was very nice seeing you guys again and a lot of fun as well."

"Thank you very much for doing all this for us," Nodoka replied with a happy smile. "It was the perfect afternoon from my point of view, one I will treasure for years."

"You're more than welcome, Nodoka." The black-haired girl smiled at the woman who had no idea she was talking to her own offspring. Nabiki watching, wondering what the auburn-haired woman would say if she knew with some inner bemusement. It was becoming apparent to her that the day of revelation, at least in part, was steadily drawing nearer. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad yet, but it seemed inevitable with the way in which the Minato branch of her family was becoming more and more involved with the Nerima branch. All of it ultimately because of her in a way.

"It will work out, sister," 'Chou' said from where she was standing near Fumiko by the portal to Minato. The blonde looked at her, obviously having picked up on her thoughts somehow. "Trust in the fact that family bonds are strong, and we have a good one despite past issues. It's not quite time yet but it's getting there faster than I expected."

"I still have no idea how we can actually tell them," Nabiki admitted.

"Neither do I, yet, but I'm sure it will happen eventually. At the rate things seem to have improved over the summer it might not even require the security spell." 'Chou' smiled gently at nothing in particular. "I would so dearly love to be able to talk to father again as myself. Well, my original self." She giggled quietly. "I seem to have many selves these days, all equally real."

"Maiko and Rika need to visit soon, Auntie was talking about them a little while ago. She likes them." Nabiki snickered.

"Of course she does, they're nice people," 'Yori' commented with a laugh. "I know them both well."

"Idiot." She smirked at the other woman.

The martial artist sent her a look of amusement, before turning back to Uthryyl, who had come over to say goodbye. "It was nice seeing you again, Uthryyl. I'll be back soon, I have a lot of things to talk about, but for now I guess we'll be on our way."

"I look forward to your next visit with anticipation," Uthryyl told her gravely, although the tip of his tail was twitching.

"Come on, everyone, let's go home," Nodoka announced, smiling at Uthryyl and Onkra, then at the collection of magical girls. She waved, before disappearing into the portal. The others trailed after her, calling goodbyes to those remaining behind, until only Nabiki and Akane were standing and looking around.

"This was amazing, 'Biki," Akane said in a low voice. "I'm glad you pushed me into trying the gliding, and thanks for the swimming lessons as well."

"Any time, sis," Nabiki grinned. She waved to 'Yori' and the other girls, smiled at Onkra and her father, watched the soaring who were chasing each other around the portals for a moment, then followed her sister home again. It had been a good afternoon, definitely.
"That went well," Onkra said once the first portal had collapsed. She turned to the disguised Ranma. "I like your mother, she seems very nice."

"She is, to be honest," 'Yori' smiled. "I do miss her, although I still remember all the problems. That said, she seems to have changed a lot since those days. Even Genma seems less... well, Genma, in some ways. He might eventually grow up into a real human." She shook her head slightly as the others laughed. "I'll never be able to trust him the way I should, too much water under the bridge for that, but at least I'm slowly becoming able to stand being near him without wanting to leave the room."

Putting her arm around her husband, 'Chou' smiled down at her. "We understand, dear, and there's no pressure. We'll deal with revealing ourselves to them when you decide you're ready."

"Are you ready?" the martial artist asked curiously. The blonde woman thought for a moment, then sighed.

"Mostly, yes, I think. There are still problems and we shouldn't rush into it, certainly, but... Perhaps sometime in the next year at the rate things are improving?"

'Yori' looked slightly dubious but eventually nodded slowly. "It's not impossible. We'll see how things go. With Ukyo safely married that will be one less problem, definitely."

Onkra looked curious. "What about Shampoo and Akane?"

"Akane is certainly a hell of a lot easier to deal with these days," 'Yori' grinned. "If I'd met the woman who was swimming badly in the lake for the first time today, I think I'd really like her. Shampoo too, and even Mousse. I guess that's growing up for you. People change, some for the better, some not. Those guys are all improved more than I'd have thought possible based on the past."

"I expect at least part of it is due to your own maturity," Uthryyl chuckled. "From what you've told me over the years you yourself were somewhat... quick to take offence when younger."

'Yori' looked embarrassed as her friends all smiled at her. "Well, yes, that's true. I'll admit that I definitely didn't help sometimes. Although I still say most of the time someone else started it!"

Several people laughed, making her grin. "We all got better. Anyway, time to go." She turned to Onkra. "You should come and stay for a while soon, perhaps next week if you can free up a month or so. I need to see where you've gotten to with your training, then show you some more advanced katas. Nabiki needs to get back to it as well, and I have Ami, Rei, and Hotaru to start off as well."

Smiling, Onkra nodded. She looked at her father for a moment. "I should be free in a few days for a reasonable period of time. I'd certainly like to come and visit."

"It's fine with me," Uthryyl assured his daughter. "Perhaps we can combine it with delivering a pair of fusion reactors. Nabiki seemed quite keen on getting on with that now the paperwork is sorted out."

"The PSIA is as well, so that sounds like a good idea," 'Yori' mused, rubbing her chin. "We'll have to talk about that soon." She looked up. "Right. See you two later." Turning to the soarers who had stopped running around and were now sitting nearby watching with curiosity, she firmly added, "Stay!"

Both Onkra and her father laughed as the animals looked disappointed, their heads drooping, while
the six humans walked through the portal, which immediately dissipated. "That was fun," she said when they were alone.

"Yes, it was," he replied, smiling. "Come on, let's go and find something to eat." Picking up her glider which had been packed away completely she accompanied him back to the car.

Sitting outside in the now-cooler evening air after a good dinner, Miki leaned back in her chair and looked up at the first stars which were just coming out, before turning to her two sisters who were talking quietly near the pond and drinking a little wine. "This has been one of the strangest weekends I've ever had," she announced firmly.

Kimiko stared at her, her glass at her lips, then lowered it slowly. "One of the strangest? What sort of parties do you normally go to, if this is only one of the strangest weekends you've ever had?" she asked incredulously. Hana, beside her, began laughing, looking at them both.

Thinking about it, Miki finally nodded agreement. "OK, you're right, sis, it's the strangest weekend. Fair enough."

"Was it fun, though?" John asked from her other side, where he'd been relaxing with his eyes closed. She glanced at him with a smile, seeing he was still apparently asleep.

"Oh, yes, so much fun. I can't believe how much."

He smiled to himself, opening his eyes and rolling his head towards her. "So you're glad you became friends with Nabiki then, I guess."

"Very glad. She's not only a really nice person but she knows all these weird other people. I mean, magical girls?" She laughed. "Normally, you'd be pretty impressed if someone you knew could introduce you to a decent band, but magical girls of all things? Never mind her sister, the Amazons, and everything else."

"Like I've said before, Japan is crazy, and that Tendo woman is one of the crazier things in it," he snickered. Reaching down he felt around until he found his beer bottle, lifting it and taking a drink before putting it back. "Nice, but totally nuts. The way that she just accepts all this and simply looks completely unsurprised is... not at all normal, like I said. But everyone around here is like that to one level or another."

"I suppose if you grow up with it you don't think of it as all that weird," Hana put in. "OK, so the magic and everything is pretty new from what I've heard, but the crazy martial arts things aren't and they're nearly as odd." She looked around the garden, before waving at the claw-marks still visible in the lawn as mute evidence that something unusual had recently happened. "Although that has got to be a little strange even around here."

They all nodded, none of them disputing the fact. "I always heard Nerima was different from almost everywhere else but I never realised quite how different," Hana added, finishing off her wine and putting the glass down.

"I suspect that unless you actually experience it you'd never believe it," John chuckled.

"True. Very true."

They fell into a companionable silence for a while. Eventually, Kimiko asked, "Where is everyone else, anyway?"
"Mousse went home, still grinning like a lunatic, Shampoo and Akane I think are in the Dojo practising from what Nodoka said, she went to return some pans she'd borrowed from a friend and took Genma with her, and Soun and Nabiki were talking about something to do with money a while ago," Miki replied. "Nabiki said she'd be out a little later but to just relax until then."

"Fine by me," her boyfriend mumbled, almost asleep by this point. "It's been a long day."

Some time later, Nabiki came out of the house carrying a bottle of wine in one hand and some more glasses in the other, walking over and sitting in a garden chair between Hana and Kimiko. "Sorry about that, I was helping Dad with some household accounts stuff. He seems to think that just because I've been doing a degree in economics I should be his accountant."

"Which, of course, you can do with your eyes shut."

"Well, yes, but he's not supposed to realise that." She grinned when Miki snickered. Extracting the cork from the bottle with a corkscrew she took from her pocket, she filled three glasses, then topped up Hana's and Kimiko's. Handing a pair of them to Miki and John, she looked at hers for a moment, then raised it.

"To a damn good party, with some interesting friends," she toasted with a small grin. Laughing, the others did the same, all tapping their glasses together then drinking. "Oh, I nearly forgot. Hang on, I'll be right back." She put the glass down then jumped to her feet and dashed back inside the house.

The four people left behind exchanged curious glances, before returning their attention to the middle Tendo as she came back outside carrying a cardboard box. Sitting down again she put it on her knees, looking around at each of them in turn with a sneaky smile. "I had some free time on Friday so I called a friend and talked for a while," she began, slowly opening the box, then putting her hands inside. "She was good enough to give me..." She lifted a couple of brightly coloured boxes with transparent fronts out of the larger one and displayed them with a grin, "...these." Hana sucked in a breath sufficiently hard that she ended up coughing in surprise, while Miki's eyes widened to a level that it almost hurt, a rush of acquisitiveness shooting through her instantly. Both sisters stared in wonder, then looked at each other. "So, who wants Yori and who wants Chou?" Nabiki asked with a wide smirk. John sighed as his girlfriend leapt to her feet, her elder sister just as fast, then nearly crushed the Tendo woman in their rush to approach. He looked at Kimiko and rolled his eyes, making her giggle.

"Me!" shouted both Sano sisters simultaneously. They glared at each other.

Laughing, Nabiki waved the action figures in their boxes around just out of reach. "Only one each. Decide politely or I'll let your parents do it for you." She looked over at John, then towards Kimiko. "Would one of you ask them if I give these to you?"

"Of course, Nabiki," Kimiko agreed, grinning. "You can trust me to keep them safe until Dad makes a ruling. He might even keep them for himself, because they're pretty rare from what I understand."

"NOOO!" Hana wailed, grabbing at one of the boxes. "Don't let him steal them from me."

"Us, you mean, Hana," Miki snapped, before flushing as Nabiki grinned at her.

"Girls, girls," the middle Tendo said calmly. "We can work this out. John? Do you have a hundred yen coin?"
"I do indeed, Nabiki," he smiled, producing one from his pocket

"Right then. Hana? Heads it's Yori, tails it's Chou. That seems fair to me." Both sisters stared at each other for several seconds with narrowed eyes then reluctantly nodded.

Balancing the coin on his thumb, John watched them stare at it for a couple of seconds, shook his head sadly, then flipped it, catching it in his other hand and slapping it down on the garden table. "Are you sure we should be enabling them like this?" he asked Nabiki, not moving his hand.


"But it's feeding your problem!" he protested, making both Kimiko and Nabiki giggle.

"Move your damn hand or... or... I'll think of something horrible later. Just move it!"

Grinning, he did as requested, to reveal the reverse side of the coin. "Tails."

Nabiki handed the Chou doll to Hana who grabbed it so fast it nearly disappeared from sight. "You're welcome," the Tendo woman joked. Hana flushed.

"Sorry. Thank you very, very much, Nabiki. And your friend."

"It's not a problem, Hana," Nabiki grinned. She turned to Miki who was waiting beside her, her hands itching, and handed her the Yori box. "And here you go as well. A pleasure doing business with you both."

The sisters inspected their new possessions with wide smiles, then looked at each other's figurines as well. "It's wonderful, Nabiki, thanks a lot for this," Miki finally said, feeling very happy again.

"Enjoy them. Remember, you can't sell them legally, but other than that, have fun." The brunette looked amused as the two sat back down cuddling their action figures. "You could take them out and play with them if you want."

"I'm not six any more, Nabiki," Miki said with amused asperity.

"Open the box!? Are you insane?" Hana yelped at the same time, then looked slightly embarrassed when the others stared at her. Subsiding she held the box close to her chest, grinning in a slightly deranged manner than made Kimiko laugh and sigh simultaneously.

"I still think I was adopted, you know," she remarked, finishing her wine.

"Got a quick job for you, Nabs," Ranma's voice said in her head as Nabiki was getting ready for bed, at just after midnight. She sighed faintly, looking over to where Akane was sleeping peacefully having dropped into her own bed nearly an hour ago.

"Don't..."

"Call her Nabs!" several voices chorused on the com, making her grin. Ranma laughed a little.

"What sort of job?" she queried. He explained, making her grin widen, then become rather dark.

"Oh, yes, please let me do that," she sniggered in a manner that would make those who knew her take a step back and look worried. "I'll be ready for a pickup in the usual spot in about two minutes."
"I'm on my way," Aiko told her. Quickly putting her shirt back on she ran a hand through her hair, checked that everyone was asleep with a quick scan, then snuck downstairs and out the back door, closing it silently behind her. Checking once more she hopped through the gap in the wall and headed for the alley. Seconds later it was empty.

Putting the last of her supplies away in a warded cupboard, Cologne finished cleaning her workroom, running a damp rag over the bench she'd recently used. She slowly became aware that the back of her neck was getting cold, scratching it for a moment before suddenly freezing mid-motion. 'Oh, hell,' she thought nervously. A couple of seconds passed while she stared at the bench, before reluctantly turning around.

"Greetings, Elder Cologne," Ms Aoyama said politely, in a manner that probably passed as friendly in whatever eldritch dimension she claimed as home. Feeling her guts clench, the Amazon wondered fatalistically what on earth the horrible woman-thing wanted this time. Not to mention how the hell she managed to wander back and forth through her wards, which she'd beefed up considerably since the last time, with no apparent effect or problem.

"Hello, Ms Aoyama," she replied, equally politely albeit somewhat less evenly than she was really happy with. "What can I help you with today?"

"I wish to request a minor consideration I am reliably informed you have sufficient expertise to provide," the green-haired woman told her calmly. "It has come to my attention, Elder Cologne, that you possess a considerable proficiency with summoning circles and rituals, a field of study that is somewhat unconventional amongst the magically capable denizens of your world. My employers find themselves requiring such expertise locally and are amenable to providing suitable recompense for your time and effort if you would be good enough to accommodate them in this matter."

"You need a summoning circle?" Cologne asked with interest and a certain amount of slightly horrified wonder. What in the name of the gods could someone like her be summoning? The woman nodded once.

"That is correct, Elder Cologne."

"May I ask why?"

"You may."

Ms Aoyama waited silently and patiently.

After a short pause, Cologne sighed to herself, making very sure that it wasn't audible, and politely added, "Why do you need a summoning circle?" She was fairly certain the answer would be the normal, rather unnerving "That information is unavailable," and was therefore pleasantly surprised when Ms Aoyama did indeed explain in some detail. The ancient woman started cackling.

"Oh, my," she chuckled. "Yes, of course I'll help, I'd be happy to."

"Your assistance in this matter is appreciated. Your file will be updated appropriately." Ms Aoyama looked, as far as she could tell, pleased. Cologne stopped laughing for a moment, wondering what that fairly worrying statement actually meant, then shrugged, deciding there was nothing she could do about it anyway, and started poking through her supplies to find the right materials.

"This is a little extreme even under the circumstances," she said over her shoulder.
"It was felt that a demonstration of unmistakable intent was required due to the potential severity of the recent regrettable occurrence," Ms Aoyama replied in her chilly tones. "I am confident that such an approach will impress upon the individual in question that such acts in future will bring somewhat more vigorous response and therefore provide a more effective restraint on less than ideally competent overenthusiasm in the field of magical rituals than a mere verbal warning would."

Privately thinking that a verbal warning from Ms Aoyama would probably be sufficient to stop practically anything up to and including a volcano erupting, Cologne nodded her understanding. If nothing else it was a damn good practical joke. She wondered if whatever it actually was that was standing behind her radiating cold knew that. Or cared.

"I'm ready," she finally announced, putting the last of the materials into a bag and picking up up.

"Excellent. Ms Aiko awaits outside to provide transportation to the remaining actor in our small presentation," Ms Aoyama, turning to the door. Cologne followed, smiling a little to herself. This promised to be entertaining. For her, anyway.

The poor sod who had attracted the wrath of the green-haired horror silently descending the stairs in front of her was entirely another matter.

Hikaru lay in bed reading his latest acquisition, a scroll that reeked of alien magic, which he'd traded the coffee for to another weirdly odd person in the middle of Minato. It was written in some very strange looking language, not the same as the book he'd used recently, but had a translation in archaic English of all things attached to it, which he was slowly puzzling his way through. He was also wishing that he'd paid more attention in school as he did so. Picking up his notebook he added to the notes he'd made already, then retrieved a Japanese-English dictionary and leafed through it.

"Oh. It means 'triangle'," he mumbled, blinking tiredly at the scroll and making some more notes. "Weird. OK, that doesn't make a lot of sense, but..."

A few minutes passed silently, until he sniffed. A second later he sniffed again, then looked around, puzzled. "Why can I smell burning?" he said out loud. Dropping the scroll he leaned over the side of his bed, his eyes widening. There was a line of blueish light forming a circle around the entire bed. As he watched in awed horror, the line expanded in width, cryptic symbols in red fire appearing above it and slowly circling around him. The smell of wood smoke strengthened.

"What the hell is that?" he squeaked in shock. The entire thing had taken only four or five seconds to appear. Diving off the bed towards the door, he yelped in pain as he bounced off an immaterial barrier at the edge of the circle, recoiling onto the bed again.

"Ow." Staring wildly around while holding his abused nose in his hand, he noticed that the symbols were circling faster. They sped up to a blur, then a horrible sensation of falling went through him, everything going dark for a moment. When the light came back he looked around, then recoiled in shock.

"Uh oh."

"Indeed, Mr Gosunkugi. That is most certainly an appropriate sentiment."

He stared in horror at the woman in the expensive-looking suit who was inspecting him with an air of cold interest, then looked wildly about himself again. He was still sitting on his bed, but that bed wasn't in his room, it was instead apparently now located on a flat sandy surface lit by half a dozen
ghostly spheres of pale red light floating above him. Past them he could see stars.

In addition to the woman with green hair and, now that he looked more carefully, pointed ears, who was for some reason wearing sunglasses despite the near-darkness, he saw the figure of that ancient little Chinese woman who was balancing on the end of her long staff staring at him. A little further around the circle was the most disconcerting one of all, a tall shape covered in fine blue scales standing on legs that ended in hooves, wearing black leather and not a lot of it. Apparently female yet very obviously not at all human, this one was looking at him in a manner that made him think she was working out the best cuts as if he was a beef cow.

When she met his eyes with her own inhuman ones, she licked her lips with a long forked tongue which slipped past sharp teeth for a moment, then vanished again.

"Who... who are you?" he managed to ask, clutching at the bedclothes.

"I, Mr Gosunkugi, am Ms Aoyama. You will of course recognise Elder Cologne of the Joketsuzoku Amazon tribe, currently resident in Nerima as are you. My other companion is Archmage Zytha'a, a colleague from... elsewhere. She would like discuss the recent events you precipitated with an overambitious yet unfortunately misplaced attempt at a summoning ritual."

The blue-scaled female demon was watching him unblinkingly, and with extremely worrying attention.

She said something in a very disturbing sounding language, full of hissing sibilants, which made him quail. He was sure that even Cologne, who before right now he'd have put down as one of the scariest people he'd run into, quivered a little at the sound. Ms Aoyama listened, then replied in the same language. "Arch-mage Zytha'a would like me to inform you that your... uniquely... modified ritual of summoning caused unacceptable interference to delicate operations she was in the process of performing, and to impress upon you the importance of ceasing such activities forthwith.

Furthermore, she requested that I relay the information that repeating such interference may attract a response which you would find somewhat upsetting."

The scaly demoness hissed something else, Ms Aoyama cocking her head a little as she listened, then nodding her understanding. "My apologies, Mr Gosunkugi. I misspoke. Please replace the word 'upsetting' in the previous utterance with 'fatal'. Do you understand her warning as stated?"

Hikaru went even paler than he had been for the last couple of minutes, which was already more pallid than healthy or normal. He nodded jerkily. "Yes," he managed to say, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Excellent. I assume, therefore, that you will comply with Arch-mage Zytha'a's request?"

"Yes," he squeaked through a tight throat.

"I am most appreciative of your cooperation in this matter, Mr Gosunkugi. Additionally, to ensure that there is no further misunderstanding, I would request that you deliver all documentation you may have utilised in your recent magical experimentation to Elder Cologne at your convenience." The tone implied very strongly that 'at his convenience' meant 'immediately, if not sooner.' Once again, he nodded.

"First thing in the morning." His voice was scratchy and weak.

"Again, excellent. Well done, Mr Gosunkugi. My apologies for interrupting your activities but the matter at hand was deemed sufficiently important that an immediate action was required. Our business is now concluded. Farewell." She stepped back, moving to stand beside the blue
demoness, who was still staring at him with a look that made him want to hide under the bedclothes.

Cologne hopped closer on her staff, looking hard at him, then over her shoulder at the two alien women. "I'd take that advice seriously, my lad. I don't know about the Arch-mage, I've never met her before, but Ms Aoyama..." She shuddered. "Trust me, you don't want her annoyed at you."

"I'll be good," he whispered.

"Good. Read about magic all you want, but don't try rituals like that again, they're likely to attract all the wrong sort of attention. Come see me in a couple of years if you're still interested in the subject and we'll see what we can do about it."

He nodded, after which she mumbled a few words in Chinese and drew some symbols in the air with her finger. The falling sensation came again, blackness following instantly.

Arriving outside the Café again, Cologne turned to Ms Aoyama, who was standing next to Aiko. The magical girl had dropped them off in what she said was a desert in the middle of Australia, then picked them up again after she'd reversed the summoning circle and sent the Gosunkugi boy home once more.

Grinning a little, she said, "All things considered that was more fun than it should have been. A little intimidation is always good for a laugh."

"I am pleased to have brought a certain quantity of entertainment into your life, Elder Cologne," Ms Aoyama stated, a very faint air of amusement underlaying her words. "It is to be hoped that Mr Gosunkugi accepts the warning he was given. My employers do not wish to be required to take further action against him although I have no doubt that should it become necessary such measures would be authorised." A tiny and chilling smile accompanied this comment.

"I'm interested in seeing what on earth led him to working out such a botched summoning circle in the first place," Cologne remarked after she'd finished shivering at that horrible smile. "I assume you'll want the paperwork he delivers?"

"That is indeed correct, although I am willing to allow you some time to study the documentation for your own edification. I will return in one week to collect it."

"Thank you." Cologne was genuinely grateful, the boy had managed to do something that strictly speaking he shouldn't have been able to and she was very curious to find out how.

"I must take my leave, Elder Cologne, I have other activities which require my attention." Ms Aoyama held out her hand, on which a ten centimetre metal cube was now sitting, of a colour that Cologne recognised with shock. "As promised, recompense for your efforts. Your aid in this matter is noted with gratitude."

Taking the offered, astoundingly heavy, solid gold block, Cologne stared at it for several seconds. When she looked up both Aiko and the creepy alien woman were gone. She hadn't even noticed the flash.

"Thank you, Ms Aoyama," she said anyway, just in case, before going back into the Café and yet again locking the door very carefully, resetting the wards and wondering if there was actually any way to keep the woman out. Gold or no gold, she found her more than a little uncomfortable to be around.
Blinking, Hikaru stared at the ceiling of his room, before suddenly sitting bolt upright on his bed. Frantically turning his head he looked around. All he could see was his bedroom.

"Oh, thank god, it was only a dream," he mumbled, dropping back onto his pillow and sighing in relief.

A couple of minutes later he decided he need a drink of water and got out of bed, managing two steps towards the door before he froze, stopping dead in his tracks. Then, very very slowly, he turned his gaze downwards to see the perfect circle of reddish sand that his bed was in the middle of, before swallowing hard.

"Oh, dear," he sighed, as he felt blackness take him yet again. This time it was something of a relief.

Nabiki kept giggling to herself for some time after she finally got to bed. It had been a very interesting day.

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